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Driving Times in the Yucatán, Tabasco & Chiapas

Frommer's®

Mexico 2011

by David Baird, Shane Christensen, Christine Delsol & Joy Hepp

with Maribeth Mellin

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HOW TO CONTACT US

In researching this book, we discovered many wonderful places—hotels, restaurants, shops, and more. We're sure you'll find others. Please tell us about them, so we can share the information with your fellow travelers in upcoming editions. If you were disappointed with a recommendation, we'd love to know that, too. Please write to:

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AN ADDITIONAL NOTE

Please be advised that travel information is subject to change at any time—and this is especially true of prices. We therefore suggest that you write or call ahead for confirmation when making your travel plans. The authors, editors, and publisher cannot be held responsible for the experiences of readers while traveling. Your safety is important to us, however, so we encourage you to stay alert and be aware of your surroundings. Keep a close eye on cameras, purses, and wallets, all favorite targets of thieves and pickpockets.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

A writer, editor, and translator, **David Baird** has lived several years in different parts of Mexico. Now based in Austin, Texas, he spends as much time in Mexico as possible. A former resident of Mexico City, **Shane Christensen** has written extensively for Frommer's throughout Mexico, and is also the author of *Frommer's Dubai* and *Frommer's Grand Canyon.* He resides in New York, and goes back to Mexico at every chance he gets. **Joy Hepp** is a native Californian who has spent most of her life in Mexico and its former territories. She writes about travel, culture, and music for several print and online publications. Author of *Pauline Frommer's Cancún & the Yucatán,* **Christine Delsol** has been traveling to Mexico at every opportunity for 30 years. She has spent most of her career in newspapers and is the recipient of an Associated Press award and two Lowell Thomas awards. **Maribeth Mellin** is the author of *Traveler's Mexico Companion,* which won the country's presitigous Pluma de Plata award, and has covered Mexico and Latin America for dozens of newspapers, magazines, web sites, and guides.

FROMMER'S STAR RATINGS, ICONS & ABBREVIATIONS

Every hotel, restaurant, and attraction listing in this guide has been ranked for quality, value, service, amenities, and special features using a **star-rating system.** In country, state, and regional guides, we also rate towns and regions to help you narrow down your choices and budget your time accordingly. Hotels and restaurants are rated on a scale of zero (recommended) to three stars (exceptional). Attractions, shopping, nightlife, towns, and regions are rated according to the following scale: zero stars (recommended), one star (highly recommended), two stars (very highly recommended), and three stars (must-see).

In addition to the star-rating system, we also use **eight feature icons** that point you to the great deals, in-the-know advice, and unique experiences that separate travelers from tourists. Throughout the book, look for:

Finds	Special finds—those places only insiders know about
Fun Facts	Fun facts—details that make travelers more informed and their trips more fun
Kids	Best bets for kids, and advice for the whole family
Moments	Special moments—those experiences that memories are made of
Overrated	Places or experiences not worth your time or money
Tips	Insider tips—great ways to save time and money
Value	Great values—where to get the best deals
Warning!	Warning—traveler's advisories are usually in effect

The following **abbreviations** are used for credit cards:

AE American Express
DC Diners Club
DISC Discover
MC MasterCard
V Visa

TRAVEL RESOURCES AT FROMMERS.COM

Frommer's travel resources don't end with this guide. Frommer's website, **www.frommers.com**, has travel information on more than 4,000 destinations. We update features regularly, giving you access to the most current trip-planning information and the best airfare, lodging, and car-rental bargains. You can also listen to podcasts, connect with other Frommers.com members through our active-reader forums, share your travel photos, read blogs from guidebook editors and fellow travelers, and much more.

1

The Best of Mexico

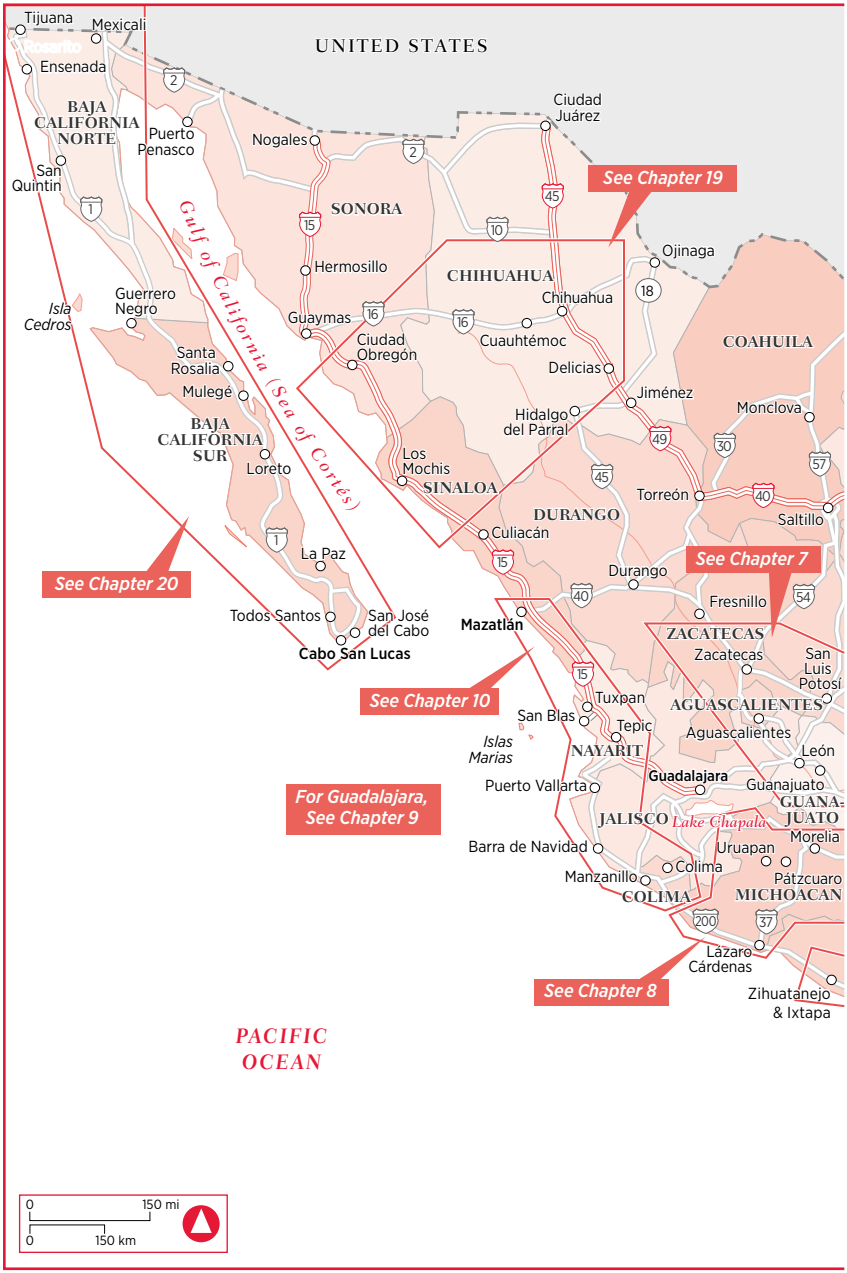
by David Baird, Shane Christensen, Christine Delsol & Joy Hepp

Across Mexico, in villages and cities, and in mountains, tropical coasts, and jungle settings, enchanting surprises await travelers. These might take the form of a fantastic small-town festival, delightful dining in a memorable restaurant, or even a stretch of road through heavenly countryside. Below is a starter list of our favorites, to which you'll have the pleasure of adding your own discoveries.

1 THE BEST CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

- **Passing Time in the Plazas & Parks:** All the world may be a stage, but some stages have richer backdrops than others. Town plazas are the place to sit and watch daily Mexican life unfold before your eyes. Alive with people, these open spaces are no modern product of urban planners, but are rooted in the traditional Mexican view of society. Several plazas are standouts: **Veracruz**'s famous *zócalo* (chapter 13) features nearly nonstop music and tropical gaiety. One look tells you how important **Oaxaca**'s *zócalo* (chapter 12) is to the local citizenry; the plaza is remarkably beautiful, grand, and intimate all at once. **Mexico City**'s Alameda (chapter 5) has a dark, dramatic history—heretics were burned at the stake here during the colonial period—but today it's a people's park where lovers sit, cotton-candy vendors spin their treats, and the sound of organ grinders drifts over the changing crowd. **San Miguel de Allende**'s Jardín (chapter 7) is the focal point for meeting, sitting, painting, and sketching. During festivals, it fills with dancers, parades, and elaborate fireworks. **Guanajuato** and **Querétaro** (chapter 7) have the coziest plazas, and **Mérida's** El Centro (chapter 17), can't be beat on Sundays.
- ***Música Popular:*** Nothing reveals the soul of a people like music, and Mexico has given rise to various styles, which you can hear in many different settings. You can hear brassy **mariachi** music in the famous Plaza de Garibaldi in Mexico City (chapter 5), under the arches of El Parián in Tlaquepaque, and in other parts of Guadalajara (chapter 9). Or perhaps you want to hear romantic **boleros** sung to the strumming of a Spanish guitar, or what Mexicans call ***música tropical*** and related *cumbias,* mambos, and cha-cha-chas (chapter 17).
- **Regional Folk Dancing:** From the Ballet Folklórico in Mexico City to the Ballet Folclórico in Guadalajara (chapters 5 and 9), or the almost-nightly park dances in **Mérida** (chapter 17), Mexican folk dance events are diverse and colorful expressions of Mexican traditions.

Mexico


UNITED STATES
Tijuana
Mexicali
Rosarito
Ensenada
BAJA CALIFORNIA NORTE
Puerto Penasco
San Quintin
Nogales
Ciudad Juárez
See Chapter 19
SONORA
Hermosillo
CHIHUAHUA
Chihuahua
Ojinaga
Guerrero Negro
Isla Cedros
Guaymas
Ciudad Obregón
Cuauhtémoc
Delicias
COAHUILA
Jiménez
Monclova
Santa Rosalia
Mulegé
Hidalgo del Parral
BAJA CALIFORNIA SUR
Loreto
Los Mochis
SINALOA
Torreón
Saltillo
DURANGO
Culiacán
Durango
See Chapter 7
Fresnillo
See Chapter 20
La Paz
Todos Santos
San José del Cabo
Cabo San Lucas
Mazatlán
ZACATECAS
Zacatecas
San Luis Potosí
See Chapter 10
Tuxpan
AGUASCALIENTES
San Blas
Tepic
Aguascalientes
Islas Marias
NAYARIT
León
Guadalajara
Guanajuato
Puerto Vallarta
For Guadalajara, See Chapter 9
JALISCO
Lake Chapala
GUANAJUATO
Morelia
Barra de Navidad
Uruapan
Colima
Manzanillo
Pátzcuaro
COLIMA
MICHOACAN
Lázaro Cárdenas
See Chapter 8
Zihuatanejo & Ixtapa
PACIFIC OCEAN
Gulf of California (Sea of Cortés)
0 150 mi
0 150 km

UNITED STATES
Gulf of Mexico
Piedras Negras
Nuevo Laredo
Monterrey
Matamoros
NUEVO LEÓN
TAMAULIPAS
Ciudad Victoria
Ciudad Mante
Tampico
SAN LUIS POTOSÍ
San Miguel de Allende
Tuxpan
QUERÉTARO
Querétaro
Poza Rica
HIDALGO
Papantla
Pachuca
Mexico City
Toluca
Cuernavaca
TLAXCALA
Tlaxcala
Puebla
Xalapa
Veracruz
MORELOS
PUEBLA
Orizaba
Tehuacán
Taxco
Catemaco
VERACRUZ
Coatzacoalcos
GUERRERO
Acapulco
Oaxaca
OAXACA
Puerto Escondido
Puerto Ángel
Salina Cruz
Huatulco
Gulf of Tehuantepec
Bay of Campeche
TABASCO
Villahermosa
Palenque
CHIAPAS
Tuxtla Gutiérrez
San Cristóbal de las Casas
Comitan
Tapachula
CAMPECHE
Campeche
Escárcega
Bacalar
Chetumal
QUINTANA ROO
Río Lagartos
Progreso
Valladolid
Celestún
Mérida
YUCATÁN
Isla Mujeres
Cancún
Cozumel
Playa del Carmen
Punta Allen
Mahahual
Peninsula
BELIZE
Caribbean Sea
GUATEMALA
HONDURAS
EL SALVADOR
See Chapter 15
See Chapter 17
See Chapter 14
For Mexico City, See Chapter 5
See Chapter 13
See Chapter 16
See Chapter 6
See Chapter 11
See Chapter 12
See Chapter 18

- **Fireworks:** Mexicans share such a passion for fireworks and such a cavalier attitude toward them that it's a good thing the buildings are stone and cement, or the whole country would have burned down long ago. Many local traditions surround fireworks, and every festival includes a display. The most lavish are the large constructions called *castillos,* and the wildest are the *toros* that men carry over their shoulders while running through the streets, causing festivalgoers to dive for cover.
- **Strolling *El Malecón:*** Wherever there's a seafront road, you'll find *el malecón* bordering it. This is generally a wide sidewalk for strolling, complete with vendors selling pinwheels and cotton candy. In some places, it has supplanted the plaza as a centerpiece of town life. The best examples are in **Puerto Vallarta, Mazatlán** (chapter 10), **La Paz** (chapter 20), **Cozumel** (chapter 15), and **Veracruz** (chapter 13).
- **Fútbol Matches:** There are very few people in the world who can match the passion of a serious Mexican Fútbol (soccer) fan. From dusty rural fields to colossal urban stadiums you can join *fanáticos* chanting team fight songs. If you have trouble learning the words, all you really need to know is, "Goooooooooooool."

2 THE BEST ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

- **Teotihuacán:** It's so close to Mexico City, yet centuries away. You can sense the majesty of the past in a stroll down the pyramid-lined Avenue of the Dead, from the Pyramid of the Sun to the Pyramid of the Moon. Imagine what a fabulous place this must have been when the walls were stuccoed and painted brilliant colors. See "A Side Trip to the Pyramids of San Juan Teotihuacán," p. 152.
- **Monte Albán:** A grand ceremonial city built on a mountaintop overlooking the valley of Oaxaca, Monte Albán affords visitors panoramic vistas; a fascinating view of a society in transition, reflected in the contrasting methods of pyramid construction; and intriguing details in ornamentation. See "Road Trips from Oaxaca," p. 443.
- **Palenque:** Like the Pharaohs of Egypt, the rulers of Palenque built tombs deep within their pyramids. Imagine the magnificent ceremony in A.D. 683, when King Pacal was entombed in his burial chamber, which lay unspoiled until its discovery in 1952. See "Palenque," p. 651.
- **Uxmal:** No matter how many times we see Uxmal, the splendor of its stone carvings remains awe-inspiring. A stone rattlesnake undulates across the facade of the Nunnery complex, and 103 masks of Chaac—the rain god—project from the Governor's Palace. See "The Ruins of Uxmal," p. 621.
- **Chichén Itzá:** Stand beside the giant serpent head at the foot of El Castillo and marvel at the architects and astronomers who positioned the building so precisely that shadow and sunlight form a serpent's body slithering from peak to the earth at each equinox (Mar 21 and Sept 21). See "The Ruins of Chichén Itzá," p. 635.
- **Ek Balam:** In recent years, this is the site where some of Mexico's most astounding archaeological discoveries have been made. Ek Balam's main pyramid is taller than Chichén Itzá's, and it holds a sacred doorway bordered with elaborate stucco figures of priests and kings and rich iconography. See "Ek Balam: Dark Jaguar," p. 644.

3 THE BEST BEACH VACATIONS

- **Puerto Vallarta:** Vallarta captures the best of Mexico—gorgeous weather, a charming town, spectacular setting, sophisticated culture, friendly people, and of course delicious margaritas. Spectacularly wide Banderas Bay is graced by 42km (26 miles) of sandy beach. Some, such as Playa Los Muertos—the popular public beach in town—abound with *palapa* restaurants, volleyball players, and parasailers. The beaches of Punta Mita, the exclusive development north of Vallarta, offer white-sand, crystalline waters and coral reefs just offshore. Others around the bay nestle in coves, accessible only by boat. Puerto Vallarta is the only beach town in Mexico with an authentic colonial feel as well as luxury resort amenities. See "Puerto Vallarta," in chapter 10.
- **Puerto Escondido:** The best overall beach value in Mexico is principally known for its world-class surfing beach, Playa Zicatela. The surrounding beaches and towns all have their own appeal—be they lined with colorful fishing *pangas,* delicious seafood restaurants, shady palms, or all four. Puerto Escondido offers unique accommodations at excellent prices, with exceptional budget dining and nightlife. See p. 402.
- **Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo:** These side-by-side resorts afford beachgoers the best of both worlds: serene simplicity and resort comforts. For travelers seeking to get back to basics, the best and most beautiful beach is Playa La Ropa, close to Zihuatanejo. The wide beach at Playa Las Gatas, with its restaurants and snorkeling sites, is also a great place to play. The high-rise hotels in Ixtapa, on the next bay over from Zihuatanejo, front Playa Palmar, a fine, wide swath of beach. The most beautiful beach in Ixtapa lies in front of Las Brisas hotel. See p. 385.
- **Cancún:** Whether or not you believe Cancún is an unrelenting spring break party in which Americans compete with Mexicans for the city's real identity—and I'd say the truth lies in the timing of your visit—you're likely to agree this man-made resort has some of the most spectacular beaches in the country. The powdery white-sand is complemented by warm Caribbean waters the color of a Technicolor dream; it's so clear that you can see through to the coral reefs below. You can come here just to relax, but this is of course also one of the world's most popular entertainment destinations. Cancún offers Mexico's widest selection of beachfront resorts, with more restaurants, nightlife, and activities than any other resort destination in the country. See chapter 14.
- **Isla Mujeres:** If uninterrupted relaxation is what you're after, Isla Mujeres offers a quintessential laid-back vacation. Most accommodations are small, inexpensive inns, with a few luxury boutique hotels tempting you for at least a night. Bike—or take a golf cart—around the island to explore rocky coves and sandy beaches, or focus your tanning efforts on the wide beachfront of Playa Norte. Here you'll find calm waters perfect for swimming and snorkeling as well as beachfront *palapa* restaurants beckoning you for a fresh fish lunch. If island fever starts to take over, you're only a ferry ride away from the action in Cancún. See chapter 15.
- **Playa del Carmen:** Stylish and hip, Playa del Carmen has a beautiful beach and an eclectic assortment of small hotels, inns, and cabañas. The social scene focuses on the beach by day and

the pedestrian-only Avenida Quinta (Fifth Ave.) by night, with its assortment of restaurants, clubs, sidewalk cafes, and shops offering all the entertainment you could want. You're also close to the coast's major attractions, including nature parks, ruins, and cenotes (sinkholes or natural wells). Playa is Mexico's fastest-growing city and is becoming homogenized (think Dairy Queen and Starbucks). Enjoy it while it's still a manageable size. See p. 551.

- **Tulum:** Fronting some of the best beaches on the entire coast, Tulum's small *palapa* hotels offer guests a little slice of paradise far from the crowds and megaresorts. The bustling town lies inland; at the coast, things are quiet, because all these small hotels must generate their own electricity. If you can pull yourself away from the beach, there are ruins to marvel at and a vast nature preserve to explore. See p. 568
- **La Paz:** This state capital borders a lovely beach, dotted with colorful playgrounds and lively open-air restaurants. Take a cue from the local residents, though, and pass on swimming here in favor of the exquisite beaches just minutes from downtown. La Paz's beaches and the islets just offshore have transformed this tranquil town into a center for diving, sea kayaking, and other adventure pursuits. See p. 737.
- **Los Cabos:** Dramatic rock formations and crashing waves join forces with wide stretches of soft sand and rolling surf breaks. Start at Playa Palmilla and work your way down the Tourist Corridor to the famed Lover's Beach at Land's End. Some beaches are more appropriate for contemplation than for swimming, which isn't all bad. See p. 707.

4 THE BEST ACTIVE VACATIONS

- **Scuba Diving in Cozumel & Along the Yucatán's Caribbean Coast:** The coral reefs off Cozumel, Mexico's premier diving destination, are among the top five dive spots in the world. The Yucatán's coastal reef, part of the planet's second-largest reef system and a national marine park, affords excellent diving all along the coast. Diving from Isla Mujeres is quite spectacular. Especially beautiful is the Chinchorro Reef, lying 32km (20 miles) offshore from Mahahual or Xcalak. See chapters 15 and 16.
- **Fly-Fishing off the Punta Allen & Mahahual Peninsulas:** Serious anglers will enjoy the challenge of fly-fishing the saltwater flats and lagoons on the protected sides of these peninsulas. See "Sian Ka'an & the Punta Allen Peninsula" and "Mahahual, Xcalak & the Chinchorro Reef" in chapter 16.
- **Hiking & Horseback Riding in the Copper Canyon:** Miles and miles of beautiful, remote, challenging canyon lands are paradise for the serious hiker or rider. Follow a Tarahumara Indian guide, who can take you deep into the canyons to places rarely viewed by tourists. Experienced horseback riders can set up a 12-day ride with **Paraíso del Oso** (p. 686), that tests a rider's skill in mountainous terrain. It has to be the most challenging ride in North America. See chapter 19.
- **Golf in Puerto Vallarta & Los Cabos:** Puerto Vallarta, with its eight championship courses, is *the* new destination for golfers to watch—with a second Jack Nicklaus Signature course that opened in fall 2008 in Punta Mita. Added to the appeal of golf here are fabulous courses within easy driving distance along the Pacific Coast at El

Tamarindo, Isla Navidad, and Manzanillo. See chapter 10. The Corridor between San José del Cabo and Cabo San Lucas is one of the world's premier golf destinations, with seven championship courses and a total of 207 holes slated for the area. See chapter 20.

- **Surfing the Pacific Coast:** The world-class break at Zicatela Beach in **Puerto Escondido** is a lure for surfers from around the globe. It challenges the best in the sport each September and October, when the waves peak and the annual surf competitions take place. See chapter 11. Other noted surf breaks in Mexico include Sayulita, Punta Mita, and Las Islitas Beach near **San Blas** (all north of Puerto Vallarta); Playa Costa Azul, on the outskirts of **San José del Cabo;** and "Killers" at Todos Santos Island in northern Baja. See chapters 10 and 20.
- **Sportfishing in La Paz:** Billfishing for magnificent marlin and sailfish is popular in southern Baja, and La Paz pulls in the most consistent share. See chapter 20. Fishing is excellent in Los Cabos, Mazatlán, Manzanillo, and Zihuatanejo, too. See chapters 10, 11, and 20.
- **Sea Kayaking in the Sea of Cortez:** From Cabo San Lucas to La Paz, and continuing north, the Sea of Cortez is a sea kayaker's dream. It has dozens of tiny coves and impressive inlets to pull into and explore, under the watchful gaze of sea lions and dolphins. Professional outfitters provide gear, guides, and instruction for novices. See chapter 20.

5 THE BEST OF NATURAL MEXICO

- **Michoacán's Million Monarch March:** Mexico is an exotic land, and no place drives this home more forcefully than a mountain forest where you stand surrounded by the fluttering wings of millions of monarch butterflies—it's like being in a fairy tale. The setting is the rugged highlands of Michoacán, from mid- to late November through March. See p. 257.
- **Whale-Watching:** Each winter, between December and April, magnificent humpback and gray whales return to breed and instruct their young in the waters of Banderas Bay, fronting **Puerto Vallarta** (chapter 10), and in **Los Cabos** (chapter 20).
- **Sea Turtle Nesting Beaches:** Between June and November, sea turtles return to the beaches of their birth to lay their eggs in the sand. With poaching and natural predators threatening these species, communities along Mexico's Pacific coast have established protected nesting areas. Many are open for public viewing and participation in the egg collection and baby-turtle release processes. Turtles are found along the Yucatán coast, in Baja Sur, on the Oaxaca coast, in Puerto Vallarta, and on Costa Alegre. See chapters 10, 16, and 20.
- **Technicolor Laguna Bacalar:** The waters of this crystal-clear, spring-fed lake—Mexico's second largest, though it's actually a lagoon—are noted for their vibrant color variations, from pale blue to deep blue-green and turquoise. The surrounding area is known for birding, with over 130 species identified. See p. 582.
- **The Rugged Copper Canyon:** The canyons, known collectively as the Copper Canyon, are beautiful, remote, and unspoiled. The entire network is larger than the Grand Canyon, in the U.S.; it incorporates high waterfalls, vertical canyon walls, mountain forests in the canyon-rim country, and semi-arid desert inside the canyons. This is the land of the Tarahumara Indians, who gained their legendary endurance

from adapting to this wilderness. See chapter 19.

- **Desert Landscapes in Baja Sur:** The painted-desert colors and unique plant life are a natural curiosity in Los Cabos, where horseback, hiking, and ATV trips explore the area. The arid desert contrasts sharply with the intense blue of the strong sea surrounding the peninsula. See chapter 20.

6 THE BEST PLACES TO GET AWAY FROM IT ALL

- **Tepoztlán:** On the weekends, Tepoztlán's cobblestone streets are filled with spirituality seekers, market lovers, and city dwellers, but during the week, travelers will find a tranquil, enchanting town that is the embodiment of small-town life in Mexico. In many ways, Tepoztlán is like a town out of a storybook; there are quaint ice-cream shops, a rock-hewn staircase on the edge of town leads to an ancient pyramid, and wild horses often roam the streets. See p. 184.
- **Costa Alegre:** Between Puerto Vallarta and Manzanillo, a handful of exclusive boutique hotels cater to the privileged. These resorts, such as Hotelito Desconocido, Las Alamandas, the Careyes Hotel, and El Tamarindo, sit miles from civilization on secluded, pristine beaches. See "Costa Alegre: Puerto Vallarta to Barra de Navidad," p. 345.
- **Punta Mita:** Its ancient inhabitants considered the northern tip of the Bay of Banderas sacred ground. Today the point where the Sea of Cortez, the Pacific Ocean, and Banderas Bay meet has evolved into Mexico's most exclusive residential resort development, with both the Four Seasons and St. Regis located here alongside two world-class golf courses. The beaches are white and the waters crystalline. See p. 326.
- **The Yucatán's Riviera Maya:** Away from the busy resort of Cancún, a string of quiet getaways, including Paamul, Punta Bete, and Xpu-ha, offer tranquility on extraordinarily beautiful beaches. For the kind of sleepy fishing village atmosphere—and low prices—that once belonged to Playa del Carmen, pull off the highway at Puerto Morelos. See chapter 16.
- **Laguna Bacalar:** The spring-fed waters of Lagoon Bacalar make an ideal place to unwind. South of Cancún, near Chetumal, there's nothing around for miles. If you want adventure, you can paddle a kayak on the lake, follow a birding trail, or venture to Belize or nearby Maya ruins. See p. 582.
- **Cerocahui:** Up in the high Sierra Tarahumara, far from where the large tours stop, you'll find a peaceful little town surrounding a former mission. Nearby are two small hotels that are even more peaceful—no phones, no crowds, no traffic, just beautiful mountains and canyons clothed in pine forest. See p. 685.
- **Cabo Pulmo:** It's only a 97km (60-mile) drive from the Los Cabos airport to Cabo Pulmo, yet if the mounded Sierra de La Laguna peaks weren't a dead giveaway for Baja, you could be in the South Pacific. Swaying in the shade of a *palapa*-roofed bungalow at Cabo Pulmo Beach Resort, you won't care where you are—you just won't want to leave. Extensive hiking/mountain-biking trails loop through the mountains for those who prefer the peace of the desert. See p. 708.

7 THE BEST ART, ARCHITECTURE & MUSEUMS

- **Museo Nacional de Antropología:** Among the world's most outstanding museums, the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City contains riches representing 3,000 years of the country's past. Also on view are fabulous artifacts of still-thriving indigenous cultures. The award-winning building, designed by architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, is stunning. See p. 124.
- **Palacio Nacional:** Mexico's national center of government overlooks one of the three biggest public squares in the world (the *zócalo*) and was originally built in 1692 on the site of Moctezuma's "new" palace, to be the home of Hernán Cortez. The top floor, added in the late 1920s, holds a series of stunning Diego Rivera murals depicting the history of Mexico. See p. 126.
- **Palacio de Bellas Artes:** The country's premier venue for the performing arts in Mexico City, this fabulous building is the combined work of several masters. The exterior is early-20th-century Art Nouveau covered in marble; the interior is 1930s Art Deco. See p. 130.
- **The Templo Mayor's Aztec Splendor:** The Templo Mayor and Museo del Templo Mayor constitute an archaeological excavation and museum with 6,000 objects on display. They showcase the variety and splendor of the Aztec Empire as it existed in the historic center of what is now Mexico City. See p. 126.
- **Catedral Metropolitana:** This towering cathedral, begun in 1567 and finished in 1788, blends baroque, neoclassical, and Mexican *churrigueresque* architecture and was constructed primarily from the stones of destroyed Aztec temples. See p. 132.
- **Santa Prisca y San Sebastián Church:** One of Mexico's most impressive baroque churches, completed in 1758, this church in Taxco has an intricately carved facade, an interior decorated with gold-leafed saints and angels, and paintings by Miguel Cabrera, one of Mexico's most famous Colonial-Era artists. See p. 164.
- **La Parroquia:** In San Miguel de Allende, inspired by European Gothic, but lighter and more cheerful, this fanciful church is like a fiesta captured in stone—especially at night, when it's illuminated. See p. 195.
- **Murals of José Clemente Orozco:** Of the great Mexican muralists of the Revolutionary period, Orozco is perhaps the most technical and the most expressive of his generation's concerns. To see his image of Hidalgo bearing down on you from the ceiling of the grand staircase of the Palacio de Gobierno in Guadalajara is to understand almost instantly what he and his *compañeros* were striving to accomplish. See p. 285.
- **Museo Virreinal de Guadalupe:** Six kilometers (3¾ miles) southeast of Zacatecas in the small town of Guadalupe, this Franciscan convent and art museum holds a striking collection of 17th- and 18th-century paintings by such masters as Miguel Cabrera and Cristóbal de Villalpando. The expressive, dramatic works will fascinate art lovers. See p. 236.
- **Morelia's Cathedral:** Sober lines, balanced proportions, a deft blending of architectural styles, and monumental height—Morelia's cathedral is the most beautiful in the country. It's built of brownish-pink stone that turns fiery

rose in the late-afternoon sun. See p. 250.

- **Museo Pantaleón Panduro:** The peoples of Mexico have always placed a high value on pottery as a field of artistic achievement. It's a cultural continuity that spans from pre-Columbian times to the present. And this museum in Tlaquepaque is perhaps the greatest single expression of this love for pottery. Its collection holds prized pieces from the yearly national ceramics competition. See p. 287.
- **Museo Antropología de Xalapa:** Along with the finest examples of Olmec and Totonac sculpture and ceramics, this museum includes the best collection of the Olmec megalithic heads. See p. 470.
- **Capilla del Rosario:** In Puebla's church of Santo Domingo, this chapel is a tour de force of baroque expression, executed in molded plaster, carved wood, Talavera tile, and gold leaf. The overall aim is to overpower the senses. See p. 461
- **Museo Amparo:** This museum in Puebla contains a beautifully displayed, magnificent collection of pre-Columbian art. See p. 462.

8 THE BEST SHOPPING

- **Bazar del Sábado in San Angel:** This festive Saturday market in and around Plaza San Jacinto in colonial San Angel, one of Mexico City's more exclusive southern neighborhoods, offers exceptional crafts of a more sophisticated nature than you'll see in most *mercados.* Furnishings, antiques, and collectibles are also easy to find in surrounding shops and street plazas. See p. 144.
- **Polanco, Mexico City:** This fashionable neighborhood is noted for its designer boutiques, formal dress shops, fine jewelers, and leather-goods offerings. Avenida Presidente Masaryk is Mexico City's equivalent of Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills or the Champs Elysées in Paris. See p. 142.
- **Contemporary Art:** Latin American art is surging in popularity. Galleries in Mexico City feature Mexico's masters and emerging stars. Oaxaca, Puerto Vallarta, and San Miguel de Allende galleries also have excellent selections. See chapters 5, 7, 10, and 12.
- **Taxco Silver:** Mexico's silver capital, Taxco, has hundreds of stores featuring fine jewelry and decorative objects. See p. 157.
- **Talavera Pottery in Puebla & Dolores Hidalgo:** An inheritor of the Moorish legacy of ceramics, Puebla produces some of the most sought-after dinnerware in the world. And the tiles produced there adorn building facades and church domes throughout the area. See chapter 13. Dolores Hidalgo, 40km (25 miles) northwest of San Miguel de Allende, produces attractive, inexpensive Talavera of less traditional design. See p. 204.
- **San Miguel de Allende's Diverse Crafts:** Perhaps it's the influence of the Instituto Allende art school, but something has given storekeepers here savvy about choosing their merchandise. The stores have fewer typical articles of Mexican handicrafts and more interesting and eye-catching works than you'll find in other towns. See p. 198.
- **Pátzcuaro's Fine Crafts:** Michoacán is known for its crafts, and Pátzcuaro is at the center of it all. You can find beautiful cotton textiles, woodcarvings, pottery, lacquerware, woven straw pieces, and copper items in the market, or you can track the object to its source in one of the nearby villages. See p. 262.

- **Decorative Arts in Tlaquepaque & Tonalá:** These two neighborhoods of Guadalajara offer perhaps the most enjoyable shopping in Mexico. Tlaquepaque has attracted sophisticated and wide-ranging shops that sell a wide variety of decorative art. More than 400 artisans have workshops in Tonalá, and you can visit many of them; on market days, wander through blocks and blocks of market stalls to find that one perfect piece. See p. 288.
- **Oaxacan Textiles:** The valley of Oaxaca produces the best weavings and naturally dyed textiles in Mexico; it's also famous for its pottery and colorful, imaginative woodcarvings. See chapter 12.
- **San Cristóbal de las Casas:** Deep in the heart of the Maya highlands, San Cristóbal has shops, open plazas, and markets that feature the distinctive waist-loomed wool and cotton textiles of the region, as well as leather shoes, handsome pottery, amber jewelry, and Guatemalan textiles. Highland Maya Indians sell direct to tourists from their armloads of textiles, pottery, and woodcarvings. See p. 667.
- **Huichol Art in Puerto Vallarta:** One of the last indigenous cultures to remain faithful to their customs, language, and traditions, the Huichol Indians come down from the Sierra Madre to sell their unusual art to Puerto Vallarta galleries. Inspired by visions received during spiritual ceremonies, the Huichol create their art with colorful yarn or beads pressed into wax. See p. 316.

9 THE BEST LUXURY HOTELS

- **Condesa*df*** (Mexico City; www.condesadf.com): The city's trendiest hotel sits in the hip urban neighborhood of Condesa. In an early-20th-century French building, it combines Art Nouveau with contemporary designs and features one of the city's hottest restaurants and rooftop bars. See p. 112.
- **Hotel Four Seasons** (Mexico City; www.fourseasons.com): The standard of excellence in Mexico, and the most classically luxurious option in Mexico City, this hotel captures serenity and elegance in a palace-style building that surrounds a picturesque courtyard. Bonuses include the gracious staff and unique cultural tours on offer. See p. 109.
- **W Mexico City** (Mexico City; www.starwood.com/whotels): Stylish and high-tech, this W is where the young and cool come to stay. With its super-*caliente* red hues and lively bar, the W Mexico City has infused the country's capital with a dose of minimalist urban chic. Luxury extras include expansive bathrooms with circular tubs. See p. 108.
- **Villa Montaña** (Morelia; www.villamontana.com.mx): The Villa Montaña defines perfection. From the layout of the grounds to the decoration of the rooms, every detail has been skillfully handled. The hotel perches on a ridge that overlooks Morelia; from its terraces, guests can survey the city below. The restaurant is one of the city's best. See p. 254.
- **Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita** (north of Puerto Vallarta; www.fourseasons.com): This luxury resort offers an unrivaled location (on a remote, pristine stretch of beach) and the stellar service characteristic of the Four Seasons chain. Also on-site are an expansive spa and two private Jack Nicklaus Signature golf courses. See p. 327.

- **Playa Escondida** (Sayulita; www.playaescondida.com): This dreamy yet unpretentious resort sits on a secluded beach close to Sayulita. Choose from among individually designed beachfront casitas, bungalows in the jungle, or imported teak houses from Thailand constructed in a spectacular bird canyon. You won't want to leave. See p. 329.
- **El Tamarindo Beach & Golf Resort** (btw. Manzanillo and Puerto Vallarta; www.eltamarindoresort.com): The most exclusive resort in Mexico, this breathtaking hotel has just a small selection of casitas hidden amid tropical landscaping or facing the Pacific, with a stunning private oceanfront golf course. Guests are likely to be Hollywood celebrities and rich folk from around the world. It's about 1 hour north of Manzanillo along Costa Alegre. See p. 348.
- **La Casa Que Canta** (Zihuatanejo; www.lacasaquecanta.com): This is one of Mexico's most romantic spots, an unforgettable boutique hotel above Playa La Ropa. *Palapa*-style guest rooms have their own furnished outdoor terraces, many with private plunge pools overlooking the sea. The service, amenities, and cuisine will make you feel like you've landed in heaven. See p. 392.
- **Amuleto** (Zihuatanejo; www.amuleto.net): With a spectacular view of Zihuatanejo Bay that makes it seem like you're on top of the world, this intimate boutique hotel was designed for people seeking seclusion. Amuleto, which houses only six individually designed suites, has a beautiful infinity pool, an outstanding open-air restaurant, and exquisite service. See p. 395.
- **Ritz-Carlton Cancún** (Cancún; www.ritzcarlton.com): Thick carpets, sparkling glass and brass, and rich mahogany surround guests at this hotel, for years the standard-bearer of luxury in Cancún. The service is impeccable, leaving guests with an overall sense of pampered relaxation. Its restaurants are among the best in the city, and there's an outstanding culinary center open to guests and outside visitors. See p. 494.
- **Aqua** (Cancún; www.feel-aqua.com): This is the trendiest resort in Cancún, a privileged spa-retreat for the urban jet set. Completely rebuilt after having been destroyed by Hurricane Wilma, Aqua features spacious oceanview rooms, eight beachfront pools, an invigorating spa, world-class cuisine, and exceptional service. See p. 489.
- **JW Marriott** (Cancún; www.jwmarriottcancun.com): This gorgeous resort affords elegance without pretense, combining classic and Caribbean styling with warm Mexican service. The inviting free-form infinity pool extends to the white-sand beach, and families feel just as comfortable here as romance-seeking couples. The hotel includes a spectacular 3,250-sq.-m (35,000-sq.-ft.) spa. See p. 492.
- **Presidente InterContinental Cozumel** (Cozumel; www.intercontinentalcozumel.com): Surrounded by shady palms, this hotel also has the best beach on the island, right in front of Paraíso Reef. Favorite rooms are the deluxe beachside units with spacious patios and direct access to the beach—you can even order romantic in-room dining on the patios, complete with a trio to serenade you. Excellent scuba diving is accessible right in front. See p. 538.
- **Hacienda Xcanatún** (outskirts of Mérida; www.xcanatun.com): With its large, boldly designed suites built with extravagance in mind, acres of tropical gardens, private spa, excellent restaurant, and ample staff, this hotel masters the difficult trick of being compact in size but expansive in offerings. See p. 601.

- **Hacienda Puerta Campeche** (Campeche; www.luxurycollection.com): Not a hacienda at all, really, this gorgeous hotel was created out of several adjoining colonial houses. This makes for a large property (especially for having only 15 rooms), with an open area in back featuring a pool and tropical gardens under ancient crumbling walls. From any vantage point the hotel is beautiful—both in overall layout and design details. And the service is impeccable. See p. 632.
- **Las Ventanas al Paraíso** (Los Cabos; www.lasventanas.com): Stunning in its relaxed elegance, Las Ventanas has a deluxe European spa, excellent gourmet restaurant, and elegantly appointed rooms and suites. From fireplaces and telescopes to private pools and rooftop terraces, each suite offers a slice of heaven. See p. 715.
- **Esperanza** (Los Cabos; www.esperanzaresort.com): This Auberge resort pampers guests in a desert-chic setting, on a bluff overlooking twin coves. Spacious rooms are enhanced by ample terraces, and the resort's spa and dining services make a stay here even more memorable. See p. 714.

10 THE BEST INEXPENSIVE INNS

- **Holiday Inn Zócalo** (Mexico City; www.hotelescortes.com): This unique Holiday Inn is one of the city's most charming hotels. Located next to the capital's historic central square, it's decorated in a colonial Mexican style with colorful art, antiques, and handicrafts. See p. 111.
- **Red Tree House** (Mexico City; www.theredtreehouse.com): Mexico City is the second-largest city in the world, so it's easy to feel like a number whether you're in a restaurant, on the subway, or in a crowded hotel. But life at the Red Tree House features daily breakfasts in a light and airy kitchen and plenty of space to lounge in the courtyard and garden; the owners have created an atmosphere where every guest feels at home. See p. 113.
- **Hotel San Francisco Plaza** (Guadalajara; www.sanfranciscohotel.com.mx): This two-story colonial-style hotel is a more agreeable place to stay than lodgings that cost twice the price, and it's every bit as comfortable. See p. 278.
- **Hotel Los Flamingos** (Acapulco; www.hotellosflamingos.com): Once a private club for Hollywood's elite, this hotel will enchant you with its pervasive midcentury charm, funky profusion of hot pink, and breathtaking cliff-top views. See p. 373.
- **Paraíso Escondido** (Puerto Escondido; www.hotelparaisoescondido.net): This eclectic inn is a great bargain, especially for the originality of the decor and the excellent service. It's a short walk to the beach and the action along Puerto's main drag. See p. 373.
- **Misión de los Arcos** (Huatulco; www.misiondelosarcos.com): Just 1 block from the central plaza, this elegant hotel has an all-white facade and intriguing decorative touches that give it an inviting feel. Plus, there's shuttle service to the Huatulco beaches. See p. 420.
- **Las Golondrinas** (Oaxaca; www.hotellasgolondrinas.com.mx): We receive more favorable letters about this hotel than about any other in the country. It's small, simple, and colorful, with homey touches of folk art and pathways lined with abundant foliage. See p. 435.
- **Casa Na-Bolom** (San Cristóbal; www.nabolom.org): This beautiful colonial house was once the home and office of Frans and Trudy Blom, and a gathering

place for anthropologists interested in the region's various ethnic groups. It is now a museum and library full of materials about the region and its indigenous peoples. Rooms have fireplaces and are decorated in local fashion. See p. 664.

- **Rey del Caribe Hotel** (Cancún; www.reycaribe.com): An inexpensive retreat in downtown Cancún, this hotel has considered every detail in its quest for an organic and environmentally friendly atmosphere. Set in a tropical garden, the Rey del Caribe provides sunny rooms, warm service, yoga and other themed classes, and healthful dining—all a welcome respite from party-hearty Cancún. See p. 498.
- **Cabo Inn** (Cabo San Lucas; www.caboinnhotel.com): This former bordello is the area's best budget inn. Rooms are small but extra clean and invitingly decorated, amenities are generous, and the owner-managers are friendly and helpful. Ideally located, close to town and near the marina, the inn caters to sportfishers. See p. 727.

11 THE BEST SPA RESORTS

- **El Santuario Resort & Spa** (Valle de Bravo; www.elsantuario.com): The suites at this spa resort, built into the foot of a quartz mountain, overlook a vast lake. A 1,858-sq.-m (19,999-sq.-ft.) spa offers a wealth of therapies, plus yoga, Pilates, Tai Chi, and meditation classes. See p. 174.
- **Misión Del Sol Resort & Spa** (Cuernavaca; www.misiondelsol.com): This is Mexico's finest spa resort, with every architectural and functional detail designed to soothe body and soul—from meditation rooms to reflexology showers, to magnets under your mattress. The sumptuous, full-service spa and fitness center and delicious vegetarian cuisine make this a heavenly base for personal renewal. See p. 182.
- **Hotel Ixtapan Spa & Golf Resort** (Ixtapan; www.hotelixtapan.com): In operation since 1939, this resort is a classic, traditional spa with consistently upgraded amenities and services. It's also close to the region's renowned thermal baths. See p. 170.
- **Paradise Village** (Nuevo Vallarta; www.paradisevillage.com): Excellent fitness facilities combined with pampering-yet-affordable spa services make this one of the best all-around spas in Mexico. It actively promotes the beneficial properties of indigenous Mexican spa therapies and natural treatments. See p. 324.
- **Pueblo Bonito Emerald Bay** (Mazatlán; www.pueblobonitoemeraldbay.com): The resort's luxury spa is Mazatlán's best (and most expensive), offering a tempting variety of international spa treatments and more traditional Mexican rituals, as well as massage therapies, body scrubs, and facials. The high tech spa is managed by an extremely well-trained staff. See p. 337.
- **Le Méridien Cancún Resort & Spa** (Cancún; www.meridiencancun.com.mx): The Spa del Mar is a state-of-the-art, 1,400-sq.-m (15,069-sq.-ft.) facility bordering the brilliant Caribbean. It has the most complete spa in the area, with inhalation rooms, saunas, steam, Jacuzzis, cold plunges, Swiss showers, a cascading waterfall whirlpool, and 14 treatment rooms. See p. 492.
- **ME** (Cancún; www.mecancun.travel): The ultrachic Yhi Spa of Cancún's ME hotel overlooks the ocean and offers body glows and exfoliations, aromatherapy massages, body masks, and wraps—this is a place to indulge yourself until you're convinced that you've landed in heaven. See p. 496.

- **The Tides Riviera Maya** (north of Playa del Carmen; www.tidesriviera maya.com): Small, secluded, and supremely private, the Tides offers extraordinary personal service—some villas come with a major-domo on call—and spa treatments. Rooms are spread throughout the jungle, and there's a beautiful seaside pool and restaurant. See p. 549.
- **Rancho La Puerta** (Baja Norte; www. rancholapuerta.com): One of Mexico's best-known spas, Rancho La Puerta is a spa-vacation pioneer, having opened its doors (at the time, tent flaps) in 1940. A steady stream of guests returns to this pristine countryside for the constantly expanding facilities, spa services, and outdoor opportunities. See p. 755.

12 THE BEST MEXICAN FOOD & DRINK

- **La Opera** (Mexico City; ✆ **55/5512-8959**): This legendary cantina, in the style of an opulent European cafe, has attracted the capital's most illustrious personalities for decades—Pancho Villa shot a still-visible hole through the roof. In the historic center, it doubles as a restaurant, but it's best as a late-afternoon watering hole. See p. 119.
- **El Sacromonte** (Guadalajara; ✆ **33/3825-5447**): Various dishes delight the senses with novel tastes and textures and skillful presentation. The menu describes each dish in Spanish couplets. See p. 279.
- **Adobe Fonda** (Tlaquepaque; ✆ **33/3657-2792**): Delicious Mexican food is served inside one of those gorgeous decorative arts stores that line Tlaquepaque's Calle Independencia. The point of departure for the food is with some uncommon Mexican recipes, which are then given sparkling Italian and Argentine accents. See p. 279.
- **Daiquiri Dick's** (Puerto Vallarta; www. ddpv.com): A Vallarta institution, this excellent beachfront restaurant combines scrumptious Mediterranean cuisine with excellent service and a lovely setting. Come for fresh fish creatively prepared and wash it down with a daiquiri or two. You'll find this casual restaurant as compelling for a romantic occasion as for a fun night out with friends. See p. 308.
- **Trio** (Puerto Vallarta; www.triopv. com): Most locals will tell you Trio is their favorite restaurant in Vallarta, a modest but stylish cafe where chef-owners Bernhard Güth and Ulf Henricksson's undeniable passion for food imbues each of the delicious Mexican and Mediterranean dishes. See p. 306.
- **Le Fort** (Bucerías; www.lefort.com. mx): Diners are treated to a culinary show by acclaimed chef Gilles Le Fort followed by the chance to sit down with him and other guests in a communal gourmet dinner. The pre-fixe menu includes three courses and matching wines, and the table seats 16. See p. 325
- **Zibu** (Acapulco; ✆ **744/433-3058**): This chic open-air restaurant combines Mexican and Thai architectural and culinary styles to create one of the nation's best dining experiences, including a breathtaking view of the sea. See p. 375.
- **Los Flamingos** (Acapulco; www.hotel losflamingos.com/restaurant.html): If you're in Acapulco on a Thursday, you can enjoy a bowl of pozole, a traditional hominy-and-meat stew. Although you'll find it served at lunchtime throughout town, the best place to savor it is at Los Flamingos' cliff-top restaurant. Order a

Coco Loco to accompany it, and you're in for a real treat. See p. 373.

- **Mariscos Villa Rica Mocambo** (Veracruz; ✆ **229/922-2113**): Nobody else does seafood the way Veracruz does seafood, and this restaurant is the showcase for the region's cuisine. See p. 476.
- **The Club Grill** (in the Ritz-Carlton Cancún; ✆ **998/881-0808**): Two of the only AAA three diamond restaurants in all of Mexico sit inside the Ritz-Carlton Cancún under the direction of Executive Chef Rainer Zinngrebe, who also operates a world-class culinary center here. Consider this formal restaurant for a special occasion; just about anything you order will be unforgettable. See p. 499.
- **Labná** (Ciudad Cancún; www.labna.com): In Cancún's old downtown, this authentic Yucatecan restaurant offers deliciously unusual cuisine from the region like lime soup, *poc chuc,* and pork *pibil.* The gracious staff takes good care of diners, ensuring they have an enriching experience. See p. 503.
- **La Pigua** (Campeche; ✆ **981/811-3365**): Campeche's regional specialty is seafood, and nowhere else will you find seafood like this. Mexican caviar, coconut-battered shrimp, and chiles stuffed with shark are just a few of the unique specialties. Thinking about La Pigua's pompano in a fine green herb sauce makes me want to start checking flight schedules. See p. 633.
- **Don Emiliano** (downtown San José del Cabo; www.donemiliano.com.mx): Don Emiliano wields farm-fresh ingredients laced with Mexican tradition and emerges from the kitchen with modern delights such as stepped-up *chile en nogada* for Día de Independencia and *lemon atole* with candied pumpkin for Day of the Dead. Apart from holiday menus, don't miss the regular menu, which combines the likes of locally made cheeses with roasted tomatillos and dried hibiscus flowers with beef tenderloin. See p. 712.
- **Palapa Azul** (La Paz; ✆ **612/122-1801**): Best plucked straight from the ocean, *almejas* (clams) can be found everywhere from roadside shacks to gourmet restaurants in Baja Sur and are prepared raw with lime and salsa or baked inside their shells. The best place to enjoy this local treat is Palapa Azul on La Paz's Tecolote beach. The shells are stuffed with cheese, jalapeños, bacon, butter, tomatoes, and a secret ingredient the chef isn't willing to reveal. They are then wrapped in aluminum foil and tossed into an oven. The result is delectable and so is the view of the Sea of Cortez you will enjoy while eating your meal. See p. 742.

2 Mexico in Depth

by Christine Delsol

Ever since Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortez set sail in 1519 to find a world of gold and riches hidden beyond the sea, curious travelers have been coming to this land in search of "the real" Mexico. Like all timeworn myths, such a place remains just out of reach. Over the years, countless novelists and travel writers have claimed to have found something real while strolling the sun-parched cobblestone streets of Mérida, nesting in the steamy jungles of Chiapas, or swooning in the arms of a Mexican lover.

My grandmother's Mexico was a ranch in California's Central Valley, where her Mexican parents and grandparents carved out a pretty good, if laborious, life when the land was Mexico's northern outpost. My introduction to the country as a child was a day trip across the border while visiting my uncle in El Paso, Texas; all I can remember is a horrifying bullfight that I am still trying to forget. Was that the real Mexico? Ten years later, I drove the length of the Baja peninsula in my old Dodge Dart on the newly completed Hwy. 1 and found dusty crossroads where hastily erected prefab buildings next to *bodeguitas* served as hotels—and then La Paz, with its leafy tropical languor, beguiling *malecón,* and air-conditioned hotels. The real Mexico?

The answer, of course, is all of the above, and more. But my "real Mexico" lies in the generosity of its people, which is extended liberally to visitors. I have been adopted by farm families who gave me tent space under their *palapa* in return for paying a meager sum to share their meals, ushered by an office worker to his family's home for siesta so we could continue our conversation, and watched gape-jawed as a *campesino* scaled a 12m (40-ft.) palm to fell a coconut and hand it to me with a straw after I casually asked what he grows on his farm. I have been stopped by policemen and then escorted to my destination 32km (20 miles) away when I confessed that I was lost. The one constant within this mosaic of experiences is a warmth and compulsion to share, recognizing no regional or economic boundaries and defying hardship, corruption, and natural disaster.

1 MEXICO TODAY: VIVA LA VIDA

Our art movement is not needed in this country.
–French surrealist artist André Bretón upon visiting Mexico

Despite the drug war's bloody undercurrents, corrupt politicians and their burdensome bureaucracy, and the low wages and swift inflation that the average citizen endures on a daily basis, Mexicans maintain a robust zeal for life with all its idiosyncrasies. A wild sense of humor, an appetite for good food, and the ability to make time for friends, family, and fiesta are all essential to life in Mexico today.

Small wonder that magic realism is a popular theme in contemporary Mexican literature. The ghost of Juan Preciado's father floats through his journey like a graveyard breeze in Juan Rulfo's ***Pedro Páramo;*** the star-crossed lovers in Laura

Esquivel's ***Like Water for Chocolate*** burn their house down with their searing love-making. The more time you spend in Mexico, the more this fiction seems based in fact.

When André Bretón arrived here in 1938, his guides included a feisty communist with a unibrow, as famous for her pre-Hispanic wardrobe as for her explicit paintings, and her husband, a frog-faced muralist with a list of sexual conquests as long as his paintbrush. Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera introduced the French artist to a country of spontaneous 6-hour parades and, at the time, the newly discovered and mystifying colossal helmeted-head sculptures of the ancient Olmec culture.

If Bretón were to visit in the 21st century, he would likely find this country just as incredible. Though it is marginally more sedate today, Mexico is still a land where one man can turn the world's attention to the poverty in the steaming southern jungles, never once removing his woolen ski mask; a culture where women dance with flaming candles balanced on their heads; a collection of peoples who affectionately call death "Katrina" and welcome her with flowers, food, and prayer; and a nation where a notorious drug dealer is honored with hit radio songs for escaping prison in a laundry cart. This is the magic that animates the mad and complex Mexican life.

Even everyday activities can be surreal. Naked protesters regularly interrupt traffic on one of the world's busiest avenues, Maya temples serve as the backdrop for train stations, and grown men fly through the air, tethered to a pole, in front of the National Anthropology Museum.

Sundays bring a degree of sanctity, thanks largely to the vast majority of the population that considers itself Catholic. Normally traffic-choked streets and congested plazas are eerily empty on the seventh day, making it virtually impossible to get any work done—why would you want to?—but wonderful for an aimless stroll.

Lately, news about Mexico tends to be fraught with brazen drug violence and political strife. But Mexicans live by the proverb, *"No hay mal que por bien no venga"* ("There is no bad that comes without good"); even these trying times are sure to reveal their own hidden meaning, eventually.

Meanwhile, Mexico moves forward despite the saddening current events. In 2010 the country celebrated both the centennial of the Mexican revolution and the bicentennial of the independence movement. Mexico City got busy as soon as gay marriage was legalized, working with travel agencies to put special travel packages together in a bid to become the next Río or San Francisco. And in 2011, Mexico will host both the Pan American Games and the World Cup, spurring renovation and new hotels from Monterrey to Puerto Vallarta to Guadalajara to the capital.

What's Your Hurry?

A common phrase among Mexicans is *ahorita,* which translates loosely to "a little bit of right now." Depending on the context, it can mean either 5 seconds from now, or a quarter to never. This little phrase illustrates that Mexicans have a different concept of time than their English-speaking neighbors to the north, and that life in Mexico often moves at a slower pace. An imperfect appreciation of this difference can lead to misunderstandings and/or unnecessary frustration. If you're staying in the Sonoran desert in summer and your hotel says the air-conditioning will be fixed *ahorita,* you just might want to pick up a paper fan at the market.

2 LOOKING BACK AT MEXICO

PRE-HISPANIC MEXICANS

The earliest "Mexicans" were Stone Age hunter-gatherers from the north, descendants of a race that probably crossed the Bering Strait and reached North America around 12,000 B.C. They arrived in what is now Mexico by 10,000 B.C. Sometime between 5200 and 1500 B.C., in what is known as the **Archaic period,** they began practicing agriculture and domesticating animals.

The Olmecs & Maya (The Pre-Classic Period 1500 B.C.–A.D. 300)

Agriculture eventually yielded enough food to support large communities, with enough surplus to free some people from agricultural work. A civilization emerged that we call the **Olmec**—an enigmatic people who settled the coast of today's Tabasco and Veracruz states. Anthropologists regard them as Mesoamerica's mother culture because they established a pattern for later civilizations, developing a basic calendar, devising principles of urban architecture, and originating the cult of the jaguar and the sacredness of jade. They likely also bequeathed the sacred ball game found throughout Mesoamerican culture.

A defining feature of the Olmec was its colossal carved stone heads, several examples of which reside today in Villahermosa, Tabasco, and Xalapa, Veracruz. These sculptures were immense projects, sculpted from basalt stone mined miles inland and transported to the coast, probably by river rafts. Their rounded, baby-faced look, marked by a peculiar, high-arched lip—a "jaguar mouth"—is an identifying mark of Olmec sculpture.

As Olmec cities began declining, other civilizations rose to the south and north. The **Maya** civilization, developing around 500 B.C. in the late pre-Classic period, perfected the Olmec calendar and developed an ornate system of hieroglyphic writing. North of the Valley of Mexico, a city we know as **Teotihuacán** also began its long life. In the valley of Oaxaca, construction of the Zapotec city of **Monte Albán** began. These cultures would shape the next age of Mesoamerica.

Teotihuacán, Monte Albán & Palenque: The Classic Period (A.D. 300–900)

The rise and fall of these three centers of civilization defines this period—the heyday of pre-Columbian Mesoamerican culture and art. Achievements include the pyramids and palaces in Teotihuacán; the ceremonial center of Monte Albán; and the temple complexes and pyramids of Palenque and Calakmul.

The inhabitants of **Teotihuacán** (100 B.C.–A.D. 700), near present-day Mexico City, built a well-organized city that is thought to have had 200,000 inhabitants or more, covering 30 sq. km (12 sq. miles) and built on a grid with streams channeled to follow the city's plan. Led by an industrious and literate ruling class, its wide-ranging influence included the feathered serpent god, Quetzalcóatl, which joined the pantheons of the Toltec, Maya and other cultures.

Farther south, the **Zapotec,** influenced by the Olmec, raised an impressive civilization in the Oaxaca region. Their principal cities were **Monte Albán,** inhabited by an elite class of merchants and artisans, and **Mitla,** reserved for the high priests.

Toltecs & Aztec Invasions: The Post-Classic Period (A.D. 900–1521)

During this period, cultural and social development were replaced by a trend of violent warfare that begat the growth of an

Malinche: Mexico's First Tour Guide

When Cortez gained control in present-day Tabasco, the *Cacique,* or military chief, presented him with 20 female slaves in an effort to pacify the powerful invader. Among them was **Malinche,** the beautiful daughter of a fallen Aztec chief, whose mother had sold her off after her younger half-brother was born, thus denying her the position of rightful heir. In addition to the Aztec's Náhuatl language, she spoke Yucatec Maya, and her language skills were a boon to Cortez. One member of his entourage was Franciscan Friar Jerónimo de Aguilar, who had been shipwrecked in the Yucatán peninsula in 1511. Unlike the rest of their shipmates, Aguilar and his companion, Gonzalo Guerrero, managed to escape human sacrifice and ended up in friendlier interior territories, where they picked up the local Yucatec Mayan language.

When Cortez came back through the Yucatán in 1519, Guerrero refused to leave his new life as an important chieftain (a statue outside of Chetumal's **Museo de la Cultura Maya** honors him as the symbolic father of the mestizos), but Aguilar joined the party. With Aguilar and Malinche's help, Cortez was able to negotiate with Aztec tribes by translating from Náhuatl to Yucatec Mayan, to Spanish, and vice versa. Malinche eventually learned Spanish—some believe in as little as 3 months—and Aguilar's services were no longer needed.

Malinche proved to be an invaluable asset to Cortez as he toppled the Aztec empire. Eventually, she also became the mother of two of his children, and ironically, finally achieved the status denied her as a young girl. Though many still consider her to be a traitor to her people, she is also credited with being the mother of the **mestizo** (mixed European and indigenous) race.

empire. The **Toltec** of central Mexico established their capital at Tula in the 10th century. They revered a god known as **Tezcatlipoca,** or "smoking mirror," who later became an Aztec god. Originally one of the barbarous hordes that periodically migrated from the north, they were influenced by remnants of Teotihuacán culture at some point and adopted Quetzalcóatl, who was elevated to a twin god with Tezcatlipoca. The Toltec's large military class was divided into orders symbolized by animals. With as many as 40,000 people at its height, Tula spread its influence across Mesoamerica. But its might was played out by the 13th century, probably because of civil war and battles with northern invaders.

The **Aztecs,** who first served as mercenaries for established cities in the Valley of Mexico, acquired an unwanted, marshy piece of land in the middle of Lake Texcoco for their settlement. It eventually grew into the island city of Tenochtitlán, which lies today beneath the foundations of Mexico City. Through aggressive diplomacy and military action, the Aztec soon conquered central Mexico and extended their rule east to the Gulf Coast and south to the valley of Oaxaca.

During this later period, the Maya civilization flourished in northern Yucatán, especially in cities such as Chichén Itzá, Uxmal, and the more recently discovered Ek Balaam.

It's All in the Game

The ancient Maya played a game with a solid rubber ball of such importance that ball courts appear in virtually every Maya city (Bonampak is a rare exception). They were laid out in an I shape with sloping walls in the center. Similar ball courts have been found as far south as Nicaragua and as far north as Arizona.

What little we know of this sacred game comes from ancient depictions, the Popol Vuh (the Maya "bible"), and early accounts by the Spanish. The ball was heavy and could inflict injury. Wearing thick padding and protective gear, players formed teams of 2 to 10 members, the object being to propel the ball through a stone ring or other goal using mainly the hips.

We also know the ball game was part sport and part religious ritual affirming a cosmological belief system. It sometimes involved sacrifice, though whether the winners, the losers, or perhaps prisoners of war lost their heads is unclear. In the Popol Vuh, the hero twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque challenge the lords of the underworld to a ball game, played in part with the head of one brother. Eventually, the twins win and are allowed to return to the world of the living. The ball game, then, might have been one way to cheat the underworld.

All Mesoamerican cultures apparently practiced human sacrifice, but the Aztecs brought it to another level. During the 15th century, an estimated 20,000 to 250,000 sacrifices were carried out each year. The victims had usually been taken prisoner during battle and are believed to have accepted their fate with dignity, as sacrifice was seen as both an honorable way to die and a direct ticket to paradise.

CORTEZ, MOCTEZUMA & THE SPANISH CONQUEST

In 1517, the first Spaniards arrived in what is today known as Mexico and skirmished with Maya Indians off the Yucatán coast. A shipwreck left several Spaniards stranded as expedition, under **Hernán Cortez,** landed on Cozumel in February 1519. The coastal Maya were happy to tell Cortez about the gold and riches of the Aztec empire in central Mexico. Disobeying all orders from his superior, the governor of Cuba, Cortez promptly sailed into the Gulf of Mexico and landed at what is now Veracruz.

Cortez arrived when the Aztec empire was at the height of its wealth and power. **Moctezuma II** ruled over the central and southern highlands and extracted tribute from lowland peoples. His greatest temples were plated with gold and encrusted with the blood of sacrificial captives. A fool, a mystic, and something of a coward, Moctezuma dithered in Tenochtitlán, sending messengers with gifts and suggestions that Cortez leave. Meanwhile, Cortez blustered and negotiated his way into the highlands, cloaking his intentions. Moctezuma, terrified by the Spaniard's military tactics and technology, was convinced that Cortez was the god Quetzalcóatl making his long-awaited return. By the time he arrived in the Aztec capital, Cortez had accumulated 6,000 indigenous allies who resented paying tribute to the Aztec. In November 1519, he took Moctezuma hostage in an effort to leverage control of the empire.

The Return of Quetzalcóatl

The exact nature of the Toltec influence on the Maya is a subject of debate, but an intriguing myth in central Mexico tells of **Quetzalcóatl** quarreling with Tezcatlipoca and being tricked into leaving Tula. Quetzalcóatl heads east toward the morning star, vowing to return. In the language of myth, this could be a metaphor for a civil war between two factions in Tula, each led by the priesthood of a particular god. Might the losing faction have migrated to the Yucatán and later ruled Chichén Itzá? Perhaps. What we do know is that this myth of Quetzalcóatl's eventual return became, in the hands of the Spanish, a powerful weapon of conquest.

In the middle of Cortez's manipulations, another Spanish expedition arrived with orders to end Cortez's unauthorized mission. Cortez hastened back to the coast, routed the rival force, and persuaded the vanquished to join him on his return to Tenochtitlán. The capital had erupted in his absence, and the Aztec chased his garrison out of the city. Moctezuma was killed during the attack—whether by the Aztec or the Spaniards is not clear. For a year and a half, Cortez laid siege to Tenochtitlán, aided by rival Indians and a devastating smallpox epidemic. When the Aztec capital fell, all of central Mexico lay at the conquerors' feet, vastly expanding the Spanish empire. The king legitimized Cortez's victorious pirate expedition after the fact and ordered the forced conversion to Christianity of the new colony, to be called New Spain. By 1540, New Spain included possessions from Vancouver to Panama. In the 2 centuries that followed, Franciscan and Augustinian friars converted millions of Indians to Christianity, and Spanish lords built huge feudal estates with Indian farmers serving as serfs. Cortez's booty of silver and gold made Spain the wealthiest country in Europe.

THE RISE OF MEXICO CITY & SPANISH COLONIALISM

Cortez set about building a new city upon the ruins of the Aztec capital, collecting the tributes, some of them in labor, that the Indians once paid to Moctezuma. This model for building the new colony backfired over the next century, as the workforce perished from diseases imported by the Spaniards.

Over the 3 centuries of colonial rule, 61 viceroys governed Mexico while Spain grew rich from New World gold and silver chiseled out by Indian labor. The Spanish elite built lavish homes filled with ornate furniture and draped themselves in imported velvets, satins, and jewels. Under the new class system, those born in Spain *(peninsulares)* were considered superior to Spaniards born in Mexico *(criollos)*. People of other races and the *castas* (Spanish-Indian, Spanish-African, or Indian-African mixes) occupied society's bottom rungs.

Criollo discontent with Spanish rule simmered for years over taxes, royal monopolies, bureaucracy, *peninsulares'* superiority, restrictions on commerce with Spain and other countries, and the 1767 expulsion of the Jesuits. In 1808, **Napoleon** invaded Spain, deposed Charles IV

and crowned his brother **Joseph Bonaparte.** To many in Mexico, allegiance to France was unthinkable. The next logical step was revolt.

HIDALGO, JUAREZ & MEXICO'S INDEPENDENCE

In 1810, **Father Miguel Hidalgo** set off the rebellion with his *grito,* the fabled cry for independence, from his church in the town of Dolores, Guanajuato. With **Ignacio Allende** and a citizen army, Hidalgo marched toward Mexico City. Although he ultimately failed and was executed, Hidalgo is honored as "the Father of Mexican Independence." Another priest, José María Morelos, kept the revolt alive with several successful campaigns until he, too, was captured and executed in 1815.

When the Spanish king who replaced Joseph Bonaparte decided to institute social reforms in the colonies, Mexico's conservative powers concluded they didn't need Spain after all. Royalist **Agustín de Iturbide** defected in 1821 and conspired with the rebels to declare independence from Spain, with himself as emperor. However, internal dissension quickly deposed Iturbide, and Mexico was instead proclaimed a republic.

The young, politically unstable nation ran through 36 presidents in 22 years, during which it lost half its territory in the disastrous **Mexican-American War (1846-48).** The central figure, **Antonio López de Santa Anna,** was flexible enough in those volatile days to portray himself variously as a liberal, a conservative, a federalist, and a centralist. He assumed the presidency no fewer than 11 times and just might hold the record for frequency of exile. He was ousted for good in 1855 and finished his days in Venezuela.

Amid continuing political instability, conservative forces, with some encouragement from Napoleon III, hit upon the idea of bringing in a Habsburg to regain control. Archduke Maximilian of Austria accepted the position of emperor with the support of French forces, but ragtag

A Sticky Habit

Cigar smoking and gum chewing are two pleasures we have the Maya to thank for. Gum, the more innocuous of the two, comes from the sap of a species of zapote tree that grows in the Yucatán and Guatemala. Chewing releases its natural sugars, producing a mild, agreeable taste. The chewing-gum habit spread from the Maya to other cultures and eventually to the non-Indian population. In the second half of the 19th century, a Mexican (said to have been Gen. Santa Anna) introduced gum to the American Thomas Adams, who realized that it could be sweetened further and given other flavors. He marketed chewing gum in the U.S. with great success. Chemists have since figured out how to synthesize the gum, but the sap is still collected in parts of the Yucatán and Guatemala for making natural chewing gum. *Chicle* is the Spanish word, originally from the Náhuatl (Aztec) *tzictli,* and those who live in the forest and collect the sap are *chicleros.* Because the tree takes so long to produce more sap, there is no way to cultivate it commercially, so it is still collected in the wild.

Mexican troops defeated the well-equipped French in a battle near Puebla in 1862 (now celebrated as **Cinco de Mayo**). A more successful second attempt seated Ferdinand Maximilian Joseph as emperor. Ferdinand Maximilian developed a genuine fondness for the Mexican people and upheld such policies as land reforms, religious freedom, and extending the right to vote beyond the landholding class. But he never overcame the opposition of Mexican extremists or the refusal of many foreign countries, including the United States, to recognize his government. After 3 years of civil war, the French finally abandoned the emperor's cause, leaving Maximilian to be captured and executed in 1867.

Maximilian's adversary and successor (as president of Mexico) was **Benito Juárez,** a Zapotec Indian lawyer and one of Mexico's greatest heroes. Juárez did his best to unify and strengthen his country before dying of a heart attack in 1872; his and his plans and visions bore fruit for decades.

ZAPATA, PANCHO VILLA & THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION

A few years after Juárez's death, one of his generals, **Porfirio Díaz,** took power in a coup. He ruled Mexico from 1877 to 1911, a period now called the Porfiriato. He maintained his rule through repression and by courting the favor of powerful nations. Generous in his dealings with foreign investors, Díaz became the archetypal *entreguista* (one who sells out his country for private gain). With foreign investment came the concentration of great wealth in a few hands, and social conditions worsened.

In 1910, Francisco Madero called for armed rebellion, which became the **Mexican Revolution** (La Revolución in Mexico; the revolution against Spain is the Guerra de Independencia). Díaz was exiled and is buried in Paris. Madero became president, but **Victoriano Huerta,** in collusion with U.S. ambassador Henry Lane Wilson, betrayed and executed him in 1913. Those who had answered Madero's call responded again—to the great peasant hero **Emiliano Zapata** in the south, and to the seemingly invincible **Pancho Villa** in the central north, flanked by Álvaro Obregón and Venustiano Carranza. They eventually expelled Huerta and began hashing out a new constitution.

For a few years, Carranza, Obregón, and Villa fought among themselves; Zapata did not seek national power, though he fought tenaciously for land for the peasants. Carranza, who was president at the time, betrayed and assassinated Zapata. Obregón finally consolidated power and probably had Carranza assassinated. He, in turn, was assassinated when he tried to break one of the tenets of the revolution—no reelection. His successor, Plutarco Elias Calles, learned this lesson well, installing one puppet president after another, until **Lázaro Cárdenas,** elected in 1934, exiled him. At last, the Revolution appeared to have a chance. Cárdenas implemented massive land redistribution, nationalized the oil industry, instituted many other reforms, and gave shape to the ruling political party (precursor to today's **Partido Revolucionario Institucional,** or **PRI**). Cárdenas is practically canonized by most Mexicans.

A NEW DEMOCRACY

The presidents who followed were noted more for graft than for leadership, and the party's reform principles were abandoned. Ten days before the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City, the government quashed a student demonstration in the Tlatelolco district, killing several hundred people. Though the PRI maintained its grip on power, it lost all semblance of being a progressive party. Economic progress, particularly in the form of large development projects—most famously a

¡Hola!

Mexicans place paramount value on family and friends, social gatherings, and living in the present; worrying about the future takes a back seat. They are always ready to meet with friends for a drink or a cup of coffee or attend a family get-together. Social greetings and introductions are their own mini-rituals, and learning all of the intricacies could take a lifetime. The most important courtesy to remember is to acknowledge people individually; a general wave hello to the whole room doesn't cut it. You won't find more amiable people anywhere on Earth, and you can invite the full force of their natural gregariousness by being mindful of some social norms. Here's a start:

Slow Down The "*mañana* time" stereotype is mostly true. Life obeys slower rhythms, and "on time" is a flexible concept. Arriving 30 minutes to 2 hours late to a party in someone's home is acceptable—in fact, coming at the specified hour would be rude, for your hosts almost certainly will not be ready. Here's the "mostly" part: Dinner invitations are less flexible; arrive within 30 minutes of the appointed hour. And do be on time for business appointments, public performances, weddings, and funerals.

Meet & Greet Don't short-circuit the hellos and goodbyes; social values trump time efficiency. A Mexican must at least say "¡Buenos días!" even to strangers. When meeting a group of people, each is greeted separately, no matter how long it takes. Handshakes, *abrazos* (embraces), and, among women, kisses abound. Stick to handshakes until your host decides you rate a more intimate greeting. But don't back away from an embrace—that would amount to a rejection of friendship.

Have a Little Respect Mexicans are lavish with titles of respect, so dispense *señor, señora, and señorita* (Mr., Mrs., Miss) freely. Teachers, lawyers, architects, and other professionals have earned the right to a title: *licenciado* for lawyers (and some other professions requiring a college degree), *maestro* or *maestra* for elementary schoolteachers, *profesor* or *profesora* for secondary or college teachers. Mexicans have two surnames, father's first and mother's second. Both appear on business cards (the mother's name might be abbreviated to an initial), but when addressing people, use just the first (paternal) surname.

Don't Get Huffy Mexicans are genuinely interested in foreigners. If they stare, it's friendly curiosity. They like to practice their English and will ask about family, friends, money, and other intimate matters. If you are over 30 and have no children, they may express deep concern. Don't take it personally.

Show Some Culture Mexicans tend to divide the world into the well-raised and cultured *(bien educado)* and the poorly raised *(mal educado)*. Don't be shy about trying out your rudimentary Spanish; even the most elementary attempt is appreciated because it shows your interest in the culture. It's no big deal to be categorized as a foreigner; what's important is to be pegged a cultured foreigner and not one of the barbarians.

skinny, unpopulated sandbar called Cancún—became the PRI's sole basis for legitimacy.

The government weathered several bouts of social unrest caused by periodic devaluations of the peso. But in 1985, the devastating **Mexico City earthquake** brought down many of the government's new, supposedly earthquake-proof buildings, exposing the widespread corruption that had fostered the shoddy construction and triggering heavy criticism of the government's relief efforts.

A political and military **uprising in Chiapas** and the occupation of San Cristóbal de las Casas in 1994 focused world attention on Mexico's profound social problems. A new political force, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, or EZLN (Zapatista National Liberation Army), skillfully publicized the plight of the peasant.

In the years that followed, opposition political parties grew in power and legitimacy. Facing widespread public discontent at home as well as pressure and scrutiny abroad, the PRI began to concede defeat in state and congressional elections throughout the '90s. Party reformers were able to make changes over the objections of many hard-liners. They instituted a partial system of primary elections to give greater voice to the rank and file. This made for successful campaigns in several states, but in other states the old-style party leaders held on to their right to appoint the official party candidate. Internal strife reached a climax with the 1994 assassination of the party's presidential candidate, Luis Donaldo Colosio. A quick compromise resulted in the nomination of **Ernesto Zedillo** for president. Once in power, Zedillo proved to be a reformer. Over his 6-year term, he steadily led the country toward open and fair elections by strengthening the electoral process, gaining the public's confidence, and getting his own party to accept the possibility of losing power.

Vicente Fox

In 2000, Zedillo shepherded Mexico's first true elections in 70 years of one-party rule. The winner, by a landslide, was PAN (Partido Acción Nacional) candidate **Vicente Fox,** who ran on a platform of economic liberalization and anti-corruption. Many Mexicans voted for him simply to see if their voices would be heard and the PRI would relinquish power.

During Fox's presidency, the three main political parties had to adjust to the new realty of power sharing. The old government party, the PRI, still had a large infrastructure for getting out the vote and still controlled several state governments. Fox's center-right PAN had control of the presidency and most seats in the legislature, while the center-left PRD (Partido de la Revolución Democrática, or Democratic Revolution Party) controlled the government of Mexico City and a few southern states. To their credit, they handled the transition better than expected.

But by the end of Fox's term, Mexico's experiment with pluralistic democracy faced a crisis. Fox hadn't proved to be the master politician that the situation required. His efforts to build a coalition with segments of the PRI foundered, and his government failed to pass most of its initiatives. In the off-year elections of 2004, PAN lost many seats in the legislature and several governorships.

The PRI was in an excellent position for the presidential election of 2006, until party leader Roberto Madrazo sought to become the nominee in 2005 without going through primary elections. His power plays won him the nomination but deeply splintered the party; worse, they reminded voters of the old days when their votes hadn't counted for anything.

THE 2006 ELECTION

Meanwhile, Mexico City mayor **Andrés Manuel López Obrador** (AMLO, for short) was the PRD's clear nominee. He

was tremendously popular for creating programs such as a pension for the city's elderly, and he was genuinely interested in helping the poor. Still, there was something unsettling about his habit of taking political opposition personally.

The bitter campaign between AMLO and PAN candidate **Felipe Calderón,** a social conservative and devout Catholic who believes in privatization and market forces, followed by a historically close election in the summer of 2006, was pure political circus. When the elections tribunal finally declared Calderón the winner more than a month later, AMLO refused to recognize the verdict. He launched a protest in grand Mexico City style that clogged the streets and infuriated commuters for a month. Supporters even took over the legislative chambers in an effort to physically prevent Calderón from taking office.

The contretemps diminished AMLO's popularity, and members of his party saw him as a nuisance best forgotten. However, AMLO still has a large following, and the recession brought new currency to his leftist message. He mustered tens of thousands of supporters in 2009 for a rally in Mexico City's *zócalo,* and in January 2010, he announced he would make another run for the presidency in 2012, with Mexico City mayor Marcelo Ebrard as his major rival for the PRD nomination.

The Calderón Presidency

Despite the controversy surrounding his election, Calderón quickly asserted his authority. Just 15 days after his December 2006 swearing-in, Calderón sent thousands of troops to his home state of Michoacán to quell the lucrative drug trade. He also created 150,000 temporary jobs and raised military pay.

After his rocky acquisition of power, won with only 35% of the popular vote, Calderón won over more of the public with his no-nonsense approach. He closed his first year in office with a 65% approval rating, which dropped to around 60% the following year as drug-related violence reached fever pitch but bounced back to 65% in 2009. Whether his presidency will be considered as successful is still up for debate, but it's certainly been an uphill battle that not everyone would be willing to fight.

While the rest of the world focused on the U.S. presidential election on November 4, 2008, Mexicans were distracted by a tragic event in their capital. A small Lear Jet carrying Mexican Secretary of the Interior Juan Camilo Mouriño and other high-ranking officials crashed on busy Paseo de la Reforma, killing all on board along with several bystanders. Mouriño was a leader in the fight against drug violence and Calderón's right-hand man. Many believed he was being groomed to be the next PAN leader.

Though foul play by politicians or drug factions was widely suspected, the official investigation, based partly on U.S. analysis of the black boxes, found the cause to be pilot error. Without his main supporter, Calderón has faced even greater PRD and PRI opposition to his domestic policies, particularly for use of military force in his mission to eradicate drug violence.

DRUGS & OTHER BORDER ISSUES

For years Mexico's drug traffickers operated in secluded mountain passes along abandoned highways, and from within their own transportation and trade network—much like a hornet's nest, buzzing away in the nation's backyard. As long as politicians and law enforcement officers stayed out of their way—or, in some cases, aided in their enterprises—they remained out of sight and only occasionally stung an outsider.

When Calderón was elected, he poked a stick into that hornet's nest. His first act as president was to send troops to his home state of Michoacán, where lush mountain slopes support a lucrative marijuana business. Soon afterward, he sent

the army into five other areas, most of them border states.

Calderón resorted to military takeovers of local and state police forces because the military is less corrupt than Mexico's law enforcement agencies. Investigations have found that as many as half of all of the country's police officers, who earn only about US$5,000 a year, have been deemed incompetent or worse. The number was as high as 9 out of 10 in Baja California Norte. Since 1982, the federal law enforcement system has been reorganized five times, and at least four elite forces have been created in an attempt to combat corruption. The president has implemented such extreme measures as confiscating the guns of 2,300 Tijuana police officers while detectives investigate whether they were used in crimes.

But military personnel are not trained for close contact with civilians, and their heavy-handed tactics have brought accusations of human rights-abuse. Well aware that using the military is far from ideal, Calderón instituted federal police reforms in 2008 with a view to reducing the soldiers' role. The first major step came in January 2010, when he shifted control of Joint Operation Chihuahua from the military to the federal police and sent 2,000 police officers to Ciudad Juárez, the country's deadliest drug war zone. Federal police, who are specifically trained to work with civilians, will operate in high-risk urban areas while the military continues to guard the state's vast expanses of rural desert. If the new strategy succeeds, it could be extended to Mexico's other joint operations.

Despite these efforts—or, some say, because of them—drug violence has escalated. According to security intelligence analyses, the death toll for 2009 was around 7,500, up from 5,700 in 2008 and 2,500 in 2007.

Joaquin Guzman Loera, head of the Sinaloa Cartel, is an example of the kind of mastermind authorities face. While feared by citizens and loathed by authorities, Guzman, known as El Chapo ("Shorty"), is lionized by many in his home state, where he is the subject of many a *narco-corrido,* or drug-inspired ballad, and has even had MySpace pages created in his honor. Known for rising from a humble farmer to one of the country's most successful and elusive drug dealers, he enhanced his reputation in 2001 by allegedly bribing guards and escaping prison in a laundry cart. Guzmán made no. 701 on Forbes' 2008 list of the world's richest people, with an estimated net worth of $1 billion.

There are actually two drug wars in Mexico: The battle between the drug lords and the Mexican government, and the fight among competing cartels for lucrative supply routes. It's not that Calderón's efforts have been ineffective; they have taken out some key players, such as Arturo Beltran Leyva, head of the Beltran Leyva Organization operating on the Pacific coast, and his brother Carlos 2 weeks later in December 2009. Such success disrupts the drug runners but in fact spurs more violence as beheaded cartels descend into infighting, other gangs grabs for new territory, and both target journalists and government officials for revenge killings.

Travelers are not likely to see signs of this struggle except in places where the flow of tourists and drugs intersect—mostly along the border, especially in Tijuana, El Paso, Nuevo Laredo, Nogales, and Matamoros. Violence has surged in Michoacán state in the past year, though not in tourist areas. Even in the most dangerous spots, it's an unspoken tenant among the *narcos* that you don't mess with the tourists. Breathless headlines about the slaughter of innocent tourists are rarely followed by reports that the victim was buying or selling drugs, which is the case most of the time. In fact, many places in Mexico's interior experience less drug violence than U.S. cities, nor are beach resorts likely settings for shootouts between the army and the cartels.

See p. 65 in chapter 3 for more safety-related information.

3 EATING & DRINKING IN MEXICO

Yo soy como un chile verde—picante pero sabroso.
I'm like the green chile—spicy but delicious.
–La Llorona, traditional *corrido*

I like to think it's no coincidence that on a map, Mexico looks like a giant cornucopia. All the Mexican food you've ever encountered at home has merely been skimmed off the top, leaving all of the interesting, lesser-known fruit at the intriguing bottom of the bounty. Yes, Mexicans eat beans, rice, and tacos, but they also eat complex dishes like the countless variations of *mole,* an intricate sauce that can contain 100 different ingredients and take up to 3 days to prepare; *almejas rellenas,* fresh clam baked in its shell with butter, ham, jalapeños, tomatoes, and onions; and *pozole,* a hearty pork or chicken soup served with radishes, cilantro, avocado, and fried pork rinds as garnish.

Despite a multitude of regional differences, some generalizations can help you navigate. Most Mexican food isn't spicy-hot or piquant when it arrives at the table (though there are exceptions). The *picante* flavor is added with chiles and salsas; you'll never see a table in Mexico without one or both of these condiments. Mexicans don't drown their cooking in cheese and sour cream, a la Tex-Mex, and they use a greater variety of ingredients than most people expect. But the basis of Mexican food is simple—tortillas, beans, chiles, squash, and tomatoes—the same as it was centuries ago before the arrival of the Europeans.

For additional food terms, see chapter 22.

THE STAPLES

TORTILLAS Like the crusty baguette in France, a perfect tortilla can truly round out your meal. **Flour tortillas,** which were developed in northern Mexico and until recently were difficult to find south of Chihuahua, are arguably the most popular north of the border. However, the traditional **corn tortilla,** made from corn cooked in water and lime, ground into *masa* (a grainy dough), patted and pressed into thin cakes, and cooked on a hot griddle known as a *comal,* remains king in most of Mexico. Whether they're sopping up shrimp *molcajetes* in Jalisco or beans and rice in Oaxaca, Mexicans often use tortillas as an alternative to silverware, ripping off large pieces and using them to scoop up food.

SALSA You can usually tell whether you're going to like a restaurant based on their salsa alone—if the cooks are inventive with tomatoes and spices, imagine what they can do with steak. Top marks go to places that bring out a tray with three or more choices, beginning with **pico de gallo,** the most simple and common variety of fresh cilantro, tomatoes, jalapeños, and onions. Another favorite is **salsa chipotle,** which gets its smoky taste from the chipotle chile. **Salsa verde,** made with tomatillos instead of regular red tomatoes, can be tangier and milder. Beyond these three, there are as many salsas as there are colors in the rainbow.

TACOS Whether it's *tacos al pastor* made with gyro-style spit-grilled meat in Mexico City, or beer-battered shrimp tacos in Ensenada, just about every region has its own take on this quintessential fast food. Anything folded or rolled into a tortilla—sometimes two, either soft or fried—is a taco. *Flautas* and quesadillas (except in Mexico City, where they are a different animal) are species of tacos.

FRIJOLES Most Mexican households eat beans daily. Pinto beans are predominant in northern Mexico, while black beans are the legumes of choice in the south. Mexicans add only a little onion

A Debt of Gratitude

Lost among the laurels heaped upon the ancient Maya for their contributions to science, mathematics, architecture, astronomy, and writing is the wide array of foods these masters of agriculture introduced to the rest of the world. It's no exaggeration to say the Maya changed the world's eating habits in the 1500s. Just try to imagine life without:

Chocolate The Maya's "food of the gods," made from the toasted, fermented seeds of the cacao tree, is arguably the New World's greatest gift to civilization. Though Cortez learned of chocolate from the Aztecs, the Maya ate it many centuries earlier and used cacao beans as currency.

Vanilla The elixir from the world's only known edible orchid originally flavored Maya chocolate drinks. Southern Mexico's jungle is still the only place the orchid grows wild, pollinated by native stingless bees that produce Maya honey. The prized Tahitian vanilla, which came from Mexican stock, must be hand-pollinated.

Corn The Popul Vuh, the Maya creation myth, attributes humankind's very existence to this domesticated strain of wild grass, easily the most important food in the Americas. Thousands of years after corn became a dietary staple, the Maya started cultivating it around 2500 B.C. and abandoned their nomadic ways to settle in villages surrounded by cornfields.

Chiles Chiles have been cultivated in the Americas for more than 6,000 years. Blame Christopher Columbus for calling them "peppers," but credit him for their worldwide reach. Southern Mexico's Capsicum annuum species, with its many cultivars, is crucial to nearly every fiery cuisine.

Tomatoes Even the Italians had to make do without tomato sauce before Columbus set out for the New World. Precursors originated in Peru, but the tomato as we know it came from the Yucatán, where the Maya cultivated it long before the conquest.

Black beans Archaeological digs indicate the black bean originated in southern Mexico and Central America more than 7,000 years ago. Still the favorite in and around the Yucatán, the black bean spread widely throughout Latin America, the Caribbean, and the southern United States.

Avocado From its origins in southern Mexico, where it was used as an aphrodisiac, the avocado spread to the Rio Grande and central Peru before the Europeans found out about it.

Papaya The large, woody, fast-growing herb—commonly referred to as a tree—was used to treat stomach ailments. After spreading from southern Mexico, it now grows in every tropical country.

and garlic and a pinch of herbs, as beans are meant to be a counterpoint to spicy foods. They also may appear at the end of a meal with a spoonful of sour cream. Fried leftover beans often appear as *frijoles refritos,* a side dish commonly translated

"refried beans." In fact, the are fried just once; the prefix *re* means "well" (as in "thoroughly"), so a better translation would be "well-fried beans."

TAMALES The ultimate takeout meal, tamales (singular: tamal) developed in pre-Hispanic Mexico and became more elaborate after the Spanish introduced pork and other ingredients. To make a tamal, you mix corn *masa* with lard, beat the batter, add a filling, wrap it, and cook it. Every region has its own specialty; in some places, a single *tamal* can be big enough to feed a family; in others, they are barely 3 inches long. The most popular *rellenos* (fillings) are pork and cheese, but they might be anything from fish to iguana, augmented by pumpkin, pineapple, rice, or peanuts, and tucked into a blanket of yellow, black, or purple *masa.* Tamales are usually steamed but may be baked or grilled; the jackets are most often dried corn husks or fresh corn or banana leaves but are sometimes fashioned from palm, avocado, or *chaya* (a spinachlike vegetable) leaves.

CHILES Hardly a traditional dish in all of Mexico lacks chiles. Appearing in wondrous variety throughout Mexico, they are bestowed different names depending on whether they are fresh or dried. Chiles range from blazing hot with little discernible taste to mild with a rich, complex flavor, and they can be pickled, smoked, stuffed, or stewed. Among the best-known are the *pimiento,* the large, harmless bell pepper familiar in the U.S.; the fist-sized poblano, ranging from mild to very hot; the short, torpedo-shaped *serrano;* the skinny and seriously fiery *chile de árbol;* the stubby, hot *jalapeño;* the *chipotle,* a dried and smoked jalapeño usually served in *adobo* (vinegar and garlic paste); and the tiny, five-alarm *pequín.*

DRINKS

If you want bottled water, ask for *agua natural* or *agua embotellada* bottled water (*con gas* for carbonated, *sin gas* for still). Coca-Cola and Pepsi are nearly as entrenched in Mexico's drinking habits as tequila, and they taste the way they used to in the U.S., before the makers started adding corn syrup. These and other American *refrescos* outsell Mexican brands such as Manzana, a carbonated apple juice. If you like your soft drinks cold, specify *frío,* or you may get them *clima* (room temperature).

Better yet, treat yourself to ***licuados***—refreshing smoothies of fresh fruit (or juice), milk, and ice, sold all over Mexico. (***A note of linguistic caution:*** In Spanish, the word for tuna, *atún,* is perilously similar to the word for a small cactus fruit, *tuna.* Make sure you know which one is going in your ***licuado.***) ***Aguas frescas*** ("fresh waters") are lighter drinks made by adding a small amount of fresh fruit juice and sugar to water. Hibiscus, melon, tamarind, and lime are common, but rice, flowers, *tuna,* and other exotic ingredients find their way into these refreshments. And inexpensive, fresh-squeezed juices from every fruit you can name—and a few you can't—are one of Mexico's greatest pleasures. **Coffee** one of Mexico's most important exports, is generally good, but latte addicts beware: Tarted-up coffee isn't Mexico's style. Your basic choices are *café Americano,* the familiar gringo-style brew; espresso and occasionally cappuccino, served in cafes; and the widely popular *café con leche,* translated as "coffee with milk" but more accurately described as milk with coffee. Traditional hot drinks are **hot chocolate,** usually made with cinnamon and often some crushed almonds, and *atole,* made from cornmeal, milk, cinnamon, and puréed fresh fruit, often served for breakfast.

Mexico has a proud and lucrative **beer**-brewing tradition that goes back to the German immigrants who arrived in the early 1800s. With the exception of Minerva beers out of Guadalajara, Jalisco, you'll be hard-pressed to find any variety

Tequila Sun Rising

You can tug on Superman's cape, you can spit into the wind, but don't ever mess with tequila in Mexico. Tequila lovers savor the subtle flavors of the agave spirit and prefer to take it like wine, sip by sip, over the course of an entire meal. They will likely gasp in horror if you throw back a shot of Jose Cuervo like a coed on spring break, and pity you when you wake with a monster hangover.

The makers of tequila—all but one still based in Jalisco—have formed an association to establish standards for labeling and denomination. The best tequilas are 100% agave, made with a set minimum of sugar to prime the fermentation process. These tequilas come in three categories, based on how they were stored: *Blanco* is white tequila aged very little, usually in steel vats; *reposado* (reposed) is aged in wooden casks for between 2 months and a year; *añejo* (aged) has been stored in oak barrels—often reused whiskey barrels from the U.S.—for at least a year. A good way to ease into the world of tequila appreciation is to order a *bandera* (flag), which consists of a shot of tequila and shots of lime and tomato juice. Each glass represents a color in the Mexican flag.

beyond amber and light. You will, however, find a variety of beer concoctions, including the **chelada,** beer with lime juice and salt, and its sophisticated cousin, the **michelada,** which may contain hot sauce, Worcester sauce, salt, and lime. The names and recipes vary regionally, so if you're squeamish, ask your waiter.

Tequila's poorer cousins, **pulque** and **mescal,** originated with *octli,* an Aztec agave or maguey drink produced strictly for feasts. Mexicans drank *pulque* (now found mostly in central Mexico's *pulquerías*), made from fermented juice straight from the plant, for more 5,000 years, but it has recently given way to more refined—and more palatable—spirits. The Spanish learned to create serious fire power by roasting the agave hearts and then extracting, fermenting, and distilling the liquids. Thus were born tequila and *mescal. Mescal,* famous for the traditional worm at the bottom of the bottle, is more potent than *pulque* but easier to swallow. Mescal comes from various parts of Mexico and from different varieties of agave. With its stronger smell and taste, mescal is much more easily detected on the drinker's breath. In some places, such as Oaxaca, it comes with a worm in the bottle; you are supposed to eat the worm after polishing off the mescal. For teetotalers interested in just the worm, I have good news—you can find them for sale in Mexican markets when in season. *¡Salud!*

Tequila is a variety of mescal produced from the *a. tequilana* Weber species of agave in and around the area of Tequila, in the state of Jalisco. The tequila distilling process is much more sophisticated than that of mescal.

MARKETS & RESTAURANTS

Exploring the culinary delights of a *tianguis,* or traditional market, is one of my favorite pastimes. The people-watching is top-notch, and the food stalls harbor creative surprises ranging from strawberry shortcakes covered in fresh cream to juicy cheeseburgers and onion rings. To ensure your chances of getting the healthiest food possible, visit stands that seem to be popular among the locals. Word spreads fast in Mexico, so it doesn't take long for customers to root out the stalls with less than stellar hygiene practices. On the other side

of the spectrum, avoid eating at those inviting sidewalk restaurants that you see beneath the stone archways that border the main plazas. These places usually cater to tourists and don't need to count on getting any return business. But they are great for getting a coffee or beer and watching the world turn.

In most nonresort towns, there are always one or two restaurants (sometimes it's a coffee shop) that are social centers for a large group of established patrons. Over time, they become virtual institutions, and change comes very slowly. The food is usually good standard fare, cooked as it was 20 years ago, and the decor is simple. The patrons have known each other and the staff for years, and the *charla* (banter), gestures, and greetings are friendly, open, and unaffected. If you're curious about Mexican culture, these are fun places to eat in and observe the goings-on.

You'll see multitudes of ***taquerías*** **(taco joints)** everywhere in Mexico. These are generally small places with a counter or a few tables set around the cooking area; you see exactly how they make their tacos before deciding whether to order. Most tacos come with a little chopped onion and cilantro, but not with tomato and lettuce. Find one that seems popular with the locals and where the cook performs with *brio* (a good sign of pride in the product). Sometimes a woman will be making the tortillas (or working the *masa* into *gorditas* or *sopes,* if these are also served) right

Dining Tips

- Nearly all restaurants and bars that serve middle-class Mexicans use filtered water, disinfect their vegetables, and buy ice made from purified water. If in doubt, look for ice with a rough cylindrical shape and a hollow center, produced by the same kind of machinery across the country. Street vendors and market stalls are less consistent. I've never gotten sick on any of my travels to Mexico, but people who live there say a good way of keeping your stomach happy is by drinking one of the tiny Yakult yogurt drinks found in the dairy section of just about every grocery store or corner market.
- For the afternoon meal, the main meal of the day, many restaurants offer a multicourse blue-plate special called ***comida corrida*** or ***menú del día.*** This is the most inexpensive way to get a full dinner.
- In Mexico, you need to **ask for your check;** it is considered inhospitable to present a check to someone who hasn't requested it. If you're in a hurry, ask for the check when your food arrives.
- Tips are about the same as in the U.S. You'll sometimes find a 15% value-added tax on restaurant meals, which shows up on the bill as IVA. This is effectively the tip, which you may augment if you like. Just make sure you're not tipping twice.
- To **summon the waiter,** wave or raise your hand, but don't motion with your index finger, which is a demeaning gesture that may even cause the waiter to ignore you. Or if it's the check you want, you can motion to the waiter from across the room using the universal pretend-like-you're-writing gesture.

there. You will never see men doing this—this is perhaps the strictest gender division in Mexican society. Men do all other cooking and kitchen tasks, and work with already-made tortillas, but will never be found working *masa.*

4 LAY OF THE LAND

GEOGRAPHY

Mexico's northern border with the United States runs 3,141km (1,947 miles); the southern border with Guatemala and Belize is less than a third that length, at 1,212km (751 miles). The Pacific Ocean hems in the western and southern coasts, while the Sea of Cortez (or the Gulf of California) is positioned between Baja California and the mainland, forming the world's longest peninsula. In the east, the Gulf of Mexico dominates the north, while the Caribbean Sea flanks the eastern Yucatán Peninsula. In all, the coastline runs 9,330km (5,785 miles).

Northern Mexico is a sprawling, arid region home to two deserts. The larger of the two, *el Desierto Chihuahuense,* sits between the Sierra Madre Occidental in the west and the Sierra Madre Oriental in the east, both extensions of mountain ranges in the U.S. *El Desierto Sonorense* covers most of the Baja peninsula and the northwestern mainland. **Baja California's** mountains run virtually the entire length of the state, about 1,400km (868 miles).

Southwestern Chihuahua is home to the **Copper Canyon,** one of the world's most majestic canyon systems, larger and sometimes deeper than the Grand Canyon in the U.S. The six canyons that make up the **Parque Nacional Barranca del Cobre** are located in the Sierra Tarahumara, traditional home of the indigenous Raramuri (Tarahumara).

The Sierra Madre Occidental begins near the U.S. border and continues 1,250km (775 miles) south, where it merges with the *Cordillera Neovolcánica.* To the east is the Sierra Madre Oriental, stretching 1,350km (837 miles) until also reaching the *Cordillera Neovolcánica.*

The two Sierra Madre ranges frame Mexico's most dominant geographic feature, the *Altiplano.* This group of broad central plateaus reaches from the U.S. border to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The southern plateau is home to rolling hills and valleys that have some of the best farmland in the country. **Mexico City** and **Guadalajara** are both located in this region, as well as the states of **Jalisco, Puebla, Tlaxcala, Hidalgo,** and **Morelos.**

The Cordillera Neovolcánica extends from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico and includes the active volcanoes Popocatépetl and Volcán de Fuego de Colima, as well as Mexico's other highest peaks: Pico de Orizaba, Iztaccíhuatl, and Paricutín. South of the Cordillera Neovolcánica are several other important mountain ranges, including the Sierra Madre del Sur, Sierra Madre de Oaxaca, and Sierra Madre de Chiapas.

The country is positioned on top of three tectonic plates, making Mexico one of the most seismologically active places on Earth, where volcanic eruptions and earthquakes rattle the ground. The last significant eruption was *El Chichon* in **Chiapas** in 1982. A magnitude-8.1 earthquake hit Mexico City in 1985, causing the deaths of thousands and long-term political consequences.

Although surrounded by the sea, Mexico's freshwater resources are unevenly distributed among its 150 rivers. Five rivers—the Usumacinta, Grijalva, Papaloapán, Coatzacoalos, and Pánuco—contain more than half the volume of water in all

of the rivers combined. Four of these five rivers are located in southern Mexico, leaving the north, the most populated area, with less than 10% of the country's water resources.

The Isthmus of Tehuantepec, running through southern **Veracruz** and **Chiapas,** marks the smallest distance (200km/124 miles) between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific. The northern side of the isthmus is wide and marshy, stretching from Veracruz to the Yucatán. Lush tropical rainforests and dense jungles occupy the Gulf Coastal Plain, Chiapan Highlands, and the southern Yucatán Peninsula. These regions are hot and humid, keeping the region green and teeming with wildlife. Jungle turns to tropical savanna at the end of the peninsula.

FLORA & FAUNA

Mexico is one of the most biologically diverse places in the world. It is estimated to have between 20,000 and 50,000 species of plants from the northern deserts to the southern jungles. The highest concentrations of species can be found in **Chiapas, Oaxaca,** and **Veracruz.** Mexico also places 1st in reptile biodiversity, with more than 740 known species; 2nd in mammals, at 526; 4th in amphibians, at 290; and 10th in birds, at 1,150.

Bucking the stereotype of "barren wasteland," Mexico's deserts are some of the planet's most diverse regions. About 6,000 species of desert plants, 90% of them endemic to the deserts of Mexico and the U.S., flourish in the northern deserts. The **Chihuahuan Desert** sustains around 400 cactus species alone, including prickly pears, hedgehogs, living rocks, cory, whitethorn acacia, creosote, and lechuguilla (a type of agave). The sotol, or desert spoon, is used to make a distilled spirit similar to tequila that has become the state drink of Chihuahua.

Certain mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles, and invertebrates call the northern deserts home. White-tailed deer, pronghorn, coyotes, blacktailed jack rabbits, desert tarantulas, whip scorpions, geckos, and a rich display of butterflies and moths are just a few of the local critters. Finally, the Chihuahuan and Sonoran deserts wouldn't be considered deserts if you couldn't find snakes. King snakes, rat snakes, coral snakes, and many species of rattlesnakes stripe these vast landscapes.

The Sierra Madre mountain ranges support an assortment of trees in Central Mexico. The higher regions of the forests sustain mahogany, zapote, ceiba, oak, cypress, and over 50 different species of pine trees. Within the midrange forests, you will find juniper, piñon (or pinyon) pine, and evergreen oaks. Figs, lianas, orchids, and bromeliads such as the spiny and silvery Hechtia argentea occupy the lowest slopes of the mountains. The central plateaus *(altiplano)* between the ranges support semidesert grasslands where yucca and barrel cactus grow.

Central Mexico is also home to the famous agave americana, also known as maguey in Mexico, used to make pulque (similar to tequila) and other useful products. Webster blue agave is the official plant used to make tequila and is mostly grown in the state of Jalisco.

Every winter, hundreds of millions of monarch butterflies wing south to eastern **Michoacán,** where the Oyamel fir forest becomes their winter nest.

The tropical rainforests in the south are covered with dense layers of broadleaf evergreen vegetation and massive deciduous trees joined with palms, marshes, and mangroves. Mexico's fauna is most abundant in these southern *selvas* (jungles). Bats, spider and howler monkeys, the silky anteater, coatimundis, jaguars and jagarundi, the Baird's tapir, numerous species of parrots, macaws, and toucans bring the *selvas* to life. The quetzal bird is also found in the *selvas* and is known for its beautiful colors (*quetzal* comes from the word *quetzalli* in Náhuatl, meaning "large, brilliant

Portals to the Underworld

The Yucatán Peninsula is a flat slab of limestone that millions of years ago absorbed the force of the giant meteor thought to have extinguished the dinosaurs. The impact sent shock waves through the brittle limestone, fracturing it throughout and creating an immense network of fissures that drain rainwater away from the surface. You'll notice no bridges, rivers, or watercourses in northern and central Yucatán. The vast subterranean basin stretching across the peninsula is invisible but for the area's many cenotes—sinkholes or natural wells that don't exist outside the Yucatán. Many are perfectly round vertical shafts that look like nothing else in nature; others are hidden in caverns that retain a partial roof, often perforated by tree roots. To the Maya, they were passageways to the underworld. Indeed, they look sacred: Quiet, dark, and cool, they are the opposite of the warm, bright world outside.

tail feather"), as well as its religious symbology in ancient Maya and Aztec beliefs.

The **Yucatán** is more like a tropical savanna, supporting thick grasses mixed with evergreens and shrubs, where ferns, epiphytes, and palms are common. Mangrove swamps and lagoons are an important migratory stop for birds on the North American Migration Flyway, providing habitat for flamingos and herons.

Mexico's ample coasts are home to abundant aquatic life. Just off the Yucatán Peninsula is the **Mesoamerican Reef,** the second-largest reef in the world, after the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. Mexico has about 380 types of freshwater fish and at least 1,300 ocean species. Around 30 different cetaceans live in the seas, from the smallest and most endangered porpoise, the vaquita, to the blue whale, the largest mammal on Earth. Manatees swim in warm coastal waters as well as lagoons. Seven of the world's eight species of sea turtle live in Mexico's waters. Baja California also has an array of marine mammals, including California sea lions, elephant seals, finback whales, humpbacks, blue whales, the California gray whale, and bottle-nosed dolphins.

Despite this abundance, heavy deforestation has endangered many species, including the Mexican bobcat, black howler, jaguar, jagarundi, and quetzal. Both the forests in the north and the rainforests in the south continue to be deforested by logging, farming, and mining. The southern wetlands, in particular, are an important focus of environmental movements in Mexico. Overfishing, poor agricultural practices, infrastructure projects, and salt harvesting threaten reefs and coastal habitats. It's not all bad news: Sea turtle populations, along with other species, are slowly recovering with the help of scientific efforts, grass-roots organizations, and local governments.

5 MYTH, RELIGION & SPIRITUALITY

For more than 150 years, Catholic pilgrims have traveled every Easter to a hill in Mexico City's rough-and-tumble Iztapalapa neighborhood to witness a theatric reenactment of the Crucifixion of Christ. Though many would likely claim to have always felt a strong spiritual connection to the site, until 2006 the devotees were

Impressions

"Any contact with the Mexican people, no matter how fleeting, will show that beneath Western forms lie ancient beliefs and customs. These remnants, alive even now, are a testament to the vitality of Mexico's pre-Hispanic cultures."

—Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*

unaware that ruins from the ancient Teotihuacán culture lay in the earth beneath the actor Jesus' feet. After the discovery of the remains of a 1,500-year-old temple, archaeologists and religious leaders were faced with the quandary of whether to continue with a century-old tradition or risk doing further damage to millennium-old artifacts.

This juxtaposition of ancient mythology and modern Catholicism is the perfect metaphor for the history of religion in Mexico. Before Catholicism arrived with the Franciscan order in the late 1500s, there was no specific concept of organized religion, but rather a universal set of beliefs that were so ingrained in everyday life that they were seen as one entwined experience. While different societies across Mesoamerica worshiped their own specific gods and had local ceremonies, three basic components were universal: a belief in a duality of forces of nature in the universe, reverence for the calendar, and human sacrifice.

BEG, BORROW & STEAL

As different societies—the Teotihuacán, Olmec, and Maya—dominated their neighbors, they enforced their own rites and rituals and adopted those of their conquered. At the height of the its power in the 13th century, the Aztec empire was a melting pot of conquered peoples and cultures. They took to wearing the feathered fashions of the tropical nations, Maya lip ornaments, and the colorful clothes of the Totonacs, and their belief system grew to include a vast number of gods and their manifestations, including at least 400 gods of drink and drunkenness.

Much like dominant indigenous tribes before them, the Spaniards were successful in converting the population to Catholicism because they cleverly integrated ancient beliefs into their own theology. They often built churches and shrines directly on top of former holy places; the Catedral Metropolitana in Mexico City's *zócalo* is perhaps the most stunning example, built on the ruins of the Aztecs' greatest temple.

In 1531, Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin, an indigenous Mexican, was walking to a Catholic mass when he witnessed an apparition of the Virgin Mary who bore a strong resemblance to an Aztec princess. Speaking in his native Náhuatl, she bade him tell the bishop to build her a home on that very site, but when Diego approached the Franciscan Bishop, Juan de Zumárraga, he told him he needed a sign. When Diego returned to relay this to the Virgin, she filled his *tilma,* or cloak, with roses that grew only in Zumárraga's native Spain in order to provide convincing evidence. Today the **Basilica de Guadalupe** is the second-most-visited Roman Catholic holy site in the world. after the Vatican. It was built upon the former site of the Aztec fertility goddess *Tonantzin* (the second-most-important shrine in Mexico, San Juan de los Lagos, occupies the land of a former shrine to the Aztec rain god, *Tlaloc*). The iconic Virgin de Guadalupe is now considered the patron saint of Mexico. Her indelible image, which to this day includes a mantle of roses, along with her prayer, can be seen on everything from key chains to tattoos—she even makes the occasional miraculous appearance in tortillas.

MODERN RELIGION

Catholicism remains the dominant religion in Mexico, with adherents making up 76% of the total population (Protestants trail with 6% while pockets of Muslims, Mennonites, and Jews can be found around the country), and Mexicans continue to incorporate their own ancient traditions with the new. The modern *Día de los Muertos* holiday coincides with the Catholic All Saints' Day, and many of the elements, such as using marigolds and offering food to the dead, are similar to ceremonies held by the Aztecs in late August.

Many growing offshoots of Catholicism are not officially recognized by the church. The Mexico City suburb of Tepito is home to the shrine of *Santa Muerte,* or Saint Death, whose adherents look to her skeletal, scythe-carrying image for protection, not unlike the pre-Hispanic veneration of Mictecacihuatl, queen of the Aztec underworld.

Religion in Mexico thrives and evolves in the country's thousands of shrines, cathedrals, and churches, and the faithful continue to walk and crawl to Iztapalapa every year.

6 ART & ARCHITECTURE

ANCIENT ART & ARCHITECTURE

Art in Mexico begins with one piece, called the Tequixquiac bone. It isn't very big, having been made from the sacrum (hipbone) of an extinct form of camelid that existed in the upper Paleolithic. From this sacrum, some artist sculpted the head of a coyote. The bone was discovered in 1870 in the area of Tequixquiac, north of Mexico City. It's impossible to establish with certainty when the bone was worked by human hand, but given where and how deep it was buried, it might date as far back as 12,000 B.C. A striking piece, it merits special attention, should you visit the National Anthropology Museum in Mexico City, where it's on display.

Aside from a few other artifacts, the record of artistic achievement in Mexico skips forward to the pre-Classic age and the great Olmec and earliest Maya cities. These date from the 3rd millennium before Christ, roughly the same time that cities were growing in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Peru. Fortunately, the inhabitants left behind a wealth of pottery and stone objects with intriguing images and a clear artistic style. These are on view in the National Anthropology Museum and the museums of Puebla, Xalapa, and Villahermosa.

The Classic and post-Classic periods left us with much more artwork and better-preserved architecture. Visiting cities such as Teotihuacán, Palenque, or Monte Albán reveals the clear-cut geometry of these spaces and something of what the builders envisioned. To understand the artistic achievement of these civilizations, you must witness the large sculptures that they left behind, such as the massive Aztec calendar stone or the many stelae (large stone monuments) and murals of the Maya. Their thickly textured imagery, meshed into complex allegorical structures, are difficult to understand but visually striking.

AFTER THE CONQUEST

Everything takes an abrupt turn after the conquest. The Spanish were determined to instill in their new subjects an alien belief system, and the Indians, with a highly complex system of their own, had to make sense of things by using what they knew.

Frida & Diego

In Mexico, Frida and Diego are like everyone's beloved yet crazy aunt and uncle who delight everyone at family reunions and threaten each other with the good silver by the end of the night. Painter Frida Kahlo and her husband, muralist Diego Rivera, are among Mexico's most prolific artists, but their tumultuous relationship was often more gut wrenching than their artwork. During their decade-long marriage/relationship, Diego cheated on Frida with her younger sister, and Frida had an affair with Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky. Many places where their personal drama played out have now been turned into museums. At least 10 museums feature the artwork of Frida and/or Diego in Mexico City, along with historical sites in Acapulco, Cuernavaca, and Guanajuato and works of art in museums across the country.

This clash of beliefs produced a fluid artistic tradition that reconciled contradictory dialectical symbols, but this synthesis took more than a century. The arrival of the baroque style from Europe was a stroke of good fortune. The baroque breadth of scope and possibility, and its lack of emphasis on structure or even consistency, accommodated both symbol systems. Its parallels with pre-Columbian art resonated with Mexican artists, who began producing with a vigor and brilliance that mark the artistic pinnacle of the Colonial Era. Though little of this work survived, good examples include the Capilla del Rosario in Puebla, the altarpieces of Santa Rosa de Viterbo and Santa Clara in Querétaro, the church of Santo Domingo in Oaxaca, and the Sagrario Metropolitano in Mexico City's cathedral.

POST-REVOLUTIONARY ART & ARCHITECTURE

The long regime of dictator Porfirio Díaz, which began in 1876 and ended in 1911 with the Mexican Revolution, brought a measure of stability after the near-constant social and economic upheaval following national independence. During these years, known as the *Porfiriato,* the ruling ideas and art forms came from Europe. A surge in the construction of public buildings took inspiration primarily from French architecture, especially Beaux Arts. Examples include many of the municipal theaters and opera houses throughout the country, such as Bellas Artes in Mexico City, and several government palaces.

La Revolución did as much to give Mexico its own voice as it did to establish the nation's governing institutions. The great Mexican muralists, Diego Rivera, Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, were a product of these times, as were painters Frida Kahlo and Rufino Tamayo. All believed art is meant for public enjoyment, not just private collectors, and expressed through their personal styles a quintessentially Mexican sensibility that was artistically revolutionary. The same is true of architects Luis Barragán and Juan O'Gorman, especially the former, who absorbed the ideas of modernist architecture (which, at its heart, is internationalist) and wedded them to warm Mexican colors and an Indian stoicism to create architecture with a strong sense of place.

CONTEMPORARY ART & BUILDING

What began during *La Revolución* continues to this day, as contemporary artists and

architects find new ways to express the ever-changing nature of national identity.

Luis Barragán never built anything outside of Mexico, and much of what he built was residential and thus unavailable for public viewing. Yet this didn't hinder the growth of his reputation. In 1980, he was awarded the Pritzker Prize; he died in 1988.

Two architects who have followed in his footsteps, Ricardo Legorreta and Teodoro González de León, have constructed many public buildings both in Mexico and abroad. Legorreta's use of forceful colors and bold lines distinguish his works, including the Public Library of San Antonio (Texas), the Tech Museum of San Jose (California), and the Hotel Camino Real in Mexico City. González León's work is more futuristic and includes skyscrapers in Mexico City, the Mexican embassy in Berlin, and museums and cultural centers in the U.S.

Gabriel Orozco is one of Mexico's most prominent artists. An installation artist from Jalapa, Veracruz, he has traveled the world exhibiting his sculptures and conceptual pieces, such as *Homerun,* in which he placed oranges on the windowsills of various apartment buildings. Miguel Calderon, another notable artist, created oil paintings of masked, shirtless savages, featured in the movie the *Royal Tenenbaums.*

One of the most impressive collections of modern Mexican art is the Colección Jumex, owned by Mexican juice magnate Eugenio López Alonso. Every year López opens the gallery, located in the otherwise-nondescript Jumex headquarters in Mexico City, for a well-lubricated event attended by art luminaries from all over the world.

Following in the tradition of the great muralists, many of Mexico's most exciting modern artists go beyond the canvas to present their work. Urban art, or street art consisting of graffiti installations, posters, and even fashion, is exceedingly popular in large cities. A good example of this can be seen at the Mercado Michoacán in Mexico City's Condesa (a neighborhood made up almost exclusively of Art Deco buildings). The bright yellow building is the home to fruit and vegetable vendors on the inside, but its facade features graffiti art by a rotating group of artists.

7 BOOKS, FILM & MUSIC

BOOKS

Literature

Call me a dilettante for including a book I picked up at a grocery store, but reading Gary Jennings' *Aztec* as I traveled around central Mexico for the first time was one of the most rewarding experiences I've had as a reader. Jennings, an American who wrote the book while living in San Miguel de Allende, unfurls the tale of Mixtli, a character with an almost omnipotent perspective on the state of Mexico's various indigenous societies in the years just before the arrival of the Spaniards. Jennings gets creative with some of his interpretations, but the important details are historically accurate and provide great cultural context for visiting pre-Hispanic sites.

Novelist Carlos Fuentes is Mexico's preeminent living writer. His earlier novels, such as ***The Death of Artemio Cruz,*** are easier to read than more recent works, which are heavily post-structural and demand a great deal of effort. More of a page turner, Angeles Mastretta's ***Arráncame la Vida (Tear Up My Life)*** covers the same subject—Mexican society's values, contradictions, and pleasures after the Revolution from the point of view of a young woman in Puebla. In 2008, a wildly

popular cinematic version of the book was released in Mexico and South America. If you want a good idea of period costumes and architecture, tracking down a copy is worth your while. Fuentes has an ironic touch and dips occasionally into the surreal. Mastretta's book is a well-written, straightforward narrative brimming with political gossip; it's a delightful read.

Another good novel covering roughly the same period, but with fewer social observations and more magic realism, is ***Like Water for Chocolate,*** by Laura Esquivel. This book and the movie of the same title did much to popularize Mexican food abroad.

History & Nonfiction

For contemporary culture, start with ***The Labyrinth of Solitude,*** by the Mexican Nobel laureate poet and essayist Octavio Paz. It still generates controversy among Mexicans.

The Life and Times of Mexico, by Earl Shorris, is an in-depth analysis of Mexican history. It's really the only text you'll need to learn the history of the country, from the rituals of Aztecs to the 70-year-rule of the PRI. For a more concise yet still thorough survey of Mexican history, try ***A Short History of Mexico,*** by J. Patrick McHenry.

For an overview of pre-Hispanic cultures, pick up Michael D. Coe's ***Mexico: From the Olmecs to the Aztecs,*** Nigel Davies's ***Ancient Kingdoms of Mexico,*** or Jacques Soustelle's ***Daily Life of the Aztecs.*** Richard Townsend's ***The Aztecs*** is a thorough, well-researched examination of the Aztec and the Spanish Conquest. For the Maya, Michael Coe's ***The Maya*** is probably the best general account. John L. Stephens's classic account of 44 Maya sites, the two-volume ***Incidents of Travel in the Yucatán,*** is still the most authoritative. Before his expeditions, beginning in 1841, the world knew little about the region and nothing about the Maya.

The best-title prize goes to *Los Angeles Times* columnist Gregory Rodriguez's ***Mongrels, Bastards, Orphans and Vagabonds: Mexican Immigration and the Future of Race in America.*** Rodriguez's skillful history of race relations in the Americas provides thought-provoking anecdotes that will have you thinking twice about what it means to be Mexican, American, Mexican-American, American-Mexican, or a citizen of the world.

MEXICAN CINEMA

Golden Age & Classics

During Mexico's "Golden Age of Cinema" in the 1940s, studios stopped trying to mimic Hollywood and began producing unabashedly Mexican black-and-white films whose stars are still cultural icons in Mexico. **Mario Moreno,** aka Cantinflas, was a comedic genius who personalized the *el pelado* archetype—a poor, picaresque, slightly naughty character trading on his wits alone and getting nowhere. Mexican beauty **Dolores del Río** ended up playing the steamy Latin babe in Hollywood. **Pedro Infante,** the singing cowboy, embodied the ideal of Mexican manhood.

Luis Buñuel's dark *Los Olvidados* (1950) was the Spanish surrealist's third Mexican film, exploring the life of young hoodlums in Mexico City's slums.

The New Cinema

After a long fallow period, a new generation of filmmakers came along in the 1990s. The first big ***El Nuevo Cine Mexicano*** (the New Cinema) hit outside of Mexico was *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992), directed by Alfonso Arau, then author Laura Esquivel's husband. He continues to make films, mainly in Mexico. The second, *Sexo, Pudor y Lágrimas* (1999), by director **Antonio Serrano,** is an unflinching look at the battle of the sexes in Mexico City.

After **Alfonso Cuarón's** debut film, the mordant social satire *Sólo con tu pareja*

(1991), scored critical and commercial success in Mexico, he garnered international acclaim with his ironic *Y Tu Mamá También* (2001), which touches on class hypocrisy while following a pair of teenage boys on an impromptu road trip with a sexy older woman. Cuarón has since directed *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban,* the science-fiction thriller *Children of Men,* and other international productions.

In *Amores Perros* (2000), **Alejandro González Iñárritu** (director of *21 Grams* and *Babel*) presents a keen glimpse of contemporary Mexican society through three stories about different ways of life in Mexico City that converge at the scene of a horrific car accident. His Academy Award–nominated *Babel* (2006), another tour de force, features a Mexican border scene that is realistic, exhilarating, and frightening all at once.

Guillermo del Toro's debut, the dark, atmospheric *Cronos* (1993), won critical acclaim in Mexico. Moving into the international arena, he has directed similarly moody films such as *Hellboy* (2004) and Oscar winner *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006).

As part of a $100-million, five-feature partnership, Cuarón, Iñárritu, and del Toro will each direct his own movie, along with two projects from Colombian director Rodrigo Garcia *(Nine Lives)* and Cuarón's brother and co-screenwriter of *Y Tú Mama También,* Carlos Cuarón. Each director has experienced crossover success, and at least two of the films will be in Spanish. The first, *Rudo y Cursi,* reteamed the Mexican dynamic duo Gael Garcia and Diego Luna and debuted in late 2008. The star-studded *Mother and Child* opened in May 2010 after premières at the Toronto and Sundance film festivals, and *Biutiful,* featuring Javier Bardem, was due for release in late 2010.

Views from the Outside: Films Starring Mexico

Elia Kazan's 1952 classic, ***Viva Zapata!,*** written by John Steinbeck, stars Marlon Brando as revolutionary Emiliano Zapata. Orson Welles's 1958 film noir ***Touch of Evil*** (preposterously billing Charlton Heston as a Mexican narcotics agent) looks at drugs and corruption in Tijuana—still compelling, even though it feels sanitized, compared with today's screaming headlines.

HBO's 2003 flick ***And Starring Pancho Villa as Himself,*** with Antonio Banderas, is the true story of how revolutionaries allowed Hollywood to film Pancho Villa in battle. ***Man on Fire*** (2004), with Denzel Washington as a bodyguard hired to protect a little girl, is full of great Mexico City scenes, though the plot is depressing and all too real. Dylan Verrechia's ***Tijuana Makes Me Happy*** (2005), focusing on Tijuana's humanity rather than its perceived sins, has won awards in Latin America and at U.S. film festivals. Stephen Soderbergh's Academy Award–winning ***Traffic*** (2000), with Benicio del Toro, has powerful scenes focusing on Tijuana's drug war, while the documentary ***Tijuana Remix*** (2002) unveils the city's unique and idiosyncratic culture. Mel Gibson's controversial ***Apocalypto*** (2006) cast indigenous Maya to depict of the Maya empire's waning days; the rainforests of Veracruz state stand in for the lush jungles that must have covered the Yucatán centuries ago. Loosely based on a true story, ***Nacho Libre*** (2006) is a highly-stylized take on Mexican wrestling, shot entirely in rural Oaxaca state.

Julie Taymor's *Frida* (2002), with Mexican actress Salma Hayek producing and starring, is an enchanting biopic about Frida Kahlo's life and work, from her devastating accident to relationships with Diego Rivera and Leon Trotsky. The exquisite cinematography captures the magic realism evinced in Kahlo's work.

Director **Robert Rodriguez**'s breakout film, *El Mariachi* (1992), is set in a small central Mexican town. Made on a shoestring budget, the somewhat cheesy action flick is at least highly entertaining. His *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* (2003) isn't as great, but it's fun to see scenes of San Miguel Allende. Ditto for San Luis Potosí in *The Mexican* (2001), with Brad Pit and Julia Roberts.

MUSIC

Marimba & Son

Marimba music flourishes in much of southern and central Mexico but is considered traditional only in Chiapas and the port city of Veracruz, whose bands travel to such places as Oaxaca and Mexico City, where they play in clubs and restaurants.

Son is a native art form from many parts of Mexico, played with a variety of string instruments. Ritchie Valens' "La Bamba" popularized one of the most famous forms, *son jarocho,* in the '50s. Often fast-paced, with lots of strumming and fancy string picking, it originated in southern Veracruz. Dancing to this form of music requires a lot of fast, rhythmic pounding of the heels *(zapateado). Jarana,* the Yucatán's principal dance music, is a form of *son jarocho* that adds woodwinds and a sensuous Caribbean beat.

Danzón & Bolero

These musical forms came from Cuba in the late 19th century and gained great popularity, especially in Veracruz and Mexico City. *Danzón* is orchestra music that combines a Latin flavor with a stateliness absent from later Latin music. *Bolero* (or *trova*) is the music mainly of guitar trios, such as Los Panchos. It's soft and romantic, often with a touch of melancholy.

Mariachi & Ranchera

Mariachis, with their big sombreros, waist-length jackets and tight pants, embody the Mexican spirit. The music originated from Jalisco state's *son,* arranged for guitars, violins, string bass, and trumpets. Now heard across Mexico—Yucatecan trova music even has mariachi adaptations—and much of the American southwest, it is at its traditional best in Jalisco and its capital, Guadalajara.

The national pride, individualism, and sentimentality expressed in mariachi's kin, *ranchera,* earns it favored status as drinking music. Many Mexicans know the songs of famous composer **José Alfredo Jiménez** by heart.

Mexican-American singer/songwriter **Lila Downs** updated *ranchera* and mariachi for a modern, bicultural audience. Her debut album, *La Cantina,* explored traditional favorites, while her latest, *Shake Away,* features collaborations with famous Latin artists like Mercedes Sosa and Enrique Bunburry.

Norteña, Grupera & Banda

Norteña owes its origins to *tejano* music, coming out of Texas. Mexicans in south-central Texas encountered musicians from the immigrant Czech and German communities of the Texas Hill Country and picked up a taste for polkas and the accordion. Gradually, the music became popular farther south. *Norteña* music tweaked the polka for many of its popular songs and later borrowed from the *cumbia,* slowing the tempo a bit and adding a strong downbeat. It also incorporated the native *corrido,* a type of ballad popularized during the Mexican Revolution (1910–17). *Norteña* became hugely popular in rural northern Mexico though the 1970s, and later generated spinoffs known as *grupera*

Your Mexico Soundtrack, by Joy Hepp

I've always found that one of the best ways to make a vacation have a lasting impression is to create my own personal soundtrack to the trip. Here are my recommendations for the perfect Mexico soundtrack. They include old classics and contemporary favorites:

1. "Mediodia," Café Tacvba
2. "Tijuana Makes Me Happy," Nortec Collective
3. "Llorona," Chavela Vargas
4. "Da Da Da," Molotov
5. "Mexico City," Jill Holland
6. "Andar Conmigo," Julieta Venegas
7. "Como me Duele," Valentín Elizalde
8. "Cumbia Sobre el Río," Celso Piña
9. "Ojo de Culebra," Lila Downs
10. "Quisiera Ser Alcohol," Jaguares
11. "Rata de Dos Patas," Paquita del Barrio
12. "Peligroso Pop," Plastilina Mosh

or *banda,* a style of *norteña* from the area of Sinaloa that replaces the accordion with electric keyboards. *Grupera/banda* is now heard nationwide. **Los Tigres del Norte,** who have released more than 50 albums, are the undisputed kings of Banda; other notable groups and artists include **Los Alacranes Musicales** and **Valentín Elizalde.**

Rock en Español

Mexican rock forged its identity in the 1980s and exploded during the 1990s with bands such as Jaguares and Molotov out of Mexico City, and Maná, based in Guadalajara. Named for the 1920s cafe in the capital's Centro Histórico, **Café Tacvba** (pronounced Tacuba) has been at it since 1989. Their music is influenced by indigenous Mexican music as much as folk, punk, bolero, and hip-hop. The fast-rising **Yucatán a Go Go**—hailing, despite the name, from central Mexico—fuses a bouncy pop beat to lyrics firmly rooted in cultural tradition.

3

Planning Your Trip to Mexico

by Shane Christensen

Planning your trip to Mexico is the first step in what promises to be a fascinating journey. Mexico's geographic and cultural diversity make this country among the world's most interesting to visit. Climate, food, dress, dialect, and social norms often differ markedly from one region to the next: You may be surprised to see how much a trip to Baja California or the Pacific Coast will differ from an excursion to the Caribbean; how distinctive the Mexican culture is on the U.S. border, compared to the Central American border; and how liberal Mexico City seems in the context of the conservative colonial cities surrounding it.

A little planning can make the difference between a bum trip and a great journey. When should you go? What festivals or special events will occur during your visit? What's the best way to get there? How much should you plan to spend? What safety or health precautions should you take? This chapter answers these and other questions.

In addition to these basics, I highly recommend taking a little time to learn about the culture and traditions of Mexico. It will help enrich even the simplest seaside getaway. See chapter 2, "Mexico in Depth," to get started.

1 WHEN TO GO

Mexico has two principal travel seasons. **High season** begins around December 20, peaks over New Year's, and continues through Easter week *(Semana Santa);* in some places, it begins as early as mid-November. **Low season** is from the day after Easter to mid-December; during low season, prices may drop 20% to 50%. In beach destinations popular with Mexican travelers, such as Veracruz and Acapulco, prices will revert to high season during July and August, the traditional national summer vacation period. Prices in inland cities seldom fluctuate from high to low season, but may rise dramatically during the weeks of **Easter** and **Christmas.** Taxco and Pátzcuaro raise prices during their popular Easter-week celebrations. In Isla Mujeres and Playa del Carmen, on the Yucatán Peninsula, high season starts earlier than in the rest of the country and includes the month of August, when many European visitors and Mexican families arrive.

Mexico has two main climate seasons: **rainy** (May to mid-Oct) and **dry** (mid-Oct to Apr). The rainy season can be of little consequence in the dry, northern regions of the country. Southern regions typically receive tropical showers, which begin around 4 or 5pm and last a few hours. Though these rains can come on suddenly and be quite strong, they usually end just as quickly and cool off the air for

the evening. **Hurricane season** particularly affects the Yucatán Peninsula and the southern Pacific coast, especially from June through October. If no hurricanes strike, however, the light, cooling winds, especially from September through November, can make it a perfect time to tackle the pre-Hispanic ruins that dot the interior of the peninsula.

***Norte* (northern) season** runs from late November to mid-January, when the jet stream dips far south and creates northerly winds and showers in many resort areas. These showers usually last only for a couple of days.

June, July, and August are unrelentingly hot on the Yucatán Peninsula and in most coastal areas, though temperatures rise only into the mid-20s to 32°C (mid-80s to 90°F). Most of coastal Mexico experiences temperatures in the 20s°C (80s°F) in the hottest months. The northern states that border the U.S. endure very high summer temperatures.

Elevation is another important factor. High-elevation cities, such as Mexico City and San Cristóbal de las Casas, can get quite cool. Temperatures can drop near freezing at night in winter, even in San Miguel de Allende and Guanajuato, which are at lower elevations.

Mexican beaches reach uncomfortably hot temperatures (often with high humidity) in summer, and most foreign visitors prefer the Caribbean and Pacific Coasts after the hurricane and rainy seasons end in October. Although the weather may be ideal then, the craziest time to visit Cancún is during the American spring-break period in March and April, so avoid this time if you're looking for rest and relaxation. The north of Mexico is unspeakably hot in summer, so it's probably best to avoid extensive travel there during this season. Mexico City is temperate year-round, and the only important difference is whether it's the rainy season or not.

Mexico City's Average Temperatures

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Avg. High (°C)	21	22	24	25	26	24	23	23	22	22	22	21
Avg. High (°F)	70	72	76	78	79	76	74	74	73	73	72	70
Avg. Low (°C)	7	7	10	11	12	13	13	13	12	11	8	7
Avg. Low (°F)	45	46	50	53	55	57	56	56	55	52	48	45

Cancún's Average Temperatures

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Avg. High (°C)	27	27	28	29	31	31	32	32	31	30	28	27
Avg. High (°F)	81	82	84	85	88	89	90	90	89	87	84	82
Avg. Low (°C)	19	20	21	22	25	25	25	25	24	23	22	20
Avg. Low (°F)	67	68	71	73	77	78	78	77	76	74	72	69

Acapulco's Average Temperatures

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
Avg. High (°C)	30	30	30	30	31	31	31	31	31	31	31	31
Avg. High (°F)	87	87	87	87	89	89	89	89	89	89	89	88
Avg. Low (°C)	22	22	22	22	24	25	25	25	25	25	23	22
Avg. Low (°F)	72	72	72	73	76	77	77	77	77	77	75	73

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Religious and secular festivals are a part of life in Mexico. Every town, city, and state holds its own specific festivals throughout the year commemorating religious and historic figures. Indeed, in certain parts of the country it sometimes feels like the festivities never die down.

For an exhaustive list of events beyond those listed here, see **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.

JANUARY

Año Nuevo (New Year's Day), nationwide. This national holiday is perhaps the quietest day in Mexico. Most people stay home or attend church. All businesses are closed. In traditional indigenous communities, new tribal leaders are inaugurated with colorful ceremonies rooted in the pre-Hispanic past. January 1.

Día de los Reyes (Three Kings' Day), nationwide. This day commemorates the Three Kings' presenting gifts to the Christ Child. Children receive presents, much like they do at Christmas in the United States. 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 must host a tamales-and-*atole* (a warm drink made of corn dough) party on February 2. January 6.

Regional Fair, León, Guanajuato. One of Mexico's largest fairs celebrates the founding of this shoemaking and leather-craft city. The fair features parades, theater, craft exhibits, music, and dance. Month of January.

Feast of San Antonio Abad, Mexico City. This feast is celebrated through the Blessing of the Animals at the Santiago Tlatelolco Church on the Plaza of Three Cultures, at San Juan Bautista Church in Coyoacán, and at the Church of San Fernando, 2 blocks north of the Juárez-Reforma intersection. January 17.

FEBRUARY

Día de la Candelaria (Candlemas), nationwide. Music, dances, processions, food, and other festivities lead up to a blessing of seed and candles in a ceremony that mixes pre-Hispanic and European traditions marking the end of winter. 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. Celebrations are especially festive in Tlacotalpan, Veracruz. 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, nationwide. Carnaval takes place the 3 days preceding Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. The cities of Tepoztlán, Huejotzingo, Chamula, Veracruz, Cozumel, and Mazatlán celebrate with special gusto. In some places, such as Veracruz, Mazatlán, and Cozumel, the celebration resembles New Orleans's Mardi Gras, with a festive atmosphere and parades. In Chamula, the event harks back to pre-Hispanic times, with ritualistic running on flaming branches. On Shrove Tuesday, in Tepoztlán and Huejotzingo, brilliantly clad *chinelos* (masked dancers) fill the streets. Transportation and hotels are packed, so it's best to make reservations 6 months in advance and

arrive a couple of days ahead of the beginning of celebrations.

Ash Wednesday, nationwide. The start of Lent and time of abstinence, this is a day of reverence nationwide; some towns honor it with folk dancing and fairs.

March

Annual Witches Conference, Lake Catemaco, Veracruz. Shamans, white witches, black witches, and practitioners of Caribbean, Afro, and Antillean ritualistic practices gather on the shores of the lake. Taking place the first Friday night of March every year, the annual gathering is a spectacle of witches, healers, magicians, and wizards.

Benito Juárez's Birthday, nationwide. This national holiday celebrating one of Mexico's most beloved leaders is observed through small hometown celebrations, especially in Juárez's birthplace, Guelatao, Oaxaca. March 21.

Spring Equinox, Chichén Itzá. On the first day of spring, the Temple of Kukulkán—Chichén Itzá's main pyramid—aligns with the sun, and the shadow of the plumed serpent moves slowly from the top of the building down. When the shadow reaches the bottom, the body joins the carved stone snake's head at the base of the pyramid. According to ancient legend, at the moment that the serpent is whole, the earth is fertilized. Visitors come from around the world to marvel at this sight, so advance arrangements are advisable. Elsewhere, equinox festivals and celebrations welcome spring, in the custom of the ancient Mexicans, with dances and prayers to the elements and the four cardinal points. It's customary to wear white with a red ribbon. March 21 (the shadow appears Mar 19–23).

April

Semana Santa (Holy Week), nationwide. Mexico celebrates the last week in the life of Christ, from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, with somber religious processions, spoofing of Judas, and reenactments of biblical events, plus food and craft fairs. Among the Tarahumara Indians in the Copper Canyon, celebrations have pre-Hispanic overtones. Pátzcuaro, Taxco, and Malinalco hold special celebrations. Businesses close during this traditional week of Mexican national vacations.

If you plan to travel to or around Mexico during Holy Week, make your reservations early. Seats on flights into and out of the country will be reserved months in advance. Buses to these towns and to almost anywhere else in Mexico will be full, so try arriving on the Wednesday or Thursday before Good Friday. Easter Sunday is quiet, and the week following is a traditional vacation period. Early April.

Festival de México en el Centro Histórico (Annual Mexico City Festival), Mexico City. Regarded as one of Latin America's most vibrant celebrations of art and culture, this 2-week festival features diverse events including opera, concerts, theater, art exhibits, dance productions, and gourmet fare. Proceeds go toward the rescue and restoration of the art and architecture of Mexico City's historic downtown area. For a detailed schedule and more information, visit www.festival.org.mx. Mid- to late March, depending on Easter.

San Marcos National Fair, Aguascalientes. Mexico's largest fair, first held in 1604, lasts 22 days. About a million visitors come for bullfights and rodeos, as well as *ranchera* music and mariachis. There are craft and industrial exhibits, markets, fireworks, and folk dancing. Mid-April.

May

Labor Day, nationwide. Workers' parades countrywide; everything closes. May 1.

Cinco de Mayo, Puebla and nationwide. This national holiday celebrates the defeat of the French at 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.

Cancún Jazz Festival. Over Memorial Day weekend, the Parque de las Palapas, as well as the area around the Convention Center, has live performances from jazz musicians from around the world. To confirm dates and schedule information, check www.cancun.travel.

International Gay Festival. This weekend event in Cancún kicks off with a welcome fiesta of food, drinks, and mariachi music. Additional festivities include a tequila party, tour of Cancún, sunset Caribbean cruise, bar and beach parties, and a final champagne breakfast. For schedule information, check www.cancun.eventguide.com.

June

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

Corpus Christi, nationwide. This day, celebrated nationwide, honors the Body of Christ (the Eucharist) with processions, Masses, and food. Festivities include performances of *voladores* (flying pole dancers) beside the church and at the ruins of El Tajín, Veracruz. In Mexico City, children dressed as Indians and carrying decorated baskets of fruit for the priest's blessing gather with their parents before the National Cathedral. *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, Jalisco. This pottery center on the outskirts of Guadalajara offers craft demonstrations and competitions, as well as mariachis, dancers, and colorful parades. June 14 to July 14.

Día de San Pedro y San Pablo (St. Peter and St. Paul Day), nationwide. This feast day is celebrated wherever St. Peter is the patron saint; it also honors anyone named Pedro or Peter. It's especially festive at San Pedro Tlaquepaque, near Guadalajara, with mariachi bands, folk dancers, and parades with floats. June 29.

July

Guelaguetza Dance Festival, Oaxaca. This is one of Mexico's most popular events. Villagers from the seven regions around Oaxaca gather in the city's amphitheater. They dress in traditional costumes, and many wear colorful "dancing" masks. The celebration dates from pre-Hispanic times. Make advance reservations—this festival attracts visitors from around the world. Check out www.visitmexico.com for more details. Late July.

August

International Chamber Music Festival, San Miguel de Allende. Held since 1982 in this beautiful town, the festival features international award-winning classical music ensembles. July 30 to August 15. See www.festivalsanmiguel.com for details.

Fall of Tenochtitlán, Mexico City. The last battle of the Spanish Conquest took place at Tlatelolco, ruins that are now part of the Plaza of Three Cultures. Wreath-laying ceremonies there and at the Cuauhtémoc monument on

Reforma commemorate the surrender of Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec king, to Cortez, and the loss of thousands of lives. August 13.

Assumption of the Virgin Mary, nationwide. This day is celebrated throughout the country with special Masses and, in some places, with processions. In Huamantla, flower petals and colored sawdust carpet the streets. At midnight on August 15, a statue of the Virgin is carried through the streets; on August 16 is the running of the bulls. On August 15 in Santa Clara del Cobre, near Pátzcuaro, Our Lady of Santa Clara de Asis and the Virgen de la Sagrado Patrona are honored with a parade of floats, dancers on the main square, and an exposition of regional crafts. Buses to Huamantla from Puebla and Mexico City will be full, and there are few hotels in Huamantla. Plan to stay in Puebla and commute to the festivities. August 15 to August 17.

Fiestas de la Vendimia (Wine Harvest Festival), Ensenada, Baja California. This food and wine festival celebrates the annual harvest, with blessings, seminars, parties, and wine tastings. Check out www.visitmexico.com for more details. Mid- to late August.

September

International Mariachi Festival, Guadalajara, Jalisco. These public concerts of mariachi music include visiting mariachi groups from around the world (even Japan!). Workshops and lectures focus on the history, culture, and music of the mariachi in Mexico. Check www.mariachi-jalisco.com.mx to confirm dates and the performance schedule. August 30 to September 9.

Reto al Tepozteco (Tepozteco Challenge), Tepoztlán, Morelos. This celebration of King Tepoztecatl's conversion to the Catholic religion includes a performance depicting the event. A procession leads toward the Tepozteco Pyramid, where people offer food and beverages. This event includes hypnotic *chinelo* dances, fireworks, and a food festival. September 7 and 8.

Independence Day, nationwide. Celebrates Mexico's independence from Spain with parades, picnics, and family reunions. At 11pm on September 15, the president gives the famous independence *grito* (shout) from the National Palace in Mexico City. At least half a million people crowd into the *zócalo* (main plaza), and the rest of the country watches on TV or participates in local celebrations. Tall buildings downtown are draped in the national colors (red, green, and white), and the *zócalo* is ablaze with lights. Many people drive downtown at night to see the lights. Querétaro and San Miguel de Allende, where Independence conspirators lived and met, also celebrate elaborately; the schedule of events is exactly the same in every village, town, and city across Mexico. September 15 and 16.

Fall Equinox, Chichén Itzá. The same shadow play that occurs during the spring equinox is repeated. September 21 and 22.

October

Fiestas de Octubre (October Festivals), Guadalajara. This "most Mexican of cities" celebrates for a month with its trademark mariachi music. It's a bountiful display of popular culture and fine arts, and a spectacular spread of traditional food, Mexican beer, and wine. All month.

Festival Cervantino, Guanajuato. This festival began in the 1970s as a cultural event, bringing performing artists from all over the world to this picturesque

village northeast of Mexico City. Now the artists travel all over the republic after appearing in Guanajuato. Check www.festivalcervantino.gob.mx for details. Mid- to late October.

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

Feria Nacional del Mole, Mexico City. Just south of Mexico City, thousands of varieties of *mole* will be prepared for sampling and competition. This spicy sauce is a Mexican staple, made of unsweetened chocolate, peppers, and spices, often served with meat or poultry. Between October 1 and 15.

November

Day of the Dead, nationwide. This holiday (Nov 1) actually lasts for 2 days: All Saints' Day, honoring saints and deceased children, and All Souls' Day, honoring deceased adults. Relatives gather at cemeteries countrywide, carrying candles and food, and often spend the night beside graves of loved ones. Weeks before, bakers begin producing bread in the shape of mummies or round loaves decorated with bread "bones." Sugar skulls emblazoned with glittery names are sold everywhere. Many days ahead, homes and churches erect altars laden with bread, fruit, flowers, candles, favorite foods, and photographs of saints and of the deceased. On both nights, costumed children walk through the streets, often carrying mock coffins and pumpkin lanterns, into which they expect money to be dropped.

The most famous celebration—which has become almost too well known—is on Janitzio, an island on Lake Pátzcuaro, Michoacán, west of Mexico City. Mixquic, a mountain village south of Mexico City, hosts an elaborate street fair. At around 11pm on both nights, solemn processions lead to the cemetery in the center of town. Cemeteries around Oaxaca are well known for their solemn vigils, and some for their Carnaval-like atmosphere. November 1 and 2.

Fiestas de Noviembre (November Festivals), Puerto Escondido, Oaxaca. The month's events include the annual Pipeline of Mexico, Zicatela Beach's International Surfing Tournament, the International Sailfish Tournament, and the Coastal Dance Festival. Check local calendars or www.visitmexico.com for details. All month.

Gourmet Festival, Puerto Vallarta, Jalisco. In this culinary capital of Mexico, chefs from around the world join with local restaurateurs to create special menus and host wine and tequila tastings, cooking classes, a gourmet food expo, and other special events. For detailed information, see www.festivalgourmet.com. Dates vary, but the festival generally runs November 12 to November 22.

Revolution Day, nationwide. This holiday commemorates the start of the Mexican Revolution in 1910 with parades, speeches, rodeos, and patriotic events. November 20.

Annual Yucatán Bird Festival, Mérida, Yucatán. Bird-watching sessions, workshops, and exhibits are the highlights of this festival designed to illustrate the special role birds play in our environment and in the Yucatán. Visit www.yucatanbirds.org.mx for details. Late November to early December.

National Silver Fair, Taxco. This competition pits Mexico's best silversmiths against some of the world's finest artisans. There are exhibits, concerts, dances, and fireworks. Check local calendars or www.visitmexico.com for details. Late November to early December.

Annual Hot Air Balloon Festival, León, Guanajuato. This is the largest festival in Latin America, with more than 60 balloons and pilots from all over the globe participating. Visit www.festivaldelglobo.com.mx for details. Late November.

December

Feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe, nationwide. Religious processions, street fairs, dancing, fireworks, and Masses honor the patroness of Mexico. It is one of the country'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. It's customary for children to dress up as Juan Diego, wearing mustaches and red bandannas. One of the most famous and elaborate celebrations takes place at the Basílica of Guadalupe, north of Mexico City, where the Virgin appeared. But every village celebrates this day, often with processions of children carrying banners, and with *charreadas* (rodeos), bicycle races, dancing, and fireworks. In Puerto Vallarta, the celebration begins on December 1 and extends through December 12, with traditional processions to the church for a brief Mass and blessing. In the final days, the processions and festivities take place around the clock. There's a major fireworks exhibition on the feast day at 11pm. December 12.

Festival of San Cristóbal de las Casas, San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas. This 10-day festival in Chiapas includes a procession by the Tzotzil and Tzetzal Indians, *marimba* music, and a parade of horses. December 12 to December 21.

Christmas Posadas, nationwide. On each of the 9 nights before Christmas, it's customary to reenact the Holy Family's search for an inn. Door-to-door candlelit processions pass through cities and villages nationwide, especially Querétaro and Taxco. Hosted by churches, businesses, and community organizations, these take the place of the northern tradition of a Christmas party. December 15 to December 24.

Fiesta de los Rábanos (Festival of the Radishes), Oaxaca. Local artisans and sculptors set up stalls around the main square to display their elaborate pieces of art—made entirely from radishes! The local crop is used for creating nativity scenes and famous Mexican figures. Balloons and birds crafted from local flowers add even more color. December 23.

Christmas, nationwide. Mexicans often extend this national holiday and take vacations for up to 2 weeks before Christmas, returning after New Year's. Many businesses close, and resorts and hotels fill. Significant celebrations take place on December 23 (see above). Querétaro has a huge parade. On the evening of December 24 in Oaxaca, processions culminate on the central plaza. On the same night, Santiago Tuxtla in Veracruz celebrates by dancing the *huapango* and with *jarocho* bands in the beautiful town square. December 24 and 25.

New Year's Eve, nationwide. Like the rest of the world, Mexico celebrates New Year's Eve with parties, fireworks, and plenty of noise. New Year's Eve in Mexico is typically spent with family. Special festivities take place at Santa Clara del Cobre, near Pátzcuaro, with a candlelit procession of Christ; and at Tlacolula, near Oaxaca, with commemorative mock battles. December 31.

2 ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

PASSPORTS

Travelers to Mexico from most countries are required to present a valid passport. Citizens from some countries will need a Mexican visa. U.S. citizens can enter Mexico with any U.S. official ID; passports are not required. Nonetheless, U.S. citizens need to be mindful of reentry requirements, outlined below.

Virtually every air traveler **entering the U.S.** is required to show 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 to enter or reenter the United States. 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 other 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.** The card is valid only for land and sea travel between the U.S. and Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean region, and Bermuda. For more details on application restrictions, see www.dhs.gov/files/programs/gc_1200693579776.shtm.

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

VISAS

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

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., among others, can get their visas upon arrival. Many other countries require a pre-approved visa; for the latest requirements, please check 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, ensure that you obtain such a card at the immigration module located at the border and have it stamped by the authorities. If you do not receive a stamped tourist card at the border, ensure that, when you arrive at your destination within Mexico, you immediately go to the closest National Institute of Immigration office, present your bus ticket, and request a tourist card. Travelers who fail to have their tourist card stamped may be fined, detained, or expelled from the country.

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 or its local offices.

If you plan to enter Mexico by car, please read the vehicle importation requirements on p. 56.

Note on travel of minors: Mexican law requires that any non-Mexican citizen 17 years of age and under departing Mexico without both parents must carry notarized written permission from the parent or guardian who is not traveling with the child to or from Mexico. This permission must include the name of the parent, the name of the child, the name of anyone traveling with the child, and the notarized signature(s) of the absent parent(s). The U.S. Department of State recommends that permission include travel dates, destinations, airlines, and a summary of the circumstances surrounding the travel. The child must be carrying the original letter (not a facsimile or scanned copy), and proof of the parent/child relationship (usually a birth certificate or court document) and an original custody decree, if applicable. Travelers should contact the Mexican Embassy or closest Mexican Consulate for current information.

CUSTOMS

Mexican Customs inspection has been streamlined. At most points of entry, tourists are requested to press a button in front of what looks like a traffic signal, which alternates on touch between red and green. Green light and you go through without inspection; red light and your luggage or car may be inspected. If you have an unusual amount of luggage or an oversize piece, you may be subject to inspection anyway. Passengers that arrive by air will be required to put their bags through an X-ray machine and then move to the kiosk and push a button to determine whether their luggage will be selected for any further inspection.

What You Can Bring into Mexico

When you enter Mexico, Customs officials will be tolerant if you are not carrying illegal drugs or firearms. Tourists are allowed to bring in their personal effects duty-free. A laptop computer, camera equipment, and sports equipment that could feasibly be used during your stay are also allowed. The underlying guideline is: Don't bring anything that looks as if it's meant to be resold in Mexico. Those entering Mexico by air or sea can bring in gifts worth a value of up to $300 duty-free, except alcohol or tobacco products. The website for Mexican Customs *(Aduanas)* is **www.aduanas.gob.mx/aduana_mexico/2008/pasajeros/139_10134.html**.

What You Can Take Home from Mexico

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

Australian Citizens: Australian Customs Service, Customs House, 5 Constitution Ave., Canberra City, ACT 2601 (✆ **1300/363-263;** from outside Australia, 612/6275-6666; www.customs.gov.au).

Canadian Citizens: Canada Border Services Agency, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0L8 (✆ **800/461-9999** in Canada, or 204/983-3500; www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca).

New Zealand Citizens: New Zealand Customs, The Customhouse, 17–21 Whitmore St., Box 2218, Wellington, 6140 (✆ **04/473-6099** or 0800/428-786; www.customs.govt.nz).

U.K. Citizens: HM Customs & Excise, Crownhill Court, Tailyour Road, Plymouth, PL6 5BZ (✆ **0845/010-9000;** from outside the U.K., 020/8929-0152; www.hmce.gov.uk).

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

MEDICAL REQUIREMENTS

No special vaccinations are required for entry into Mexico. For other medical requirements and health-related recommendations, see "Health," p. 63.

3 GETTING THERE & GETTING AROUND

GETTING TO MEXICO

By Plane

Mexico has dozens of international and domestic airports throughout the country. Among the major airports and their online airport codes are Mexico City (MEX), Cancún (CUN), Acapulco (ACA), Guadalajara (GDL), Puerto Vallarta (PVR), Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo (ZIH), and Los Cabos (SJD). There are two major Mexican airlines—Aeroméxico and Mexicana, and a handful of newer, low-cost carriers.

For a list of airlines serving Mexico, see "Major Airlines," in chapter 21.

Arriving at the Airport

Immigration and Customs clearance at Mexican airports is efficient. Expect longer lines during peak season, but you can usually clear Immigration and Customs within an hour. For more on what to expect when passing through Mexican Customs, see "Customs," above.

By Car

Driving is not the cheapest way to get to Mexico, but it is a convenient way to see the country. Even so, you may think twice about taking your own car south of the border once you've pondered the bureaucracy involved. One option is to rent a car once you arrive and tour around a specific region. Rental cars in Mexico generally are clean and well maintained, although they are often smaller than rentals in the U.S., may have manual rather than automatic transmission, and are comparatively expensive due to pricey mandatory insurance. Discounts are often available for rentals of a week or longer, especially when you make arrangements in advance online or from the United States. Be careful about estimated online rates, which often fail to include the price of the mandatory insurance. (See "Car Rentals," below, 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. Although travel insurance companies generally are helpful, they may not have the most accurate information. To check on road conditions or to get help with any travel emergency while in Mexico, call ✆ **800/482-9832** or 55/5089-7500 in Mexico City. English-speaking operators staff both numbers.

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

Tips Carrying Car Documents

You must carry your temporary car-importation permit, tourist permit (see "Entry Requirements," above), and, if you purchased it, your proof of Mexican car insurance in the car at all times. The temporary car-importation permit papers are valid for 6 months to a year, while the tourist permit is usually issued for 30 days. It's a good idea to overestimate the time you'll spend in Mexico so that 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.

Car Documents

To drive your car into Mexico, you'll need a **temporary car-importation permit,** which is granted after you provide a required list of documents (see below). The permit can be obtained after you cross the border into Mexico through Banco del Ejército (Banjercito) officials with Mexican Customs *(aduanas),* 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.**
- **A valid driver's license,** issued outside of Mexico.
- **Current, original car registration and a copy of the original car title.** If the registration or title is in more than one name and not all the named people are traveling with you, a notarized letter from the absent person(s) authorizing use of the vehicle for the trip is required; have it ready. The registration and your credit card (see below) must be in the same name.
- **Original immigration documentation.** Likely your tourist card (see above).
- **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 prepay $49 by Internet at www.banjercito.com.mx. 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, a great source is the Customs office in Nuevo Laredo, or *Módulo de Importación Temporal de Automóviles, Aduana Nuevo Laredo* (✆ **867/712-2071**).

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

Mexican Auto Insurance (Seguros de Auto)

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

You can also buy car insurance through **Sanborn's Mexico Insurance,** P.O. Box 52840, 2009 S. 10th, McAllen, TX (✆ **800/222-0158;** fax 800/222-0158 or

Tips 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.

956/686-0732; www.sanbornsinsurance.com). The company has offices at all U.S. border crossings. Its policies cost the same as the competition's do, but you get legal coverage (attorney and bail bonds, if needed) and a detailed guide for your proposed route. Most of the Sanborn's border offices are open Monday through Friday from 8am to 6pm; a few are staffed on Saturday and Sunday. **AAA** auto club (www.aaa.com) also sells insurance.

Returning to the U.S. with Your Car

You *must* return the car documents you obtained when you entered Mexico when you cross back with your car, or within 180 days of your return. (You can cross as many times as you wish within the 180 days.) If the documents aren't returned, 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 return the car documents only to a Banjercito official on duty at the Mexican *aduana* building *before* you cross back into the United States. Some border cities have Banjercito officials on duty 24 hours a day, but others do not; some do not have Sunday hours.

By Ship

Numerous cruise lines serve Mexico. Some (such as Carnival and Royal Caribbean) cruise from California to the Baja Peninsula and ports of call on the Pacific coast, or from Houston or Miami to the Caribbean (which often includes stops in Cancún, Playa del Carmen, and Cozumel). Several cruise-tour specialists sometimes offer last-minute discounts on unsold cabins. One such company is **CruisesOnly** (✆ **800/278-4737;** www.cruisesonly.com).

By Bus

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

GETTING AROUND

By Plane

Mexico has two large private national carriers: **Mexicana** (✆ **800/531-7921** in the U.S., or 01-800/801-2010 in Mexico; www.mexicana.com) and **Aeroméxico** (✆ **800/237-6399** in the U.S., or 01-800/021-4000 in Mexico; www.aeromexico.com), in addition to several low-cost carriers. Mexicana and Aeroméxico offer extensive connections to the United States as well as within Mexico.

Low-cost carriers include **Aviacsa** (www.aviacsa.com), **Click Mexicana** (www.mexicana.com), **InterJet** (www.interjet.com.mx), and **Volaris** (www.volaris.com.mx). **Aerovega** (www.oaxacamio.com/aerovega.htm) serves destinations in Oaxaca. Regional carriers like this can be expensive, but go to difficult-to-reach places. In each applicable section of

this book, we've mentioned regional carriers with all pertinent telephone numbers.

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

AIRPORT TAXES Mexico charges an airport tax on all departures. Passengers leaving the country on international flights pay about $24, 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. Another custom that's very important to respect is turning left. Never turn left by stopping in the middle of a highway with your left-turn signal on. Instead, pull onto the right shoulder, wait for traffic to clear, and then proceed across the road.

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

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

BREAKDOWNS If your car breaks down on the road, help might already be on the way. Radio-equipped green repair trucks, run by uniformed English-speaking officers, patrol major highways during daylight hours. These **"Green Angels/ Angeles Verdes"** perform minor repairs and adjustments 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 MECÁNICO.

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

MINOR ACCIDENTS When possible, many Mexicans drive away from minor accidents, or try to make an immediate settlement, to avoid involving the police. If the police arrive while the involved persons are still at the scene, the cars will likely be confiscated and both parties will likely have to appear in court. Both parties may also be taken into custody until liability is determined. Foreigners who don't speak fluent Spanish are at a distinct

disadvantage when trying to explain their version of the event. Three steps may help the foreigner who doesn't wish to do as the Mexicans do: If you were in your own car, notify your Mexican insurance company, whose job it is to intervene on your behalf. If you were in a rental car, notify the rental company immediately and ask how to contact the nearest adjuster. (You did buy insurance with the rental, right?) Finally, if all else fails, ask to contact the nearest Green Angel, who may be able to explain to officials that you are covered by insurance. See also "Mexican Auto Insurance," in "Getting to Mexico," above.

CAR RENTALS You'll get the best price if you reserve a car at least a week in advance. For a list of car-rental firms operating in this region, see "Airline & Car Rental Websites," p. 764.

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

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

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

DEDUCTIBLES Be careful—these vary greatly; some are as high as $2,500, which comes out of your pocket immediately in case of damage without insurance.

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. Insurance may be invalid if you have an accident while driving on an unpaved road.

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

By Taxi

Taxis are the preferred way to get around almost all of Mexico's resort areas, and around Mexico City. Fares for short trips within towns are generally preset by zone and are quite reasonable compared with U.S. rates. (Los Cabos is one exception; another is taxi service to the north side of the bay from Puerto Vallarta. Travelers are better off renting a car than paying these exorbitant taxi fares—about $100 for a one-way trip to Punta Mita.) For longer trips or excursions to nearby cities, taxis can generally be hired for around $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,

Warning! Bus Hijackings

The U.S. Department of State notes that bandits sometimes target long-distance buses. First-class buses on toll *(cuota)* roads sustain a markedly lower crime rate than second-class and third-class buses that travel the less secure "free" *(libre)* highways.

and a taxi travels much faster than a bus. For anyone who is uncomfortable driving in Mexico, this is a convenient, comfortable alternative. A bonus is that you have a Spanish-speaking person with you in case you run into trouble. Many taxi drivers speak at least some English. Your hotel can assist you with the arrangements.

By Bus

Except for the Baja Peninsula, where bus service is not well developed, 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 about as comfortable as business class on an airline. Buses are often the only way to get from large cities to other nearby cities and small villages. Don't hesitate to ask questions if you're confused about anything, but note that little English is spoken in bus stations.

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

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

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.

4 MONEY & COSTS

The Value of the Mexican Peso vs. Other Popular Currencies

Pesos	US$	Can$	UK£	Euro (€)	Aus$	NZ$
100	US$7.70	C$8.20	£5.35	€6.15	A$9.30	NZ$11.40

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

Overall, 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 Cancún and Los Cabos. The least

Money Matters

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

Tips 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 has a **value-added tax** of 15% (*Impuesto de Valor Agregado,* or IVA; pronounced "*ee*-bah") on most everything, including restaurant meals, bus tickets, and souvenirs. (Exceptions are Cancún, Cozumel, and Los Cabos, where the IVA is 10%; as ports of entry, they receive a break on taxes.) Hotels charge the usual 15% IVA, plus a locally administered bed tax of 2% (in most areas), for a total of 17%. In Cancún, Los Cabos, and Cozumel, hotels charge the 10% IVA plus 2% room tax. The prices quoted by hotels and restaurants do not necessarily include IVA. You may find that upper-end properties (three or more stars) quote prices without IVA included, while lower-priced hotels include IVA. Ask to see a printed price sheet and ask if the tax is included.

expensive are those off the beaten path and in small rural villages. In the major cities, such as the capital, prices vary greatly depending on the neighborhood. As you might imagine, tourist zones tend to be much more expensive than local areas.

The currency in Mexico is the **peso.** Paper currency comes in denominations of 20, 50, 100, 200, and 500 pesos. Coins come in denominations of 1, 2, 5, 10, and 20 pesos, and 20 and 50 **centavos** (100 centavos = 1 peso). The current exchange rate for the U.S. dollar, and the one used in this book, is 13 pesos; at that rate, an item that costs 13 pesos would be equivalent to $1.

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

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

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

Casas de cambio (exchange houses) are generally more convenient than banks because they have more locations and longer hours; the rate of exchange may be the same as at a bank or slightly lower. Before leaving a bank or exchange-house window, count your change in front of the teller before the next client steps up.

Large airports have currency-exchange counters that often stay open whenever

What Things Cost in Mexico	Pesos (US$ where indicated)
Cancún beachfront double room, moderate	US$120.00
Puerto Vallarta beachfront double room, moderate	US$200.00–US$400.00
Mexico City dinner for one, expensive	200.00–300.00
Tacos from market or street vendor	20.00–30.00
Admission to most archaeological sites	31.00–51.00
Cancún night out dancing	US$40.00
Mérida night out dancing	Free

flights are operating. Though convenient, they generally do not offer the most favorable rates.

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

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

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

Travelers to Mexico can easily withdraw money from **ATMs** (called *cajeras*) in most major cities and resort areas. The exchange rate given by ATMs is generally more favorable than at *casas de cambio.* Most machines offer Spanish/English menus and dispense pesos, but some offer the option of withdrawing dollars.

The U.S. Department of State recommends caution when you're using ATMs in Mexico, stating that they should be used only during business hours and in large protected facilities, but this pertains primarily to Mexico City, where crime remains a significant problem. In most resorts in Mexico, the use of ATMs is perfectly safe—just use the same precautions you would at any ATM. However, beware of using ATMs in dubious locations as there have been reports of people having their card numbers "skimmed" (a scheme in which information is copied and moneys stolen or cards fraudulently charged).

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 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.

5 HEALTH

As of press time, there was no longer a travel alert for Mexico regarding H1N1 ("swine flu"). The 2009 world outbreak of H1N1 began in central Mexico and quickly spread to over 74 countries. Though the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a pandemic alert at the time, that alert is no longer in effect. 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 at www.travel.state.gov, the **CDC website** at www.cdc.gov, or the website of the **World Health Organization** at www.who.int.

GENERAL AVAILABILITY OF HEALTHCARE

In most of Mexico's resort destinations, you can usually find healthcare that meets U.S. standards. The U.S. Department of State notes that excellent health facilities are available in Mexico City, but training and availability of emergency responders may be below 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. 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 north of the border do and may be just as good for less cost.

Prescription medicine is broadly available at Mexico pharmacies; however, be aware that you may need a copy of your prescription or need to obtain a prescription from a local doctor. This is especially true in the border towns, such as in Tijuana, where many Americans have been crossing into Mexico specifically for the purpose of purchasing lower-priced prescription medicines.

COMMON AILMENTS

SUN EXPOSURE Mexico is synonymous with sunshine; much of the country is bathed in intense sunshine most of the year. Avoid excessive exposure, especially in the Tropics, where UV rays are more dangerous. The hottest months in Mexico are April and May in the south, and July through September along the Pacific Coast, including Baja California. The deserts of northern Mexico are extremely hot in summer.

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

Since dehydration can quickly become life-threatening, 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 *turista.*

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/4,920 ft.). Symptoms include shortness of breath, fatigue, headache, insomnia, and even nausea. Mexico City is at 2,240m (7,347 ft.) above sea level, as are a number of other central and southern cities, such as San Cristóbal de las Casas (even higher than Mexico City). At high elevations, it takes about 10 days to acquire the extra red blood corpuscles you need to adjust to the scarcity of oxygen. To help your body acclimate, drink plenty of fluids, avoid alcohol, and don't overexert yourself during the first few days. If you have heart or lung trouble, consult your doctor before flying above 2,400m (7,872 ft.).

BUGS, BITES & OTHER WILDLIFE CONCERNS **Mosquitoes** 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. Avon's Skin So Soft also works extremely well. Another good remedy to keep the mosquitoes away is to mix citronella essential oil with basil, clove, and lavender essential oils. If you're sensitive to bites, pick up some antihistamine cream from a drugstore at home.

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

TROPICAL ILLNESSES You shouldn't be overly concerned about tropical diseases if you stay on the normal tourist routes and don't eat street food. However, both dengue fever and cholera have appeared in

Tips Over-the-Counter Drugs in Mexico

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

Tips Smoke-Free Mexico?

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

Mexico in recent years. Talk to your doctor or to a medical specialist in tropical diseases about precautions you should take. You can protect yourself by taking some simple precautions: Watch what you eat and drink; don't swim in stagnant water (ponds, slow-moving rivers, or wells); and avoid mosquito bites by covering up, using repellent, and sleeping under netting. The most dangerous areas seem to be on Mexico's west coast, away from the big resorts.

IF YOU GET SICK

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

For travel to Mexico, you may have to pay all medical costs upfront and be reimbursed later. Before leaving home, find out what medical services your health insurance covers. To protect yourself, consider buying medical travel insurance.

We list **emergency numbers** and **embassies** in "Fast Facts," p. 762 and 761, respectively.

6 CRIME & SAFETY

Mexico is one of the world's great travel destinations and millions of visitors travel safely here each year. In most places, it's uncommon for foreign visitors to face anything worse than petty crime. 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. These tips should help make your trip even more enjoyable.

Two More Authors Give Their Two Cents: Safety in Mexico

David Baird Stories of murder and mayhem are making all the headlines about Mexico these days. Stories of assassinations, kidnappings, and shootouts sell newspapers but are of no help evaluating the risk in traveling through the country. They 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 risk of traveling in Mexico is to read the U.S. State Department Travel Alert (www.state.gov).

The current situation has changed the way I travel in two ways beyond the usual precautions—such as 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 kidnappers, and it is achieved by looking as much like a tourist as possible. Kidnappers in Mexico don't target tourists. They have targeted resident foreigners who have family in the country or businesspeople 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 kidnappers 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. For this very reason, I used to lug my computer around in a briefcase and now I always use a backpack.

Joy Hepp Mexico City is one of the biggest, baddest cities in the entire world. I'd be lying if I said there weren't certain neighborhoods that make me want to clutch my purse a little tighter, but I believe the good guys here far overpower the bad guys. I've had waitresses chase me down the street after I left my credit card on the table and countless taxi drivers who make sure to wait outside my door until I've made it inside safely. On a recent trip to the Yucatán, I had the pleasure of meeting an 80-year-old traveler from Alabama who was in Mexico for the first time. She reminded me that with the proper precautions, this country is a wide-open adventure for anyone.

Mexico has experienced a serious escalation in drug-related and border violence in recent years, including cities that previously received significant tourism, including Tijuana, Ciudad Juarez, and Ciudad Chihuahua. Tourism has dried up in these areas as a result. Kidnapping also continues to occur throughout the country at an alarming rate.

The U.S. and Mexico share a border more than 3,000km (1,860 miles) long and Americans comprise the vast majority of tourists to Mexico. Due to this close and historically intertwined relationship, we recommend that all travelers read the **U.S. Department of State travel advisories** for Mexico (**www.state.gov**). The U.S. State Department encourages its citizens to use main roads during daylight hours, stay in well-known tourist destinations and tourist areas with better security, and provide an itinerary to a friend or family member not traveling with them. It can be useful to travel with a working cellphone as well. This is good advice for all travelers to Mexico.

For **emergency numbers,** see p. 762.

U.S.-MEXICO BORDER VIOLENCE

The U.S. Department of State consistently updates its Travel Alert regarding crime along the U.S.-Mexico border. Some of the content as of June, 2010, is reproduced here and is applicable to all travelers. "Violence by criminal elements affects many parts of the country, including urban and rural areas. Visitors to the U.S.-Mexico border region, including cities such as Tijuana, Ciudad Juarez, Nuevo Laredo, Nogales, and Matamoros should remain alert and be aware of their surroundings at all times. In its efforts to combat violence, the Government of Mexico has deployed military troops to various parts of the country. Military checkpoints increased in border areas in early 2008. U.S. citizens are advised to cooperate with official checkpoints when traveling on Mexican highways. Sporadic outbursts of politically motivated violence occur from time to time in certain areas of the country, particularly in the southern states of Chiapas, Guerrero, and Oaxaca."

MEXICO CITY

Violent crime is also serious in the capital. Do not wear fine jewelry or expensive watches, or display any other obvious signs of wealth. If you do not have local friends who can help guide you around the city, ask your hotel staff to help point you in the right direction. Muggings are common by day and by night. Theft is even common at the Benito Juárez International Airport, where items such as briefcases, cameras, or laptops are common targets. To avoid theft upon arrival, incoming passengers in need of pesos should use the exchange counters or ATMs in the arrival/departure gate area, where access is restricted, rather than changing money after passing through Customs. Metro (subway) robberies are frequent in Mexico City.

Avoid the use of the **green Volkswagen** and **libre taxis** taken off the street, many of which have been involved in "pirate" robberies, muggings, and kidnappings. These taxis are also common in incidents where passengers are "hijacked" and released only after they are forced to withdraw the limit on their ATM bank cards. Always use official airport or radio taxis (called *sitios*), instead. Tourists and residents alike should avoid driving alone at night anywhere in the city.

CRIME IN RESORT TOWNS

A significant number of rapes have been reported in Cancún and other resort areas, usually at night or in the early morning. Women should not walk alone at night. Drug-related violence, including shooting and kidnapping, has increased in Acapulco recently. Although this violence is not targeted at foreign residents or tourists, visitors

in these areas should be vigilant in their personal safety. Armed street crime is a serious problem in all the major cities. Some bars and nightclubs, especially in resort cities such as Cancún, Cabo San Lucas, Mazatlán, Acapulco, and Tijuana, can be havens for drug dealers and petty criminals. It is also advised that you should not hike alone in backcountry areas nor walk alone on less-frequented beaches, ruins, or trails.

The U.S. State Department offers specific safety and security information for travelers on Spring Break in Mexico: http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/spring_break_mexico/spring_break_mexico_2812.html.

CRIME NATIONWIDE

Kidnappings

Kidnapping—including the kidnapping of non-Mexicans—continues at alarming rates. The U.S. Department of State states the following: "So-called express kidnappings, that is, attempts to get quick cash in exchange for the release of an individual, have occurred in almost all of Mexico's large cities and appear to target not only the wealthy but also the middle class. Kidnapping in Mexico has become a lucrative business, whether the kidnappings are actual or 'virtual'. A common scam throughout Mexico is 'virtual' kidnapping by telephone, in which the callers typically speak in a distraught voice in a ploy to elicit information about a potential victim and then use this knowledge to demand ransom for the release of the supposed victim. In the event of such a call, it is important to stay calm, as the vast majority of the calls are hoaxes. Do not reveal any personal information; try to speak with the victim to corroborate his/her identity; and contact the local police as well as the Embassy or nearest consulate."

Highway Safety

Travelers should exercise caution while traveling Mexican highways, avoiding travel at night, and using toll *(cuota)* roads rather than the less secure free *(libre)* roads whenever possible.

All drivers are advised to cooperate with official checkpoints when traveling on Mexican highways.

Bus travel should take place during daylight hours on first-class coaches. 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. A long-standing U.S. advisory cautions against traveling by bus from Acapulco toward Ixtapa or Huatulco. Although the police have made some progress in bringing this problem under control, armed robberies of entire busloads of passengers still occur.

Bribes & Scams

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

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

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

negotiations of any kind. Stand your ground, but do it politely.

As you travel in Mexico, you may encounter several types of **scams,** which are typical throughout the world. One involves some kind of a **distraction** or feigned commotion. While your attention is diverted, for example, a pickpocket makes a grab for your wallet. In another common scam, an **unaccompanied child** pretends to be lost and frightened and takes your hand for safety. Meanwhile the child or an accomplice plunders your pockets. A third involves **confusing currency.** A 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. An ATM scam involves ATMs in questionable locations where card numbers are "skimmed" and information is copied, money stolen, or cards fraudulently charged.

7 SPECIALIZED TRAVEL RESOURCES

TRAVELERS WITH DISABILITIES

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

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

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

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

For a bit of underwater sightseeing, **Yucatek Divers** (✆ **984/803-2836;** www.yucatek-divers.com), in Playa del Carmen, specializes in dives for people with disabilities.

LGBT TRAVELERS

Mexico is a conservative country, with deeply rooted Catholic religious 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 14th overall after the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Canada, South Africa, Norway, Sweden, and six U.S. jurisdictions.

In Mexico City, the **Zona Rosa** is a gay-friendly neighborhood with numerous bars and cafes dedicated to gay and lesbian patrons. **Puerto Vallarta** is the most welcoming and gay-friendly destination in Mexico. **Cancún** and **Playa del Carmen** are popular with many gay travelers, and both coastal resorts offer gay-friendly accommodations, bars, and activities. For more information, visit **MexGay Vacations** at www.mexgay.com. Information about gay-friendly accommodations in Mérida, Yucatán, is available at www.gayplaces2stay.com.

Bayside Properties (✆ **322/222-8148** in Mexico; www.baysidepropertiespv.com) rents gay-friendly condos, villas, and hotels for individuals and large groups. The services are customized to individual needs and may include airport pickups and in-villa cooks.

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.

Some of the most popular places for long-term stays are Guadalajara, Lake Chapala, Ajijic, and Puerto Vallarta, all in the state of Jalisco; San Miguel de Allende and Guanajuato in Guanajuato state; Cuernavaca in Morelos; Alamos in Sinaloa; and, increasingly, destinations in Baja California.

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

Sanborn Tours, 2015 S. 10th St., P.O. Box 936, McAllen, TX 78505-0519 (✆ **800/395-8482;** www.sanborns.com), offers a 6-day "San Miguel, Retire in Mexico" bus tour every December over the holidays. The tour departs from McAllen, Texas and costs $438.

FAMILY TRAVEL

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

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

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

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

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

Every country's regulations differ, but in general, children traveling abroad should have plenty of documentation on hand, particularly if they're traveling with someone other than their own parents (in which case, a notarized form letter from a parent is often required). For details on entry requirements for children traveling abroad, see p. 54.

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

WOMEN TRAVELERS

Women do not frequently travel alone in Mexico, including driving alone on the highways. Walking on the street could net you a catcall, and walking alone at night is not advisable except in well-protected tourist areas. I've known people who have had uncomfortable experiences in crowded places such as subways. In general, however, Mexicans are extremely gracious toward women and often chivalrous as well.

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.

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

More hostels have entered the student travel scene. **Hostels.com.mx** offers a list of hostels in Acapulco, Cancún, Guadalajara, Guanajuato, Mérida, Mexico City, Oaxaca, Playa del Carmen, Puerto Escondido, Puebla, San Cristobal las Casas, San Miguel de Allende, and Zacatecas.

8 RESPONSIBLE TOURISM

Mexico's ecological diversity is among the broadest of any country in the world, with an abundance of ecosystems that ranges from the northern deserts to the central conifer forests, and the southern tropical rainforests. Mexico also supports a population of 111 million people and welcomes more than 20 million visitors each year. Tourism is one of the country's biggest and most lucrative industries, and while tourism has brought jobs and growth to much of Mexico, it has also created and even accelerated many of Mexico's ecological problems. Cancún may be the most high-profile example: Rapidly developed from a rural outpost to an international resort destination, Cancún imported turf from Florida for its golf courses, inadvertently introducing a disease that wiped out the local coconut palms. The region's mangroves, a key habitat for native species and vital to protecting the land from hurricanes and erosion, have also suffered.

However, tourism has also encouraged the development of ecological conservation. Mexico is home to seven of the world's eight species of sea turtle, though the entire sea turtle population was decimated on both coasts as a result of tourism growth and local overfishing. Recent success stories such as Puerto Escondido, in Oaxaca, where sea turtles are now protected by the locals (p. 412), or the Riviera Maya, in the Yucatán, where

Tips Biodegradable Sunscreen

Recent scientific studies have shown that the chemicals in commercial sunscreen can do long-term damage to coral reefs, collect in fresh water, and even build up in your own body system. The Riviera Maya, Mexico's Caribbean Coast, receives more than 2.5 million visitors every year, many of them drawn to its rare marine environment—a unique combination of fresh water cenotes and the world's second-largest coral reef. A few ounces of sunscreen multiplied by 2.5 million is equal to a substantial amount of harmful chemicals suspended in the ocean and fresh water. That's why tours to the **Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve** (p. 576) and water parks **Xcaret** (p. 562) and **Xel-Ha** (p. 567) ask that you use only biodegradable sunscreen or wear none at all when swimming in their ocean or cenotes. You might just be inspired to use a biodegradable formula wherever you swim.

The label of a biodegradable sunscreen should state that it is 100% biodegradable (and only 100% will do). Xcaret gives out packets of biodegradable formula, but Xel-Ha charges $16 for theirs. If you're curious, you can obtain a list of banned chemicals by contacting the parks directly. Buy a supply of biodegradable formula before you go from **www.mexitan.com** or **www.caribbean-sol.com**.

marine biologists are working with hotels to guard nesting turtles and their eggs, have demonstrated the benefits of linking tourism with local knowledge.

Mexico's people are proud of their land and culture, and through your travels, especially in rural areas, you will likely encounter ***ejidos*** and ***cooperativos,*** or local cooperatives, that offer small-scale tourism services—this may be as simple as taking visitors on a boat ride through a lake or as visible as controlling access to archaeological ruins. *Ejidos* will also run tours to popular ecotourism destinations similar to those offered by large travel agencies. When you deal with *ejidos,* everyone you encounter will be from the community and you know that your money goes directly back to them. States with a strong network of cooperatives include Chiapas, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo, and Yucatán.

The Mexican Caribbean supports the Great Mesoamerican Barrier Reef, the second-largest reef in the world, which extends down to Honduras. This reef and other marine ecosystems face increasing pressure from sedimentation, pollution, overfishing, and exploitative recreational activities, all newly associated with growing regional tourism. The **Coral Reef Alliance** (CORAL; www.coral.org) is an example of an organization that, by teaming up with the **World Wildlife Fund** (WWF; www.wwf.org) and **United Nations Environmental Program** (UNEP; www.unep.org), has been working to address threats to the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef and improve environmental sustainability throughout the region. CORAL partners with Mexican Amigos de Sian Ka'an, Conservation International, and the Cozumel Reefs National Park in an effort to build sustainability into mass tourism (such as cruise ships and hotels). CORAL assists marine tourism operators in implementing a voluntary code of conduct for best environmental practices. CORAL is soon to spread its influence to the Yum Balam region of the Yucatán Peninsula, where guidelines for whale shark interactions are greatly needed.

ANIMAL-RIGHTS ISSUES

Bullfights

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 ultimately be killed in a gory show. That said, a bullfight is a portal into understanding Mexico's Spanish colonial past, and traditional machismo is on full display. Bullfights take place in towns as different as Tijuana and Puerto Vallarta, and they afford a colorful spectacle like no other, with a brass band playing; the costumed matador's macho stare; men shaking their heads at less-than-perfect swipes of the cape; and overly made-up, bloodthirsty women chanting *"Ole,"* waving their white hankies, and throwing roses, jackets, and hats at the matador's feet. There is also the extremely minuscule chance that, if the bull puts up a good enough fight or pierces his horn through the matador's leg, he will be spared for breeding purposes. It does happen, if only rarely. To read more about the implications of attending a bullfight, visit **www.peta.org**, the website of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA).

Swimming 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. Local organizations have been known to staple notes to Dolphin Discovery ads in magazines distributed in Cancún hotels. 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 website of the **Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society** at www.wdcs.org or the **American Cetacean Society,** www.acsonline.org, for further discussion on the topic.

9 SPECIAL-INTEREST & ESCORTED TRIPS

ACADEMIC TRIPS & LANGUAGE CLASSES

For Spanish-language instruction, **IMAC** (✆ **866/306-5040;** www.spanish-school.com.mx) offers programs in Guadalajara, Puerto Vallarta, and Playa del Carmen. The **Spanish Institute** (✆ **800/539-9710;** www.spanishtoday.com) is affiliated with intensive Spanish-language schools in Puebla and Mérida.

To explore your inner Frida or Diego while in Mexico, look into **Mexico Art Tours,** 9323 E. Lupine Ave., Scottsdale, AZ 85260 (✆ **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, Oaxaca, Puebla, San Miguel de Allende, Veracruz, and the Yucatán—and other destinations. Special tours involve archaeology, architecture, interior design, and culture—such as a Day of the Dead tour.

Tips The Sports Scene in Mexico

Mexico has more than 120 **golf courses,** concentrated in the resort areas, with excellent options in Mexico City and Guadalajara. Los Cabos, in Baja Sur, has become the country's preeminent golf destination; the Puerto Vallarta area enjoys a growing reputation. For details on courses and events, see chapters 10 and 20. Visitors to Mexico can also enjoy **tennis, racquetball, squash, waterskiing, surfing, bicycling,** and **horseback riding. Scuba diving** is excellent, not only off the Yucatán's Caribbean coast (especially Cozumel), but also on the Pacific coast at Puerto Vallarta and Manzanillo, and off Baja in the Sea of Cortez. **Mountain and volcano climbing** is a rugged sport that allows you to meet like-minded adventurers from around the world. The top peaks are just 80km (50 miles) south of Mexico City—the snowcapped volcanoes Ixtaccihuatl (5,255m/17,236 ft.) and Popocatépetl (5,420m/17,778 ft.). Popocatépetl was not accepting visitors at press time, due to recent volcanic activity. For information on visiting and climbing the volcanoes, contact **Alaska Mountain Guides International** at ✆ **800/766-3396** (www.mountainguidesinternational.com/programs/mexico_volcano.html).

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.

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

ADVENTURE & WELLNESS TRIPS

Mexico Sagaz (Asociación Mexicana de Turismo de Aventura y Ecoturismo) is an active association of ecotourism and adventure tour operators. It publishes an annual catalog of participating firms and their offerings, all of which must meet certain criteria for security, quality, and training of the guides, as well as for sustainability of natural and cultural environments. For more information, contact ✆ **800/654-4452** toll-free in Mexico or 55/5544-7567; www.mexicosagaz.org.

Baja Expeditions, 2625 Garnet Ave., San Diego, CA 92109 (✆ **800/843-6967** or 858/581-3311; www.bajaex.com), offers natural-history cruises, whale-watching, sea kayaking, camping, scuba diving, and resort and day trips from La Paz and Loreto, with the kayak trips from

Loreto. Small groups and special itineraries are Baja Expeditions' specialty, including an exotic 7-day yoga/massage/kayak expedition to a secluded private island in the bay.

The **California Native,** 6701 W. 87th Place, Los Angeles, CA 90045 (✆ **800/926-1140** or 310/642-1140; www.calnative.com), offers small-group deluxe 7-, 8-, 11-, and 14-day escorted tours through the Copper Canyon. Many trips visit the towns of Batopilas, Urique, and Tejeban, as well as the customary destinations of Creel, El Fuerte, Divisadero, Chihuahua, and Cerocahui. The guides are known throughout the area for their work with the Tarahumara Indians. They also cover Baja and the Yucatán.

Canyon Travel, 900 Rich Creek Lane, Bulverde, TX 78163-2872 (✆ **800/843-1060** in the U.S. and Canada, or 830/885-2000; www.canyontravel.com), specializes in the Copper Canyon and has a variety of adventures, from easy to challenging. It designs trips for special-interest groups of agriculturists, geologists, rockhounds, and birders. The owner works with the Tarahumara Indians.

The **Chiapas Tourism Secretariat** has information in Spanish about ecotourism at locations across the state (www.turismo chiapas.gob.mx). Two private companies that run ecotours throughout Chiapas are **Ecochiapas** (Primero de Marzo 30, San Cristóbal de las Casas; ✆ **967/674-6660;** www.ecochiapas.com) and **Latitud 16** (Calle Real de Guadalupe 23, San Cristóbal de las Casas; ✆ **967/678-3909;** www.latitud16.com).

The **Mesoamerican Ecotourism Alliance** (✆ **800/682-0584** in the U.S.; www.travelwithmea.org) offers award-winning ecotours recognized by *National Geographic* to the Yucatán and Chiapas.

MexicoTravel.Net, 300-3665 Kingsway, Vancouver, BC V5R 5W2 Canada (✆ **604/454-9044;** fax 604/454-9088; www.mexicotravel.net), runs adventure, cultural, and sports tours to Mexico City and surrounding areas, Baja, Veracruz, the Copper Canyon, the Mayan Route, and other destinations.

Mountain Travel Sobek, 6420 Fairmount Ave., El Cerrito, CA 94530 (✆ **888/687-6235** or 510/594-6000; www.mtsobek.com), takes groups kayaking in the Sea of Cortez and hiking in Copper Canyon and Oaxaca. Sobek is one of the world's leading ecotour outfitters.

Natural Habitat Adventures, 2945 Center Green Court, Ste. H, Boulder, CO 80301 (✆ **800/543-8917** or 303/449-3711; www.nathab.com), offers naturalist-led natural history and adventure tours. Expeditions focus on monarch butterfly-watching in Michoacán, sea turtle– and gray whale–watching in Baja, and hiking through Copper Canyon.

NatureQuest, 30872 South Coast Hwy., Ste. PMB, Laguna Beach, CA 92651 (✆ **800/369-3033** or 949/499-9561; www.naturequesttours.com), specializes in the natural history, culture, and wildlife of the Copper Canyon and the remote lagoons and waterways off Baja California. A 10-day hiking trip ventures into rugged areas of the canyon; a less strenuous trip goes to Creel and Batopilas, in the same area. Baja trips get close to nature, with special permits for venturing via two-person kayak into sanctuaries for whales and birds. Special horse-packing adventures are available as well.

Sea Kayak Adventures, P.O. Box 3862, Coeur d'Alene, ID 83816 (✆ **800/616-1943** or 208/765-3116; www.seakayakadventures.com), features kayak trips in both the Sea of Cortez Loreto Bay National Marine Park and Magdalena Bay, with a focus on whale-watching. This company has the exclusive permit to paddle Magdalena Bay's remote northern waters, and they guarantee gray whale sightings. Trips combine paddling of 4 to 5 hours per day, with hiking across dunes and beaches, while nights are spent camping (as well as

staying in a hotel in Loreto). They have added a suite of yoga and spiritual retreats that combine extensive outdoor activity with twice-daily yoga sessions.

Sea Trek Ocean Kayaking Center, P.O. Box 1987, Sausalito, CA 94966 (✆ **415/332-8494;** www.seatrek.com), has been alternating sea-kayaking trips between Alaska and Baja for 20 years, which has provided them an intimate knowledge of the peninsula's coastline. Eight-day trips depart from and return to Loreto. An optional day excursion to Bahía Magdalena for gray whale–watching is available. Full boat support is provided, and no previous paddling experience is necessary.

Paddling South, P.O. Box 827, Calistoga, CA 94515 (✆ **800/398-6200** or 707/942-4550; www.tourbaja.com), offers sea-kayaking, mountain bike, and mule-pack tours in the Loreto area. Owner Trudi Angell has guided these trips for more than 20 years. She and her guides offer firsthand knowledge of the area. Kayaking, mountain biking, pack trips, and sailing charters combine these elements with outdoor adventures.

Trek America, 16/17 Grange Mills Weir Road, London, SW12 ONE, UK (✆ **800/873-5872** in the U.S., or 0845/313-2614 in the U.K.; www.trekamerica.com), organizes lengthy, active trips that combine trekking, hiking, van transportation, and camping in the Yucatán.

Veraventuras, Santos Degollado 81-8, 91000 Xalapa, Ver. (✆ **01-800/712-6572** toll-free in Mexico or 228/818-9579; www.veraventuras.xalapa.net), offers specially trained guides on well-organized adventures into the state of Veracruz, including rafting through the rapids of the Antigua and Actopan rivers. The website is in Spanish only.

FOOD & WINE TRIPS

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

VOLUNTEER & WORKING TRIPS

For numerous links to volunteer and internship programs throughout Mexico involving teaching, caring for children, providing healthcare, feeding the homeless, and doing other community and public service, visit **www.volunteerabroad.com**.

If you're interested in teaching English to Mexican university students in the colonial town of Dolores Hidalgo or Queretaro, **Global Volunteers,** 375 E. Little Canada Rd., St. Paul, MN 55117 (✆ **800/487-1074;** www.globalvolunteers.org), arranges 2-week programs for a fee.

ProWorld Service Corps, 324 E. Oak St., Fort Collins, CO 80524 (✆ **877/733-7378** or 970/472-0585; www.myproworld.org), organizes rural outreach internships in the areas of health, environment, and economic development, particularly to Oaxaca.

10 STAYING CONNECTED

MOBILE PHONES

Telcel is Mexico's expensive, primary cellphone provider. It has upgraded its systems to GSM and offers good coverage in much of the country, including the major cities and resorts. Most Mexicans buy their

cellphones without a specific coverage plan and then pay as they go or purchase prepaid cards with set amounts of airtime credit. These cellphone cards with scratch-off PINs can be purchased in Telcel stores, as well as many newspaper stands and convenience stores.

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

INTERNET & E-MAIL

Wi-Fi is increasingly common in Mexico's major cities and resorts. Mexico's largest airports offer Wi-Fi access provided for a fee by Telcel's Prodigy Internet service. Most five-star hotels now offer Wi-Fi in the guest rooms, although you will need to check in advance whether this service is free or for a fee. Hotel lobbies often have Wi-Fi as well. To find public Wi-Fi hot spots in Mexico, go to **www.jiwire.com**; its Hotspot Finder holds the world's largest directory of public Wi-Fi hot spots.

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

NEWSPAPERS & MAGAZINES

The English-language newspaper the *Miami Herald* is published in conjunction with *El Universal.* You can find it at most newsstands. *The News* is a new English-language daily with Mexico-specific news, published in Mexico City. Newspaper kiosks in larger cities also carry a selection of English-language magazines.

TELEPHONES

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

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

To call Mexico:

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

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

To call a Mexican cellular number: From the same area code, dial 044 and

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

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

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

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

11 TIPS ON ACCOMMODATIONS

MEXICO'S HOTEL RATING SYSTEM

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

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

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

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

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

HOTEL CHAINS

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

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

Finds Boutique Lodgings

Mexico lends itself beautifully to the concept of small, private hotels in idyllic settings. They vary in style from grandiose estate to palm-thatched bungalow. **Mexico Boutique Hotels** (www.mexicoboutiquehotels.com) specializes in smaller places to stay with a high level of personal attention and service. Most options have fewer than 50 rooms, and the accommodations consist of entire villas, casitas, bungalows, or a combination. The Yucatán is especially notable for the luxury haciendas throughout the peninsula.

excellent beach-resort packages. Fiesta Inn hotels are usually more business-oriented. Grupo Posadas also owns the more luxurious Caesar Park hotels and the eco-oriented Explorean hotels.

- **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.
- **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.
- **Quinta Real Grand Class Hotels and Resorts** (www.quintareal.com). These hotels, owned by Summit Hotels and Resorts, are noted for architectural and cultural details that reflect their individual regions. At these luxury properties, attention to detail and excellent service are the rule. Quinta Real is the top-line Mexican hotel brand.

HOUSE RENTALS & SWAPS

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

You'll find the most extensive inventory of homes at **Vacation Rentals by Owner (VRBO;** www.vrbo.com). They have more than 33,000 homes and condominiums worldwide, including a large selection in Mexico. Another good option is **VacationSpot** (✆ **888/903-7768;** www.vacationspot.com), owned by Expedia and a part of its sister company Hotels.com. It has fewer choices, but the company's criteria for adding inventory are much more selective and often include on-site inspections. They also offer toll-free phone support.

4

Suggested Mexico Itineraries

by Shane Christensen

Mexico's geographic and cultural diversity makes it one of the world's most fascinating countries, a place where Mexicans of wide-ranging descent live amidst fertile valleys, spectacular beaches, tropical forests, rugged mountains, and hot deserts. Several of the suggested itineraries described here will take you through visually stunning landscapes and both big-city and small-town Mexico.

Once inside Mexico, travel is best done by plane, bus, or car. A number of low-cost carriers have begun flying domestically in recent years, significantly reducing the cost of internal flights. Mexico's first-class buses remain a comfortable and inexpensive—though sometimes slow—means of travel. Car rental has generally become less expensive, and it's also possible to hire a car and driver—although for greater cost. There is only one true passenger train still operating, which runs along the Copper Canyon to Chihuahua City.

I've tried to keep travel to a minimum in order to maximize time in each destination, so none of these itineraries can be called an exhaustive exploration of Mexico. If you want to see all of Mexico's most famous sites, however, you can link the central archaeological tour with the Ruta Maya, which would take about 3 weeks. International airports serve major beach resorts, making these convenient gateway points. Keep in mind that's it's possible to fly into one airport and out of another, usually without much difference in cost when compared with buying a round-trip ticket in and out of the same airport.

1 CENTRAL MEXICO'S PRE-COLUMBIAN TREASURES IN A WEEK

Most of Mexico's great archaeological sites, aside from those left by the Maya, are in the country's center, from Mexico City to the east. This trip takes you to the best of these and to the three most impressive archaeological museums in Mexico. The area in which all of this is located is relatively compact. It doesn't require a lot of travel time to cover, unless you add on a side trip to Oaxaca for the ruins of Monte Albán and Mitla.

Days ❶, ❷ & ❸: Mexico City

If you arrive at an early hour, go straight to the very heart of the nation: Mexico City's ***zócalo,*** or main square (p. 140). There, poetically situated between the nation's first cathedral and its National Palace, lie the ruins of the Aztec's **Templo Mayor** (p. 126), left buried and forgotten until 1978. Dedicate your second day to the **Museo Nacional de Antropología** (p. 124) and **Chapultepec Park** (p. 134). By the third day, you should have adapted

to the altitude and will be ready for a day trip to **Teotihuacán** (p. 152), "City of the Gods," where you can explore palaces and pyramids and climb to the summit of the Pyramid of the Sun.

Day 4: Tlaxcala

Drive or take a bus to colonial Tlaxcala to view the vivid murals of **Cacaxtla** and the hilltop stronghold of **Xochitécatl** (p. 467). The murals are painted in an intriguing Maya style, with rich symbolism that invites speculation. Stay the night here and enjoy the slow rhythms and street life of the town. Stroll over to the **Government Palace** (p. 466) to view the modern murals of artist Desiderio Hernández Xochitiotzin, which chronicle the history of the Tlaxcaltecans, ancient rivals of the Aztecs. See p. 466.

Days 5 & 6: Puebla ★★, Cholula & Xalapa

From Tlaxcala, it's a quick car or bus ride to colonial **Puebla** (p. 452) and its satellite town, Cholula, which was the ancient religious center of central Mexico. In the afternoon, visit the **Museo Amparo** (p. 462) to see its stunning collection of pre-Hispanic art, and then head over to **Cholula** (p. 462) the next day to view the ruins of Mexico's largest pyramid, with the majestic volcano "El Popo" as a backdrop. Visit the local churches of **Tonantzintla** (p. 463) and **San Francisco Acatepec** (p. 463) for their Indian baroque design.

From Puebla, it's on to bustling **Xalapa** (p. 468), a 3-hour drive from the dry central plateau to the misty slopes of the Sierra Madre Oriental. Visit the city's wonderful **Museo de Antropología** (p. 470), with a collection of megalithic Olmec heads and expressive Totonac art.

Day 7: Veracruz City ★

Next travel down to the old port city of **Veracruz** (p. 472). Enjoy a relaxing day in this lively town, with its coffee shops, tropical music, and dance. From here, you can fly out directly or via Mexico City. To extend your trip, consider heading north to see the ruins of **El Tajín** (p. 480), or south to **Oaxaca** (p. 424) to see Monte Albán and Mitla.

2 THE BEST OF WESTERN MEXICO IN A WEEK

On this route, you enter Mexico through the León/Guanajuato International Airport and leave from Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo. In between, you're treated to a variety of places and

scenes—from the maze of streets and alleyways of the old mining town of Guanajuato, to the stately colonial city of Morelia, to the Indian town of Pátzcuaro, to the modern resort hotels of Ixtapa and Zihuatanejo. From November to March, you can add a day trip from Morelia to a magical place in the mountain forests east of the city where millions of monarch butterflies congregate in a yearly ritual that is one of the most intriguing of nature's mysteries.

Day ❶ & ❷: Guanajuato & San Miguel de Allende ★★★

These enchanted colonial cities are made for walking. Spend 1 day in each, taking in the sights and sounds of their colorful cobblestone streets, flower-filled plazas, and music-filled cafes and cantinas. If you tire of walking in Guanajuato, contract a taxi to give you a tour of this university town. The panoramic highway circles the narrow valley where the old town is nestled, and there's an excellent view from the statue of **El Pípila** (p. 209) before descending to the subterranean roads. Consider visiting the bizarre yet intriguing **Museo de Las Momias (Mummy Museum)** while here (p. 212).

In San Miguel de Allende, visit the architecturally stunning **Parroquia** (p. 195), and be sure to stop in some of the marvelous galleries and shops. Most are housed in colonial buildings with beautiful interiors and lovely courtyards. Evenings are a particularly enchanted time to be in San Miguel, when the city is lit by candles and colorful lamps with people on the streets and music everywhere. The town has a number of outstanding restaurants. See p. 201.

Days ❸: Morelia ★

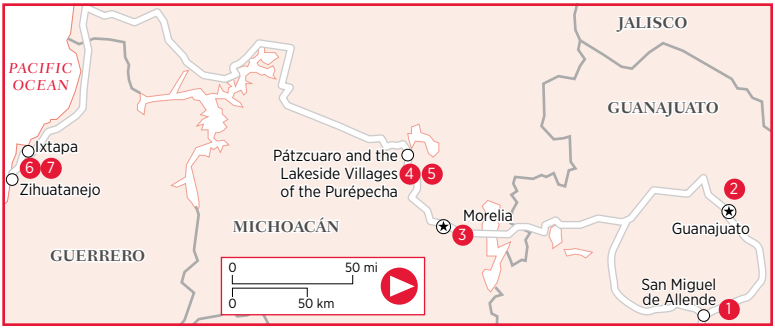
Drive or take the bus for the 3-hour trip to **Morelia** (p. 247), Mexican President Felipe Calderón's hometown. Build in time to see the **cathedral** from the vantage point of one of the many cafes and restaurants that front Avenida Madero. Take a tour of the city and enjoy coffee, a drink, or dinner on the terrace of the **Villa Montaña Hotel** (p. 254). In winter you can also make a day trip to view the magnificent **monarch butterflies** (p. 257), or head out to see to the dormant volcano **El Paricutín** (p. 270).

Days ❹ & ❺: Pátzcuaro ★★★ & the Lakeside Villages of the Purépecha

From Morelia, it's only an hour's drive to the picturesque town of **Pátzcuaro** (p. 258) and the heart of the Purépecha homeland. Enjoy a stroll around the two principal plazas of the town, and pay a visit to the **House of Eleven Patios** (p. 262) and the **Museo de Artes Industrias Populares** (p. 261) for a fascinating examination of the different art forms practiced in the region. On your next day, hire a car or guide to tour the lakeside villages and perhaps take a taxi to the town of **Santa Clara** (p. 267) to watch the coppersmiths at work.

Days ❻ & ❼: Ixtapa ★ & Zihuatanejo

Zihuatanejo is one of the most appealing beach resorts in Mexico, a small fishing village and luxury getaway that retains its traditional coastal charm. Although I prefer Zihuatanejo to its more artificial neighbor, Ixtapa also offers beautiful beaches, family-friendly resorts, and exciting nightlife. The tollway connecting the central highlands to these resorts will get you there in 4 to 5 hours. Relax for a couple of days and then catch a flight back home. See p. 385.



3 LOS CABOS TO THE COPPER CANYON

This itinerary offers a great deal of contrast by starting in the resort area of Los Cabos. After immersing yourself in any number of seaside activities, take a short tour of southern Baja that includes bohemian Todos Santos before crossing the Sea of Cortez and boarding a train that climbs up through rugged Sierra Tarahumara, hugging the sides of the Copper Canyon. Stop here to enjoy the beautiful serenity, and then reboard the train heading to Chihuahua, once home to Pancho Villa.

Days 1, 2 & 3: Cabo San Lucas, San José del Cabo & Todos Santos ★★

Take your time enjoying the gorgeous setting of these resort towns and the wide-ranging activities they offer. Rent a car to drive along the coast, and perhaps visit the town of **Todos Santos** (p. 730) to get a feel for the character of the region. See p. 700.

Day 4: La Paz ★★ to Los Mochis

Take a bus or *colectivo* to **La Paz** and, from there, to the ferry dock. After a 5-hour voyage, you'll arrive at **Topolobampo** (p. 691), the port area of Los Mochis.

Days 5 & 6: Bahuichivo & Cerocahui ★★★

The train departs early in the morning and, by late morning, is snaking its way through some of the most beautiful canyon land on the trip. By midday, you reach **Bahuichivo,** where you can get transportation to the town and mission of **Cerocahui.** This is an excellent place for hiking, horseback riding, and driving tours to the overlook of **Cerro Gallego.** See p. 685.

Days 7 & 8: Creel ★

Continue by train to **Creel,** where a car can then take you to the nearby **Copper Canyon Sierra Lodge** (p. 689). Here you can enjoy the peace and quiet of the sierra, visit an old mission, hike to a nearby waterfall, and meet Tarahumara Indian women, who come to sell their pine-needle baskets and other handicrafts. See p. 687.

Days 9 & 10: Chihuahua ★

You'll arrive at night. Use part of the next day to wander the historic downtown area and visit **Pancho Villa's house** (p. 698) before flying back home. See p. 693.

4 LA RUTA MAYA

This route, which connects the major Maya sites in Mexico, could be done moving quickly over 2 weeks, or more slowly in a month or perhaps broken up into two trips. I've condensed the trip by leaving out Mérida, but you may want to visit the beautiful Yucatán capital. There's a risk of overdosing on ruins by seeing too many in too short a time, so feel free to pick and choose at your own pace. The best mode of travel is by rental car: The highways have little traffic and are, for the most part, in good shape.

Day ❶: Arrive in Cancún

After you arrive, enjoy the rest of the day with a swim in the Caribbean or an afternoon by the pool. See chapter 14.

Day ❷: Ek Balam ★★★ & Chichén Itzá ★★★

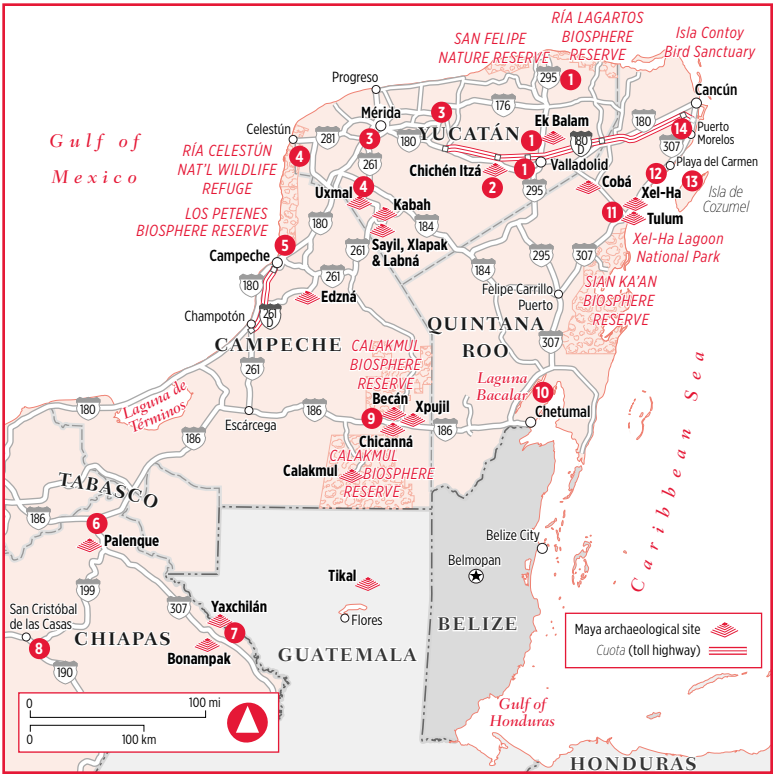
Get on the modern toll highway that heads toward Mérida and take the exit for Valladolid. Head north, away from town, to visit the ruins of **Ek Balam** (p. 644). Then head back to **Valladolid** (p. 641) for lunch before driving the short distance to **Chichén Itzá** (p. 635). Just outside of Valladolid, stop to see the cenotes of **Dzitnup** and **Sammulá** (p. 644). Farther on is the **Balankanché Cave** (p. 641). When you get to Chichén, check into your hotel, and then go to the **ruins** later in the evening for the sound-and-light show. See p. 636.

Day ❸: Uxmal ★★★

Spend more time at the ruins of **Chichén Itzá** in the morning, then continue west on the toll highway toward Mérida, and turn off at Ticopó. Head south toward the town of **Acanceh** (p. 620) and Hwy. 18. Stop to see the small but interesting ruins in the middle of town, and then proceed down Hwy. 18 to the ruins of **Mayapán** (p. 620). Afterward, continue through Ticul to Santa Elena and **Uxmal** (p. 622) for the sound-and-light show.

Day ❹: Edzná

Visit **Uxmal** (p. 621) in the morning, then drive back toward Santa Elena, and take Hwy. 261 south to Hopelchén and on to the impressive ruins of **Edzná** (p. 634). Nearby is a fancy hacienda-turned-hotel, called **Uayamón** (p. 603). Better still, stay at the sister property in old-town



Campeche, **Hacienda Puerta Campeche** (p. 632). Or choose from several more modest digs.

Days 5 & 6: Palenque ★★, Bonampak & Yaxchilán

Stay on Hwy. 261 to Escárcega, then head west on Hwy. 186 toward Villahermosa, and then south on Hwy. 199 to the town of **Palenque** (p. 351) with its magnificent pyramids. The next day go to the ruins of **Bonampak** and **Yaxchilán** (p. 658).

Days 7 & 8: San Cristóbal de las Casas ★★

Keep south on Hwy. 199 toward **San Cristóbal de las Casas** (p. 660). On the way, take a swim at **Misol Ha** (p. 658), and visit the ruins of **Toniná** (p. 659) outside of Ocosingo. From San Cristóbal, go with one of the local guides to see the Maya communities of **San Juan Chamula** and **Zinacantán** (p. 666).

Day 9: Calakmul ★★★

Retrace your steps to Escárcega and continue east on Hwy. 186. If you have time, visit the fascinating sculptures of **Balamkú** (p. 591). Spend the night at one of the hotels in the vicinity of the turnoff for **Calakmul,** one of the prime city-states of the Classic age of the Maya, and not often visited.

Day ⑩: Calakmul & Becán ★★★

Get to **Calakmul** (p. 590) early. Keep your eyes open for wildlife as you drive along the narrow jungle road; all the area surrounding the city is a wildlife preserve. Afterward, continue east on Hwy. 186 to see the ruins of **Becán** (p. 589), a large ceremonial center with tall temples. Also in the vicinity are **Xpujil** (p. 589) and **Chicanná** (p. 590). Spend the night on the shores of **Lake Bacalar** (p. 582), where you can cool off in its blue waters.

Days ⑪, ⑫ & ⑬: Tulum

Drive north on Hwy. 307 to **Tulum** and settle into one of the small beach hotels there. In the morning, walk through the ruins and enjoy the lovely view of the coast. On your last day, depending on your schedule, you can enjoy some more beach time, or head straight to the airport (25 min. south of Cancún) and depart.

5

Mexico City

by Joy Hepp

We wandered in a frenzy and a dream. We ate beautiful steaks for forty-eight cents in strange tiled Mexican cafeterias with generations of marimba musicians standing at one immense marimba . . . . Nothing stopped; the streets were alive all night.

—*On the Road,* Jack Kerouac

Steak prices may have risen, but the frenzy and dreams that flit through Mexico City haven't disappeared with time. This city has a way of drawing in the world's most outrageous and creative minds, Kerouac being only one example. Leon Trotsky sought asylum from Stalin in Coyoacán, climbed the pyramids in Teotihuacán, and was immortalized in a Diego Rivera mural (he was also murdered in his home by an ax-wielding Stalinist, but we'll let that one slide). John Malkovich made a foray into town in 2008 and was inspired to stay and make a documentary about the plight of children crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. American photographer Spencer Tunick, famous for capturing large groups of nudes on film, took on his greatest challenge in Mexico City. He broke his record (7,000 models in Barcelona) in 2007 when 18,000 Mexicans happily filled the *zócalo* and sang songs like *Cielito Lindo* while posing naked.

What is it about this sprawling megalopolis that grabs the wild-hearted by the soul and won't let go? My own adoration for this city was not love at first sight. Like many other travelers, I had heard the nightmare stories about traffic, smog, and kidnapping, and it was hard for me to shake these stereotypes at first. My love developed over a series of moonlit strolls, lazy afternoons, and wild nights that seemed as though they would last an eternity.

Then, of course, there's the history. Unlike any other large city I've visited, there's an underlying sense that the ancients move among the modern population. Street names and neighborhoods still maintain their pre-Hispanic names; the Pino Suárez Metro station surrounds the ruins of an ancient pyramid; dancers in full Aztec garb bestow copal incense blessings and cleansings to spiritual seekers in the main square.

Founded in A.D. 1325 as the ancient city of Tenochtitlan, this was the capital of the Aztec Empire and the most important city in Mesoamerica by A.D. 1428. Today Mexico City and its immediate surroundings hold more than 25 million inhabitants—making it the second-most-populated city in the world (only Tokyo is larger).

Technically, Mexico City is a federal district (similar to Washington, D.C., in the U.S.), called the Distrito Federal, or D.F. One finds here a microcosm of all that is happening in the rest of the country. It's not just the seat of government; in every way, it's the dominant center of Mexican life and has been since ancient times.

You need only to stand in the center of the *zócalo*—the central plaza—to visually comprehend the undisputed significance of the Mexican capital. Here the remains of an Aztec pyramid, a colonial church, and a towering modern office building face one another, a testament to the city's prominence in ancient and contemporary history.

About the H1N1 Flu

In late April 2009, the world's attention was turned to Mexico when a new strain of influenza, H1N1, also referred to as "swine flu," began infecting its citizens. Local and federal governments responded by implementing mandatory closures of restaurants, schools, museums, and other places where many people gathered. As of November 2009, the World Health Organization is not recommending travel restrictions related to pandemic H1N1 2009 to Mexico or any other country. The best way to protect yourself from H1N1 and any other virus is to take proper sanitary measures such as washing your hands often, drinking plenty of fluids, and avoiding areas where there is high risk of contamination. For more information, check the **World Health Organization**'s website, www.who.int, before your trip.

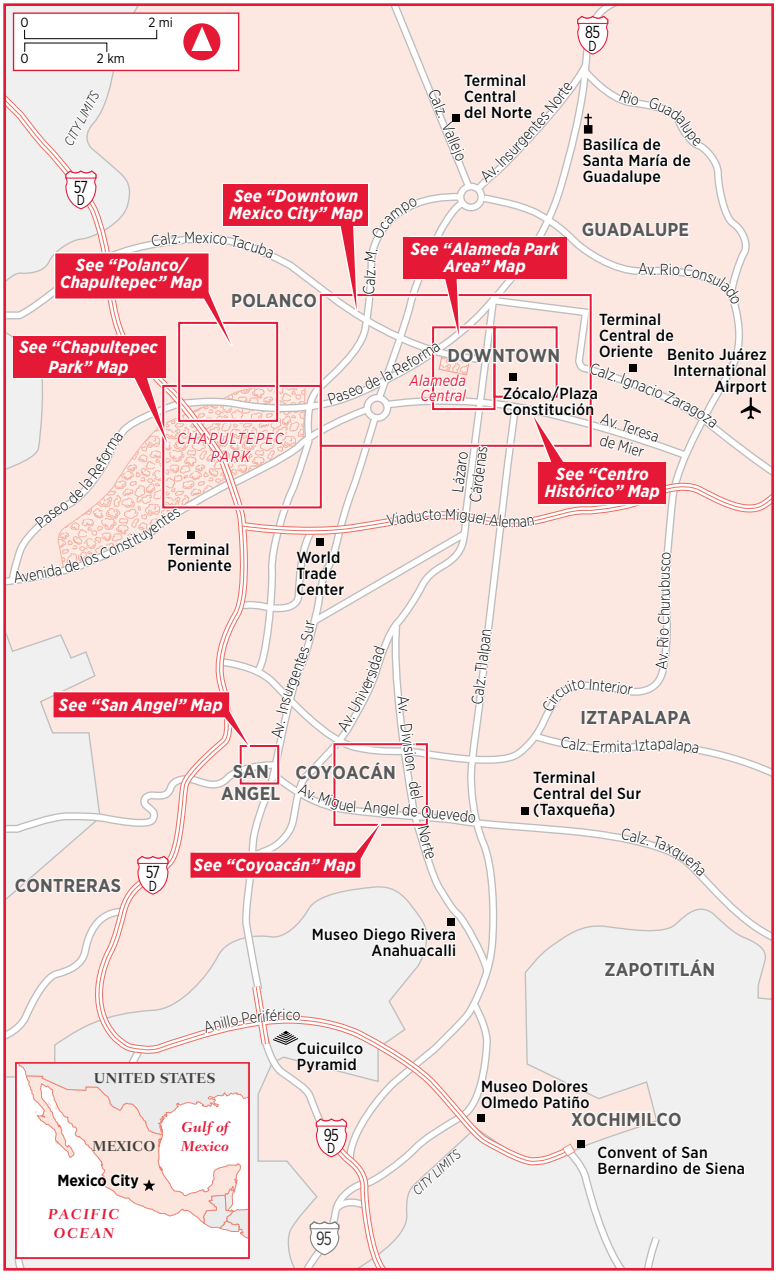
The Teotihuacán, Toltec, Aztec, and European conquistadors all contributed to the city's fascinating evolution, art, and heritage.

The sheer number of residents trying to exist here—amid economic malaise, high unemployment, and government corruption—has created an environment where petty crime (principally robberies) is common. Several years ago, Mexico City's notoriety came from its rising crime rate, a trend that is fortunately in reverse. Over the past several years, the city has achieved admirable progress in making visitors feel more secure, with special safety programs, faster response to reports of crime, a vastly increased police presence, and programs that are effectively combating corruption. By 2006, Mexico City had reduced crime rates by almost 40% from 1994's historic highs, with only .02% related to visitors to the city.

Violent crime in Mexico is largely concentrated among drug traffickers and politicians, but kidnappings and murders of businesspeople, both Mexican and foreign, are numerous. Mexico City has many treasures, but safety concerns demand that you dress and behave conservatively as you explore the city.

You've undoubtedly heard about Mexico City's pollution. Major steps to improve the air quality (restricted driving, factory closings, emission-controlled buses and taxis) have worked wonders, but the problem persists. On some days you won't notice it (especially during the summer rainy season); on other days it can make your nose run, your eyes water, and your throat rasp. If you have respiratory problems, be very careful; the city's elevation makes matters even worse. Minimize your exposure to the fumes and refrain from walking busy streets during rush hour. Sunday—when many factories are closed and many cars escape the city—should be your prime outdoor day. One positive note: In the evenings, the air is often deliciously cool and relatively clean.

If for some reason you tire of the delights and idiosyncrasies of the city, there are many world-class archaeological sites, spas, and national parks within a 1- or 2-hour bus ride. Or you could just be like Kerouac and spend an eternity writing poetry, eating steak, and enjoying the company of *marimba* singers.


0
2 mi
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CITY LIMITS
57 D
85 D
Terminal Central del Norte
Calz. Vallejo
Av. Insurgentes Norte
Rio Guadalupe
Basilíca de Santa María de Guadalupe
GUADALUPE
Av. Rio Consulado
See "Downtown Mexico City" Map
Calz. M. Ocampo
See "Alameda Park Area" Map
Calz. Mexico Tacuba
See "Polanco/ Chapultepec" Map
POLANCO
See "Chapultepec Park" Map
Paseo de la Reforma
Alameda Central
DOWNTOWN
Zócalo/Plaza Constitución
Terminal Central de Oriente
Benito Juárez International Airport
Calz. Ignacio Zaragoza
Av. Teresa de Mier
CHAPULTEPEC PARK
Lázaro Cárdenas
See "Centro Histórico" Map
Paseo de la Reforma
Avenida de los Constituyentes
Viaducto Miguel Aleman
Terminal Poniente
World Trade Center
Av. Insurgentes Sur
Av. Universidad
Av. Division del Norte
Calz. Tlalpan
Av. Rio Churubusco
Circuito Interior
See "San Angel" Map
IZTAPALAPA
Calz. Ermita Iztapalapa
SAN ANGEL
COYOACÁN
Av. Miguel Angel de Quevedo
Terminal Central del Sur (Taxqueña)
Calz. Taxqueña
See "Coyoacán" Map
CONTRERAS
Museo Diego Rivera Anahuacalli
ZAPOTITLÁN
Anillo Periférico
Cuicuilco Pyramid
UNITED STATES
Gulf of Mexico
MEXICO
Mexico City
PACIFIC OCEAN
Museo Dolores Olmedo Patiño
XOCHIMILCO
95 D
95
Convent of San Bernardino de Siena
CITY LIMITS

1 ORIENTATION

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING

BY PLANE Mexico City's **Benito Juárez International Airport** (www.aicm.com.mx) is something of a small city, where you can grab a bite, have an espresso (including Starbucks), or buy duty-free goods, clothes, books, gifts, and insurance, as well as exchange money or stay in a hotel. It was recently expanded—filled with marble floors, upscale shops, and improved services—and overall has become a much more welcoming airport. (One Japanese traveler, Hiroshi Nohara, even liked it so much that he lived in one of the terminals for 117 days in late 2008.) International flights depart from the new Terminal 2 and from the international section of Terminal 1; domestic flights are accommodated by the rest of Terminal 1.

Guarded **baggage-storage areas** are near Gate A (✆ **55/5618-3116**) and Gate F. The key-operated metal lockers measure about .5×.5×.5m (1½×1½×1½ ft.) and cost 100 pesos daily. You may leave your items for up to a month.

The Mexico City Hotel and Motel Association offers a **hotel-reservation service** for its member hotels. Look for its booths before you leave the baggage-claim area, or near Gate A on the concourse. Representatives will make the call according to your specifications for location and price. If they book the hotel, they require 1 night's advance payment and will give you a voucher, which you must present at the hotel. Ask about hotels with special deals. **Telephones** (operated by Telmex using prepaid Ladatel cards) are all along the public concourse.

Be sure to allow at least 45 to 60 minutes' travel time from the Zona Rosa or the *zócalo* (plaza) area to the airport—add about 30 minutes more if you're traveling during rush hour or bad weather. Check in 3 hours before international flights and 2 hours before domestic flights. ***Note:*** Mexican airlines will usually not let you check in for a domestic flight if it's less than an hour before departure time.

Getting to the City from the Airport Ignore those who approach you in the arrivals hall offering taxis; they are usually unlicensed and unauthorized. **Authorized airport taxis,** however, provide good, fast service. After exiting the baggage-claim area and before entering the public concourse (as well as near the far end of the terminal near Gate A), you'll see a booth marked TAXI. Staff members at these authorized taxi booths wear bright-yellow jackets or bibs emblazoned with TAXI AUTORIZADO (authorized taxi). Tell the ticket seller your hotel or destination; the price is based on a zone system. Expect to pay around 250 pesos for a *boleto* (ticket) to Polanco. Present your ticket outside to the driver. Taxi "assistants" who lift your luggage into the waiting taxi naturally expect a tip for their trouble. Putting your luggage in the taxi is the driver's job. (See also "Taxi Safety Precautions in Mexico City," below.)

The **Metro,** Mexico City's modern subway system, is cheap and faster than a taxi, but it seems to be gaining popularity among thieves who target tourists. If you take it, be forewarned: As a new arrival, you'll stand out. If you are carrying anything much larger than a briefcase, including a suitcase, don't even bother going to the station—they won't let you on with it. For Metro information, see "Getting Around," later in this chapter.

Here's how to find the Metro at the airport: As you come from your plane into the arrivals hall, turn left toward Gate A and walk all the way through the long terminal, out the doors, and along a covered sidewalk. Soon you'll see the distinctive Metro logo that identifies the Terminal Aérea station, down a flight of stairs. The station is on Metro Line 5.

Warning! Taxi Safety Precautions in Mexico City

There has been a marked increase in violent crime against both residents and tourists using taxis for transportation in Mexico City, concentrated among users of Volkswagen Beetle and *libre* (those hailed off the street) taxis. Robberies of taxi passengers are sometimes violent, with beatings and even murders reported. Victims have included U.S. citizens. Many times the robberies involve taking passengers to an ATM, where they are forced to withdraw whatever limit their card or cards will allow.

If you plan to use a **taxi from the airport or bus stations,** use only an authorized cab with all the familiar markings: yellow car, white taxi light on the roof, and TRANSPORTACION TERRESTRE painted on the doors. Buy your ticket from the clearly marked taxi booth inside the airport or bus terminal—nowhere else. After purchasing your ticket, go outside to the line of taxis, where an official taxi chief will direct you to the next taxi in line. Don't follow anyone else.

In Mexico City, *do not hail a passing taxi on the street.* Most hotels have official taxi drivers who are recognized and regulated by the terminal and city; they are considered safe taxis to use. These are known as **authorized** or ***sitio* taxis.** Hotels and restaurants can call the radio-dispatched taxis. **Official Radio Taxis** (✆ **55/5590-3325** or 5698-5192) are also considered safe. You can hire one of these taxis from your hotel; the driver will frequently act as your personal driver and escort you through your travels in the city. This is a particularly advisable option at night.

All official taxis, except the expensive "turismo" cars, are painted predominantly yellow, orange, or green; have white plastic roof signs bearing the word TAXI; have TAXI or SITIO painted on the doors; and are equipped with meters. Look for all these indications, not just one or two of them. Even then, be cautious. The safest cars to use are sedan taxis (luxury cars without markings) dispatched from four- and five-star hotels. They are the most expensive but worth it¾taxi crime in Mexico City is very real.

Do not use VW Beetle taxis, which are frequently involved in robberies of tourists and will likely be phased out of existence by 2012. Even though they are the least expensive taxis, you could be taking your life into your hands should you opt to use one. In any case, never get in a taxi that does not display a large 5×7-inch laminated **license card** with a picture of the driver on it; it's usually hanging from the door chain or glove box, or stuck behind the sun visor. *If there is no license, or if the photo doesn't match the driver, don't get in.* It's illegal for a taxi to operate without the license in view. No matter what vehicle you use for transportation, lock the doors as soon as you get in. Do not carry credit cards, your passport, or large sums of cash, or wear expensive jewelry when taking taxis.

Follow the signs for trains to Pantitlán. At Pantitlán, change for Line 1 ("Observatorio"), which takes you to stations that are just a few blocks south of the *zócalo* and La Alameda park: Pino Suárez, Isabel la Católica, Salto del Agua, and Balderas.

AN ALTERNATIVE TO BENITO JUÁREZ Toluca's Licenciado Adolfo López Mateos International Airport (TLC) lies just 52km (32 miles) southwest of Benito Juárez International Airport and has been a convenient alternative for Mexican nationals since it opened in 2002. In 2006 the airport started accommodating a limited amount of international traffic and now Continental (✆ **744/466-9063**), along with the Mexican airline Volaris (✆ **866/988-3527** toll-free U.S. or 01-800/122-8000 toll-free in Mexico; www.volaris.com.mx) offer regular flights from the U.S. Volaris also offers a shuttle service that takes its customers to the Santa Fe financial district. Domestic flights to and from Toluca are often significantly cheaper than comparable flights through Benito Juárez.

To get to the Toluca airport by car from the Mexico City airport, merge onto Viaducto Miguel Alemán, take exit to North Periférico and merge onto Constituyentes. Then take Mexico-Toluca highway. When you arrive in Toluca turn right on to Miguel Alemán Valdez and follow signs to the airport. Depending on traffic, the drive could take up to 3 hours.

BY CAR Driving in Mexico City is as much a challenge and an adventure as driving in any major metropolis. Here are a few tips. First, ask the rental company whether your license-plate number permits you to drive in the city that day (break the rule and the fine can be well over 10,000 pesos). Traffic runs the course of the usual rush hours—to avoid getting tangled in traffic, plan to travel before dawn. Park the car in a guarded lot whenever possible.

The chief thoroughfares for getting out of the city are: Insurgentes Sur becomes Hwy. 95 to Taxco and Cuernavaca; Insurgentes Norte leads to Teotihuacán and Pachuca; Hwy. 57, the Periférico (loop around the city), is also known as Bulevar Manuel Avila Camacho, to denote street addresses, and goes north and leads out of the city to Tula and Querétaro; Constituyentes leads west out of the city past Chapultepec Park and connects with Hwy. 15 to Toluca, Morelia, and Pátzcuaro (Reforma also connects with Hwy. 15); Zaragoza leads east to Hwy. 150 to Puebla and Veracruz.

BY BUS Mexico City has a bus terminal for each of the four points of the compass: north, east, south, and west. However, you can't necessarily tell which terminal serves which area of the country by looking at a map.

Some buses leave directly from the **Mexico City airport.** Departures are from a booth located outside **Sala D (Gate D),** and buses also park there. Tickets to Cuernavaca and Puebla each run about 200 pesos, with departures every 45 minutes. Other destinations include Querétaro, Pátzcuaro, and Toluca.

If you're in doubt about which station serves your destination, ask any taxi driver—they know the stations and the routes they serve. All stations have restaurants, money-exchange booths or banks, post offices, luggage storage, and long-distance telephone booths where you can also send a fax.

Taxis from bus stations: Each station has a taxi system based on fixed-price tickets to various zones within the city, operated from a booth or kiosk in or near the entry foyer of the terminal. Locate your destination on a zone map or tell the seller where you want to go, and buy a *boleto.* See also the "Taxi Safety Precautions in Mexico City" box, p. 91.

Terminal Central de Autobuses del Norte Called "Terminal Norte," or "Central Norte," Avenida de los Cien (100) Metros (✆ **55/5133-2444** or 5587-1552), is Mexico's largest bus station. It handles most buses coming from the U.S.-Mexico border. It also handles service to and from the Pacific Coast as far south as Puerto Vallarta and Manzanillo; the Gulf Coast as far south as Tampico and Veracruz; and such cities as Guadalajara,

San Luis Potosí, Durango, Zacatecas, Morelia, and Colima. You can also get to the pyramids of Teotihuacán and Tula from here. By calling the above number, you can purchase tickets over the phone by charging them to a credit card. The operators can also provide exact information about prices and schedules, but few speak English.

To get downtown from the Terminal Norte, you have a choice: The **Metro** has a station (Terminal de Autobuses del Norte, or TAN) right here, so it's easy to hop a train and connect to all points. Walk to the center of the terminal, go out the front door and down the steps, and go to the Metro station. This is Línea 5. Follow the signs that say DIRECCION PANTITLAN. For downtown, you can change trains at La Raza or Consulado (see the Mexico City Metro map on the inside back cover of this guide). Be aware that if you change at La Raza, you'll have to walk for 10 to 15 minutes and will encounter stairs. The walk is through a marble-lined underground corridor, but it's a long way with heavy luggage. If you have heavy luggage, you most likely won't be allowed into the Metro in the first place.

Another way to get downtown is by **trolley bus.** The stop is on Avenida de los Cien Metros, in front of the terminal. The trolley bus runs down Avenida Lázaro Cárdenas, the "Eje Central" (Central Artery). Or try the Central Camionera Del Norte–Villa Olimpica buses, which go down Avenida Insurgentes, past the university. Just like the Metro, the trolley will not let you board if you are carrying anything larger than a small carry-on suitcase. Backpacks seem to be an exception, but not large ones with frames.

Terminal de Autobuses de Pasajeros de Oriente This terminal is known as **TAPO** (✆ **55/5786-9341**). Buses going east (Puebla, Amecameca, the Yucatán Peninsula, Veracruz, Xalapa, San Cristóbal de las Casas, and others) and Oaxaca buses, which pass through Puebla, arrive and depart from here.

To get to TAPO, take a Hipodromo-Pantitlán bus east along Alvarado, Hidalgo, or Donceles; if you take the Metro, go to the San Lázaro station on the eastern portion of Line 1 (DIRECCION PANTITLÁN).

Terminal Central de Autobuses del Sur (Taxqueña) Mexico City's southern bus terminal is at Av. Taxqueña 1320 (✆ **55/5689-9745**), right next to the Taxqueña Metro stop, the last stop on Line 2. The Central del Sur handles buses to and from Acapulco, Cuernavaca, Guadalajara, Huatulco, Puebla, Puerto Escondido, Taxco, Tepoztlán, Zihuatanejo, and intermediate points. The easiest way to get to or from the Central del Sur is on the Metro. To get downtown from the Taxqueña Metro station, look for signs that say DIRECCION CUATRO CAMINOS, or take a trolley bus on Avenida Lázaro Cárdenas.

Terminal Poniente de Autobuses The western bus terminal is conveniently located right next to the Observatorio Metro station, at Sur 122 and Tacubaya (✆ **55/5271-4519**).

This is the smallest terminal; it mainly serves the route between Mexico City and Toluca. It also handles buses to and from Ixtapan de la Sal, Valle de Bravo, Morelia, Uruapan, Querétaro, Colima, Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo, Acapulco, and Guadalajara. In general, if the Terminal Norte also serves your destination, you'd be better off going there. It has more buses and better bus lines.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The Federal District Department provides several information services for visitors. The **Centro Integral de Atención al Turista** (**CIAT;** ✆ **888/401-3880** from the U.S., or toll-free inside Mexico 01-800/987-8224 or simply 078) offers information in English and Spanish, including maps, a wide selection of brochures, and access to information

Welcome to Chilangolandia

People from Oaxaca are referred to as *Oaxaqueños,* the residents of Durango are *Duranguenses,* those who live in Sinaloa are *Sinaloenses.* What are the residents of Mexico City called? After many years of debate in cantinas across the land, both the Royal Spanish Academy and the Mexican Academy of Language agree that *Chilango* is the proper term to use when referring to people from Mexico City. Theories on the term's origins vary—some wryly joke that it refers to "body of a *chile* face of a *chango* (monkey)"—but it's most likely of Náhuatl (Aztec) origin. Like many terms that started out as insults, *Chilango* is now used with pride and affection by many people living in Mexico City. However, *Chilango* can still be considered an insult if it is used by Mexicans in the rest of the country, who often view *Chilangos* as a stuck-up, bourgeois class. In your travels, you'll likely find that discussing one's rancor or adoration for the capital is a lively topic for debate.

Synonyms for Chilango include *Defeño,* which refers to the D.F. abbreviation for Distrito Federal, and *Capitalano,* but you'll have more street cred if you use the first term properly.

from the Mexico Secretary of Tourism (SECTUR) website. The office sits in Polanco at Av. President Masaryk 172 (✆ **55/3002-6300**), at the corner of Hegel. It's open Monday to Friday from 8am to 6pm and Saturday from 10am to 3pm.

SECTUR, Mexico's Secretary of Tourism, developed a website to address safety concerns about travel to this city and other areas in Mexico. The website **www.sectur.gob.mx** offers perhaps not-so-objective assessments of destinations, as well as travel safety tips and help with lodging reservations throughout Mexico.

Branches of the **Mexico City Tourist Office** are in the Zona Rosa at Paseo de la Reforma and Florencia (across from the Angel de la Independencia; ✆ **55/5208-1030**), at the TAPO bus terminal (✆ **55/5784-3077**), and at the airport (✆ **55/5786-9002**). They're generally open daily from 9am to 6pm. The **Mexico City Secretary of Tourism** website (**www.mexicocity.gob.mx**) includes details on things to do, special events, safety precautions, and tourist services.

The **Mexico City Chamber of Commerce** (✆ **55/5592-2665**) maintains an information office with a very friendly, helpful staff that can sell you detailed maps of the city or country and answer questions. It's conveniently located at Reforma 42—look for the Cámara Nacional de Comercio de la Ciudad de México. It's open Monday through Thursday from 9am to 2pm and 3 to 6pm, Friday from 9am to 2pm and 3 to 5:30pm.

Day and night diversions are listed in the Spanish-language magazine ***Tiempo Libre,*** which is published each Thursday and is available at hotels and newsstands. It also has a website, **www.tiempolibre.com.mx**. Excellent English-language sources of visitor information are the **Mexico File** (www.mexicofile.com) and **Solutions Abroad** (www.solutionsabroad.com). Current-event information and visitor tips are offered on the excellent site **www.mexicocity.gob.mx**.

CITY LAYOUT

FINDING AN ADDRESS

Despite its size, Mexico City is not hard to get a feel for. The city is divided into 350 *colonias,* or neighborhoods. Taxi drivers are sometimes not aware

of the major tourist sights and popular restaurants. Before getting into a taxi, always give a street address, *colonia,* and cross streets as a reference, and show the driver your destination on a map that you carry with you. Some of the most important *colonias* are Colonia Centro (historic city center); Zona Rosa (Colonia Juárez); Polanco (Colonia Polanco), a fashionable neighborhood immediately north of Chapultepec Park; colonias Condesa and Roma, south of the Zona Rosa, where there are many restaurants in quiet neighborhoods; all the Lomas—including Lomas de Chapultepec and Lomas Tecamachalco—which are exclusive neighborhoods west of Chapultepec Park; and San Angel and Coyoacán, the artsy neighborhoods toward the south of Mexico City. In addresses, the word is abbreviated *Col.,* and the full *colonia* name is vital in addressing correspondence.

STREET MAPS The **CIAT** office (see "Visitor Information," above) generally has several free maps available. Bookstores carry several local map/guides, with greater detail. The best detailed map is the ***Guía Roji*** (www.guiaroji.com.mx), available at bookstores in Mexico City. It features all the streets in Mexico City and is updated annually.

NEIGHBORHOODS IN BRIEF

Colonia Centro The heart of Mexico City, this business, banking, and historic center includes the areas in and around La Alameda park and the *zócalo,* the capital's historic central square. The Spaniards built their new capital city on top of the destroyed capital of the conquered Aztec, and today it is home to over 1,500 buildings. In the Centro Histórico—the concentrated historical center within Colonia Centro—you'll find the most historic landmarks, the most important public buildings, the partially unearthed Aztec ruins of the Great Temple, and numerous museums. The area has restaurants, shops, and hotels as well. In the past few years, public improvements have spurred the development of a few new hotels here, as well as a surge in nightlife and dining options, with some exquisite bars and clubs located in historic buildings.

A $300-million face-lift was completed in 2003 in honor of the city's 675th anniversary. Mexican telecommunications magnate Carlos Slim Helú, who, depending on the stock market, is considered the richest person in the world, has also put a lot of money into renovating the area. In addition to a beautification program for the *zócalo,* other elements of the program included the restoration and conversion of more than 80 18th- and 19th-century buildings.

A special corps of police on horseback outfitted in traditional *charro* attire (along with many female police on foot) now patrols the Centro Histórico and Alameda Park. Many speak English, and they have been specially trained in the history and culture of the area they patrol.

Chapultepec Park & Polanco The large residential area west of the city center and Zona Rosa centers on Chapultepec Park. The largest green area in Mexico City, it was dedicated as a park in the 15th century by the Aztec ruler Nezahualcóyotl. Together with the neighboring *colonia* of Polanco (north of the park), this is Mexico City's most exclusive address. With its zoo, many notable museums, antiques shops, stylish shopping, fine dining and nightlife, and upscale hotels, it's an ideal place for discovering contemporary Mexican culture. **Avenida Presidente Masaryk** is the main artery—think of it as the Rodeo Drive or Champs Elysées of Mexico City. Some of the city's best high-rise hotels are located along the

aptly named **Campos Eliseos,** Polanco's version of the Champs Elysées.

Condesa & Roma These side-by-side bohemian neighborhoods, located just south of the Zona Rosa, are home to some of the city's hippest cafes and bars, from cutting-edge restaurants to offbeat shops, art galleries, and nightclubs. The neighborhoods are also known for their parks and restored Art Deco buildings.

Coyoacán Eight kilometers (5 miles) from the city center, east of San Angel and north of the Ciudad Universitaria, Coyoacán (koh-yoh-ah-*kahn*) is an attractive, Colonial-Era suburb noted for its beautiful town square, cobblestone streets, fine old mansions, and several of the city's most interesting museums. This was the home of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, and of Leon Trotsky after his exile from Stalin's USSR. With something of a hippie feel, it's a wonderful place to spend the day, but overnight accommodations are almost nonexistent. A fun hippie market takes place here on Sundays.

From downtown, Metro Line 3 can take you to the Coyoacán or Viveros station, within walking distance of Coyoacán's museums. Iztacala-Coyoacán buses run from the center to this suburb. If you're coming from San Angel, the quickest and easiest way is to take a cab for the 15-minute ride to the Plaza Hidalgo. Francisco Sosa, a beautiful cobblestone street surrounded by old aristocratic homes, is the main artery into Coyoacán from San Angel, which you can also walk. Or you can catch the Alcantarilla–Col. Agrarista bus heading east along the Camino al Desierto de los Leónes or Avenida Altavista, near the San Angel Inn. Get off when the bus reaches the corner of Avenida México and Xicoténcatl in Coyoacán.

San Angel Eight kilometers (5 miles) south of the city center, San Angel (sahn *ahn*-hehl) was once a weekend retreat for Spanish nobles but has long since been absorbed by the city. It's a stunningly beautiful neighborhood of cobblestone streets and Colonial-Era homes, with several worthwhile museums. This is where the renowned Bazar del Sábado (Saturday Bazaar) is held at Plaza San Jacinto. It's full of artistic and antique treasures and surrounded by excellent restaurants and cantinas—a wonderful place to spend a day. Other attractions in San Angel include a magnificent baroque fountain made of broken pieces of porcelain at the Centro Cultural Isidro Fabela, better known as the Casa del Risco (Plaza San Jacinto 15), and the ethereal Iglesia San Jacinto, a 16th-century church with an exquisite baroque altar, bordering the Plaza San Jacinto.

The nearest Metro station is M.A. de Quevedo (Line 3). From the center of town, take the Metrobus all the way down Insurgentes and get off at the La Bombilla stop and cross to the west side of Insurgentes; continue straight, walking up Avenida La Paz. Cross Avenida Revolucion and walk up Madero to Plaza San Jacinto.

Santa Fe Eight kilometers (5 miles) west of the town center, this is Mexico City's newest and most modern neighborhood. It includes high-tech and multinational companies, banks, Iberro Americana University, and a large shopping complex. Santa Fe looks more like a modern American neighborhood than anywhere else in Mexico City. Many of the capital's well-off young professionals have moved to this area, which has developed a booming restaurant and nightlife scene. To reach Santa Fe, take Reforma Avenue west to the Toluca highway and follow the signs to Santa Fe.

Xochimilco Twenty-four kilometers (15 miles) south of the town center, Xochimilco (soh-chee-*meel*-coh) is noted for its famed canals and Floating Gardens, which have existed here since the

time of the Aztec. Although the best-known attractions are the more than 80km (50 miles) of canals, Xochimilco itself is a Colonial-Era gem: It seems small, with its brick streets, but they can become heavy with traffic—it has a population of 300,000. Restaurants are at the edge of the canal and shopping area, and historically significant churches are within easy walking distance of the main square. In the town of Xochimilco, you'll find a busy market, specializing in rugs, ethnic clothing, and brightly decorated pottery.

Xochimilco hosts an amazing 422 festivals annually, the most famous of which celebrate the Niñopa, a figure of the Christ Child that is believed to possess miraculous powers. The figure is venerated on January 6 (Three Kings' Day), February 2 (annual changing of the Niñopa's custodian), April 30 (Day of the Child), and from December 16 to December 24 (*posadas* for the Niñopa). Caring for the Niñopa is a coveted privilege, and the schedule of approved caretakers is filled through 2031. The week before Easter is the Feria de la Flor Más Bella del Ejido, a flower fair when the most beautiful girl with Indian features and costume is selected. For more information and exact dates, contact the **Xochimilco Tourist Office (Subdirección de Turismo),** Pino 36, Barrio San Juan (✆ **55/5676-8879;** fax 55/5676-0810), next to VIPS, 2 blocks from the main square. It's open weekdays from 9am to 8pm, and weekends from 10am to 7pm. Attractions in Xochimilco are listed in the section "Southern Neighborhoods," later in this chapter.

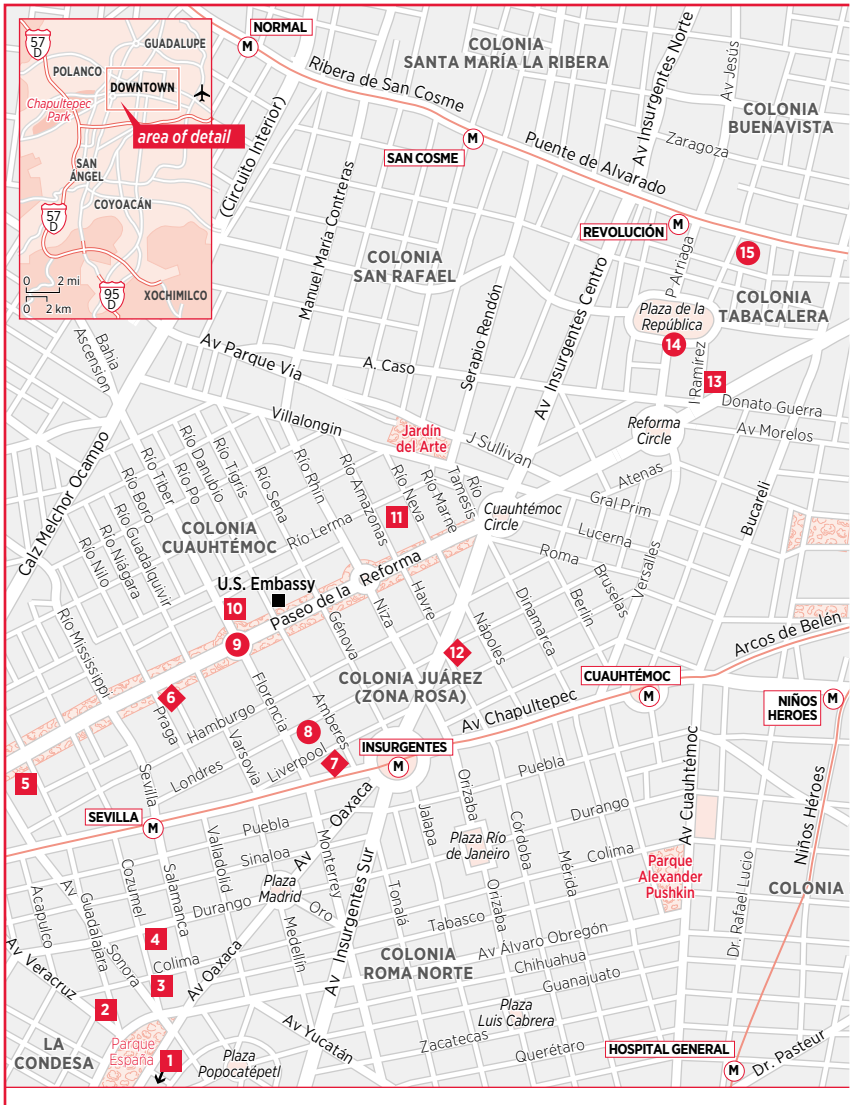
To reach Xochimilco, take the Metro to Taxqueña, then the *tren ligero* (light train). From there, take a taxi to the main plaza of the town of Xochimilco. Buses run all the way across the city from north to south to end up at Xochimilco, but they take longer than the Metro. Of the buses coming from the center, the most convenient is La Villa–Xochimilco, which you catch going south on Correo Mayor and Pino Suárez near the *zócalo,* or near Chapultepec on Avenida Vasconcelos, Avenida Nuevo León, and Avenida División del Norte. Since Xochimilco is located in the far south of the city, it can take a long time to reach in traffic during the workweek. Consider visiting it on the weekend.

Zona Rosa West of the Centro, the "Pink Zone" was once the city's most exclusive residential neighborhood. It has given way to just about every segment of society and offers an array of moderate hotels, antiques and silver shops, casual restaurants, gay bars, and kitsch nightlife venues. Although the Zona Rosa has become increasingly tacky with time, many of the streets here are pedestrian-only, and you will find inviting cafes, ice-cream shops, and shopping plazas along the way. It's a good place to shop or grab a bite, but there are few real historic or cultural attractions within the area. It's not safe to walk in this area at night.

2 GETTING AROUND

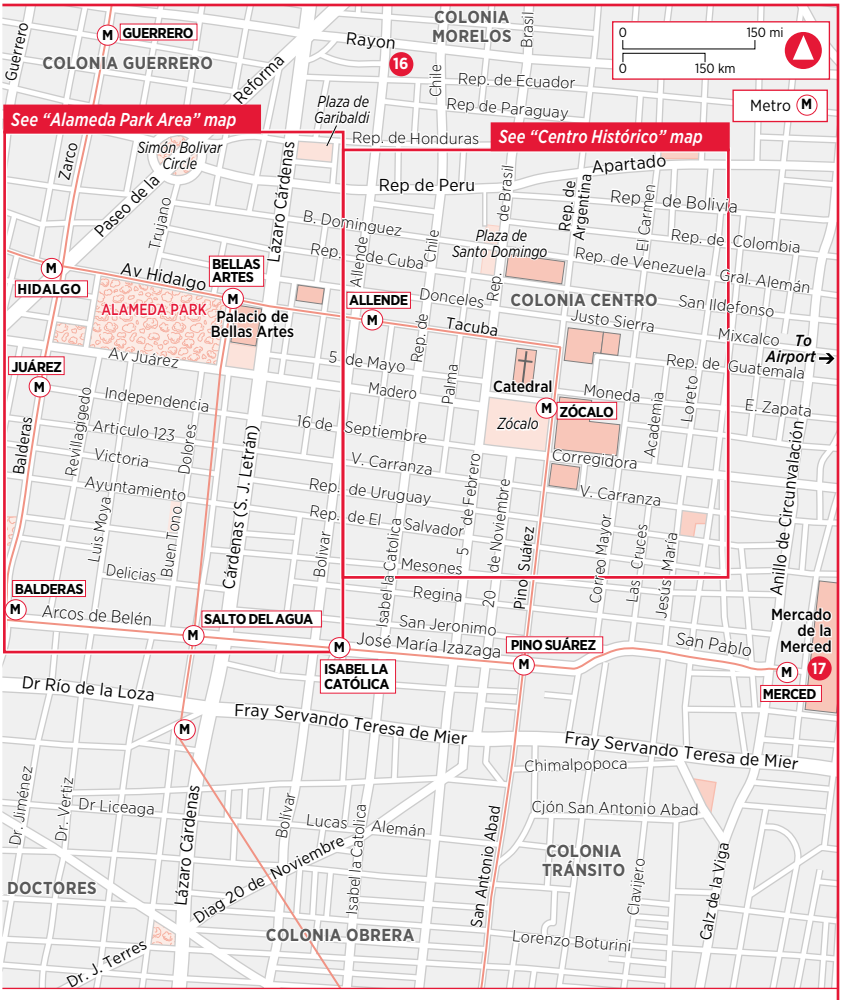
Mexico City has a highly developed and remarkably cheap public transportation system. It is a shame that the sharp increase in crime and resulting safety concerns have made these less comfortable options for travelers. The Metro, first- and second-class buses, *colectivos,* and Nissan Tsuru *libre* taxis will take you anywhere you want to go for very little money—but the recent visitor warnings about the use of public transportation

Downtown Mexico City



ACCOMMODATIONS

Condesa*df* **2**
Embassy Suites **13**
Hostal Condesa Chapultepec **3**
Hotel Four Seasons **5**
Hotel María Cristina **11**
Hotel Sheraton María Isabel **10**
La Casona Hotel-Relais **4**
Red Tree House **1**



DINING ◆

Casa Bell **6**

Condon Bleu Casa de Francia **12**

Fonda el Refugio **7**

ATTRACTIONS ●

Lagunilla Market **16**

Mercado de la Merced **17**

Mercado Insurgentes **8**

Monumento a la Revolución/Museo Nacional de la Revolución **14**

Monumento a los Héroes de la Independencia **9**

Museo Nacional de San Carlos **15**

should be respected. Because *sitio* taxis (official taxis registered to a specific locale or hotel) are relatively inexpensive and the safest way to travel within the city, you are best off using them.

BY TAXI Taxis operate under several distinct sets of rules. ***Warning:*** Read the cautionary box, "Taxi Safety Precautions in Mexico City," p. 91, before using any taxi.

"Turismo" and Sitio Taxis These are by far the safest way to travel within Mexico City. Turismo taxis are unmarked cabs, usually well-kept luxury cars assigned to specific hotels that have special license plates. Although more expensive than the VW and *libre* taxis (usually Nissan Tsurus), "turismo" taxis, along with radio-dispatched *sitio* taxis, are the safest ones to use. The drivers negotiate rates with individual passengers for sightseeing, but rates to and from the airport are established. Ask the bell captain what the airport fare should be, and establish it before taking off. These drivers are often licensed English-speaking guides and can provide exceptional service. In general, expect to pay around 200 pesos per hour for guided service, and about 15% more than metered rates for normal transportation. Often these drivers will wait for you while you shop or dine to take you back to the hotel, or they can be called to come back and pick you up.

Metered Taxis Most of the classic green VW Beetle cabs have been phased out but their red counterparts as well as *libre* cabs provide low-cost service, but *you should not use them, for safety reasons.* Some *sitio* taxis (radio taxis, which are safe; ✆ **55/5590-3325** or 5698-5192) use meters, while others have set rates. I use **Intertaxi** (✆ **55/2603-3268**).

Tips Mexico City Fun-derground

Who says you need a lot of money to have a great time while traveling? For the cost of Metro fare (2 pesos!) you can get a true sense of Mexico City's quirkiness. Most major stations are also miniature underground malls, complete with fast food, snack stalls, and shops.

Zócalo station features dioramas and large photographs of the different periods in the history of the Valley of Mexico. The **Pino Suárez** station is home to the preserved ruins of a pyramid dedicated to the Aztec god Ehecatl. In addition to being the god of the wind, Ehecatl was also responsible for the cardinal directions, which is appropriate because Pino Suárez is one of the Metro's most important hubs. Science geeks will not want to miss a trip to the **La Raza** station in the northern part of the city. The "Túnel de la Ciencia" (Tunnel of Science), a permanent exhibition maintained by the UNAM, links the platforms for lines 3 and 5 and features giant slides of fractals and embryos as well as a glow-in-the-dark rendition of the universe on the ceiling. The 1990 Arnold Schwarzenegger flick *Total Recall* was filmed mostly in Mexico City. Director Paul Verhoeven used the **Insurgentes** station as a backdrop and painted the Metro cars gray in order to portray his vision of the future.

If you find yourself in the company of well-off *Chilangos*—perhaps at a gallery in Polanco, or a restaurant in San Angel—mention that you rode the Metro. You'll likely be met with stunned expressions, as many members of the upper class have never set foot underground and will think you're either crazy or brave for trying it.

Tips The Subway Skinny

The Metro system runs Monday to Friday from 5am to midnight, Saturday from 6am to midnight, and Sunday and holidays from 7am to midnight. Baggage larger than a small carry-on is not allowed on the trains. In practice, this means that bulky suitcases or backpacks will make you persona non grata. On an average day, Mexico City's Metro handles more than five million riders—leaving little room for bags! But in effect, if no one stops you as you enter, you're in.

Watch your bags and your pockets. Metro pickpockets prey on the unwary (especially foreigners) and are very crafty—on a crowded train, they've been known to empty a fanny pack from the front. Be careful, and carry valuables inside your clothing. Women should avoid traveling alone.

They have a fleet of regular cars that don't appear to be taxis from the outside. This is especially safe if you're traveling late at night, when thieves may see taxis as easy targets. Although you may encounter a gouging driver or one who advances the meter or drives farther than necessary to run up the tab, most service is quick and adequate.

BY METRO The subway system in Mexico City offers a smooth ride for one of the lowest fares anywhere in the world (2 pesos or 20¢ per ride). Twelve lines crisscross the sprawling city. Each train usually has nine cars. The Metro is open Monday to Friday 5am to midnight, Saturday 6am to midnight, and Sunday 7am to midnight.

As you enter the station, buy a *boleto* at the glass *taquilla* (ticket booth). Insert your ticket into the slot at the turnstile and pass through; inside you'll see two large signs showing the line's destination (for example, for Line 1, it's OBSERVATORIO and PANTITLÁN). Follow the signs in the direction you want and *know where you're going;* there is usually only one map of the routes, at the entrance to the station. You'll see two signs everywhere: **salida** (exit) and **andenes** (platforms). Once inside the train, you'll see above each door a map of the station stops for that line, with symbols and names.

correspondencias indicates transfer points. The ride is smooth, fast, and efficient (although hot and crowded during rush hours). The beautifully designed stations are clean and have the added attraction of displaying archaeological ruins unearthed during construction. A subterranean passage goes between the Pino Suárez and Zócalo stations, so you can avoid the crowds along Pino Suárez.

The Metro is crowded during daylight hours on weekdays and, consequently, pretty hot and muggy in summer. In fact, you may find it virtually unusable downtown between 4 and 7pm on weekdays, because of sardine-can conditions. At some stations, there are even separate lanes roped off for women and children; the press of the crowd is so great that someone might get molested. Buses, *colectivos,* and taxis are all heavily used during these hours, less so during off hours (such as 10:30am–noon). Avoid the crowds by traveling during off-peak hours, or simply wait a few minutes for the next train.

Be prepared to do some walking within the Metro system, especially if you transfer lines. Stations are connected by elevated walkways, corridors with shops or museum-like displays, and escalators.

BY BUS Moving millions of people through this sprawling urban mass is a gargantuan task, but the city officials do a pretty good job of it. Bus stops on the major tourist streets usually have a map posted with the full route description.

Women-Only Buses & Train Cars

In January 2008, Mexico City designated a number of city buses for women only, distinguished by conspicuous pink placards. The popular program was designed to prevent men from groping female passengers—a fairly common problem in the capital's crowded public transportation system. Bus drivers are charged with keeping men off of these buses, and their female passengers are delighted. During peak hours, Mexico City's subway system also designates the first three cars for women and children.

Crowding is common during peak hours. The cost is 4 pesos, the U.S. equivalent of 25¢ to 50¢. Although the driver usually has change, try to have exact fare or at least a few coins when you board.

One of the most important bus routes runs between the *zócalo* and the Auditorio (National Auditorium in Chapultepec Park) or the Observatorio Metro station. The route is Avenida Madero or Cinco de Mayo, Avenida Juárez, and Paseo de la Reforma. Buses marked ZÓCALO run this route.

The latest member of the Mexico City transportation family, the **Metrobus** was first introduced in 2006. These buses run in their own designated lanes up and down Avenida Insurgentes and often travel much faster than surrounding traffic. Most of the stops are designed to be convenient for commuters, but you can use it to access Plaza Tres Culturas from the Tlateloco stop, and the new luxurious Reforma 222 shopping plaza near the Hamburgo stop; if you get off at Campeche, you'll be just a short walk from Condesa. To board these buses, purchase a smartcard for 15 pesos which can be recharged for 5 pesos per trip. These buses are generally cleaner and faster than other forms of transportation but can get just as crowded during peak hours.

BY COLECTIVO Also called *peseros* or *microbuses,* these are sedans or minibuses, usually green and gray, that run along major arteries. They pick up and discharge passengers along the route, charge established fares, and provide slightly more comfort and speed than the bus. Cards in the windshield display routes; often a Metro station is the destination. One of the most useful routes for tourists runs from the *zócalo* along **Avenida Juárez,** along **Reforma** to **Chapultepec,** and back again. Board a *colectivo* with a sign saying ZÓCALO, not VILLA. (The Villa route goes to the Basílica de Guadalupe.) Some of the minibuses on this route have automatic sliding doors—you don't have to shut them.

As the driver approaches a stop, he may put his hand out the window and hold up one or more fingers. This is the number of passengers he's willing to take on (vacant seats are difficult to see if you're outside the car).

BY TOURIST BUS A convenient and popular way to see the city is on one of the red double-decker **Turibuses** (✆ **55/5133-2488;** www.turibus.com.mx), which offer separate circuits in the north and south of the city. Each of the double-decker buses seats 75 and offers audio information in five languages, plus street maps. The buses operate from 9am to 9pm, with unlimited hop-on, hop-off privileges after paying 125 pesos for a day pass (145 pesos weekends). Along the Chapultepec–Centro Histórico Route are 25 stops at major monuments, museums, and neighborhoods along the 35km (22-mile) route, which runs from the National Auditorium to the city center (including the *zócalo*) and from there to La Plaza de las Tres Culturas (Square of the Three Cultures), returning via

Tips Festival de México en el Centro Histórico

In March of every year, a series of concerts, cultural events, art exhibits, and public performances takes place in—and in honor of—Mexico City's historic downtown district. For more information or a calendar of events, check the **Festival de México** website (www.festival.org.mx).

Reforma Avenue toward the posh neighborhood of Polanco and finally to Museo del Niño (Children's Museum). The full circuit takes a little under 3 hours. Another Turibus circuit runs in the city south, taking passengers from La Roma neighborhood south along Insurgentes Avenue to San Angel, Coyoacán, and Tlalpan. Stops include the World Trade Center, Plaza de Torros bullring, Carillo Gil museum, Perisur shopping center, UNAM university, and Frida Kahlo museum, among others. Turibus also offers a route to the pyramids at Teotihuacán (p. 152).

BY RENTAL CAR If you plan to travel to Puebla (see chapter 13) or a surrounding area, a rental car might come in handy. However, due to high rates of auto theft, I don't recommend renting a car. Taxis and the Metro also eliminate the risk of getting lost in an unsavory area.

If you must rent, be aware that that the least-expensive rental car is a manual-shift without air-conditioning. The price jump is considerable for automatics with air-conditioning. (See also "Getting Around," in chapter 3.) The safest option is to leave the driving to someone else—**Avis** offers chauffeur-driven rental cars at its nine locations in the Mexican capital. The chauffeur is on an 8-hour shift, but the car is available to the customer for 24 hours. For prices and reservations, call Avis (✆ **800/352-7900** in the U.S. or 01-800/288-8888 toll-free in Mexico).

Fast Facts Mexico City

Banks Banks are usually open Monday through Friday from 9am to 4pm (some later); many offer Saturday business hours, typically from 8am to 3pm. Bank branches at the airport are open whenever the airport is busy, including weekends. They usually offer ATMs and decent rates of exchange. Banks and money-exchange offices line Avenida Reforma. The Centro Histórico downtown also has banks and money-exchange booths on almost every block, as does the Zona Rosa.

Currency Exchange The alternative to a bank is a currency-exchange booth, or *casa de cambio*. These often offer extended hours, with greater convenience to hotels and shopping areas, and rates similar to bank exchange rates. Usually, their rates are much better than those offered by most hotels. Use caution when exiting banks and currency exchanges, which are popular targets for muggings.

Drugstores The drug departments at Sanborn's stay open late. After hours, check with your hotel staff, which can usually contact a 24-hour drugstore.

Elevation Remember, you are now at an elevation of 2,239m (7,344 ft.)—over a mile in the sky. There's a lot less oxygen in the air than you're used to. If you run

for a bus and feel dizzy when you sit down, it's the elevation. If you think you're in shape but huff and puff getting up Chapultepec Hill, it's the elevation. If you have trouble sleeping, it may be the elevation. If your food isn't digesting, again, it's the elevation. There is not much you can do to help your body adjust—it takes about 3 days or so to adjust to the scarcity of oxygen. Go easy on food and alcohol the first few days in the city.

Embassies & Consulates Most countries have their embassy in Mexico City. See "Fast Facts," p. 761.

Emergencies The Mexico City government has an emergency number for visitors—dial ✆ **060** for assistance 24 hours a day; have a local or Spanish speaker help you. **SECTUR** (Secretaría de Turismo; ✆ **078;** www.sectur.gob.mx) staffs telephones 24 hours daily to help tourists in difficulty. In case of theft, you can contact **Quejas de Turistas Contra Robos** (✆ **55/5592-2677**). A government-operated service, **Locatel** (✆ **55/5658-1111**), is most often associated with finding missing persons anywhere in the country. With a good description of a car and its occupants, they'll search for motorists who have an emergency back home.

Hospitals The **American–British Cowdray (ABC) Hospital** is at Calle Sur 136, at the corner of Avenida Observatorio, Col. las Américas (✆ **55/5230-8000;** www.abchospital.com).

Internet Access Surprisingly enough, it is easier to find cybercafes in some resort areas than in Mexico City. However, most hotels that cater to business travelers offer Internet connections in their business centers. The **Internet Café,** Rep. de Guatemala 4, connected to the international youth hostel in the Centro Histórico (✆ **55/5618-1726**), is open daily from 7:30am to 11pm. The price per hour of access is 20 pesos. Many cafes offer free Wi-Fi for customers; just ask for the code and order at least a cup of coffee.

Pollution The rainy season, usually lasting from May to October, has less pollution than the dry season. Mid- to late November, December, and January are noted for heavy pollution. During January, schools may even close because of it, and restrictions on driving that are usually imposed only on weekdays may apply on weekends; be sure to check before driving into or around the city. (See "By Rental Car" under "Getting Around," above.) Be careful if you have respiratory problems. Just before your visit, call the Mexican Government Tourist Board office nearest you (see "Visitor Information" in chapter 21 for the address) and ask for the latest information on pollution in the capital. Minimize your exposure to fumes by refraining from walking busy streets during rush hour. Make Sunday, when many factories are closed and many cars escape the city, your prime outdoor sightseeing day.

Post Office The city's main post office, the gorgeous **Correo Mayor,** is a block north of the Palacio de Bellas Artes on Avenida Lázaro Cárdenas, at the corner of Tacuba. For general postal information, call **FonoPost** (✆ **55/5385-0960**); the staff is very helpful, and a few operators speak English.

If you need to mail a package in Mexico City, take it to the post office called Correos Internacional 2, Calle Dr. Andrade and Río de la Loza (Metro: Balderas or Salto del Agua). It's open Monday through Friday from 8am to noon. Don't wrap your package securely until an inspector examines it. Although postal service is improving, your package may take weeks, or even months, to arrive at its destination.

Restrooms There are few public restrooms. Use those in the larger hotels and in cafes, restaurants, and museums. Carry your own toilet paper and hand soap. Many public restrooms at museums and parks have an attendant who dispenses toilet paper for a "tip" of 5 pesos, in lieu of a usage charge.

Safety Read the "Crime & Safety" section in chapter 3 and the "Taxi Safety Precautions in Mexico City" box earlier in this chapter. In response to rising crime, Mexico City has added hundreds of new foot and mounted police officers, and there's a strong military presence. But they can't be everywhere. Watch out for pickpockets. Crowded subway cars and buses provide the perfect workplace for petty thieves, as do major museums (inside and out), crowded outdoor markets and bullfights, and indoor theaters. The "touch" can range from light-fingered wallet lifting or purse opening to a fairly rough shove by two or three petty thieves. Be extra careful anywhere that attracts a lot of tourists: on the Metro, in Reforma buses, in crowded hotel elevators and lobbies, at the Ballet Folklórico, and at the Museo de Antropología.

Robberies may occur in broad daylight on crowded streets in "good" parts of town, outside major tourist sights, and in front of posh hotels. The best way to avoid being mugged is to not wear any jewelry of value, especially expensive watches. If you find yourself up against a handful of these guys, the best thing to do is relinquish the demanded possession, flee, and then notify the police. (You'll need the police report to file an insurance claim.) If you're in a crowded place, you could try raising a fuss—whether you do it in Spanish or English doesn't matter. A few shouts of *"¡Ladrón!"* ("Thief!") might put them off, but that could also be risky. Overall, it's wise to leave valuables in the hotel safe and to take only the cash you'll need for the day, and no credit cards. Conceal a camera in a shoulder bag draped across your body and hanging in front of you, not on the side.

If you think you've been ripped off on a purchase, call the **consumer protection office** (**Procuraduría Nacional del Consumidor;** ✆ **55/5568-8722** or 01-800/468-8722; www.profeco.gob.mx).

Telephones Telephone numbers within Mexico City are eight digits; the first digit of the local phone number is always 5. Generally speaking, Mexico City's telephone system is rapidly improving (with new digital lines replacing old ones), offering clear, efficient service. Some of this improvement is resulting in numbers changing. As elsewhere in the country, the telephone company changes numbers without informing the telephone owners or the information operators. Business telephone numbers may be registered in the name of the corporation, which may be different than the name of a hotel or restaurant owned by the corporation. Unless the corporation pays for a separate listing, the operator uses the corporate name to find the number. The local number for **information** is ✆ **040,** and you are allowed to request three numbers with each information call. When dialing a mobile from within the country dial 044 before the 55.

Coin-operated phones are prone to vandalism; **prepaid Ladatel card-only Telmex phones** have replaced most of them. Ladatel cards are usually available at pharmacies and newsstands near public phones. They come in denominations of 30, 50, and 100 pesos. See p. 77 for information on using phones.

Weather & Clothing Mexico City's high altitude means you'll need a warm jacket and sweater in winter and even on some chilly summer nights. The southern parts

of the city, such as the university area and Xochimilco, are much colder than the central part. In summer, it gets warm during the day and cool (but not cold) at night. From May to October is the rainy season (this is common all over Mexico)—take a raincoat or rain poncho. People tend to dress somewhat conservatively in Mexico City; neither shorts nor short skirts are common.

3 WHERE TO STAY

Not only is Mexico City one of the most exciting cities in the world, but it can also be one of the most affordable when it comes to accommodations. For around $75, you can find a double room in a fairly central hotel, including a bathroom and often air-conditioning and TV. Many hotels have their own garages where guests can park free.

The best hotel values concentrate in the downtown **Centro Histórico (historic district),** which has recently undergone a dining and nightlife renaissance. Luxury hotels are mostly in the two most popular areas for mainstream tourism: The Financial District, running alongside Reforma Avenue and near the **Zona Rosa,** attracts predominantly those in the city for business or shopping, whereas **Chapultepec Park** and the **Polanco** neighborhood are ideally located near museums and other cultural attractions. Hotels in these zones not only offer more deluxe accommodations and amenities, but also generally have their own fleets of taxis and secured entrances for guests. The crime rate, though on the decline, is still quite high; visitors should consider staying in the most secure accommodations they can afford.

If you're looking to save a few bucks on accommodations and to meet a few fellow travelers in the process, consider one of the city's budget hostels. The **Hostal Virreyes,** Izazága 8, Colonia Centro Histórico (✆ **55/2141-8087;** www.hostalvirreyes.com.mx; map p. 123), occupies a large, impressive Art Deco building near the Centro Histórico; and **Hostal Condesa Chapultepec,** Cozumel 53-A, Roma Norte (✆ **55/5211-1024;** www.hostelcondesachapultepec.com; map p. 98), a cozy two-story former residence smack between Roma and Condesa, is another great, affordable option. Both offer private rooms in addition to dorm-style accommodations.

CHAPULTEPEC PARK & POLANCO

Very Expensive

Casa Vieja ★★★ (Finds) Pure Mexican style and service are the hallmarks of this luxury boutique hotel, a true gem known more to locals than tourists. Once a private residence, Casa Vieja is decorated with bold colors, unique handicrafts, exquisite antiques, and original furnishings. Each individually decorated suite is named after a Mexican artist, such as Frida Kahlo or Diego Rivera, and includes a living and kitchen area, 36-inch TV, spacious bedroom, and large bathroom with Jacuzzi tub. Notwithstanding the lovely decor, the real attraction is the highly personalized, gracious service. Guests receive a welcome drink and fruit basket upon arrival. An intimate rooftop restaurant and lounge serves made-to-order breakfast, lunch, and dinner (not included in the room rate). The only drawback is that, in some rooms, you may overhear conversations in the halls and common areas.

Eugenio Sue 45 (a half-block from Av. Presidente Masaryk), Col. Polanco, 11560 Mexico, D.F. ✆ **55/5282-0067** or 5281-4468. Fax 55/5281-3780. www.casavieja.com. See map p. 107. 10 suites. $300 junior suite; $550 master suite; $950 presidential suite. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, MC, V. Limited free parking. Metro: Polanco. **Amenities:** Bar and cafe w/light meal service; concierge; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV/DVD, hair dryer, kitchenette, minibar, Wi-Fi.

JW Marriott ★★ The JW Marriott is one of the city's most luxurious and expensive hotels, and a number of the city's most important visitors stay here. The refined marble lobby leads past world-class artwork and gorgeous flower displays to a dark-wood library and a piano lounge. The hotel is home to the Club Industriales business center, as well as La Griglia, a beautiful Mediterranean-Italian restaurant. Spacious guest rooms have panoramic city and park views, plush furnishings, and separate showers and tubs with spray jets. The full-service spa includes body and facial treatments, massages, a well-equipped fitness center, and a lovely outdoor pool and Jacuzzi. Executive-level rooms afford premium wines, gourmet food presentations, complimentary pressing and shoe-shine, and free Wi-Fi. Impeccable service complements the elegant surroundings, within

 easy walking distance of Chapultepec Park and Avenida Presidente Masaryk. It's a short drive to the financial center.

Andrés Bello 29 (at Campos Eliseos), Col. Polanco, 11560 Mexico, D.F. ✆ **800/228-9290** in the U.S., or 55/5999-0000. Fax 55/5999-0001. www.marriott.com. See map p. 107. 312 units. $399 and up double; $489 junior suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Parking $15 per day. Metro: Polanco. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; concierge; executive-level rooms; health club w/spa services and fitness center; Jacuzzi; piano lounge; outdoor pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

W Mexico City ★★★ This dramatic 26-story business hotel is a sophisticated mixture of style, comfort, and technology. The entry encompasses a series of stepped lounge areas with koi ponds; the trendy four-section Whiskey Bar also features a heated outdoor terrace. Rooms are striking, with cherry-red walls, white feather beds, terrazzo floors, plasma TVs, and a spacious and comfortable work area. Stylish bathrooms have walk-in showers and a hanging hammock; some rooms have a large circular tub. Eight high-ceiling "loft" suites afford views of Chapultepec Park, green-glass showers, and plasma TVs on the ceiling above the beds. Business traveler amenities include nine high-tech conference rooms that seat up to 400, a complete business center, and "cyber rooms" with printers, scanners, and fax. The hotel's full-service spa and health club are excellent. Solea, a fashionable seafood restaurant serving continental Mexican cuisine, offers terrace dining for breakfast or lunch.

Campos Eliseos 252 (corner of Andrés Bello), Col. Polanco, 11560 Mexico, D.F. ✆ **888/625-5144** in the U.S., or 55/9138-1800. Fax 55/9138-1899. www.starwood.com/whotels. See map p. 107. 237 units. $299 and up double; $439 and up suite. AE, MC, V. Valet parking 90 pesos. Metro: Polanco. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 4 bars; concierge; CD and DVD library; room service; full-service spa. *In room:* A/C, plasma TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Expensive

Hotel Camino Real ★★ Although it is aging, the Camino Real remains one of the capital's top spots for business and social entertaining, and frequently sells out. Set amid Mexico's finest museums, it's a work of art in itself. Designed by renowned architect Ricardo Legorreta, the building is a classic example of contemporary Mexican architecture; more than 400 works of art by Mexican masters and other celebrated contemporary artists complement the design. Spacious rooms are brightly colored, with a sitting and desk area and armoires that conceal the TV and minibar. Some could use a renovation. Executive Club rooms come with bathrobes; rates here include continental breakfast, evening cocktail hour, and daily newspaper. The hotel houses a branch of China Grill, the 24-hour Bice Bistro, and the first Le Cirque restaurant outside of the U.S. The lobby's Blue Lounge—with waterfall and seating on an acrylic floor over a pool—occasionally features live music.

Mariano Escobedo 700, Col. Anzúrez, 11590 Mexico, D.F. ✆ **55/5263-8888.** Fax 55/5263-8889. www.caminoreal.com/mexico. See map p. 107. 712 units. $170 king; $399 executive club; $549 fiesta suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Parking $9. Metro: Chapultepec. **Amenities:** 6 restaurants; popular bar w/live entertainment; concierge; gym; outdoor pool; room service; sauna; steam room. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Hotel Habita ★ Habita deserves credit for helping to modernize the Mexico City hotel scene, even if it's now less trendy than it was a few years ago. A boutique hotel of chic minimalist design, Habita quickly became a preferred hotel in the city's most stylish neighborhood. The white-and-steel room decor is understated, with flatscreen TVs and

elegant gray Mexican marble lining the bathrooms from floor to ceiling. Beds are super comfortable, with down comforters and pillows. Located on the rooftop terrace, the hotel's **AREA** (p. 150) bar remains among the city's chic nightspots, despite newer arrivals. The lower level of the terrace features AREA's VIP section, along with a lap pool and small fitness center for guests. Adjacent to the lobby is a designer restaurant and lounge serving fusion cuisine and exotic martinis.

Av. Presidente Masaryk 201, Col. Polanco, 11560 Mexico, D.F. ✆ **55/5282-3100.** Fax 55/5282-3101. www.hotelhabita.com. See map p. 107. 36 units. $315 double; $355 deluxe double. AE, MC, V. Free parking. Metro: Polanco. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 bars; concierge; small gym; Jacuzzi; rooftop heated pool and solarium; room service; sauna; steam room. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Presidente InterContinental ★★ The buzzing Presidente is a leading destination for business executives and international visitors, a self-contained hotel city in a sleek 42-story building. Situated in the fashionable Polanco neighborhood, the Presidente is a short walk to some of the city's trendiest restaurants and nightlife, and to Mexico City's world-class museums housed in Chapultepec Park. The hotel's excellent restaurants, including the **Palm, Au Pied de Cochon** (p. 115), and **Zhen** (p. 115), are fed by the Presidente's wine cellar, the largest in Latin America. Contemporary Mexican designs decorate public areas and guest rooms, which are spacious and well appointed with flatscreen TVs and city or park views. Executive club rooms include private check-in service, breakfast, and evening hors d'oeuvres and cocktails; there's also a floor dedicated to rooms with special amenities just for women. The hotel's numerous event salons make this as much of a business as a social center, and the large staff is known for its friendly, professional service. The knowledgeable concierges will help familiarize you with the area and point you in the direction you wish to travel.

Campos Eliseos 218, Col. Polanco, 11560 Mexico, D.F. ✆ **800/424-6835** in the U.S., or 55/5327-7700. Fax 55/5327-7737. www.ichotelsgroup.com. See map p. 107. 661 units. $99–$229 double; $329 junior suite. AE, MC, V. Parking $10 per day. Metro: Auditorio. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants; lobby bar w/live entertainment; babysitting; concierge; executive-level rooms; fitness center; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

REFORMA AVENUE

Very Expensive

Hotel Four Seasons ★★★ One of the finest hotels in Mexico, the Four Seasons sets the standard for service with a staff noted for gracious manners. In the style of a Colonial-Era palace, its sumptuous guest rooms, and restaurant and bar surround a central courtyard. The luxurious guest rooms have high ceilings, plush bedspreads, Talavera lamps, Indonesian tapestries, and dark-wood furnishings. Most face the courtyard; two deluxe suites have courtyard-facing patios, and most executive suites overlook Reforma Avenue. The hotel offers expert-led private tours to many of the city's historic sites and museums; weekend guests have the option of joining a cultural tour. You won't be able to walk to any tourist attractions from here, but you are within easy driving distance to many of them.

Paseo de la Reforma 500, Col. Juárez, 06600 Mexico, D.F. ✆ **800/819-5053** in the U.S. and Canada, or 55/5230-1818. Fax 55/5230-1808. www.fourseasons.com. See map p. 98. 240 units. $440 and up. Special weekend packages generally available. AE, DC, MC, V. Valet parking 80 pesos an hour; maximum 275 pesos for 24 hr. Metro: Sevilla. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; gym; heated rooftop pool; whirlpool; room service; 2 rooms for travelers w/disabilities; spa; sauna. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar.

Tips Weekend Deals

Traveling business professionals make up most of the clientele of the top hotels, which often offer substantially lower rates Friday through Sunday.

Expensive

Embassy Suites ★★ One of Mexico City's newest and most modern hotels, the Embassy Suites is a welcome addition to what are mostly older hotels on this busy strip of Reforma, part of the capital's financial district. The striking glass high-rise offers two-room suites with living areas including sleeper sofas, dining nooks, and flatscreen TVs; bar areas with microwaves and coffeemakers; marble bathrooms with deep soak tubs; and bedrooms with luxury bedding. The corner and premier rooms are slightly larger than the standards. This is an outstanding value for families and travelers looking for extra space. Guests also enjoy a complimentary cocktail reception and cooked-to-order breakfast. This Embassy Suites houses a small but inviting indoor pool and gym, Starbucks, and an Argentine restaurant and bar. Concierge and nightly turndown service (uncommon at Embassy Suites elsewhere) are available.

Paseo de la Reforma 69 (Ignacio Ramirez), 06030 Mexico, D.F. ✆ **800/362-2779** in the U.S., or 55/5061-3000. Fax 55/5061-3001. www.embassysuites1.hilton.com. See map p. 98. 162 units. $159 and up suite. AE, MC, V. Parking 80 pesos. Metro: Hidalgo. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 bars; babysitting; concierge; gym; indoor pool. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Hotel Sheraton María Isabel The Sheraton María Isabel's location in front of the Monumento de la Independencia is ideal: It's next to the U.S. Embassy and across Reforma from the heart of the Zona Rosa. A favorite for business travelers, the updated 1950s-era hotel offers premium amenities in all its rooms. Tower suites, the most deluxe, occupy the 14th through 17th floors and offer private check-in, butler service, and continental breakfast and evening canapés. Some have views of the beautiful Angel of Independence monument in front, and rooms on the 15th floor are specially designed for women travelers. The excellent health club includes two tennis courts, massage services, a fitness center, and small rooftop pool. The **Jorongo Bar** (p. 149), a Mexico City institution, offers some of the best live Mexican music nightly from 7pm to 1am. The lobby bar, with its couches and TVs broadcasting in English and Spanish, is a popular gathering place for English-speaking expats and journalists during major events such as the 2008 U.S. presidential election.

Paseo de la Reforma 325 (at Río Tiber), 06500 Mexico, D.F. ✆ **800/528-2979** in the U.S., or 55/5242-5555. Fax 55/5207-0684. www.sheraton.com. See map p. 98. 755 units. $215 and up double; $250 and up tower. AE, MC, V. Covered parking $12. Metro: Insurgentes (6 blocks away). **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; concierge; full-service fitness center; privileges at nearby golf course; outdoor pool; room service; 2 tennis courts. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Inexpensive

Hotel María Cristina This classic choice for budget travelers is conveniently located just a 10-minute walk from the Zona Rosa. Resembling an aged Andalusian palace, the hotel is decorated with wrought-iron chandeliers, mahogany furnishings, and colonial patios and corridors. Standard rooms have one king-size or two double beds, ample closets, and modern bathrooms; the larger deluxe rooms include minibars and air-conditioning.

The large lobby with overstuffed couches and a fireplace makes for a comfortable meeting place. A grassy courtyard offers lounge chairs for reading or relaxing. The hotel lies at Río Neva, on the north side of Reforma.

Río Lerma 31, Col. Cuauhtémoc, 06500 Mexico, D.F. ✆ **55/5703-1212** or 5566-9688. Fax 55/5566-9194. www.hotelmariacristina.com.mx. See map p. 98. 150 units. $77 standard double; $99 deluxe double. AE, MC, V. Free guarded parking. Metro: Insurgentes. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; private garden. *In room:* A/C (in deluxe rooms only), TV, Wi-Fi (in most rooms).

CENTRO HISTORICO & SURROUNDING AREAS

Expensive

Sheraton Centro Histórico Hotel & Convention Center ★★ Across from Alameda park, this is the most luxurious option in the Historic Center. The striking marble-filled lobby leads to three outstanding restaurants, including the power lunch spot El Cardenal, and a wine bar. Spacious, modern guest rooms have separate marble showers and tubs, flatscreen TVs, and ample work spaces; corner rooms are even larger, and suites include kitchenettes and Jacuzzis. Eastern rooms overlook the Alameda and adjacent Palace of Fine Arts; western rooms have city views. The Sports City gym features one of the best fitness centers of any hotel in the city, as well as an indoor pool, sun deck, and limited spa services. Despite the hotel's role as a convention center, the five-star service remains attentive and personalized. You can easily walk from here to the Palace of Fine Arts and the major destinations in the Historic Center.

Av. Juárez 70 (at Balderas), 06010 Mexico, D.F. ✆ **800/325-3535** in the U.S. and Canada, or 55/5130-5300. Fax 55/5130-5255. www.sheraton.com/centrohistorico. See map p. 125. 457 units. $99–$325 double; $325 business suite. AE, MC, V. Covered guarded parking $10. Metro: Hidalgo. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; wine bar; concierge; fitness center; Jacuzzi; heated indoor pool; room service; limited spa services. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Moderate

Best Western Hotel Majestic ★ A Mexico City institution that visitors should experience at least once, this classic hotel has a prime location facing the *zócalo*—reason enough to stay here. The lobby's glass ceiling is the floor of a sitting area surrounded by guest rooms. Rooms that don't overlook the *zócalo* overlook Avenida Madero or the hotel's inner court. The lobby and courtyard are decorated with stone arches and fountains and beautiful tiles. Room furnishings are dated, and renovation plans continually stall. In lower-floor rooms facing Avenida Madero, street noise may be a problem. Guests in rooms that face the *zócalo* will suffer the periodic early morning flag-raising ceremony, complete with marching feet, drums, and bugle. Quieter rooms overlook the courtyard, with its own aviary. The popular Terraza rooftop cafe/restaurant serves three meals. You can save considerably by booking directly with the hotel and by asking for promotional rates or discounts.

Av. Madero 73, Col. Centro, 06000 Mexico, D.F. ✆ **55/5521-8600.** Fax 55/5512-6262. www.majestic.com.mx. See map p. 123. 85 units. $89 and up double. AE, MC, V. Nearby parking $10. Metro: Zócalo. **Amenities:** Restaurant/bar; babysitting; room service. *In room:* TV.

Holiday Inn Zócalo ★★ Finds Located next to the city's historic central square, this unique Holiday Inn is decorated in colonial Mexican style with colorful art, antiques, handicrafts, and other charming touches. In fact, it's one of the most inviting Holiday Inns I've seen anywhere. Photos of old Mexico City hang in the guest rooms, which have high ceilings, hardwood floors, marble bathrooms, robes, and modern conveniences such as Wi-Fi. Smoke-free rooms are available. The rooftop terrace overlooks the *zócalo,* and

the hotel also features a small restaurant, gym, concierge, and travel services. The multilingual staff caters to an international clientele that includes mostly Europeans and Americans.

Av. Cinco de Mayo 61, 06000 Mexico, D.F. ✆ **55/5130-5130.** Fax 55/5521-2122. www.hotelescortes.com. See map p. 123. 105 units. $79 double; $120 suite. AE, MC, V. Free parking. Metro: Zócalo. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; concierge; gym; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, Wi-Fi.

Inexpensive

Hotel Catedral (Value) This bargain hotel enjoys a stellar location 1 block north of Calle Tacuba on tree-shaded Calle Donceles, half a block from the Templo Mayor, and a block from the Museo San Ildefonso. Guest rooms have purified drinking water from a special tap, over-bed reading lights, and TVs with U.S. cable channels. Some have tub/showers, and others have whirlpool tubs. The furnishings are dated, however. Rooms on the upper floors afford views of the cathedral. On the seventh floor, a terrace with small tables and chairs offers great views. Because heavily trafficked streets surround the hotel, add 45 minutes to your departure time if you leave for the airport from here. In front of the big, marble-embellished lobby lies the bustling restaurant. The cozy bar beyond the reception desk also serves food. Ask for a top-floor room with a view. Breakfast costs $10 extra for a double room.

Calle Donceles 95 (btw. Brasil and Argentina), 06020 Mexico, D.F. ✆ **55/5518-5232.** Fax 55/5512-4344. www.hotelcatedral.com. See map p. 123. 116 units. 715 pesos double; 850 pesos junior suite. AE, MC, V. Free parking. Metro: Zócalo. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; room service. *In room:* TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

CONDESA/ROMA

Expensive

Condesadf ★★★ Developed by the same group that brought Hotel Habita to Polanco, Condesa*df* became the city's hottest place to stay after opening in 2005. Housed in a 1928 triangular Beaux Arts building, it features several rooms and bars that open onto a plant-filled interior courtyard. These spaces tend to be popular for small VIP parties and special events, which makes it a perfect place to check in on the local who's who. Interiors were fashioned by the French designer India Mahdavi, described as "Mexican with a twist"—stone floors, alpaca carpets, and a heavy dose of turquoise accents offset by cream leather sofas. Guest rooms feature high ceilings, balconies or terraces overlooking Parque España, hand-woven rugs, rocking chairs, flatscreen TVs, DVD players, and iPods. A basement "cinema" screening room transforms into a sizzling nightclub Thursday through Saturday nights.

Av. Veracruz 102, Col. Condesa, 06700 Mexico, D.F. ✆ **55/5241-2600.** www.condesadf.com. See map p. 98. 40 units. $195–$495 doubles and suites. AE, MC, V. Free parking. Metro: Insurgentes. Inquire about pets. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; club; concierge; Jacuzzi; room service. *In room:* A/C, plasma TV/DVD, hair dryer, iPod, minibar, Wi-Fi.

La Casona Hotel-Relais ★★ (Finds) Reminiscent of a small European luxury hotel, this exquisite establishment opened in 1996 in a formerly dilapidated 1923 building. Mexico's National Institute of Fine Arts has since designated it an artistic monument. Modern conveniences such as flatscreen TVs are juxtaposed with antique furniture in the individually decorated guest rooms. Tall interior shutter doors on guest-room windows keep out sound and light at night, and thick glass mutes street noise by day. Oriental-style rugs warm the hardwood floors and black-and-white marble throughout the common areas, decorated with prints of classical composers and fox hunts. A small

French-inspired restaurant next to the lobby is a popular gathering spot. The hotel lies 3 blocks south of the Diana Circle on Reforma and 4 longish blocks west of the western edge of the Zona Rosa. More important than decor or location is the excellent service here—truly capable of pampering you.

Durango 280 (corner of Cozumel), Col. Roma, 06700 Mexico, D.F. ✆ **55/5286-3001.** Fax 55/5211-0871. www.hotellacasona.com.mx. See map p. 98. 29 units. $165 double. Rates include American breakfast. AE, MC, V. Gated parking 50 pesos. Metro: Sevilla (4 blocks away). **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; concierge; small gym w/steam room; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV, Wi-Fi.

Inexpensive

Red Tree House ★ (Finds) In a town where corporate hotels and jampacked hostels are the norm, it's rare to find something in between, especially a place as comfortable as the Red Tree House. The original house was built in the 1930s and served as a resting place for visiting artists, writers, and musicians. It got its current name after co-owner Jorge Silva left the red Christmas lights on well into the new year. The neighbors liked it and a new nickname stuck. You will not find a more beautiful bargain than the penthouse, which could double as a studio for a well-off Condesa artist. With a fireplace, stylish living room with leather couches and local artwork, and a separate artist's studio on the patio, the only thing missing is an easel and a gaggle of fabulous friends. All guest rooms have been lovingly decorated with Mexican art and handicrafts; the cheapest rooms, at $50 a night, share a bathroom. The best part about the Red Tree House is the immediate feeling of welcome. A friendly house golden retriever named Abril greets visitors, and guests gather nightly in the kitchen or garden to chat about current events or travel adventures. The delightful staff can help with everything from arranging taxi pickup to suggesting local dining options.

Culiacán 6, Col. Condesa, 06700, Mexico, D.F. ✆ **55/5584-3829.** www.theredtreehouse.com. See map p. 98. 16 units. $85 double; $220 penthouse. Rates include American breakfast. AE, MC, V. Gated parking $5. Metro: Partriotismo. **Amenities:** Shared computer; shared kitchen; piano. *In room:* A/C, TV/DVD, Wi-Fi.

NEAR THE AIRPORT

Moderate

Hilton Airport Hotel ★ The Hilton is located inside the expansive Mexico City airport. The lobby bar, Carol's Place, has a great view of the runway, and if the international restaurant happens to be closed, there's 24-hour room service. The staff is attentive and the rooms nicely furnished, though small. Each has an entertainment system with satellite TV, pay movies, and video games; work desk with an ergonomic executive chair; and bath amenities by Crabtree & Evelyn. It can't be beat for convenience and a guarantee of making an early morning plane. The Hilton is located on the third level of gate F1, International Arrivals.

International Mexico City Airport (Sala F1, 3rd floor, door 8), 15260 Mexico, D.F. ✆ **800/228-9290** in the U.S., or 55/5133-0505. Fax 55/5133-0500. www.hilton.com. 129 units. $164 double; $225 executive room. AE, DC, MC, V. Parking $23. **Amenities:** Restaurant; lobby bar; concierge; executive floor; small health club; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies and games, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

SANTA FE

Moderate

Distrito Capital ★★ Leave it to the folks at Grupo Habita—the ones behind exceptional properties like Condesa*df*, La Purificadora in Puebla, and Básico in Playa del Carmen—to inject a little style into the otherwise stuffed-shirt atmosphere of the Santa Fe

financial district. Distrito Capital, styled by Parisian architect Joseph Dirand, occupies the 5th and 25th to 28th floors of a dazzling skyscraper, fit snug among glittering, towering neighbors. The guest rooms have a distinct "big city" feel, and could easily double as galleries, minus the beds. If the vintage furnishings by early modern designers like Charlotte Perriand don't win you over, the floor-to-ceiling city views will. In addition to the on-site restaurant by executive chef Enrique Olvera, sure to bring a new element of culinary prominence to the area, a noted restaurant in the building is Cebicheria Peruana La Mar, a delightful Peruvian fusion venture with some of the best ceviche in the city.

Juan Salvador Agraz 37, Col. Santa Fe, 05300, Mexico, D.F. ✆ **55/5257-1300.** www.hoteldistritocapital.com. 30 units. $145–$210 double; $215–$775 suite. AE, MC, V. No Metro access. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; gym; library; film projection room; outdoor pool; solarium. *In room:* A/C, iPod docking station, Wi-Fi.

4 WHERE TO DINE

Dining in Mexico City is sophisticated, with cuisine that spans the globe. From high chic to the standard Mexican *comida corrida* (blue-plate special), the capital offers something for every taste and budget. The **Polanco** area, in particular, has become a place of exquisite dining options, with new restaurants rediscovering and modernizing classic Mexican dishes. The **Centro Histórico** led a resurgence of popular restaurants and bars open for late-night dining and nightlife, which has spread to the **Condesa** and **Roma** neighborhoods—which you can easily stroll to find a number of small restaurants and a myriad of cuisines. Cantinas, until not so very long ago the privilege of men only, offer some of the best food and colorful local atmosphere. **San Angel** houses some of Mexico City's finest traditional restaurants.

Everybody eats out in Mexico City, regardless of social class. Consequently, you can find restaurants of every type, size, and price range scattered across the city. Mexicans take their food and dining seriously, so if you see a full house, that's generally recommendation enough. But those same places may be entirely empty if you arrive early—remember, here lunch is generally eaten at 3pm, with dinner not seriously considered before 9pm. Many establishments add a "cover" charge of $2 to $4 per person to the bill.

CHAPULTEPEC PARK & POLANCO

Very Expensive

Hacienda de los Morales ★★ Moments MEXICAN HAUTE CUISINE A 16th-century oasis amid one of the world's most populous cities, the Hacienda de los Morales is an enchanted place for special occasions. The Spanish colonial decor includes dark-wood furnishings, stone columns, and domed brick ceilings, with some tables looking out to garden fountains. The entrance patio doubles as an elegant bar, where you will find precious artwork and the original chapel where Spanish aristocrats once prayed. While the Hacienda is a bustling power lunch spot by day, it transforms into a romantic retreat at night. Expertly prepared food includes the best of Mexican dishes, with an excellent selection of meat, fish, and seafood, as well as pastas, crepes, and other selections. A constant stream of weddings and special events takes place in private salons surrounding the gardens. Jacket and tie are suggested.

Vázquez de Mella 525 (at Av. Horacio), Col. Polanco. ✆ **55/5283-3054.** www.haciendadelosmorales.com. See map p. 107. Reservations recommended. Main courses 200–400 pesos, not including a nightly per-person cover charge of 45 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 1pm–1am. Metro: Polanco.

Izote ★★★ MEXICAN HAUTE CUISINE Still at the top of the city's superb dining scene, this signature venue of celebrated chef Patricia Quintana pays homage to the best of classic Mexican cooking. There are only 19 tables, and the atmosphere is simple, but what's on your plate will more than compensate. Located on the most upscale street in all of Mexico, it remains one of the capital's most popular restaurants, so reservations are essential, even at lunch. The menu is a compilation of modern versions of pre-Hispanic dishes and draws heavily on indigenous ingredients such as yucca flower, cactus, and *masa* (corn flour). Each dish is a delight. Try traditional Oaxacan *mole,* or lamb barbecued in a banana leaf. Endings are especially sweet here—save room for Tarta Zaachila, a chocolate pastry filled with nuts, accompanied by the traditional *café de olla,* coffee flavored with cinnamon and brown sugar. If you're curious, *izote* is the beautiful white flower that adorns the yucca plant.

Av. Presidente Masaryk 513 (btw. calles Sócrates and Platón), Col. Polanco. ✆ **55/5280-1265.** See map p. 107. Reservations essential. Main courses $25–$40. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 1–11:30pm; Sun 1–5:30pm. Metro: Polanco.

Zhen ★★ HAUTE CHINESE This Shanghai-based restaurant is one of the capital's top choices for gourmet Chinese cuisine. The contemporary dining room has round tables with revolving centerpieces for sharing, exquisite place settings, and elegant leather chairs. Soft Oriental music plays in the background as the expert servers attentively wait on the tables. Start with dim sum such as steamed shrimp dumplings or spring rolls with chicken and vegetables. For a main course, I recommend the braised spareribs with aged vinegar, stir-fried snapper with celery, or crispy and delicious Peking duck. Dishes are beautifully presented and full of flavor.

In the Presidente InterContinental (p. 109), Campos Eliseos 218, Col. Chapultepec. ✆ **55/5327-7700.** www.zhen.com.mx. See map p. 107. Reservations recommended. Main courses 150–520 pesos. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 1pm–1am; Sun 1–10pm. Metro: Auditorio.

Expensive

Au Pied de Cochon ★ FRENCH/BISTRO The *capitalanos* have been maintaining their love affair with French bistros over the last several years, and this is a perennial hot spot. A direct import from Paris, this bistro always packs in the city's jet set and fashion-forward for classic cafe fare. Open 24 hours, it's the best late-night dining option in the city. The main dining room is a spirited scene of activity and conversation, in multiple languages. Two service bars offer singles places to dine without feeling "solo," and other tables are packed in together. Pâtés, cheese plates, and exquisite salads are standard starters. The French onion soup and the foie gras are particularly delicious. For the main course, perennial favorites are the steak frites, steamed mussels, and the specialty *pied de cochon* (pigs' feet). There's also a raw bar, an excellent selection of French wines, and an ample choice of tequilas. Desserts are classically French and rich.

In the Presidente InterContinental (p. 109), Campos Eliseos 218, Col. Chapultepec. ✆ **55/5327-7756.** www.aupieddecochon.com.mx. See map p. 107. Reservations recommended. Main courses 200–600 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 24 hr. Metro: Auditorio.

NAOS ★★ MEXICAN/SEAFOOD A glass-paneled open kitchen and raw bar serve as the centerpiece of acclaimed chef Monica Patiño's NAOS restaurant in the fashionable Palmas neighborhood. Waiters in black ties and vests provide crisp, attentive service to the food-loving crowd. The contemporary dining room combines glass, marble, and hardwood floors with fascinating, if slightly spooky, wall sketches of *katrinas* (humorous

 skeleton representations celebrating death). Although the menu spans the gamut, seafood remains the specialty. Consider starting with a tuna carpaccio dressed up with fried capers and a citrus vinaigrette, followed by the mild sea bass prepared with three chiles. Fresh oysters and stone crabs from Baja California are offered, along with numerous creatively prepared fish and seafood dishes.

Palmas 425, Col. Lomas de Chapultepec. ✆ **55/5520-5702.** www.monicapatino.com/naos. See map p. 107. Reservations recommended. Main courses 250–500 pesos. AE, DC, MC, V. Mon–Wed 1:30–11pm; Thurs–Sat 1:30pm–midnight; Sun 1:30–6pm. Metro: Auditorio.

Moderate

L'Olivier ★ BISTRO/COUNTRY FRENCH This bright, bustling bistro would be reminiscent of an authentic French cafe were it not for the fact that its patrons tend to be business moguls and sophisticated socialites rather than bohemians. The restaurant is particularly buzzing at lunch, and more subdued at night. Although the menu changes seasonally, a regular starter is foie gras with black beans. Main courses range from pâté to soufflé. The lamb chops with mint jelly are delectable, as are the seafood linguine and the lamb couscous. For dessert, leave enough room (and time) for the chocolate soufflé. Service is attentive and efficient.

Masaryk 49-C (at Torcuato Tasso), Col. Polanco. ✆ **55/5545-3133.** See map p. 107. Reservations recommended. Main courses 120–300 pesos. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 1:30–10:30pm; Sun 1:30–5pm. Metro: Polanco.

Villa Maria ★★ Kids TRADITIONAL MEXICAN This festive Mexican restaurant sits on a residential street of Polanco. A fun crowd comes to drink giant flavored margaritas, listen to mariachi music, and eat delicious Mexican food. The inviting dining room has two floors and is peppered with silly bar sayings such as, "I just joined alcoholics anonymous," and "I'm still drinking, but under a nickname." There are as many locals as expatriates here, and Villa Maria is every bit as much a refined celebration of Mexican food as of the culture. Tacos are available in every variety (I love the fish tacos with red adobe sauce), as are enchiladas and *mole* dishes. Other excellent suggestions include the red snapper cooked in a tamarind sauce and wrapped in a banana leaf, and the center beef cut served with a creamy tequila sauce. Whatever you order will be delicious, and you're bound to have a great time here. A kids' menu is available.

Homero 704 (at Galileo), Col. Polanco. ✆ **55/5203-0306.** www.villamaria.com.mx. See map p. 107. Reservations recommended. Main courses 90–200 pesos. AE, DC, MC, V. Mon–Sat 1:30pm–midnight; Sun 1:30–7pm. Metro: Polanco.

ZONA ROSA & SURROUNDING AREAS

If you're up for a culinary adventure, dine at the student-staffed **Cordon Bleu Casa de Francia,** Havre 15, Zona Rosa (✆ **55/5208-1868;** www.lcbmexico.com/restaurante.cfm; map p. 99), a training ground for Mexico's up-and-coming chefs. The restaurant occupies two lovely dining rooms inside the Casa de Francia, a French cultural center. The menu varies; it's a great way to sample imaginative variations on classics and local cuisine. Wines by the glass are available. It's open Monday to Wednesday and on Saturday from 8am to 5pm, Thursday to Friday from 8:30am to 10pm.

Expensive

Casa Bell ★ INTERNATIONAL MEXICAN A longtime favorite of Mexico City's political and business elite, Casa Bell is probably the capital's key power-lunch venue. Expect to find it filled every day by 3pm (peak lunch hour) with political and business

leaders. The lovely terrace begins to fill up around 2pm, as birds chirp from strategically placed cages around the patio. Exceptionally well-trained waiters move attentively around the tables as lunch unfolds, and they are likely to recommend dishes such as the duck tacos, *filete Chemite* (filet mignon), or *robalo* (sea bass) prepared any way you like. Diners typically come dressed in suits and tend to linger over their meals and perhaps a few margaritas. Finish off with a delectable pastry from the dessert cart.

Praga 14 (off Paseo de la Reforma), Zona Rosa. ✆ **55/5208-3967.** See map p. 99. Reservations recommended. Main courses 170–300 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 1–6pm. Metro: Insurgentes.

Moderate

Fonda El Refugio ★★ MEXICAN More than 40 years of tradition have shaped the service, food, and atmosphere here, making this a special place for authentic Mexican dining. It's small and unusually congenial, with a large fireplace decorated with gleaming copper pots and pans. The restaurant manages the almost impossible task of being both refined and informal. The menu runs the gamut of Mexican cuisine, from *arroz con plátanos* (rice with fried bananas) to *enchiladas con mole poblano,* topped with the rich, thick, spicy chocolate sauce of Puebla. For a main course, I recommend the *huachinango a la veracruzana* (Veracruz-style red snapper with tomatoes and olives). Or if you're in a spicy mood, the *chiles poblanos* stuffed with ground beef or cheese. For dessert, opt for the coconut candy or the mouthwatering flan. The tortillas are handmade, and the margaritas are potently delicious. Fonda El Refugio is very popular, especially on Saturday night, so get here early.

Liverpool 166 (btw. calles Florencia and Amberes), Col. Juárez Zona Rosa. ✆ **55/5207-2732** or 5525-8128. See map p. 99. Reservations recommended. Main courses 150–250 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 1–11pm. Metro: Insurgentes.

CENTRO HISTORICO & SURROUNDING AREAS

Moderate

Café Tacuba ★★ MEXICAN One of the city's most famous restaurants, Café Tacuba dates from 1912 and offers a handsome Colonial-Era atmosphere. Guests are welcomed into one of two long dining rooms, with brass lamps, dark oil paintings, and a large mural of nuns working in a kitchen. The menu is authentic Mexican with traditional dishes, including tamales, enchiladas, chiles rellenos, *mole,* and *pozole.* Wednesday through Sunday from 2 until 10pm, a wonderful group of medieval-costumed singers entertain; their sound is like the melodious *estudiantina* groups of Guanajuato accompanied by mandolins and guitars. A trio or quartet plays romantic boleros on Mondays and Tuesdays from 8 to 10pm.

Tacuba 28 (btw. República de Chile and Bolívar), Col. Centro. ✆ **55/5512-8482** or 5518-4950. See map p. 123. Breakfast 50–200 pesos; main courses 80–200 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 8am–11:30pm. Metro: Allende.

La Casa de las Sirenas ★ TRADITIONAL MEXICAN The "house of mermaids," a 16th-century building constructed with rocks from a pyramid, is one of the loveliest restaurants in the historic center. It sits above the famous cantina with the same name (p. 152) and has a wonderful rooftop terrace with a view to the back of the Cathedral and Templo Mayor. The food is as novel as the setting. Start with classic Mexican noodle soup with chicken liver, or perhaps the stuffed crepes with chicken, squash flower, and mushrooms. The best main dishes are beef medallions in a mustard seed sauce, sea bass generously stuffed with shrimp and mushrooms, and Cornish hen served with a mango

mole sauce. Pair your dish with one of the 250 tequilas on offer. Live music is offered on weekends.

República de Guatemala 32 (behind the Cathedral), Col. Centro. ✆ **55/5704-3273.** www.lacasadelassirenas.com.mx. See map p. 123. Reservations recommended. Main courses 170–190 pesos. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 11am–11pm; Sun 11am–7pm. Metro: Zócalo.

Restaurant Danubio ★★ SPANISH Danubio has been a Mexico City tradition since 1936, and it remains an excellent choice for dining in the Historic Center. Photos of celebrity diners line the walls of the classically European-style room. The Basque-inspired menu offers a range of selections emphasizing seafood, and the house specialty is *langostinos* (baby crayfish). Much of the food is prepared on an old coal and firewood stove. Danubio, which lies south of La Alameda, is also noted for its excellent wine cellar.

República de Uruguay 3 (near Bolivar), Alameda. ✆ **55/5512-0912.** See map p. 125. www.danubio.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses 150–400 pesos. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 1–10pm. Metro: Bellas Artes or Salto del Agua.

COYOACAN

Oh Mayatl ★★★ MEXICAN Forget tacos and margaritas. If you want a true "authentic" Mexican meal—one worthy of the gods—it ought to be accompanied with *chapulines* (dried grasshoppers) and *mezcal* (fermented agave drink). Luckily, Oh Mayatl's atmosphere makes the idea of washing down a handful of dead insects with a glass of firewater a bit more palatable. The lively restaurant and bar, named after Mayahuel, the Aztec goddess of agave, soul medicine, and the human heart, is located just off Coyoacán's artsy main square. The *molote de plátano,* an appetizer of puréed plantains and a potent tomato sauce, is worth the trip to the south of the city. In a feat of mixologic genius, the bartenders have created an impressive menu of mezcal-based cocktails, including the Caipirinha Mezcalera, which features mezcal, salt of the worm, lime, orange, and grapefruit juices. A hand-painted sign over the upstairs bar proclaims, CHEERS TO HONESTY.

Plaza Jardín Centenario 9-A, Coyoacán. ✆ **55/5554-7555.** http://losdanzantes.com. See map p. 129. Main courses 100–250 pesos. AE, MC, V. Mon–Thurs 1:30pm–midnight; Fri–Sat 1:30pm–2am; Sun 1:30–10pm. Metro: Coyoacán.

CANTINAS

Cantina La Guadalupana ★★ Finds MEXICAN Opened in 1928, this cantina lies in Coyoacán. From the entrance—off a narrow cobblestone street—to the antiquated bar, a sense of nostalgia permeates the comfortable, jovial cantina. The operation is as traditional as the menu. For those who are only drinking, waiters bring the customary small plates of complimentary snacks (called *botanas*) that range from crisp jicama slices with lime and chile to pigs' feet in a red sauce. It's easy to imagine the communist conversations that must have bounced off the walls here in Frida and Diego's day.

Higuera 2 and Caballo Calco (1 block from the central plaza), Coyoacán. ✆ **55/5554-6253.** See map p. 129. Main courses 60–100 pesos; mixed drinks 25–80 pesos, more for premium tequilas. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 1pm–midnight. Metro: Coyoacán.

La México ★ Finds MEXICAN The "queen of cantinas" as it is known, La México has three floors of nonstop tequila-drinking, beer-guzzling, music-playing fun. A favorite among locals from all social classes, this authentic cantina offers live music Wednesday through Saturday nights, including salsa and traditional Mexican. For $14, you get one drink and 12 small appetizers *(botanas).* Following their meals of simple Mexican fare, or

Taking It to the Streets

While Mexico City is home to some of the world's best upscale restaurants, the real culinary adventures can be found sizzling in the street. If you're on a budget, street food can also keep you sustained for cheap. Just about every *colonia* has its own street food *puesto* of choice. The best way to find good street food is to ask a variety of different residents and note when the same answer repeatedly comes up. If you make it to only one street food purveyor while you're in town, **Tacos Chupacabra** in Coyoacán is your best bet. It's located under the Viaducto Río Churubusco near the posh Centro Coyoacán shopping mall. Don't be scared away by the fact that it's located under a freeway bridge. You came to Mexico for the ambience, right? The tacos are delicious, and toppings include everything from spicy mashed potatoes to jalapeño-flavored carrots. The place is always hopping with university students and locals headed to and from the Coyoacán Metro stop. If you're watching your weight, you can order a "Chupas light," which are made with one tortilla instead of two. You can have a feast for less than 50 pesos.

Some other great finds are **Tacos Hola,** on the corner of Michoacán and Amsterdam in Condesa (no phone; www.tacoshola.com); **El Califa** (✆ **55/5271-6285**), on Altata 22 in Condesa; **Beatricita** (✆ **55/5511-4213**), on Londres between Florencia and Varsovia in Zona Rosa; or, for a surprisingly rare treat in Mexico City, a big juicy burrito with almond chipotle salsa at the **Los Burritos** stand on the corner of Insurgentes and Havre (✆ **55/5208-8737**).

Mexico City has several other unique street food offerings, which can be found in just about every neighborhood. *Tlacoyos* consist of a thick, oval-shaped blue-corn tortilla stuffed with beans, cheese, or fava beans and topped with cream, lettuce, and any number of meats. Unique to the capital are *tortas de tamal,* which are essentially tamal sandwiches with salsa on top. Another favorite is *elotes,* or corn on the cob served on a stick, popsicle style. If you add all the possible toppings—mayonnaise, cream, Oaxacan cheese, chile, lime, and pepper—you can easily double the weight of your delicious cornsicle. A good place to have a street food smorgasbord is the *antojitos* (little snacks) market just off the main square behind the Guadalupana church in Coyoacán.

perhaps in the midst of them, patrons often take to dancing between tables. La México is located in San Jerónimo, toward the south end of the city.

Eje 10 Sur (Canoa) 75, San Jerónimo. ✆ **55/5550-2072.** Main courses $4–$10; mixed drinks $2–$7, more for premium tequilas. No credit cards. Mon–Tues 1pm–12:30am; Wed 1pm–2am; Thurs–Fri 1pm–3am; Sat noon–2am. Metro: Copilco.

La Opera ★★ Moments INTERNATIONAL La Opera Bar, 3 blocks east of La Alameda, is the most opulent of the city's cantinas. Slide into a dark-wood booth below gilded baroque ceilings, patches of beveled mirror, and exquisite small oil paintings. Or opt for a linen-covered table with a basket of fresh bread. La Opera is the Mexican equivalent of a London gentlemen's club, although it has become so popular for dining

that fewer and fewer men play dominoes. Instead, you see people enjoying romantic interludes in cavernous booths—but tables of any kind are hard to find. Service is best if you arrive for lunch, when it opens, or go after 5pm, when the throngs have diminished; the jacketed waiters cater to regulars at the expense of unknown diners. The menu is unimpressive, but the atmosphere and drinks are excellent. Try a margarita or a classic tequila. Specialties include Spanish tapas, Caesar salad, and Veracruz-style red snapper with olives and tomatoes. While you wait for your meal, look to the ceiling for the bullet hole that legend says Pancho Villa left when he galloped in on a horse. The cantina is half a block toward the *zócalo* from Casa de los Azulejos.

Cinco de Mayo 10, Col. Centro. ✆ **55/5512-8959.** See map p. 125. Reservations recommended at lunch. Main courses 55–250 pesos; mixed drinks 45–65 pesos, more for premium tequilas. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 1pm–midnight; Sun 1–6pm. Metro: Bellas Artes.

Moments ¡Café, Por Favor!

In Mexico, the preparation and consumption of espresso have been considered an art form for generations. You can find the best coffee in small cafes with a crowd of regulars who congregate to catch up on the local *chisme* (gossip).

Café La Habana, downtown at Bucareli and Morelos, is one of the most famous, a long-standing cafe with a rich history—and a reputation for strong coffees, all roasted and ground in-house. Ask the waiter and he'll tell you how Fidel Castro and Che Guevara planned the Cuban revolution while sipping an espresso *cortao*. Strangely, it's Mexican and not Cuban food served here. The cafe is open Monday through Thursday from 7am to 11:30pm, Friday and Saturday from 7am to 1am, and Sunday from 8am to 10pm.

In the Centro Histórico near the Zócalo, **Mumedi,** Francisco I. Madero 74, is a hip designer cafe popular with artists, architects, and graphic designers. Attached to the cafe is a bookstore and gallery featuring contemporary art objects and changing exhibitions. It's open Tuesday through Sunday from 8am to 9pm and Monday from 11:30am to 9pm.

Bohemian-style coffeehouses are in Roma Norte, frequented by artists and trendy urbanites. One of the most popular is **Café de Carlo,** Orizaba 115 between Mérida and Álvaro Obregón (Mon–Fri 8am–10pm, Sat till 9pm, Sun 9am–5pm). Nearby Álvaro Obregón is a wide boulevard lined with independent coffee shops that each offer their own quirks and charms.

Just north of Roma Norte in the Zona Rosa the sidewalk cafe **Konditori,** Genova 61, is another good option, on a pedestrian-only street. It's open daily 7am to midnight.

The Condesa is another top cafe zone and **El Péndulo,** Nuevo León 115, close to Insurgentes, is a favorite. It combines its cafe setting with a book and music store and tends to draw intellectuals, writers, and students. It frequently hosts live music and poetry readings. It's open Monday through Friday from 8am to 11pm and weekends from 10am to 11pm. Another branch is in the Zona Rosa at Hamburgo 126.

5 EXPLORING MEXICO CITY

The diversity of Mexico City's attractions springs from its complex history. From simple bustling *mercados* to museums filled with treasures of artistic and historic significance, Mexico City has layers and layers of cultural richness to explore.

Mexico City was built on the ruins of the ancient city of Tenochtitlan. A downtown portion of the city, comprising almost 700 blocks and 1,500 buildings, is designated the Centro Histórico (Historic Center). The area has surged in popularity, and once-neglected buildings are being converted into fashionable shops and restaurants, recalling its former colonial charm.

Remember that this is a major Latin city; dress is more professional and formal here than in other parts of the country. The altitude keeps the temperature mild, which is often a surprise for travelers with preconceptions of Mexico as perpetually hot. In summer, always be prepared for rain, which falls for an hour or two almost daily. In winter, carry a jacket or sweater—stone museums are chilly inside, and when the sun goes down, the outside air gets quite cold. If you want to blend in with the crowd, black is always the new black, especially in the winter.

THE TOP ATTRACTIONS

Basílica de Santa María de Guadalupe ★★ Within the northern city limits is the famous Basílica of Guadalupe—not just another church, but the central place of worship for Mexico's patron saint and the home of the image responsible for uniting pre-Hispanic Indian mysticism with Catholic beliefs. It is virtually impossible to understand Mexico and its culture without appreciating the national devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe. The blue-mantled Virgin of Guadalupe is the most revered image in the country, and you will see her countenance wherever you travel. This is also one of the most important religious sites for Catholics.

The Basílica occupies the site where, on December 9, 1531, a poor Indian named Juan Diego reputedly saw a vision of a beautiful lady in a blue mantle. The local bishop, Zumárraga, was reluctant to confirm that Juan Diego had indeed seen the Virgin Mary, so he asked the peasant for evidence. Juan Diego saw the vision a second time, on December 12, and when he asked the Virgin for proof, she instructed him to collect the roses that began blooming in the rocky soil at his feet. He gathered the flowers in his cloak and returned to the bishop. When he unfurled his cloak, the flowers dropped to the ground and the image of the Virgin was miraculously emblazoned on the rough-hewn cloth. The bishop immediately ordered the building of a church on the spot, and upon its completion, the cloth with the Virgin's image was hung in a place of honor, framed in gold. Since that time, millions of the devout and the curious have come to view the miraculous image that experts, it is said, are at a loss to explain. So heavy was the flow of visitors—many approached for hundreds of yards on their knees—that the old church, already fragile, was insufficient to handle them. An audacious new Basílica, designed by Pedro Ramírez Vazquez, the same architect who designed the breathtaking Museo Nacional de Antropología, opened in 1987.

The miracle cloak hangs behind bulletproof glass above the altar of the new Basilica. Moving walkways going in two directions transport the crowds a distance below the cloak. If you want to see it again, take the people-mover going in the opposite direction; you can do it as many times as you want.

Tips Día de las Bicis

The traffic-congested streets of Mexico City can be daunting for drivers, let alone travelers who wish to reach their destination on two wheels. However, every Sunday bicycles rule. As part of a program called *Muévete en Bici* (Get Moving on a Bike), the city shuts down the middle lanes of Reforma—from near the entrance of Chapultepec Park to the *zócalo,* although the route can change depending on construction or special events—one of the city's most prominent avenues, so that up to 10,000 cyclists, and their friends the runners, walkers, and even the odd stilt walker, can have free reign of the pavement. The best part is that the route passes by some of the city's most famous monuments and museums, many of which are free to the public on Sundays. The streets are cleared for bicyclists from 8am to 2pm.

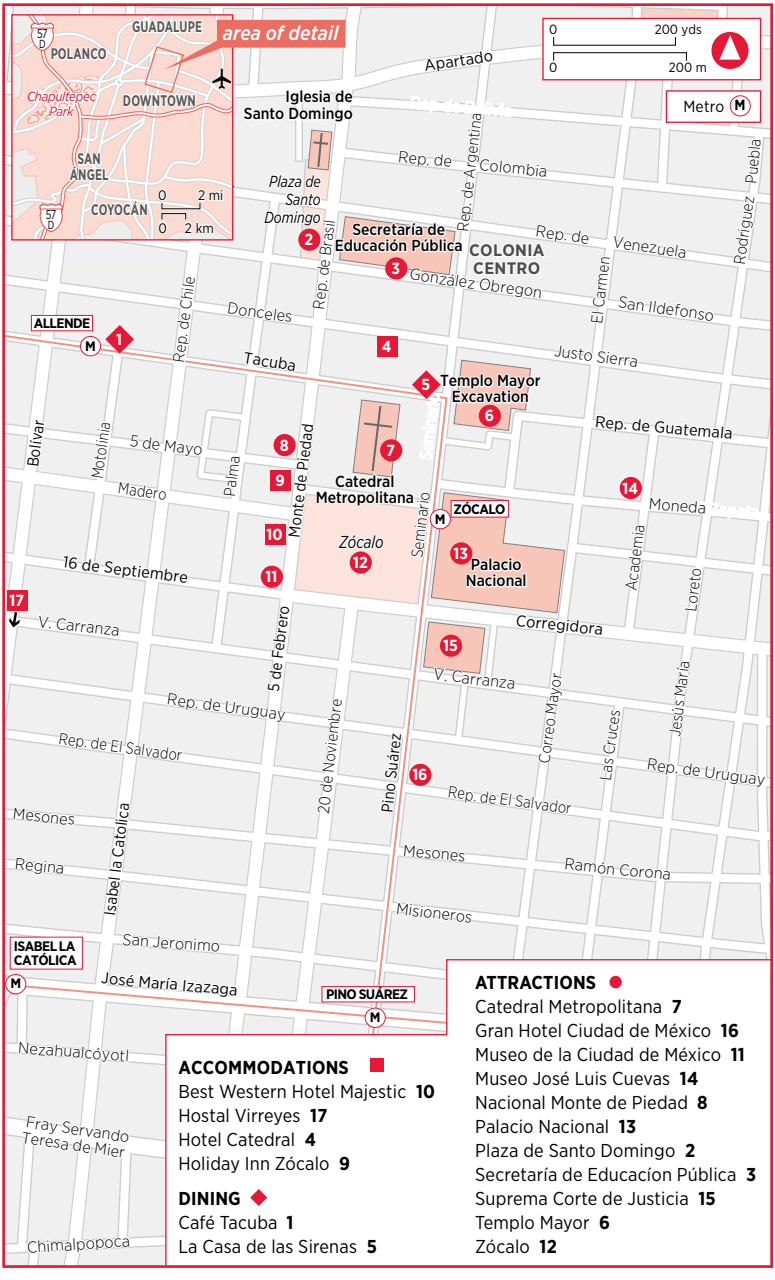
If you'd like to take part, you have a couple of options: If you're staying in Roma or Condesa, head over to **Mejor en Bici** (✆ **55/5256-4049;** www.mejorenbici.org) in Parque Mexico. They'll ask you for your official identification, such as a driver's license or passport, and a deposit of 200 pesos, which will be returned when you bring back your cruiser bike before 5:30pm. You can then take a scenic ride through the Condesa neighborhood. If you don't have a lot of experience biking in large cities, you're probably better off going to one of the rental places along the bike route on Reforma. They usually have a 3-hour time limit, which makes it more difficult to stop off at museums and landmarks, which include the **Angel de la Reforma, Palacio Bellas Artes, Palacio Nacional,** and **Catedral Metropolitana.**

In 2002, the pope declared Juan Diego a saint, a very big deal in this predominantly Catholic country; he was the first Mexican to achieve sainthood. The achievement was not, however, without controversy—Juan Diego's images have increasingly taken on a "European" appearance, and native Mexicans insist that Juan Diego be portrayed as the dark-skinned indigenous peasant he was.

To the right of the modern basilica is the Old Basílica, which used to house the cloak. To the back of it lies the entrance to the Basílica Museum, with a very good display of religious art in restored rooms. One of the side chapels, with a silver altar, is adjacent to the museum. Nearby are several gift shops specializing in religious objects and other folk art.

Outside the museum lies a garden commemorating the moment Juan Diego showed the cloak to the archbishop. Numerous photographers with colorful backdrops gather there to capture your visit on film. At the top of the hill, behind a third basilica built in 1950, is the **Panteón del Tepeyac,** a cemetery where big names such as Santa Anna and Velasco are buried. The climb up the steps, though potentially tiring, is worthwhile for the view from the top.

If you visit Mexico City on **December 12,** you will witness the grand festival in honor of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The square in front of the basilica fills with the pious and the party-minded as prayers, dances, and a carnival atmosphere attract thousands of the



ACCOMMODATIONS
Best Western Hotel Majestic **10**
Hostal Virreyes **17**
Hotel Catedral **4**
Holiday Inn Zócalo **9**

DINING
Café Tacuba **1**
La Casa de las Sirenas **5**

ATTRACTIONS
Catedral Metropolitana **7**
Gran Hotel Ciudad de México **16**
Museo de la Ciudad de México **11**
Museo José Luis Cuevas **14**
Nacional Monte de Piedad **8**
Palacio Nacional **13**
Plaza de Santo Domingo **2**
Secretaría de Educacíon Pública **3**
Suprema Corte de Justicia **15**
Templo Mayor **6**
Zócalo **12**

 devout. Many visitors combine a trip to the basilica with one to the **ruins of Teotihuacán,** as both are out of the city center in the same direction.

Plaza de las Américas 1, Villa de Guadalupe. ✆ **55/5577-6022.** www.virgendeguadalupe.org.mx. See map p. 89. Free admission; museum 5 pesos. Daily 6am–8pm. Free guided tours (in Spanish) Fri–Sat noon. Metro: Basílica or La Villa. Signs lead the way along the 15-min. walk to the entrance of the Basílica. No shorts, food, or drinks are allowed inside.

Museo Frida Kahlo ★★★ Although during her lifetime Frida Kahlo was known principally as the wife of muralist Diego Rivera, today her art surpasses his in popularity. Certainly, the 2002 Salma Hayek movie *Frida* did much to bring this Mexican icon to the attention and appreciation of millions more. Kahlo dedicated her life to both her painting and her passionate, tortured love for her husband. Her emotional and physical pain—her spine was pierced during a serious streetcar accident in her youth—were the primary subjects of her canvases, many of which are self-portraits. Her paintings are now acknowledged as exceptional works of Latin American art and some of the purest artistic representations of female strength and struggle ever created. As her paintings have surged in renown and price, so has interest in the life of this courageous, provocative, and revolutionary woman.

Kahlo was born in this house on July 7, 1910, and lived here with Rivera from 1929 to 1954. During the 1930s and 1940s, it was a popular gathering place for intellectuals. As you wander through the rooms of the cornflower-blue house, you'll get a glimpse of the life they led. Most of the rooms remain in their original state, with mementos everywhere. Tiny clay pots hang about; the names Diego and Frida are painted on the walls of the kitchen. In the studio upstairs, a wheelchair sits next to the easel with a partially completed painting surrounded by brushes, palettes, books, photographs, and other intimate details of the couple's art-centered lives. Much of the movie *Frida* was filmed in this house.

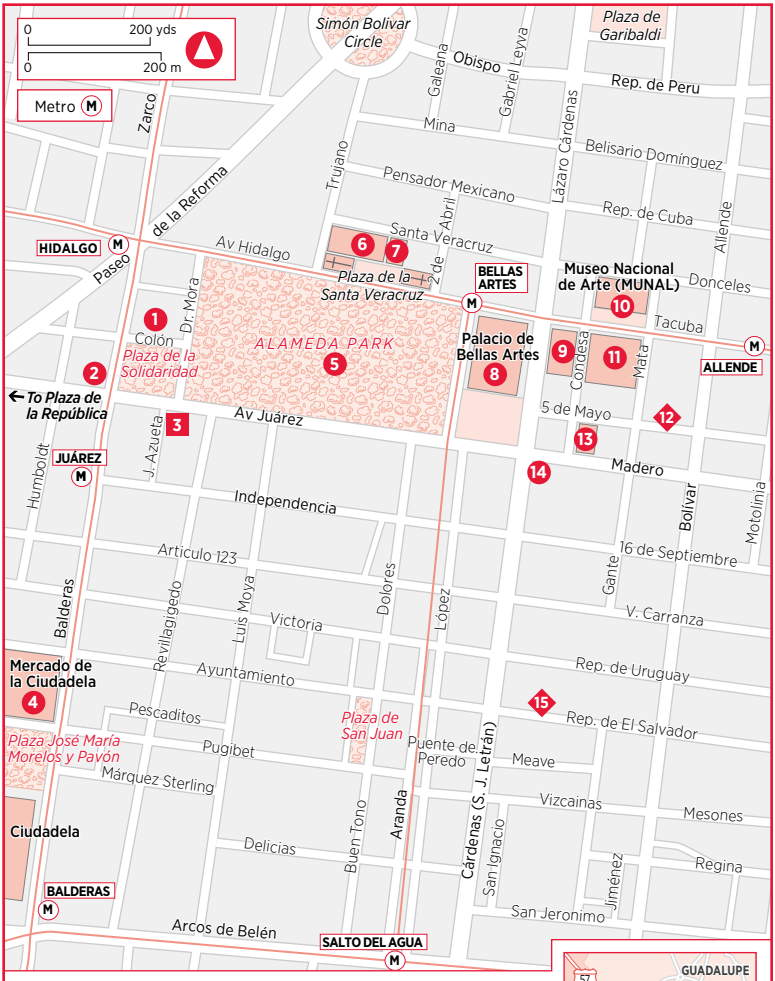
Frida and Diego collected pre-Columbian art, and many of the rooms contain jewelry and terra-cotta figurines from Teotihuacán and Tlatelolco. Kahlo even had a mock-up of a temple built in the garden to exhibit her numerous pots and statues. On the back side of the temple are several skulls from Chichén Itzá. A cafe on the first floor serves light snacks, and the adjacent bookstore offers a full range of Kahlo and Rivera books and other commercialized memorabilia.

Londres 247, Coyoacán. ✆ **55/5554-5999.** www.museofridakahlo.org. See map p. 129. Admission 55 pesos. No cameras allowed. Tues–Sun 10am–5:45pm. Metro: Coyoacán.

Museo Nacional de Antropología ★★★ Occupying approximately 4,100 sq. m (44,132 sq. ft.), Mexico City's anthropology museum is regarded as one of the top museums in the world. It offers the single best introduction to the culture of Mexico.

Inside the museum is an open courtyard (containing the Chávez Morado fountain) with beautifully designed rooms running around three sides on two levels. The **ground-floor rooms** are devoted to history—from prehistoric days to the most recently explored archaeological sites—and are the most popular among studious visitors. These rooms include dioramas of Mexico City when the Spaniards arrived, and reproductions of part of a pyramid at Teotihuacán. The Aztec calendar stone "wheel" occupies a proud place.

Save some time and energy for the livelier and more readily comprehensible **ethnographic rooms** upstairs. This section is devoted to the way people throughout Mexico live today, complete with straw-covered huts, recordings of songs and dances, crafts, clothing, and lifelike models of village activities. This floor, a living museum, strikes me



ACCOMMODATIONS
Sheraton Centro Histórico Hotel & Convention Center **3**

DINING
La Opera **12**
Restaurante Danubio **15**

ATTRACTIONS
Casa de los Azulejos **13**
Correo (Post Office) **9**
FONART **2**
Juárez Monument **5**
La Torre Latinoamericana **14**
Mercado de la Ciudadela **4**
Museo Franz Mayer **6**
Museo Mural Diego Rivera **1**
Museo Nacional de Arte **10**
Museo Nacional de la Estampa **7**
Palacio de Bellas Artes **8**
Palacio de Minería **11**

as vital to the understanding of contemporary Mexico because of the importance of pre-Hispanic customs in Mexican village life.

The museum has a lovely, moderately priced restaurant with cheerful patio tables. ***Note:*** Most of the museum is wheelchair accessible; however, assistance will be needed in places.

Paseo de la Reforma y Calzada Gandhi s/n, Chapultepec Polanco. ✆ **55/5553-6266.** www.mna.inah.gob.mx. See map p. 127. Admission 51 pesos; free Sun for residents of Mexico. Still camera 30 pesos, amateur video camera 45 pesos; no tripods or flash permitted. Tues–Sun 9am–7pm. Metro: Auditorio.

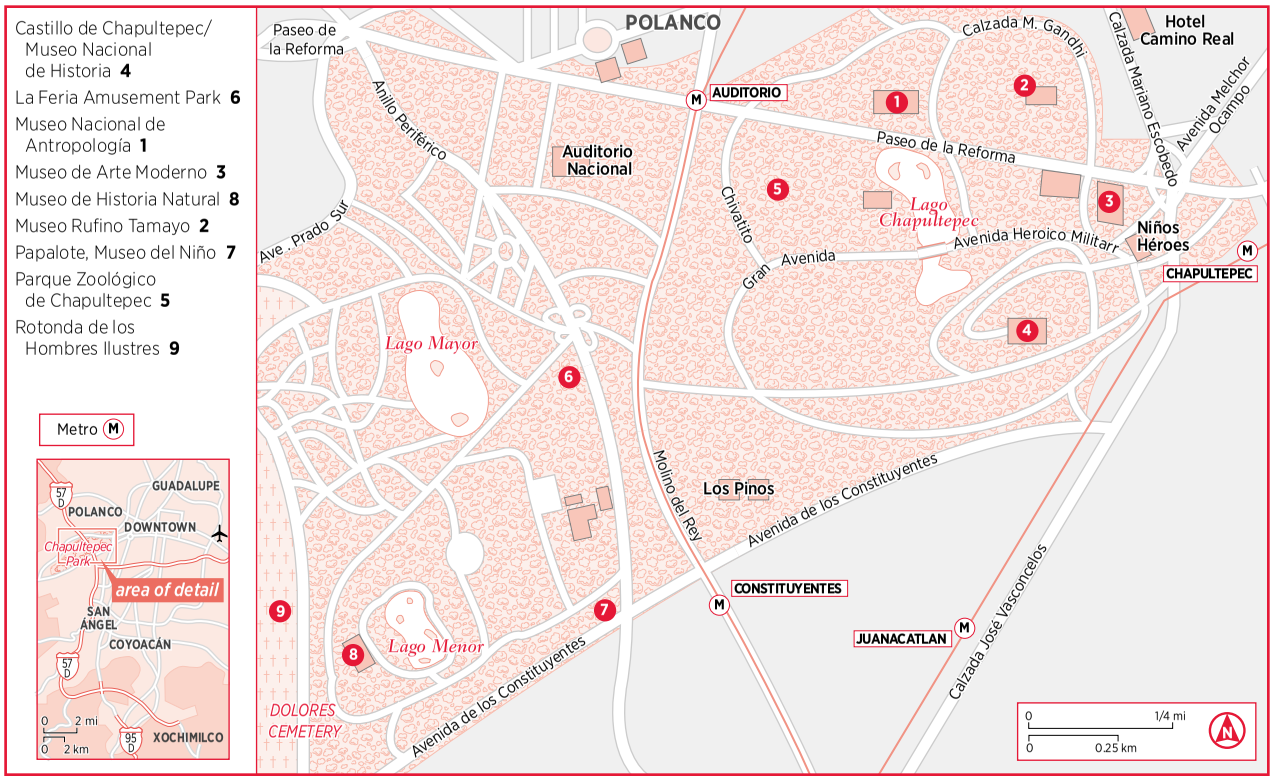
Palacio Nacional and the Diego Rivera Murals ★★ This complex of countless rooms, wide stone stairways, and numerous courtyards adorned with carved brass balconies was once where the president of Mexico worked, and it remains an important site for presidential meetings and events. But it's better known for the fabulous second-floor Diego Rivera murals depicting the history of Mexico. Begun in 1692 on the site of Moctezuma II's "new" palace, this building became the site of Hernán Cortez's home and the residence of colonial viceroys. It has changed much in 300 years, taking on its present form in the late 1920s, when the top floor was added. Just 30 minutes here with an English-speaking guide provides essential background for an understanding of Mexican history. The cost of a guide is negotiable: 150 pesos or less, depending on your bargaining ability.

Enter by the central door, over which hangs the bell rung by Padre Miguel Hidalgo when he proclaimed Mexico's independence from Spain in 1810—the famous *grito.* Each September 15, Mexican Independence Day, the president of Mexico stands on the balcony above the door to echo Hidalgo's cry to the thousands of spectators who fill the *zócalo.* Take the stairs to the Rivera murals, which were painted over a 25-year period. The *Legend of Quetzalcoatl* depicts the famous tale of the feathered serpent bringing a blond-bearded white man to the country. When Cortez arrived, many Aztecs, recalling this legend, believed him to be Quetzalcóatl. Another mural tells of the American Intervention, when American invaders marched into Mexico City during the War of 1847. It was on this occasion that the military cadets of Chapultepec Castle (then a military school) fought bravely to the last man. The most notable of Rivera's murals is the *Great City of Tenochtitlan,* a study of the original settlement in the Valley of Mexico. It showcases an Aztec market scene with the budding city in the background and includes a beautiful representation of Xochiquetzal, goddess of love, with her crown of flowers and tattooed legs.

Diego Rivera, one of Mexico's legendary muralists, left an indelible stamp on Mexico City, his painted political themes affecting the way millions view Mexican history. Additional examples of Rivera's stunning and provocative interpretations are found at the Bellas Artes, the National Preparatory School, the Department of Public Education, the National School of Agriculture at Chapingo, the National Institute of Cardiology, and the Museo Mural Diego Rivera (which houses the mural formerly located in the now-razed Hotel del Prado).

Palacio Nacional, Av. Pino Suárez, facing the *zócalo.* ✆ **55/9158-1259.** See map p. 123. Free admission, but visitor tags required; be prepared to show a form of photo identification. Daily 9am–4:30pm, but expect sporadic closings for government events. Metro: Zócalo.

Templo Mayor and Museo del Templo Mayor ★★★ In 1978, workmen digging on the east side of the Metropolitan Cathedral, next to the Palacio Nacional, unearthed an exquisite Aztec stone of the moon goddess Coyolxauhqui. Major excavations by Mexican archaeologists followed, and they uncovered interior remains of the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Metro M
GUADALUPE
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area of detail
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Paseo de la Reforma
Chivatito
Lago Chapultepec
Avenida Heroico Militarr
Niños Héroes
CHAPULTEPEC
Ave. Prado Sur
Gran Avenida
Lago Mayor
Molino del Rey
Los Pinos
Avenida de los Constituyentes
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Mighty Tenochtitlan

What 16th-century metropolis was home to approximately 200,000 inhabitants, had intricate botanical and zoological gardens filled with thousands of exotic species, and had markets where as many as 40,000 people went to trade a menagerie of goods on a regular basis? London? Nope—there were only 50,000 people living there in 1500. Barcelona? No, sir; the Spaniards had not yet conceived of the concept of botanical gardens. How about Constantinople? Nope. The European soldiers who helped conquer this city said its markets outshone even the Turkish bazaars.

The city in question was called Tenochtitlan, the capital of the mighty Aztec empire. We know the area today as Mexico City.

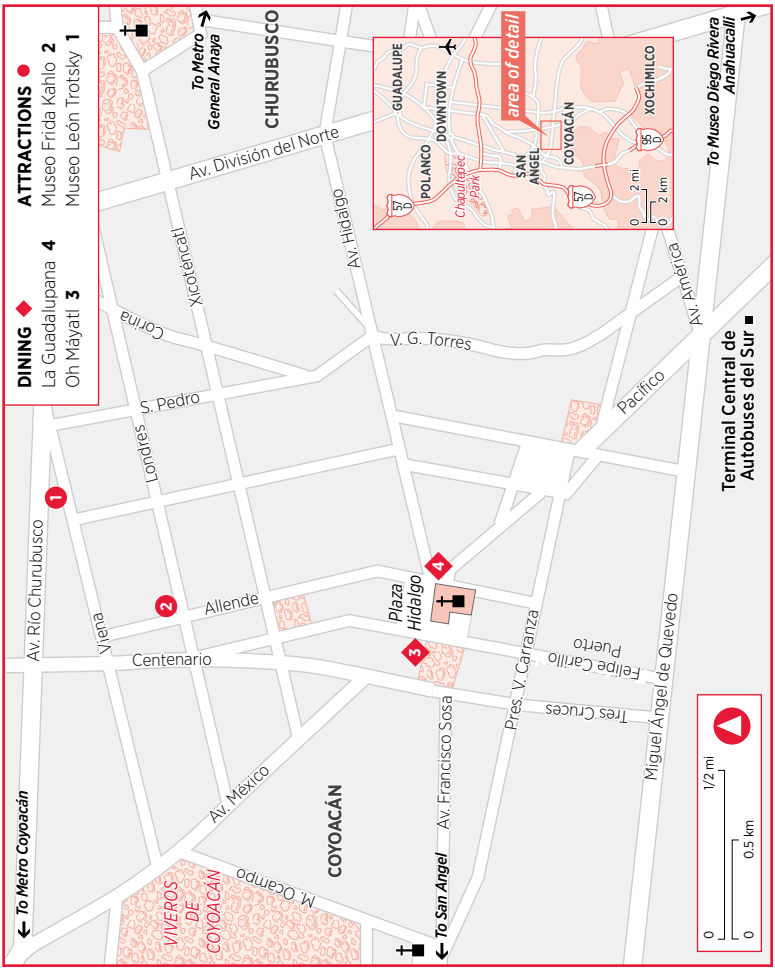
When the Spanish arrived, they must have felt as though they had landed on another planet; the Aztecs had constructed an entire metropolis on the boggy marshes of Lake Texcoco. The city was intersected by a series of causeways, one of which was 8km (5 miles) long and wide enough for eight horsemen abreast to pass through. Up to 50,000 canoes plied through these causeways and corresponding canals, transporting everything from corn to brightly colored fabrics and obsidian blades. The famous Spanish chronicler Bernal Díaz wrote that "with such wonderful sites to gaze on we did not know what to say, or if this was real that we saw before our eyes," in his personal account of the siege of Tenochtitlan in *True Story of the Conquest of New Spain*.

Unfortunately, the Spaniards hadn't traveled thousands of miles just to send home pretty postcards—after repeated attacks, famine, and a smallpox epidemic, Tenochtitlan fell on August 13, 1521, and Cuautéhmoc, the last Aztec emperor, was taken prisoner.

If you'd like to get a better feel for Tenochtitlan, the **Museo de la Ciudad de México** (p. 135) has a fine collection of maps and pictographic representations of the time period, and a few farmers still grow their produce using ancient floating garden methods in **Xochimilco** (p. 141).

Pyramid of Huitzilopochtli, also called the Templo Mayor (Great Temple)—the most important religious structure in the Aztec capital. What you see are the remains of pyramids that were covered by the great pyramid the Spaniards saw upon their arrival in the 16th century.

At the time of the 1521 conquest, the site was the center of religious life for the city of 300,000. No other museum illustrates the variety and splendor of the Aztec Empire the way this one does. All 6,000 pieces came from the relatively small plot of excavated ruins just in front of the museum. Strolling along the walkways built over the site, visitors pass a water-collection conduit constructed during the presidency of Porfirio Díaz (1877–1911), as well as far earlier constructions. Shelters cover the ruins to protect traces of original paint and carving. Note especially the Tzompantli, or Altar of Skulls, a common Aztec and Maya design. Explanatory plaques with building dates are in Spanish.



The Museo del Templo Mayor (Museum of the Great Temple) opened in 1987. To enter it, take the walkway to the large building in the back portion of the site, which contains fabulous artifacts from on-site excavations. Inside the door, a model of Tenochtitlan gives a good idea of the scale of the vast city of the Aztecs. The rooms and exhibits, organized by subject, occupy many levels around a central open space. You'll see some marvelous displays of masks, figurines, tools, jewelry, and other artifacts, including the huge stone wheel of the moon goddess Coyolxauhqui ("she with bells painted upon her face") on the second floor. The goddess ruled the night, the Aztec believed, but died at the dawning of every day, slain and dismembered by her brother, Huitzilopochtli, the sun god.

Seminario 8, off the *zócalo.* ✆ **55/5542-4943.** Fax 55/5542-1717. www.templomayor.inah.gob.mx. See map p. 123. Admission to museum and ruins 57 pesos; free Sun. Video camera permit 35 pesos; no flash photos. Tues–Sun 9am–5pm. Metro: Zócalo.

ARCHITECTURAL HIGHLIGHTS

Casa de los Azulejos This "House of Tiles" is one of Mexico City's most precious colonial gems and popular meeting places. Covered in gorgeous blue-and-white tiles, it dates from the end of the 1500s, when it was built for the count of the Valley of Orizaba. According to the oft-told story, during the count's defiant youth, his father proclaimed, "You will never build a house of tiles." A tiled house was a sign of success, and the father was sure his son would amount to nothing. So when success came, the young count covered his house in tiles, a fine example of Puebla craftsmanship. The tiled murals in the covered courtyard, where the restaurant is located, were restored a few years back. Tile craftsmen from Saudi Arabia were brought in to ensure that the technique was true to the original 16th-century work. You can stroll through to admire the interior. Pause to see the Orozco mural, *Omniscience,* on the landing leading to the second floor (where the restrooms are). There's a casual but beautiful Sanborn's Mexican restaurant in the covered patio.

Madero 4, Centro Histórico. ✆ **55/5512-7824.** See map p. 125. Free admission. Daily 7am–1am. Metro: Bellas Artes.

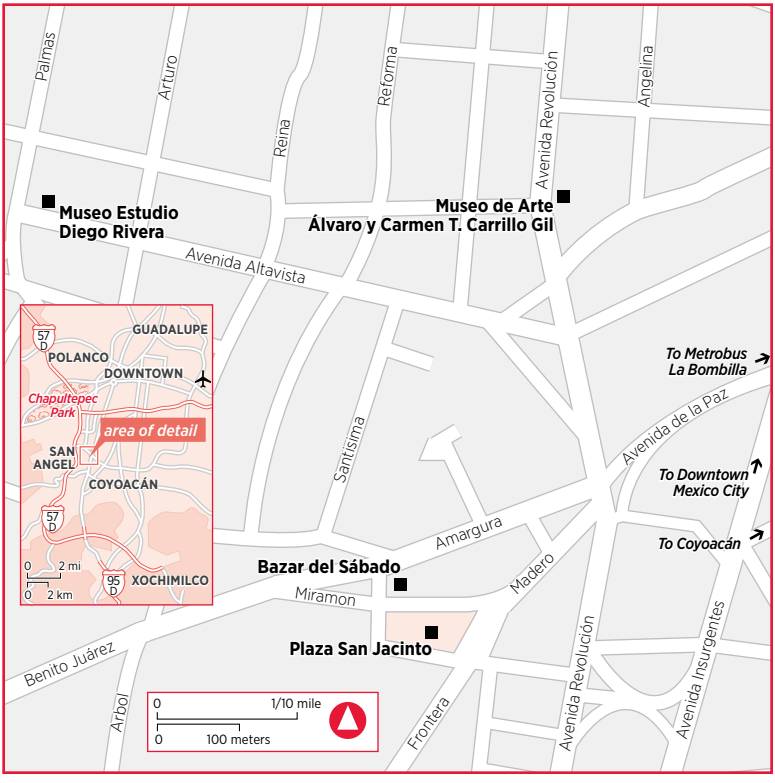
Gran Hotel Ciudad de México Originally a department store, the Gran Hotel boasts one of the most splendid interiors of any downtown building. Step inside to see the lavish lobby, with gilded open elevators on both sides, topped with a breathtaking 1908 stained-glass canopy by Jacques Graber.

On the fourth floor, overlooking the *zócalo,* El Mirador restaurant makes a great stop for a coffee or drink with a view.

Av. 16 de Septiembre 82 at 5 de Febrero. ✆ **55/1083-7700.** See map p. 123. Free admission to view the lobby, except on Sun, when the hotel is not open to nonguests. Metro: Zócalo.

Palacio de Bellas Artes ★★ Opulent and dramatic, the Bellas Artes is the masterpiece of theaters in this architecturally rich city. The exterior is early-20th-century Art Nouveau, built during the Porfiriato and covered in Italian Carrara marble. Inside it's completely 1930s Art Deco. Since construction began in 1904, the theater (which opened in 1934) has sunk some 4m (13 ft.) into the soft belly of Lake Texcoco. The Palacio is the work of several masters: Italian architect Adamo Boari, who made the original plans; Antonio Muñoz and Federico Mariscal, who modified his plans considerably; and Mexican painter Gerardo Murillo ("Doctor Atl"), who designed the fabulous Art Nouveau glass curtain that was constructed by Louis Comfort Tiffany in the Tiffany Studios of New York. Made from nearly a million iridescent pieces of colored glass, the curtain portrays the Valley of Mexico, with its two great volcanoes. You can see the curtain before important performances at the theater and on Sunday mornings.

In addition to being a concert hall, the theater houses permanent and traveling art shows. On the third level are famous murals by Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros. The controversial Rivera mural *Man in Control of His Universe* was commissioned in 1933 for Rockefeller Center in New York City. He completed the work there just as you see it: A giant vacuum sucks up the riches of the Earth to feed the factories of callous, card-playing, hard-drinking white capitalist thugs—John D. Rockefeller himself among them—while all races of noble workers of the Earth rally behind the red flag of socialism and its standard-bearer, Lenin. Needless to say, the Rockefellers weren't so keen on the



new purchase. Much to their discredit, they had it painted over and destroyed. Rivera duplicated the mural here as *Man at the Crossing of the Ways,* to preserve it. For information on tickets to performances of the **Ballet Folklórico,** see "Mexico City After Dark," later in this chapter.

Warning: Avoid taxis parked in front of the Bellas Artes Theater, and call for a radio taxi instead.

Calle López Peralta, east end of La Alameda, Centro Histórico. ✆ **55/5512-2593,** ext. 152. www.bellasartes.gob.mx. See map p. 125. Free admission to view building when performances are not in progress; museum 35 pesos. Tues–Sun 10am–5:30pm. Metro: Bellas Artes.

Palacio de Minería Built in the 1800s, this "mining palace" is one of architect Manuel Tolsá's finest works—considered a masterpiece of Latin American neoclassicism—and one of the capital's handsomest buildings. Formerly the school of mining, it's occasionally used today for concerts and cultural events (and, in those cases, the patio is often locked off). When it's open, step inside for a look at the patios and fabulous stonework. Guided tours are available.

Tacuba 5, Centro Histórico. ✆ **55/5623-2981.** www.palaciomineria.unam.mx. See map p. 125. Admission 10 pesos; guided tour 25 pesos. Wed–Sun 10am–6pm. Metro: Bellas Artes.

A CEMETERY

Rotonda de los Hombres Ilustres The din of traffic recedes in the serene resting place where Mexico's military, political, and artistic elite are buried. It's more like an outdoor monument museum than a cemetery; the stone markers stand in a double circle around an eternal flame. A stroll here is a trip through who's who in Mexican history. Among the famous buried here are the artists Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco, and Gerardo Murillo; presidents Sebastian Lerdo de Tejada, Valentín Gómez Farías, and Plutarco Calles; musicians Jaime Nunó (author of the Mexican national anthem), Juventino Rosas, and Agustín Lara; and outstanding citizens such as the philanthropist and writer Carlos Pellicer. Stop in the building at the entrance, and the guard will give you a map with a list (in Spanish and English) of those buried here, which includes biographical information.

Constituyentes and Av. Civil Dolores, Dolores Cemetery, Chapultepec Park. See map p. 127. Free admission. Daily 6am–6pm. Metro: Constituyentes.

CHURCHES

Catedral Metropolitana ★★★ The impressive, towering cathedral, begun in 1567 and finished in 1788, blends baroque, neoclassical, and Mexican *churrigueresque* architecture. As you look around the cathedral and the Sagrario (chapel) next to it, note how the building has sunk into the soft lake bottom beneath. The base of the facade is far from level and straight, and when one considers the weight of the immense towers—127,000 tons—it's no surprise. Scaffolding has become almost a part of the structure, in place to stabilize the building. However, much to the credit of Mexico City and its preservation efforts, the Catedral Metropolitana came off the World Monuments Fund's list of 100 Most Endangered Sites in 2000, as a result of an extensive reconstruction of the building's foundation.

In Mexico, the sacred ground of one religion often becomes the sacred ground of its successor. Cortez and his Spanish missionaries converted the Aztec, tore down their temples, and used much of the stone to construct a church on the spots of the temples that preceded it. The church they built was pulled down in 1628 while the present Metropolitan Cathedral was under construction. The building today has 5 naves and 14 chapels. As you wander past the small chapels, you may hear guides describing some of the cathedral's outstanding features: the tomb of Agustín Iturbide, placed here in 1838; a painting attributed to the Spanish artist Bartolomé Esteban Murillo; and the fact that the stone holy-water fonts ring like metal when tapped with a coin. Like many huge churches, it has catacombs underneath. The much-older-looking church next to the cathedral is the chapel known as the Sagrario, another tour de force of Mexican baroque architecture built in the mid-1700s.

The Metropolitan Cathedral contains many prized works of colonial art in a variety of artistic styles. Jerónimo de Balbas built and carved the Altar de los Reyes (Altar of Kings) and the Altar del Perdón (Altar of Forgiveness) in 1737. For a small donation, a tour of the towers is available (sign up inside the cathedral near the entrance).

As you walk around the outside of the cathedral, you will notice a reminder of medieval trade life. The west side is the gathering place of carpenters, plasterers, plumbers, painters, and electricians who have no shops. Craftspeople display the tools of their trades, sometimes along with pictures of their work. In front of the cathedral, you can buy crystals, gemstones, and herbs, believed to provide special qualities of protection and cure from various afflictions. Visitors are asked not to tour the cathedral during Mass.

The *zócalo,* on Cinco de Mayo, Centro Histórico. See map p. 123. Free admission. Daily 8am–7pm. Metro: Zócalo.

Convent of San Bernardino de Siena This 16th-century building is noted for its flower petals carved in stone—a signature of the Indians who did most of the work—on 16th-century *retablos* (painted boards), including one of three such altarpieces in the country that were created by pre-Hispanic Indians and that has miraculously been preserved for more than 400 years; most were destroyed by the Spaniards during the conquest and conversion to Christianity. The last Indian governor of Xochimilco, Apoxquiyohuatzin, is buried here. Inside and to the right, the skull over the font is from a pre-Hispanic skull rack, signifying an Indian-Christian mixture of the concept of life and death. Eight lateral *retablos* date from the 16th to the 18th centuries. The fabulous gilt main altar, also from the 16th century, is like an open book, with sculpture and religious paintings. A profusion of cherubic angels decorates columns and borders. Some of the altar paintings are attributed to Baltasar Echave Orio the Elder. Over the altar, above the figure of Christ, is San Bernardino with the *caciques* (local authorities) dressed in clothing with Indian elements, and without shoes.

Pino and Hidalgo (facing the main square), Xochimilco. See map p. 89. Free admission. Daily 8am–8pm. *Tren ligero* (light train): Xochimilco.

HISTORIC BUILDINGS & MONUMENTS

Chapultepec Park & Polanco

Castillo de Chapultepec/Museo Nacional de Historia This site has been occupied by a fortress since the days of the Aztec, although the present palace wasn't built until 1784. When open, the castle offered a beautiful view of Mexico City. During the French occupation of the 1860s, Empress Carlota (who designed the lovely garden surrounding the palace) could sit up in bed and watch her husband, Maximilian, proceeding down Reforma on his way to work. Later this was the official home of Mexico's president until 1939. In 2004, archaeologists discovered an ancient Teotihuacán settlement behind the landmark. They are currently working on excavations, which are expected to demonstrate that the Teotihuacán culture spread and influenced the area around Mexico City earlier than previously thought, sometime between A.D. 300 and 600.

Chapultepec Park and Polanco. ✆ **55/5061-9217.** www.castillodechapultepec.inah.gob.mx. See map p. 127. Admission 51 pesos; free Sun. Tues–Sun 9am–5pm. Metro: Chapultepec.

Zona Rosa & Surrounding Areas

Monumento a los Héroes de la Independencia ★ Without a doubt, the Monument to the Heroes of Independence is the most noted of Mexico City's exceptional public sculptures and monuments. The "Angel" is both a landmark and homage to those who lost their lives fighting for independence. It's also a central stage—along with the *zócalo*—for many of Mexico City's celebrations and mass demonstrations. Set upon a tall marble shaft, the golden angel is an important and easily discerned guidepost for travelers. A creation of Antonio Rivas Mercado, the 7m-high (23-ft.) gold-plated bronze angel, cast in Florence, Italy, was completed in 1906 at a cost of $2.5 million. With its base of marble and Italian granite, the monument's total height is 45m (148 ft.). It was renovated in 2006.

Intersection of Paseo de la Reforma, Florencia, and Río Tiber, Reforma/Zona Rosa. See map p. 99. Metro: Sevilla.

Centro Histórico & Surrounding Areas

Monumento a la Revolución and Museo Nacional de la Revolución The Art Deco Monument to the Revolution, in the large **Plaza de la República,** has a curious history. The government of Porfirio Díaz, who was perennially "reelected" president of

Finds Free Sunday Concerts

Every Sunday, concerts organized by Mexico City's Cultural Institute take place at the *zócalo,* generally around 6pm. They feature a changing array of traditional and classical Mexican talent—and can draw crowds of 5,000 or more. For information and listings of upcoming events, visit the Mexico City website **www.mexicocity.gob.mx**. Listings also appear in *Tiempo Libre* magazine.

Mexico, began construction of what was intended to be a new legislative chamber. However, only the dome was raised by the time the Mexican Revolution (1910) put an end to his plans, not to mention his dictatorship. In the 1930s, after the revolutionary turmoil had died down, the dome was finished as a monument. The remains of two revolutionary presidents, Francisco Madero and Venustiano Carranza, were entombed in two of its pillars, and it was dedicated to the Revolution. Later, presidents Plutarco Elías Calles and Lázaro Cárdenas were also buried there. (***Note:*** At the time of his death, Calles was buried at La Rotonda de los Hombres Ilustres. His body was then moved to the Monumento a la Revolución by an order of President Díaz Ordaz in 1969. A plaque honoring him still remains at the Rotunda, but his actual body is at the Monumento.)

Beneath the Monument to the Revolution is the **Museo Nacional de la Revolución** (enter directly across from the Frontón). It chronicles the tumultuous years from 1867 to 1917—when the present constitution was signed—in excellent exhibits of documents, newspaper stories, photographs, drawings, clothing, costumes, uniforms, weapons, and furnishings.

Av. Juárez and La Fragua, Plaza de la República s/n, Col. Tabacalera beneath the Monumento a la Revolución. ✆ **55/5566-1902.** See map p. 99. Admission 20 pesos; free Sun. Tues–Sun 9am–5pm. From the Colón Monument on Reforma, walk 2 blocks north on I. Ramírez; the monument looms ahead. Metro: Revolución.

Secretaría de Educación Pública Originally built in 1922 as a convent, this building became the home of the Secretary of Public Education in 1922 and was decorated with a great series of more than 200 Diego Rivera murals, dating from 1923 and 1928, that cover over 1,500 sq. m (16,146 sq. ft.) of wall space. Other artists did a panel here and there, but the Rivera murals are the most outstanding.

República de Argentina 28, near República de Brasil. ✆ **55/5328-1097.** See map p. 123. www.sep.gob.mx. Free admission. Mon–Fri 9am–5pm. Metro: Allende.

Suprema Corte de Justicia The Supreme Court of Justice, built between 1935 and 1941, is the highest court in the country. Inside, on the main staircase and its landings, are Orozco murals depicting a theme of justice.

Pino Suárez and Corregidora, Centro Histórico. No phone. See map p. 123. Free admission. Mon–Fri 9am–5:30pm. Metro: Zócalo.

OTHER MUSEUMS & GALLERIES

Chapultepec Park & Polanco

Museo de Arte Moderno ★ The Museum of Modern Art is known for having the best permanent exhibition of painters and sculptors from the modern Mexican art movement. It also features some of the most important temporary exhibitions of national and

international modern art in the world. Representing the Mexican muralist movement are significant works by the three greats: Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. The main building is a round, two-story structure with a central staircase. Two of the museum's four spaces showcase the permanent collection, which also contains works by Mexico's other modern masters—Tamayo, José Luis Cuevas, Alejandro Colunga, Francisco Toledo, and Vladamir Cora. The remaining two spaces house visiting exhibitions. The museum's surrounding gardens exhibit large-scale public sculptures.

Chapultepec Park. ✆ **55/5553-6233.** www.bellasartes.gob.mx. See map p. 127. Admission 20 pesos; discounts for students and teachers with ID; free Sun. Tues–Sun 10am–5:30pm. Metro: Chapultepec.

Museo de Historia Natural de la Ciudad de Mexico (Kids) The 10 interconnecting domes that form the Museum of Natural History contain stuffed and preserved animals and birds; tableaux of different natural environments with the appropriate wildlife; exhibits on geology, astronomy, biology, and the origin of life; and more. It's a fascinating place for anyone with the slightest curiosity about nature, and it's totally absorbing for youngsters.

Chapultepec Park, Section 2. ✆ **55/5516-2848.** See map p. 127. Admission 20 pesos; free Tues. Tues–Sun 10am–5pm. Metro: Constituyentes.

Museo Rufino Tamayo ★ Oaxaca-born painter Rufino Tamayo not only contributed a great deal to modern Mexican painting, but also collected pre-Hispanic, Mexican, and foreign works, including pieces by Willem de Kooning, Andy Warhol, Salvador Dalí, and René Magritte. Tamayo's pre-Hispanic collection is in Oaxaca, but here you can see a number of his works and the remainder of his collection (unless a special exhibit has temporarily displaced them). A special *noche de jazz* (jazz evening), with a private tour of the museum followed by a small jazz concert, is offered one Wednesday each month; check the website for scheduling.

Paseo de la Reforma s/n (corner of Gandhi), Chapultepec Park. ✆ **55/5286-6519.** www.museotamayo.org. See map p. 127. Admission 15 pesos; free Sun. Tues–Sun 10am–6pm. Metro: Chapultepec or Auditorio.

Papalote, Museo del Niño (Kids) The Building of the Pyramids at this interactive children's museum holds most of the more than 350 exhibits, while two films alternate (10 shows daily) in the IMAX building. There's virtually nothing here that children can't touch; once they discover this, they'll want to stay a long time. As they say, adults must be accompanied by children, except on Thursday, when the museum is open until 11pm to give "big kids" a chance to enjoy it themselves. It's probably been a while since you had a chance to play "hide and seek," run around "musical chairs," crawl through a narrow pitch-black tunnel, or draw animal representations of your friends, but this return to the past is a lot of fun. The patio restaurant offers live jazz during the Thursday adults' night.

Av. de los Constituyentes 268, Chapultepec Park, Section 2. ✆ **55/5237-1700** or 5237-1773. www.papalote.org.mx. See map p. 127. Admission to museum 99 pesos adults, 95 pesos children ages 2–11; admission to museum and IMAX show 110 pesos adults, 100 pesos children. Mon–Wed and Fri 9am–6pm; Thurs 9am–11pm; Sat–Sun and holidays 10am–7pm. Metro: Constituyentes.

Centro Histórico & Surrounding Areas

Museo de la Ciudad de México Before you enter the Museum of Mexico City, go to the corner of República del Salvador and look at the enormous stone serpent head, a corner support at the building's base. The stone was once part of an Aztec pyramid. At the entrance, a stone doorway opens to the courtyard of this mansion, built in 1778 as the House of the Counts of Santiago de Calimaya. This classic building became the

 Museum of the City of Mexico in 1964; it's a must for anyone interested in the country's past. Dealing solely with the Mexico Valley, where the first people arrived around 8000 B.C., the museum contains some fine maps, pictographic presentations of the initial settlements, outlines of the social organization as it developed, and models of several famous buildings. Upstairs is the studio of Mexican Impressionist Joaquín Clausell (1866–1935). There's a good bookstore to the left after you enter.

Pino Suárez 30, Centro Histórico. ✆ **55/5542-0487.** www.cultura.df.gob.mx. See map p. 123. Admission 20 pesos. Tues–Sun 10am–5pm. Metro: Zócalo.

Museo Franz Mayer One of the capital's foremost museums, the Franz Mayer Museum opened in 1986 in a beautifully restored 16th-century building on Plaza de la Santa Veracruz on the north side of La Alameda. The extraordinary 10,000-piece collection of antiques, mostly Mexican objects from the 16th through 19th centuries, was amassed by one man: Franz Mayer. A German immigrant, he adopted Mexico as his home in 1905 and grew rich here. Before his death in 1975, Mayer bequeathed the collection to the country and arranged for its permanent display through a trust with the Banco Nacional. The pieces, mostly utilitarian objects (as opposed to pure art objects), include inlaid and richly carved furniture; an enormous collection of Talavera pottery; gold and silver religious pieces; sculptures; tapestries; rare watches and clocks (the oldest is a 1680 lantern clock); wrought iron; old-master paintings from Europe and Mexico; and 770 *Don Quixote* volumes, many of which are rare editions or typographically unique. There's so much here that it may take two visits to absorb it all. In the central courtyard, a pleasant cafe serves coffee and light snacks.

Av. Hidalgo 45, next to Plaza Santa Veracruz, Col. Guerrero. ✆ **55/5518-2266.** www.franzmayer.org.mx. See map p. 125. Admission 45 pesos; free Tues. Tues–Sun 10am–5pm (Wed until 7pm). Guided tours by appointment Mon–Sat 10:30am, 11:30am, and 12:30pm. Metro: Hidalgo or Bellas Artes.

Museo José Luis Cuevas José Luis Cuevas is one of Mexico's leading contemporary artists, though early in his career, he was considered the *enfant terrible* of Mexican plastic arts. To this day, he can arouse controversy and is known to draw throngs of women wherever he appears. The center that bears his name opened in 1992 and is filled with about 1,000 paintings, drawings, and sculptures donated by Cuevas, including many of his own. Don't miss the Erotic Room, a permanent exhibit of his erotic paintings, photographs, and erotic objects from the artist's personal collection. Housed in the 16th-century Convento de Santa Inés, the museum includes many works by other contemporary Latin American artists, as well as a large collection of Picassos.

Calle Academia 13, 2 blocks northeast of the Palacio Nacional and across from the Academia de San Carlos, Centro Histórico. ✆ **55/5542-6198.** www.museojoseluiscuevas.com.mx. See map p. 123. Admission 20 pesos. Tues–Sun 10am–6pm. Metro: Zócalo.

Museo Mural Diego Rivera This museum houses Diego Rivera's famous mural *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park,* which was painted on a wall of the Hotel Prado in 1947. The hotel was demolished after the 1985 earthquake, but the precious mural, perhaps the best known of Rivera's works, was saved and transferred to its new location in 1986. The huge picture, 15m long and 4m high (49×13 ft.), chronicles the history of the park from the time of Cortez onward. Portrayed in the mural are numerous historical figures. More or less from left to right, but not in chronological order, they include: Cortez; a heretic suffering under the Spanish Inquisition; Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a brilliant, progressive woman who became a nun to continue her scholarly pursuits; Benito Juárez, seen putting forth the laws of Mexico's great Reforma; the

conservative Gen. Antonio López de Santa Anna, handing the keys to Mexico to the invading American Gen. Winfield Scott; Emperor Maximilian and Empress Carlota; José Martí, the Cuban revolutionary; Death, with the plumed serpent (Quetzalcóatl) entwined about his neck; Gen. Porfirio Díaz, great with age and medals, asleep; a police officer keeping La Alameda free of "riffraff" by ordering a poor family out of the elitists' park; and Francisco Madero, the martyred democratic president who caused the downfall of Díaz, and whose betrayal and alleged murder by Gen. Victoriano Huerta (pictured on the right) resulted in years of civil turmoil.

Plaza de la Solidaridad (at Balderas and Colón), Centro Histórico–Alameda. ✆ **55/5512-0754.** See map p. 125. Admission 15 pesos; free Sun. Tues–Sun 10am–6pm. Metro: Hidalgo.

Museo Nacional de Arte (Munal) The National Art Museum's palacelike building, designed by Italian architect Silvio Contri and completed in 1911—a legacy of Europe-loving Porfirio Díaz's era—was built to house the government's Offices of Communications and Public Works. Díaz occupied the opulent second-floor salon, where he welcomed visiting dignitaries. The National Museum of Art took over the building in 1982. Wander through the immense rooms with polished wooden floors as you view the wealth of paintings showing Mexico's art development, primarily covering the period from 1810 to 1950. There's a nice cafe on the second floor.

Tacuba 8, Centro Histórico. ✆ **55/5130-3400,** -3410. Fax 55/5130-3401. www.munal.com.mx. See map p. 125. Admission 30 pesos; free Sun. Tues–Sun 10:30am–5:30pm. Metro: Allende.

Museo Nacional de la Estampa *Estampa* means "engraving" or "printing," and this museum is devoted to understanding and preserving the graphic arts. The beautifully restored 16th-century building holds both permanent and changing exhibits. Displays include those from pre-Hispanic times, when clay seals were used for designs on fabrics, ceramics, and other surfaces. But the most famous works here are probably those of José Guadalupe Posada, Mexico's famous printmaker, who poked fun at death and politicians through his skeleton figure drawings. If your interest in this subject is deep, ask to see the video programs on graphic techniques—woodcuts, lithography, etchings, and the like.

Av. Hidalgo 39 (next door to the Museo Franz Mayer), Centro Histórico–Alameda. ✆ **55/5510-4905.** See map p. 125. Admission 10 pesos; free Sun. Tues–Sun 10am–6pm. Metro: Bellas Artes.

Museo Nacional de San Carlos The San Carlos Museum exhibits 15th- to 19th-century European paintings. The museum was once the Academy of San Carlos, an art school that some of the country's great painters—Rivera and Orozco among them—attended. Architect Manuel Tolsá built the beautiful mansion in the early 1800s; it was later the home of the Marqués de Buenavista. The rooms on the 1st and 2nd floors hold some of Mexico's best paintings, by both Mexican and European artists. Another gallery holds prints and engravings. In the mansion's elliptical court are displays of 19th-century Mexican statuary and busts by Manuel Vilar and his pupils, and off to one side is a pretty garden court shaded by rubber trees.

Puente de Alvarado 50 (at Arizpe). ✆ **55/5566-8085.** www.mnsancarlos.com. Fax 55/5535-1256. See map p. 99. Admission 25 pesos; free Sun. Wed–Mon 10am–6pm. Walk 5½ blocks west of La Alameda (2½ blocks west of San Fernando Plaza). Metro: Revolución.

Southern Neighborhoods

Museo Arqueológico de Xochimilco The building dates from 1904, when it was the pump house for the springs. It houses artifacts from the area, many of them found when residents built their homes. These include 10,000-year-old mammoth bones;

 figures dating from the Teotihuacán period, including representations of Tlaloc (god of water and life), Ehecatl (god of the wind), Xipe Totec (god of renewal and of plants), and Huehueteotl (god of fire); polychrome pottery; carved abalone; and tombs showing funerary practices. One unique piece is a clay figure of a child holding a bouquet of flowers.

Av. Tenochtitlan and Calle La Planta, Santa Cruz Acalpixcan. ✆/fax **55/2157-1757.** www.xochimilco.df.gob.mx. Free admission. Tues–Sun 10am–5pm. From Xochimilco (see "Neighborhoods in Brief," earlier in this chapter), take a cab or microbus to Tulyehualco.

Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil (MACG) Sometimes called the Museo de la Esquina (Corner Museum)—it's at a major intersection on Avenida de la Revolución—this modern gallery features a collection that includes rooms dedicated to the works of José Clemente Orozco (1883–1949), Diego Rivera (1886–1957), David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1974), and other Mexican painters. The museum is not accessible by Metro.

Revolución 1608 (at Desierto de los Leónes), Col. San Angel. ✆ **55/5550-6260.** www.museodeartecarrillogil.com. See map p. 131. Admission 15 pesos; free Sun. Tues–Sun 10am–6pm.

Museo Diego Rivera Anahuacalli ★ Not to be confused with the Museo Estudio Diego Rivera (see below) near the San Angel Inn, this is probably the most unusual museum in the city. Designed by Rivera before his death in 1957, it's devoted to his works as well as his extensive collection of pre-Columbian art. With over 52,000 pieces, it is the largest private collection displayed in Mexico. Constructed of *pedregal* (the lava rock in which the area abounds), it resembles Maya and Aztec architecture. Anahuacalli means "House of Mexico"; *Anahuac* was the old name for the ancient Valley of Mexico.

In front of the museum is a reproduction of a Toltec ball court, and the entrance to the museum is a coffin-shaped door. Twenty-three display rooms are arranged in chronological order, with thousands of pieces stashed on the shelves, tucked away in corners, and peeking out of glass cases.

Upstairs, in a replica of Rivera's studio, you'll find the original sketches for some of his murals and two in-progress canvases. There's a photo of his first sketch (of a train), done at the age of 3, plus a color photograph of him at work later in life. Rivera (1886–1957) studied in Europe for 15 years and spent much of his life as a devoted Marxist. Yet he came through political scrapes and personal tragedies with no apparent diminution of creative energy. A plaque in the museum proclaims him "a man of genius who is among the greatest painters of all time." This is one of the most popular places in Mexico to come for Day of the Dead on November 2.

Calle del Museo 150, Col. San Pablo Tepetlapa. ✆ **55/5617-3797.** www.anahuacallimuseo.org. See map p. 89. Admission 20 pesos. Tues–Sun 10am–5pm. Metro: Taxqueña; then *tren ligero* (light train) to Xotepingo; go west on Xotepingo (Museo) 3 short blocks; cross División del Norte and go another 6 blocks.

Museo Dolores Olmedo Patiño ★ Art collector and philanthropist Olmedo left her former home, the grand Hacienda La Noria, as a museum featuring the works of her friend Diego Rivera. At least 137 of his works are displayed here, including his portrait of Olmedo, 25 paintings of Frida Kahlo, and 37 creations of Angelina Beloff (Rivera's first wife), many of them drawings and engravings. Among the notable Kahlo works here is her famed *The Broken Column,* which is considered the artistic embodiment of her physical suffering, the result of a trolley accident that pierced her spine when she was young. Besides the paintings, there are fine pre-Hispanic pieces on display, colonial furniture and other hacienda artifacts, and a collection of folk art. An excellent gift shop and a cafeteria are on the premises. Olmedo was the executor of both the Rivera and Kahlo

estates, a close friend and former lover of Diego's, and a rival to Frida. Olmedo died in 2002, recognized as one of the most astute collectors of contemporary Mexican art.

Av. México 5843, Col. La Noria, Xochimilco. ✆ **55/5555-1016,** -0891. www.museodoloresolmedo.org.mx. See map p. 89. Admission 55 pesos, free on Tues. Tues–Sun 10am–6pm. Metro: Taxqueña; then *tren ligero* (light train) to Xochimilco. Get off at the La Noria station.

Museo Estudio Diego Rivera Here, in the studio designed and built by Juan O'Gorman in 1928, Rivera drew sketches for his wonderful murals and painted smaller works. He died here in 1957. Now a museum, the Rivera studio holds some of the artist's personal effects and mementos, as well as changing exhibits relating to his life and work. (Don't confuse Rivera's studio with his museum, the Anahuacalli; see above.) The museum is not accessible by Metro.

Calle Diego Rivera and Av. Altavista (across from San Angel Inn), Col. San Angel. ✆ **55/5616-0996.** See map p. 131. Admission 55 pesos; free Sun. Tues–Sun 10am–6pm. By taxi, go up Insurgentes Sur to Altavista and make a left.

Museo León Trotsky During Lenin's last days, Stalin and Trotsky fought a silent battle for leadership of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union. Trotsky stuck to ideology, while Stalin took control of the party mechanism. Stalin won, and Trotsky was exiled to continue his ideological struggle elsewhere. Invited by Diego Rivera, an ardent admirer of his work, he settled here on the outskirts of Mexico City to continue his writings on political topics and communist ideology.

His ideas clashed with those of Stalin in many respects, and Stalin, wanting no opposition or dissension in the world communist ranks, set out to have Trotsky assassinated. A first attempt failed, but it served as a warning to Trotsky; his wife, Natalia; and their household. The house became a veritable fortress, with watchtowers, thick steel doors, and round-the-clock guards, several of whom were Americans who sympathized with Trotsky's philosophies. Finally, a man thought to have been paid, cajoled, or blackmailed by Stalin, directly or indirectly, was able to gain admittance to the house by posing as a friend of Trotsky's and a believer of his political views. On August 20, 1940, he put an ice pick into the philosopher's head. The assailant was caught, and Trotsky died of his wounds shortly afterward. Because Trotsky and Rivera had previously had a falling-out—Trotsky was having an affair with Rivera's wife, Frida Kahlo—Rivera was a suspect for a short time.

You can visit Natalia's study, the communal dining room, and Trotsky's study—with worksheets, newspaper clippings, books, and cylindrical wax dictating records still spread around—as well as the fortresslike bedroom. Some of the walls bear the bullet holes left from the first attempt on his life. Trotsky's tomb, designed by Juan O'Gorman, is in the garden. You can recognize this house by the brick riflemen's watchtowers on top of the high stone walls.

Av. Río Churubusco 410 (btw. Gómez Farías and Morelos), Col. Del Carmen Coyoacán. ✆ **55/5658-8732** or 5554-0687. www.museocasadeleontrotsky.blogspot.com. See map p. 129. Admission 35 pesos. Tues–Sun 10am–5pm. Metro: Coyoacán. From Plaza Hidalgo, go east on Hidalgo 3 blocks to Morelos, then north 8 blocks to Churubusco; the house is on the left.

OUTDOOR ART/PLAZAS

Plaza de las Tres Culturas Three cultures converge here: Aztec, Spanish, and contemporary Mexican. Surrounded by modern office and apartment buildings are large remains of the **Aztec city of Tlatelolco,** site of the last battle of the conquest of Mexico.

Off to one side is the **Church of Santiago.** During the Aztec Empire, Tlatelolco was on the edge of Lake Texcoco, linked to the Aztec capital by a causeway. Bernal Díaz de Castillo, in his *True Story of the Conquest of New Spain,* described the roar from the dazzling market there, and the incredible scene after the last battle of the conquest in Tlatelolco on August 13, 1521—the dead bodies were piled so deep that walking there was impossible. That night determined the fate of the country and completed the Spanish takeover of Mexico. It was also here, in October 1968, that government troops fired on thousands of protesters who filled the square, killing hundreds.

View the pyramidal remains from raised walkways over the site. The church, off to one side, was built in the 16th century entirely of volcanic stone. The interior has been tastefully restored, preserving little patches of fresco in stark-white plaster walls, with a few deep-blue stained-glass windows and an unadorned stone altar. Sunday is a good day to combine a visit here with one to the Lagunilla street market (see "Shopping," below), which is within walking distance, south across Reforma.

Lázaro Cárdenas and Flores Magón, Centro Histórico. Metro: Tlatelolco.

Plaza de Santo Domingo Finds This fascinating plaza—a wonderful slice of Mexican life—has arcades on one side, a Dominican church on another. A statue of the Corregidora of Querétaro, Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez, dominates the plaza. The plaza is best known for the scribes who compose and type letters for clients unable to do so. Years ago, it was full of professional writers clacking away on typewriters, and a few still ply their trade on ancient electric typewriters among a proliferation of small print shops and presses. Emperor Cuauhtémoc's palace once occupied this land, before Dominicans built their monastery here.

Bordered by República de Venezuela, República de Brasil, República de Cuba, and Palma, Centro Histórico. See map p. 123. Metro: Tacuba.

Zócalo ★★ Every Spanish colonial city in North America was laid out according to a textbook plan, with a plaza at the center surrounded by a church, government buildings, and military headquarters. Because Mexico City was the capital of New Spain, its *zócalo* is one of the grandest, graced on all sides by stately 17th-century buildings. The Plaza de la Constitución, as this square is officially called, is also one of the three biggest public squares in the world.

Zócalo actually means "pedestal" or "plinth." A grand monument to Mexico's independence was planned and the pedestal built, but the project was never completed. Nevertheless, the pedestal became a landmark for visitors, and soon everyone was calling the square the *zócalo,* even after the pedestal was removed. The square covers almost 4 hectares (10 acres) and is bounded on the north by Cinco de Mayo, on the east by Pino Suárez, on the south by 16 de Septiembre, and on the west by Nacional Monte de Piedad. The downtown district—especially north of the Templo Mayor, one of the oldest archaeological sites in the city—is currently undergoing an important restoration project that is renewing much of its colonial charm. Occupying the entire east side of the *zócalo* is the majestic red *tezontle*-stone Palacio Nacional (p. 126), seat of the Mexican national government, and on the northern border is the Catedral Metropolitana (p. 132).

Juárez and 20 de Noviembre, Centro Histórico. See map p. 123. Metro: Zócalo.

PARKS & GARDENS

Alameda Park Today the lovely tree-filled Alameda Park attracts pedestrians, cotton-candy vendors, strollers, lovers, and organ grinders. Long ago, the site was an Aztec

marketplace. When the conquistadors took over in the mid-1500s, heretics were burned at the stake here under the Spanish Inquisition. In 1592, the governor of New Spain, Viceroy Luis de Velasco, converted it to a public park. Within the park, known as La Alameda, is the **Juárez Monument,** sometimes called the **Hemiciclo** (hemicycle, or half-circle), facing Avenida Juárez. Enthroned as the hero he was, Juárez assumes his proper place here in the pantheon of Mexican patriots. European (particularly French) sculptors created most of the other statuary in the park in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Av. Juárez and Lázaro Cárdenas. See map p. 125. Free admission. Metro: Bellas Artes.

Chapultepec Park One of the biggest city parks in the world, 220-hectare (543-acre) Chapultepec Park is more than a playground; it's virtually the centerpiece of the city. Besides accommodating picnickers on worn-away grass under centuries-old trees, it has canoes on the lake; jogging and bridle paths; vendors selling balloons, souvenirs, and food; a miniature train; and **Los Pinos,** home of Mexico's president. The park is also home to the **City Zoo** and **La Feria** amusement park. Most important for tourists, it contains a number of interesting museums, including the Museo Nacional de Antropología (p. 124).

Btw. Paseo de la Reforma, Circuito Interior, and Av. Constituyentes. See map p. 127. Free admission. Daily 5am–5pm. Metro: Chapultepec.

Floating Gardens of Xochimilco ★ In Xochimilco are more than 80km (50 miles) of canals known as the Floating Gardens. They consist of two main parts. The first is the tourism-oriented area in the Historic Center of town, where colorful boats called *trajineras* take loads of tourists and locals celebrating a special occasion through a portion of the canals. Lively music, some of it provided by mariachi musicians for hire who board the gondolas, is a staple. Historic buildings, restaurants, souvenir stands, curio sellers, and boat vendors border this area. The other section, north of the center of town, is the ecology-oriented area, or Parque Natural Xochimilco. On Sunday, Xochimilco is jammed; on weekdays, it's nearly deserted. As you enter Xochimilco proper, you will see many places to board boats. Should you miss them, turn along Madero and follow signs that say LOS EMBARCADEROS (the piers).

Southern neighborhood of Xochimilco. ✆ **55/5673-7890.** Admission to area $2; boat rides $14–$16 per boat per hour, which up to 14–18 people may share. Daily 9am–6pm.

UNAM Sculpture Garden Want to escape the Distrito Federal without getting on a bus? No, it's not a trick question. The campus of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México is technically a separate city with its own transportation system, police force, and government, and has therefore escaped much of the sprawl and overdevelopment that plagues the city surrounding it. The grounds are carpeted with lush plants and shaded by tall trees. The best place to get a feel for the university is the sculpture garden located in front of the *Torre de Rectoría,* which is adorned with a three-dimensional mural by socialist painter David Alfaro Siqueiros. The new **Museum Universitario Arte Contemporáneo** (**MuAC; ✆ 55/5622-6972;** www.muac.unam.mx; admission 30 pesos, free Sun; Wed, Fri, Sat 10am–6pm, Thurs and Sun noon–8pm) sits along the side. The huge green lawn strewn with sculptures by modern Mexican artists among giant lava rock beds is a great place for lounging and people-watching in a university atmosphere; during the week, expect to see everything from lovers holding hands to student violinists rehearsing before class or auditions. On the weekends, families visit with their picnic blankets.

Take the Metrobus to the Ciudad Universitaria stop. Free shuttles run throughout the campus.

BEST VIEW

La Torre Latinoamericana From the observation deck on the 44th floor of this soaring skyscraper, the Latin American Tower, you can take in fabulous views of the entire city. Buy a ticket for the deck at the booth as you approach the elevators. Tokens for the telescope are on sale here, too. You then take an elevator to the 42nd floor, cross the hall, and take another elevator to the 44th floor. An employee will ask for your ticket as you get off.

Eje Central 2 (at Madero and Lázaro Cárdenas), Centro Histórico. ✆ **55/5518-7423.** www.torrelatino.com. See map p. 125. Admission 50 pesos adults, 40 pesos children. Daily 9am–10pm. Metro: Bellas Artes.

6 ORGANIZED TOURS

Mexico City is a great place to explore on your own, and in general this is the easiest and least expensive way to see what you like. But if your time is limited, you may want to acclimate yourself quickly by taking a tour or two.

Among the noncommercial offerings are **free guided tours** sponsored by the **Mexico City Historical Center** (✆ **55/5345-8000,** ext. 1499), in the 18th-century home of Don Manuel de Heras y Soto, at Donceles and República de Chile. Groups meet each Sunday at 10:45am at a central gathering place for that day's tour, which varies from week to week. These tours might explore a historic downtown street, cafes and theaters, cemeteries, or the colonial churches of Xochimilco. Most tours, which last about 2 hours, are in Spanish; as many as 300 people may be divided among 10 guides. Visitors can ask a day in advance for a guide who speaks their language. The center's phone is almost always busy, so you may opt to visit the office, in the far back of the building, on the right and up a spiral staircase, to get a list of upcoming tours and gathering locations. Office hours are Monday through Friday from 9am to 3pm and 6 to 9pm.

The many commercial tours include a 4-hour city tour of such sites as the **Metropolitan Cathedral,** the **National Palace,** and **Chapultepec Park and Castle;** a longer tour to the **Shrine of Guadalupe** and nearby pyramids at **Teotihuacán;** and the Sunday tour that begins with the **Ballet Folklórico,** moves on to the **Floating Gardens of Xochimilco,** and may or may not include lunch and the afternoon bullfights. Almost as popular are 1-day and overnight tours to Puebla, Cuernavaca, Taxco, and Acapulco. There are also several nightclub tours. Book through your hotel concierge or tour desk; see also "By Tourist Bus" under "Getting Around," p. 102.

7 SHOPPING

From handicrafts to the finest in designer apparel, Mexico City is a marvelous place for shopping. From malls to *mercados,* to kitschy boutiques, numerous places display fascinating native products and sophisticated goods.

The two best districts for browsing boutiques are on and off **Avenida Presidente Masaryk,** in Polanco, and the **Zona Rosa.** Polanco's shops include Burberrys of London, Christian Dior, Versace, Gucci, Hermès, Luis Vuitton, Giorgio Armani, Tiffany's, and Cartier. Think Beverly Hills's Rodeo Drive, or Paris's Champs Elysées, and you'll get the picture. The 12 square blocks at the heart of the Zona Rosa are home to antiques shops, boutiques, art galleries, silver shops, and fine jewelers.

For a taste of urban and hip, check out the shops that are sprouting up in **Roma** and **Condesa,** where you'll find the work of independent fashion designers, sneakers in every color of the rainbow, and even a boutique dedicated to *lucha libre.*

ART

If you're looking for a centralized display of street art, visit **Border,** Zacatecas 43, Roma Sur (✆ **55/5584-7557;** www.border.com.mx).

Exposición Nacional de Arte Popular (FONART) This store is usually loaded with crafts: papier-mâché figurines, textiles, earthenware, colorful candelabras, hand-carved wooden masks, straw goods, beads, bangles, and glass. The Fonda Nacional para el Fomento de las Artes (FONART), a government organization that helps village craftspeople, operates the store. It's open Monday to Friday from 10am to 7pm, Saturday from 10am to 6pm, and Sunday from 10am to 4pm. Juárez 89, Centro Histórico. ✆ **55/5521-0171.** www.fonart.gob.mx. Metro: Hidalgo or Juárez.

López Quiroga Gallery Auction-quality works of art by contemporary Latin American masters, including Toledo, Tamayo, and Siqueiros. The gallery is not accessible by Metro; take a cab. It's open Monday to Friday from 10am to 7pm and Saturday from 10am to 2pm. Aristóteles 169, Polanco. ✆ **55/5280-1247.** Fax 55/5280-3960. www.arte-mexico.com.

O.M.R. Gallery This gallery has earned a reputation for discovering and introducing emerging talents and new artists from Latin America. It's open Monday through Friday from 10am to 3pm and 4 to 7pm, Saturday from 10am to 2pm. Plaza Río de Janeiro 54, Col. Roma. ✆ **55/5511-1179.** www.galeriaomr.com. Metro: Insurgentes.

Pineda Covalin This boutique shop created by two Mexican designers integrates Mexican culture and traditions into its fashionable designs. The beautiful pieces filled with vibrant colors include silk ties and scarves, handbags, shoes, and jewelry. The store's open Monday to Saturday from 10am to 8pm and Sunday from 10am to 2pm. Campos Eliseos 215 (at Galileo), Polanco. ✆ **55/5280-2179.** www.pinedacovalin.com. Metro: Auditorio.

Puro Corazón This high-quality store next to the *zócalo* sells fine arts, crafts, and jewelry from across Mexico. The prices are a good bit higher than they would be where the products were made, but here you get a fabulous selection in one lovely shop. There's also a bookstore, gallery, and traditional Mexican restaurant on-site. The store's open Monday and Tuesday from 8am to 5pm and Wednesday through Sunday from 8am to 8pm. Monte de Piedad 11, Centro Histórico. ✆ **55/5518-0300.** Metro: Zócalo.

BOOKS

About the most convenient foreign- and Spanish-language bookstore in Mexico City, with a good selection of guidebooks and texts on Mexico, is **Librería Gandhi,** Av. Juárez 4, near Avenida Lázaro Cárdenas (✆ **55/2625-0606;** www.gandhi.com.mx), right across from the Bellas Artes. It's open Monday to Saturday from 10am to 9pm, Sunday from 11am to 8pm. The **New Option,** Rosas Moreno 152 (✆ **55/5705-3332,** -0585), is open Monday through Friday from 9am to 6pm and weekends from 10am to 4pm. The **Museo Nacional de Antropología,** in Chapultepec Park (✆ **55/5553-1902** or 5211-0754; www.mna.inah.gob.mx), also has a fair selection of books on Mexico, particularly special-interest guides. It's open Tuesday through Sunday from 9am to 7pm. Also in Chapultepec, the bookstore **Otro Lugar de la Mancha,** Esopo 11 Chapultepec (✆ **55/5280-4826**), offers a small but outstanding collection of books, music, and art,

 plus an upstairs cafe in a historic home. It's open Monday through Friday from 8am to 10pm, Saturday and Sunday from 9am to 10pm.

JEWELRY

Besides the shops mentioned below, dozens of jewelry stores and optical shops are on Madero from Motolinía to the *zócalo,* in the portals facing the National Palace. **Nacional Monte de Piedad (National Pawn Shop),** also opposite the National Palace, has an enormous jewelry selection. The first Latin American branch of **Tiffany's** is on Avenida Presidente Masaryk in Polanco.

Bazar del Centro Located between La Alameda and the *zócalo,* this Colonial-Era building was the palace of the Counts of Miravalle. Now it houses shops selling jewelry, precious stones, and silver. It's open Monday through Friday from 10am to 7pm and Saturday from 10am to 3pm. Isabel la Católica 30, Centro Histórico. No phone. Metro: Zócalo.

Tane Located in the ritzy Centro Comercial Santa Fe, this is one of the branches of one of Mexico's top silver designers, with other locations found only in the best hotels and shopping centers. The quantity of high-quality silver work is enormous. You'll see jewelry, platters, pitchers, plates, cutlery, frames, candlesticks, and even the signature china, by Limoges. There are also branches in the Polanco and San Angel neighborhoods, and at the airport. It's open Monday through Friday from 10am to 7pm and Saturday from 11am to 3pm. Campos Eliseos 218 (at corner of Andrés Bello), Col. Polanco. ✆ **55/5281-0820.** www.tane.com.mx. Metro: Auditorio.

MARKETS

Bazar del Sábado Moments Located in San Angel, the charming Colonial-Era neighborhood in the southern part of the city, the "Saturday Market" is my top recommendation for passing a weekend afternoon in Mexico City. The market takes place outside on the Plaza San Jacinto and inside a bazaar building (part of a two-story mansion) next to it. High-quality handicrafts, antiques, art, and Mexican food are all offered here.

In the center of the actual bazaar building is a wonderful Mexican cafe where waiters hustle to serve authentic tacos and frosty margaritas, plus *antojitos* (finger foods) and traditional dishes such as enchiladas. *Marimba* music plays in the background. Dozens of small rooms surrounding the courtyard serve as permanent stalls featuring original decorative art pieces. You'll find blown glass, fine jewelry, papier-mâché figures, masks, and embroidered clothing. The prices are on the high side, but the quality is equally high, and the designs are sophisticated. On adjacent plazas, hundreds of easel artists display their paintings, and surrounding homes abound with antiques, fine rugs, and hand-carved furniture for sale. Members of indigenous groups from Puebla and elsewhere bring their folk art—baskets, masks, pottery, textiles, and so on—to display in the parks. Plan to spend Saturday touring the attractions on the southern outskirts of the city. (See also "San Angel" under "Neighborhoods in Brief," earlier in this chapter.) It's open Saturday from 9am to 6pm. Plaza de San Jacinto, San Angel. Metro: Miguel Angel de Quevado.

Centro Artesanal (Mercado de Curiosidades) This rather modern building set back off a plaza consists of a number of stalls on two levels, selling everything from leather to tiles. They have some lovely silver jewelry and, as in most non-fixed-price stores, the asking price is high, but the bargained result is often very reasonable. It's open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 5:30pm. Corner of Ayuntamiento and Dolores, Reforma North. Metro: Guerrero.

Jamaica Flower Market (Finds) The Aztecs may have been violent and down-right bloodthirsty, but they adored flowers, almost to the point of worship. The flower markets you'll find around the city are direct descendants of the ones that existed more than 500 years ago. The most splendid of these modern markets is the Jamaica Flower Market in Colonia Jamaica (pronounced ha-*mai*-ka). It smells like a dream and is an explosion of color. Explore this vast warehouse with vendors selling simple bunches of flowers, to ornate funerary displays. Most business is in wholesale. Around the Day of the Dead, this market receives truckloads of marigolds. Should you have some sort of tulip or geranium emergency, the market is open 24 hours, 365 days a year. Corner of Congreso de la Union and Guillermo Prieto, Colonia Jamaica. Metro: La Viga or Jamaica.

Lagunilla Market This is one of the most interesting and unusual markets in Mexico—but watch out for pickpockets. It's most interesting on Sundays, when the Lagunilla becomes a colorful outdoor market filling the streets for blocks. Arrive around 9am. Vendors sell everything from axes to antiques. The two enclosed sections, on either side of a short street, Calle Juan Salvages, are open all week. They have different specialties: The one to the north is noted for clothes, *rebozos* (shawls), and blankets; the one to the south for tools, pottery, and household goods, such as attractive hanging copper lamps. This is also where to find old and rare books, many at a ridiculously low cost, if you're willing to hunt and bargain. Vendors set up shop daily from 10am to 7pm, but bring out the antiques only on Sunday. Tourists will feel safer leaving by sundown. 3 blocks east of Plaza de Garibaldi, at the corner of Francisco Bocanegra. Metro: Allende.

Mercado de la Ciudadela An excellent place to get authentic arts and crafts, this market has hundreds of stalls with arts and crafts from all over Mexico. It's across from the Escuela Nacional de Artes. A few places take credit cards. A lovely park is across the street. It's open daily from 9am to 8pm. Balderas, btw. Reforma and Chapultepec. Metro: Balderas.

Mercado de la Merced This is the city's biggest market and among the most fascinating in the country; the intense activity and energy level are akin to those at Oaxaca's Mercado Abastos Market (see chapter 12). Officially, it's housed in several modern buildings, but shops line the tidy, crowded streets all the way to the *zócalo.*

The first building is mainly for fruit and vegetables; the others contain about what you'd find if a department store joined forces with a discount warehouse—especially housewares, such as hand-held citrus juicers of all sizes, tinware, colorful spoons, and decorative oilcloth. The main market, east of the *zócalo* on Circunvalación between General Anaya and Adolfo Gurrión, is the place to stock up on Mexican spices. The easy 13-block walk from the *zócalo* zigzags past many shops. Or take the Metro; the stop is right outside the market. It's open daily from 7am to 6pm. Circunvalación btw. General Anaya and Adolfo Gurrión. Metro: Merced.

Mercado Insurgentes Mercado Insurgentes is a full-fledged crafts market tucked into the Zona Rosa. Because of its address, you might expect exorbitant prices, but vendors in the maze of stalls are eager to bargain, and good buys aren't hard to come by. It's open Monday through Saturday from 9am to 5:30pm. Londres btw. Florencia and Amberes, Zona Rosa. Metro: Insurgentes.

Nacional Monte de Piedad (National Pawnshop) This building used to be a pawnshop for all sorts of items, but now is reserved for the more profitable and saleable jewelry, with a couple of small rooms set aside for art and antiques. Pedro Romero de Terreros, the Count of Regla, an 18th-century silver magnate from Pachuca, donated the

present building so that Mexican people could get low-interest loans. It's open Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 6pm, Saturday from 8:30am to 3pm. Corner of Monte de Piedad and Cinco de Mayo, Centro Histórico. http://dns.montepiedad.com.mx. Metro: Zócalo.

MODERN MEXICO

Chic by Accident This boutique located in a 1920s-era mansion has been featured in the Mexican version of *Architectural Digest* as a place to find unique luxury worthy of furnishing posh penthouses. It operates with interior designers in mind, but curious shoppers can browse for quirky items like a pair of wooden owl-shaped boxes and a 1980s-era neon carpet. The showroom is open Monday through Friday from 10am to 8pm and Saturday from 10am to 2pm. Álvaro Obregón 49, Roma Norte. ✆ **55/5511-1132.** www.chicbyaccident.com. Metro: Cuautéhmoc.

El Hijo Del Santo Fans of *lucha libre* deserve to have a nice quiet place where they can reflect on the beauty of wrestling in tights and shiny masks. Named after one of the most famous names in Mexican *lucha libre* wrestling, this cafe also houses a quirky boutique filled with wrestling merchandise, including official Hijo del Santo silver masks, T-shirts, and artwork. The store's open Monday and Tuesday from 8am to 5pm and Wednesday through Sunday from 8am to 8pm. Tamaulipas 219, Condesa ✆ **55/5515-2186.** www.elhijodelsanto.com.mx. Metro: Patriotismo. There's also a location next to the food court in terminal 2 of the International Airport.

Sicario This trendy two-story *tiendita* with floor-to-ceiling windows is a one-stop shop for anyone living the Mexico City urban lifestyle. Shoppers and browsers will find art books and magazines, designer bicycles, and fashion uniform necessities like original screen-print T-shirts. In addition to selling clothing and accessories by local designers, they throw some pretty epic parties and events. Check their website for details. The store is open every day from noon to 8pm. Colima 124, Roma. ✆ **55/5515/2186.** www.sicario.tv. Metro: Cuautéhmoc.

Guru Guru is a gallery/boutique on Roma's Calle Colima that regularly features exhibits by new and upcoming artists, and looks like the basement sanctuary you dreamed you had as a teenager. Expect to find one-of-a-kind T-shirts, posters, and postcards by international artists and designers. Unlike most of the upscale galleries, pets are welcome here. The building is bright orange with a giant smiling cartoon head painted on the side. Guru is open Monday through Friday from noon to 8pm, Saturday from noon to 7pm, and Sunday from noon to 6pm. Colima 143, Roma Norte. ✆ **55/5533-7140.** www.guru galleryshop.com. Metro: Cuauhtémoc.

A Naked Lunch in Roma Norte

The artists, writers, and fashionistas who find inspiration and party dresses in Roma Norte are only the latest generation of bohemians to do so. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, this neighborhood was the stamping ground of core members of the infamous beat generation including Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Lucien Carr. In 1951 William S. Burroughs, who took classes in Maya culture at nearby Mexico City College, accidentally killed his wife, Joan, in a William Tell-esque stunt in the building at Medellín 122. Pay homage to the beats by grabbing a bite to eat at the restaurant Ship Ahoy that currently occupies the infamous lot.

Shelter If you're a sneakerhead, you'll feel like a kid in a candy store visiting Shelter. This shop is popular with skateboarders and *hip-hoperos* because it's often the only place in Mexico or Latin America to carry exclusive releases by Nike or Adidas. By virtue of authority, the salespeople are extremely knowledgeable about shoe culture. Stop or skate by Monday through Saturday from noon to 8pm. Colima 134, Roma Norte. ✆ **55/5211 6031.** www.shelter.com.mx. Metro: Cuauhtémoc.

8 MEXICO CITY AFTER DARK

The fiesta is by nature sacred, literally or figuratively, and above all it is the advent of the unusual.

—Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*

Mexico City is the sort of megalopolis where you can show up at a house party at 11pm on a Monday and find the place already bustling with people. Not only are *Chilangos* master revelers who wouldn't scoff at a midweek party, but they don't put down their beer for a minor inconvenience such as sunrise. On any given night, you can find art gallery openings, new moon ceremonies, crowded dance floors, and independent movie screenings. If you're a night owl, you'll find plenty of fellow *tecolotes.*

THE ENTERTAINMENT SCENE

Mexico City boasts a world-class nightlife scene, with hot venues for downing tequila and dancing to music ranging from salsa to house. The **Centro Histórico** downtown has earned a reputation for having a number of hip and edgy bars and clubs concentrated within walking distance. The posh **Polanco** neighborhood is known for its perennially see-and-be-seen dining and bar scene, and in recent years many of the trendiest nightspots have opened in the **Condesa** and **Roma** neighborhoods. Some of the city's most exclusive nightclubs lie in the **Lomas** area. In the south of the city, **San Angel** remains highly popular, although it's a bit of a drive if you're not already staying in that area. Most bars don't even begin to get going until around 10 or 11pm and usually stay open until at least 3am; nightclubs get started after midnight and continue into the wee hours. Many clubs operate only Thursday through Saturday.

For lower-key nightlife and people-watching, outdoor cafes remain a popular option. Those in the neighborhoods of **Polanco** and **Condesa** are among the liveliest. Another tradition is **Garibaldi Square,** where mariachis tune up and wait to be hired, but *be especially careful*—it's now known as much for chronic street crime as for music. The plaza was recently renovated and will hopefully improve the safety of the neighborhood.

Warning! Crime at Night

Leave valuables—especially watches and jewelry—at your hotel, and bring only the cash you will need. While I list Metro stops, these should probably be used only for orientation; take only authorized *sitio* taxis (see the advisory "Taxi Safety Precautions in Mexico City," at the beginning of this chapter). Your hotel can help with these arrangements. If you're really short on cash and are going to head to your destination before 9pm, take the Metro there and hire a taxi for the ride back.

Hotel lobby bars tend to have live entertainment of the low-key type in the late afternoon and into the evening.

Some of the most exciting parties in the city are those sponsored by big-name labels like Nike and Absolut Vodka. These events often have themes, feature performances by well-known DJs, and are perfect if you want to check out the latest outrageous fashions. Check out websites like **www.trafficodf.com**, **www.diariodefiestas.blogspot.com**, and **www.thecitylovesyou.com** for information about upcoming events.

THE PERFORMING ARTS

Mexico City's performing arts scene is among the finest and most comprehensive in the world. It includes opera, theater, ballet, and dance, along with concerts of symphonic, rock, and popular music.

For current information on cultural offerings, ***Donde Ir, Tiempo Libre,*** and ***Concierge,*** free magazines found in hotels, are good sources for locating the newest places, though they don't have complete listings of changing entertainment or current exhibits. **Ticketmaster** (✆ **55/5325-9000**) usually handles ticket sales for major performances.

Note: The majority of the theatrical performances at the Palacio de Bellas Artes and in other theaters around the city are presented in Spanish.

Palacio de Bellas Artes Although various groups perform around the city, the finest offering is at the Palacio de Bellas Artes, where the famed **Ballet Folklórico de México** performs twice a week. The Ballet Folklórico is a celebration of pre- and post-Hispanic dancing. A typical program includes Aztec ritual dances, agricultural dances from Jalisco, a fiesta in Veracruz, a wedding celebration—all linked with mariachis, marimba players, singers, and dancers.

Because the Bellas Artes books many other events—visits by foreign opera companies, for instance—the Ballet Folklórico occasionally moves. In that case, it usually appears in the **National Auditorium** in Chapultepec Park. Check at the Bellas Artes box office. The show is popular and tickets sell rapidly (especially to tour agencies at twice the cost). The box office is on the ground floor of the Bellas Artes, main entrance. Ballet Folklórico performances are on Sunday at 9:30am and 8:30pm and Wednesday at 8:30pm.

The Fine Arts theater not only offers the finest in performing arts, but is also architecturally worth a visit (see "Exploring Mexico City," earlier in this chapter). It's open Monday through Saturday 11am to 7pm, and Sunday 8:30am to 7pm. Eje Central and Av. Juárez, Centro Histórico–Alameda. & 55/5325-9000. www.balletamalia.com.mx. Tickets $36–$60. Metro: Bellas Artes.

THE CLUB & MUSIC SCENE

This warning can't be reiterated enough: **Take an authorized *sitio* taxi or hire a car for transportation to all nightspots.** Metro stops are given merely as a point of reference.

The double-decker **Turibus** (✆ **55/5133-2488;** www.turibus.com.mx) now offers nighttime service on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday that runs a circuit through the necessary Mexico City party spots. Hop on and off from 11pm to 1am for 250 pesos.

Mariachis

Mariachis often get a bad rap. In movies they're often portrayed as bumbling nuisances who are masters of ruining romantic moments. So while you're in Mexico, take the opportunity to give them a second listen. Known for their distinctive dress, strolling presentation, and mix of brass and guitars, they epitomize the romance and tradition of

Warning! A Note of Caution for Garibaldi Square

Plaza de Garibaldi, especially at night, was previously known for thieves looking to separate tourists from their valuables. Although the plaza has recently been renovated and the police presence increased, we still recommend a visit by private taxi. If you go, don't take credit cards or excess money with you. Go with a crowd of friends rather than alone, or take a tour that includes Garibaldi. Until the new plaza settles into its rhythm, it remains to be seen how much public safety will be improved.

the country. They look a little like Mexican cowboys dressed up for a special occasion—tight trousers studded with silver buttons down the outside of the legs, elaborate cropped jackets, embroidered shirts with big bow ties, and grandiose sombrero hats. The dress dates to the French occupation of Mexico in the mid–19th century, as does the name. *Mariachi* is believed to be an adaptation of the French word for marriage; this was the type of music commonly played at weddings in the 15th and 16th centuries. The music is a derivative of *fandango,* which was the most popular dance music of the elite classes in 16th-century Spain. In Mexico, fandango became the peasant's song and dance. Among the most famous mariachi songs are *Mexico Lindo, El Rey, Guadalajara, Cielito Lindo,* and *La Cucaracha.*

In Mexico City, the mariachis make their headquarters around the **Plaza de Garibaldi,** 5 blocks north of the Palacio de Bellas Artes—up Avenida Lázaro Cárdenas, at Avenida República de Honduras. In its heyday, the plaza was a popular destination for family and tourist gatherings. However, beginning in the 1990s, the plaza became increasingly plagued with petty crime. As deterioration continued, many of the area's legitimate businesses moved on to safer neighborhoods and left many of the seedier characters behind. In 2007 more than a dozen federal and local agencies allocated 90.6 million pesos for the revitalization of the plaza. Plans include an agave garden, a tequila and mezcal museum, and a mariachi school As of press time, the inauguration of the renovated plaza and the opening of the museum was scheduled to coincide with the Bicentennial celebrations on September 15th, 2010. Authorities aim to have a high security presence in the plaza and throughout the surrounding neighborhood in order to encourage revelers to visit 24 hours a day.

The plaza is liveliest at night, when at every corner guitars are stacked together like rifles in an army camp. Young musicians strut proudly in their outfits, on the lookout for *señoritas* to impress. They play when they feel like it, when there's a good chance to gather some tips, or when someone orders a song—depending on how large your group is, a single song can be anywhere from 10 to 100 pesos and an hour of music anywhere from 200 to 1,000 pesos, but this is negotiable. The most famous cantina on the plaza is **Salón Tenampa,** at Plaza Garabaldi 12 (✆ **55/5526-6176**), which serves traditional Mexican food as well as every type of tequila amid spirited surroundings. It's open daily from 1pm to 3am, and often later on the weekend.

Should you be seeking mariachi music in a more subdued setting, I recommend:

Jorongo Bar Some of city's best mariachi and traditional Mexican music is found in this popular bar, located off the lobby of the Sheraton María Isabel (p. 110). This bar has enjoyed a reputation for outstanding traditional music for decades—it's an institution,

 with many local regulars. Monday through Saturday from 7pm to 2am (closed Sun), you can enjoy the smooth and joyous sounds for the price of a drink (60–100 pesos) plus cover (150 pesos). Hotel María Isabel Sheraton, Reforma 325, Zona Rosa. ✆ **55/5242-5555.** Metro: Insurgentes.

Clubs & Music Bars

AREA Bar and Terrace at Hotel Habita (Finds) The rooftop bar of this boutique Polanco hotel is among Mexico City's enduring hot spots. Umbrellas top tables, but otherwise, you're under the stars—and, likely, surrounded by a few—among a trendy crowd sipping tequila cocktails and cosmopolitans. Decor is minimalist, of course, with a few white couches. Bar stools set along the railing look out over the city. If you can make it past the bouncer and down the circular stairway to the lower terrace and pool area, you've really arrived—that's the glitzy VIP section, not unlike what you'd find in a rooftop L.A. bar. Music is mainly lounge. It's open Monday to Thursday from 7pm to midnight, and Friday to Saturday until 2am. Hotel Habita (p. 108), Av. Presidente Masaryk 201, Polanco. ✆ **55/5282-3100.** Metro: Polanco.

Bar Fly (Finds) The talented house band—direct from Cuba—makes this small but stylish bar sizzle. By midnight, the tiny dance floor shakes with hot salsa moves inspired by the passionate consumption of *mojitos.* Bar Fly sits on the first floor of an upscale shopping center and is open Wednesday through Saturday from 9pm to 3am. Live music starts around 11pm. Av. Presidente Masaryk 393, Polanco. ✆ **55/5282-2906.** Cover varies. Metro: Polanco.

Bengala Expats, world travelers, and internationally minded Mexicans have made Bengala one of the city's hottest bars, featuring a diverse selection of music and dancing between tables. The 30-somethings crowd comes for live jazz on Tuesday and Thursday nights and a rocking DJ the rest of the week. If you like sweet cocktails, the red-apple martini is the drink of choice. Open Tuesday to Saturday from 8pm to 3am. Sonora 34 (at corner of Puebla), Col. Roma. ✆ **55/5553-9219.** www.bengala.com. Metro: Insurgentes.

Cafeina The ultrastylish Cafeina attracts a beautiful crowd of models and young socialites, featuring a celeb-DJ serving up house, jazz, bossa nova, reggaeton, and—on Monday nights—the best Brazilian party in town, with live music and samba dancers. First-rate Mediterranean cuisine and potent *caipirinhas* (the traditional Brazilian cocktail made with *cachaça,* lime, and sugar) are available, along with specialty blue vodka kiwi martinis. Keep your eyes open for a visit by the bar's owner, actor Diego Luna. It's open Monday to Saturday from 7pm to 4am and Sunday from 6 to 10pm. Nuevo León 73 (at corner of Juan Escutia), Col. Condesa. ✆ **55/5212-0090.** Metro: Insurgentes.

La Pata Negra This is the place to go if your toes are burning holes in your dancing shoes. The huge dance floor hosts DJs who play everything from Beastie Boys to Rolling Stones to Café Tacvba, and you can find everyone from 20-something tourists to 30-something bureaucrats shaking it out. Try to arrive early because as the second-story dance floor starts to get crowded around 11pm, the doorman starts handing out numbered tickets to get in. You can grab a drink in the first-floor bar and wait for your number to be called. You know your night is coming to an end when Norteño music starts blaring—an act which is probably intended to clear the dance floor. Don't run away; grab a dance partner and kick up your heels for one last blast. Tamaulipas 30 (at Juan Escutia), Col. Condesa. ✆ **55/5211-5563,** -4678. Not easily accessible by Metro; take a taxi.

Lipstick Mexico City is home to a glamorous and thriving gay culture, and Lipstick is the place to go if you want to be a part of it. Every night features a different musical theme, from Latin Pop to House, with resident DJs at the helm. Check the website for info on "Gayelle Nights." Open Wednesday through Saturday from 10pm until 3am. Ambares 1, on the corner of Reforma, Col. Cuauhtémoc. ✆ **55/5514-4920.** www.lipstickbar.com. Cover charges start at $7. Metro: Insurgentes.

Rexo Credited with changing Mexico City's nightlife scene by leading people to Condesa, this Mediterranean restaurant and lounge still rules as one of the city's sexiest spots. A cube walled in by glass, Rexo consists of three contemporary floors, which integrate the restaurant and two stylish bars. The patrons are largely 30-somethings, mostly single, and very fashionable. The club is not easily accessible by Metro. It's open daily from 1:30pm to 2:30am. Saltillo 1 (corner of Nuevo León), Col. Condesa. ✆ **55/5553-5337.**

Patrick Miller This "dancetería" certainly isn't for everyone, but if you've got an eye for the quirky and kitschy, come on down. This club opened during the Gloria Gaynor golden days of disco and is named after a popular DJ; you'll quickly discover that sparkly pants, sequined gloves, and decked-out transvestites are still the norm here. But you'll also find plenty of everyday *Chilangos* hoping to get in on the fun. You might think you are entering a large furniture warehouse, but what you get inside is a laser-lit dance floor crowded with circles of people and flamboyant dancers engaged in exaggerated dance-offs in the middle. The only beverage served is beer, but you'll so be fascinated by the retro crowd, you won't even notice the lack of hard liquor. Mérida 17, Col. Roma. ✆ **55/5511-5406.** Metro: Cuautéhmoc.

Zinco Possibly the coolest jazz club south of the U.S. border, Zinco sits in an old basement vault in the Historic Center. Top performers play in the center of the intimate club, which attracts a crowd that's both cutting edge and unaffected. A full menu is available for those who wish to dine. It's open Wednesday to Saturday from 9pm to 3am. On Wednesday there's no cover, but the rest of the nights prices vary. Motolinía 20 (corner of 5 de Mayo), Centro Histórico. ✆ **55/5512-3369.** www.zincojazz.com. Cover typically starts at $20 and goes up depending on the night's entertainment. Metro: Zócalo.

Bars

ArticBar ★★ Ever dreamed of partying in an extremely fashionable igloo? The ArticBar—the first of its kind in Latin America—has a room for you, completely furnished with ice, in addition to a regular old bar and dance floor. Partyers borrow faux-fur lined coats and heavy-duty gloves in order to lounge on frozen couches and sip from icy beer mugs. As you might imagine, such a room is difficult to maintain so the bar is only open Wednesday through Sunday from 10pm to 2am. Nuevo Leon 73, Col. Condesa. Enter the unassuming-looking lobby and take the elevator to the second floor. ✆ **55/5285-6980.** www.articbar.com. Metro: Sevilla, Patriotismo.

The Black Horse Founded with the idea of introducing funk, jazz, and British rock to the city, the Black Horse often features excellent live musicians. Co-owner Umair Kahn even jumps into the DJ booth when he wants to liven up the joint. In this pub-style bar, Tupac Shakur posters and Borat quotes decorate the walls, and the clientele meander from English to Spanish with ease. Wednesday ladies' night featuring 5-peso drinks is a local favorite. Check the website for upcoming offers and events. Open Tuesday to Sunday from 6pm to 2am. Mexicali 85, near the corner of Tamaulipas, Col. Condesa. ✆ **55/5211-8740.** www.caballonegro.com. Metro: Patriotismo.

La Casa de las Sirenas This old-school bar serves over 200 types of tequila, one of the widest selections available anywhere (the best of the best are part of the *selección suprema*). It's well known for its friendly bar crowd and ambience, and there's live piano music on weekends. Housed in a 17th-century colonial building, the "House of Mermaids" features a courtyard filled with flowering plants and trees, and lies almost in front of the Templo Mayor in the Centro Histórico. There's also a charming restaurant (p. 117) on the floors above. The bar's open daily 11am to 11pm. República de Guatemala 32, Centro Histórico, behind the cathedral. ✆ **55/5704-3345,** -3273. Metro: Zócalo.

Tierra de Vinos Only drinks made with grapes are served in this lively wine bar and restaurant, which offers delicious tapas and other Spanish delights to accompany your wine tasting. The stylish bar has a terrific vibe and one of the city's most impressive wine cellars, with distinct cellars housing bottles from key wine regions around the world. It's open Sunday from 1 to 5pm and Monday to Saturday from 1pm to 1am. Durango 197 (at corner of Oaxaca), Col. Roma. ✆ **55/5208-5133.** Metro: Insurgentes.

Whiskey Bar ★★ The W hotel's multisection bar remains one of the city's most fashionable. It includes the Red Lounge, with its neon tube lamps visible through the lobby windows; the Living Room, with innovative leather booths; the upstairs Cocoa Bar, designated for VIPs; and the outdoor Terrace, which offers blankets for ladies. The waitstaff, dressed in jet-black attire, serves the sexy, if somewhat elitist, local and international crowd. A DJ spins lounge beats, while customers sip flavored martinis and exotic cocktails. Check for special events on Thursday and Friday. Open until 2am Sunday through Wednesday, until 3am Thursday through Saturday. At the W Mexico City hotel, Campos Eliseos 252, at Andrés Bello. ✆ **55/9138-1800.** Metro: Polanco.

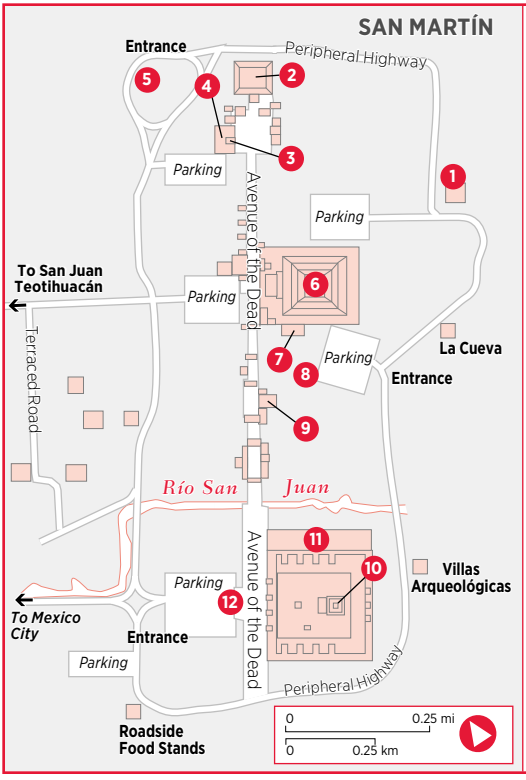
9 A SIDE TRIP TO THE PYRAMIDS OF SAN JUAN TEOTIHUACAN ★★★

50km (31 miles) NE of Mexico City

The ruins of Teotihuacán are among the most remarkable in Mexico—indeed, they are among the most important ruins in the world. Mystery envelops this former city of 200,000; although it was the epicenter of culture and commerce for ancient Mesoamerica, its inhabitants vanished without a trace. *Teotihuacán* (pronounced "teh-oh-tee-wa-*khan*") means "place where gods were born," reflecting the Aztec belief that the gods created the universe here.

Occupation of the area began around 500 B.C., but it wasn't until after 100 B.C. that construction of the enormous Pyramid of the Sun commenced. Teotihuacán's rise coincided with the classical Romans' building of their great monuments, and with the beginning of cultures in Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, Oaxaca, and Puebla.

Teotihuacán's magnificent pyramids and palaces covered about 30 sq. km (12 sq. miles). At its zenith, around A.D. 500, the city counted more inhabitants than contemporary Rome. Through trade and other contact, Teotihuacán's influence was known in other parts of Mexico and as far south as the Yucatán and Guatemala. Still, little information about the city's inhabitants survives: what language they spoke, where they came from, why they abandoned the place around A.D. 700. It is known, however, that at the beginning of the 1st century A.D., the Xitle volcano erupted near Cuicuilco (south of Mexico City) and decimated that city, which was the most prominent of the time. Those



inhabitants migrated to Teotihuacán. Scholars believe that Teotihuacán's decline, probably caused by overpopulation and depletion of natural resources, was gradual, perhaps occurring over a 250-year period. In the last years, it appears that the people were poorly nourished and that the city was deliberately burned.

Ongoing excavations have revealed something of the culture. According to archaeoastronomer John B. Carlson, the cult of the planet Venus that determined wars and human sacrifices elsewhere in Mesoamerica was prominent at Teotihuacán as well. (Archaeoastronomy is the study of the position of stars and planets in relation to archaeology.) Ceremonial rituals were timed with the appearance of Venus as the morning and evening star. The symbol of Venus at Teotihuacán (as at Cacaxtla, 80km/50 miles away, near Tlaxcala) appears as a star or half-star with a full or half-circle. Carlson also suggests the possibility that people from Cacaxtla conquered Teotihuacán, as name glyphs of conquered peoples at Cacaxtla show Teotihuacán-like pyramids. Numerous tombs with human remains (many of them either sacrificial inhabitants of the city or perhaps war captives) and objects of jewelry, pottery, and daily life have been uncovered along the foundations of buildings. It appears that the primary deity at Teotihuacán was a female, called "Great Goddess" for lack of any known name.

Today what remains are the rough stone structures of the three pyramids and sacrificial altars, and some of the grand houses, all of which were once covered in stucco and painted with brilliant frescoes (mainly in red). The Toltec, who rose in power after the city's decline, were fascinated with Teotihuacán and incorporated its symbols into their own cultural motifs. The Aztec, who followed the Toltec, were fascinated with the Toltec and with the ruins of Teotihuacán; they likewise adopted many of their symbols and motifs. For more information on Teotihuacán and its influence in Mesoamerica, see chapter 2, "Mexico in Depth."

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING

By Car Driving to San Juan Teotihuacán on the toll Hwy. 85D or the free Hwy. 132D takes about an hour. Head north on Insurgentes to leave the city. Hwy. 132D passes through picturesque villages but can be slow due to the surfeit of trucks and buses. Hwy. 85D, the toll road, is less attractive but faster.

By Private Sedan or Taxi If you prefer to explore solo or want more or less time than an organized tour allows, consider hiring a private car and driver for the trip. They can easily be arranged through your hotel or at the Secretary of Tourism (SECTUR) information module in the Zona Rosa; they cost about 200 to 250 pesos an hour. The higher price is generally for a sedan with an English-speaking driver who doubles as a tour guide. Rates can also be negotiated for the entire day.

By Bus Buses leave daily every half-hour (5am–10pm) from the Terminal Central de Autobuses del Norte; the trip takes 1 hour and costs about 25 pesos round-trip. When you reach the Terminal Norte, look for the AUTOBUSES SAHAGUN (buses headed in the direction of Sahagun, Hidalgo) sign at the far northwest end, all the way down to the sign 8 ESPERA. Be sure to ask the driver where you should wait for returning buses, how frequently buses run, and especially the time of the last bus back. **Circuito Pirámides** (✆ **55/5141-1360,** ext. 2000 and 2602; www.circuitopiramides.com.mx) offers guided air-conditioned coach tours to the ruins for 550 pesos for adults and 350 pesos for children, including transportation, entrance, and lunch buffet. Buses depart from the Auditorio Nacional at 9am, Angel de la Independencia at 9:15am, and Zócalo at 9:45am.

ORIENTATION

The ruins of Teotihuacán (✆ **59/4956-0276,** -0052) are open daily from 7am to 5pm. Admission is 51 pesos. Using a video camera costs 35 pesos.

A small trolley-train that takes visitors from the entry booths to various stops within the site, including the Teotihuacán museum and cultural center, runs only on weekends, and costs 10 pesos per person.

Keep in mind that you're likely to be doing a great deal of walking, and perhaps some climbing, at an altitude of more than 2,120m (6,954 ft.). Take it slow, bring sunblock and drinking water, and, during the summer, be prepared for almost daily afternoon showers.

A good place to start is at the **Museo Teotihuacán** ★. This excellent state-of-the-art museum holds interactive exhibits and, in one part, a glass floor on which visitors walk above mock-ups of the pyramids. On display are findings of recent digs, including several tombs, with skeletons wearing necklaces of human and simulated jawbones, and newly discovered sculptures.

The Layout The grand buildings of Teotihuacán were laid out in accordance with celestial movements. The front wall of the **Pyramid of the Sun** is exactly perpendicular

Lucky Break

When you reach the top of the Pyramid of the Sun, you might see people of all ages and entire families jostling to get near a mysterious metal tab, no bigger than your thumbnail, embedded in stone. Many believe that touching it will bring them energy or luck. It turns out that any power the metal might have is in its miscongruence. The metal is actually just a leftover marker from an archaeological excavation and probably hasn't been there for more than 50 years. Don't let this stop you from getting caught up in the excitement. Who knows, maybe you'll get lucky anyway.

to the point on the horizon where the sun sets at the equinoxes (twice annually). The rest of the ceremonial buildings were laid out at right angles to the Pyramid of the Sun.

The main thoroughfare, which archaeologists call the **Calzada de los Muertos (Avenue of the Dead),** runs roughly north to south. The **Pyramid of the Moon** is at the northern end, and the **Ciudadela (Citadel)** is on the southern part. The great street was several kilometers long in its prime, but only a kilometer or two have been uncovered and restored.

EXPLORING THE TEOTIHUACAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

LA CIUDADELA The Spaniards named the Ciudadela. This immense sunken square was not a fortress at all, although the impressive walls make it look like one. It was the grand setting for the Feathered Serpent Pyramid and the Temple of Quetzalcóatl. Scholars aren't certain that the Teotihuacán culture embraced the Quetzalcóatl deity so well known in the Toltec, Aztec, and Maya cultures. The feathered serpent is featured in the Ciudadela, but whether it was worshiped as Quetzalcóatl or a similar god isn't known. Proceed down the steps into the massive court and head for the ruined temple in the middle.

The Temple of Quetzalcóatl was covered over by an even larger structure, a pyramid. As you walk toward the center of the Ciudadela's court, you'll approach the Feathered Serpent Pyramid. To the right, you'll see the reconstructed temple close behind the pyramid, with a narrow passage between the two structures.

Early temples in Mexico and Central America were often covered by later ones. The Pyramid of the Sun may have been built up in this way. Archaeologists have tunneled deep inside the Feathered Serpent Pyramid and found several ceremonially buried human remains, interred with precise detail and position, but as yet no royal personages. Drawings of how the building once looked show that every level was covered with faces of a feathered serpent. At the Temple of Quetzalcóatl, you'll notice at once the fine, large carved serpents' heads jutting out from collars of feathers carved in the stone walls. Other feathered serpents are carved in relief low on the walls.

AVENUE OF THE DEAD The Avenue of the Dead got its strange and forbidding name from the Aztec, who mistook the little temples that line both sides of the avenue for tombs of kings or priests.

As you stroll north along the Avenue of the Dead toward the Pyramid of the Moon, look on the right for a bit of wall sheltered by a modern corrugated roof. Beneath the

shelter, the wall still bears a painting of a jaguar. From this fragment, you might be able to reconstruct the breathtaking spectacle that must have been visible when all the paintings along the avenue were intact.

PYRAMID OF THE SUN The Pyramid of the Sun, on the east side of the Avenue of the Dead, is the third-largest pyramid in the world. The first and second are the Great Pyramid of Cholula, near Puebla, and the Pyramid of Cheops on the outskirts of Cairo, Egypt. Teotihuacán's Pyramid of the Sun is 220m (722 ft.) per side at its base—almost as large as Cheops. But at 65m (213 ft.) high, the Sun pyramid is only about half as high as its Egyptian rival. No matter—it's still the biggest restored pyramid in the Western Hemisphere, and an awesome sight. Although the Pyramid of the Sun was not built as a great king's tomb, it is built on top of a series of sacred caves, which aren't open to the public.

The first structure of the pyramid was probably built a century before Christ, and the temple that used to crown the pyramid was completed about 400 years later (A.D. 300). By the time the pyramid was discovered and restoration was begun (early in the 20th c.), the temple had disappeared, and the pyramid was just a mass of rubble covered with bushes and trees.

It's a worthwhile 248-step climb to the top. The view is extraordinary and the sensation exhilarating. On a clear day, you can just barely see downtown Mexico City.

PYRAMID OF THE MOON The Pyramid of the Moon faces a plaza at the northern end of the avenue. The plaza is surrounded by little temples and by the Palace of Quetzalpapalotl or Quetzal-Mariposa (Quetzal-Butterfly) on the left (west) side. You have about the same range of view from the top of the Pyramid of the Moon as you do from its larger neighbor, because the moon pyramid is built on higher ground. The perspective straight down the Avenue of the Dead is magnificent.

PALACE OF QUETZALPAPALOTL The Palace of Quetzalpapalotl lay in ruins until the 1960s, when restoration work began. Today it reverberates with its former glory, as figures of Quetzal-Mariposa (a mythical, exotic bird-butterfly) appear painted on walls or carved in the pillars of the inner court. Behind the Palace of Quetzalpapalotl is the Palace of the Jaguars, complete with murals showing jaguars.

WHERE TO DINE

Vendors at the ruins sell drinks and snacks, but many visitors choose to carry a box lunch—almost any hotel or restaurant in the city can prepare one for you. A picnic in the shadow of this impressive ancient city allows extended time and perspective to take it all in. There is a restaurant called **Las Pirámides** in the new Museo Teotihuacán, which is the most convenient place for a snack or a meal. To the southeast of the Pyramid of the Sun you will find a kitschy joint called **La Gruta** (✆ **59/4956-0127;** www.lagruta.com.mx). The food is all right, but you'll be more impressed by its cave setting and dinner show featuring regional and folkloric dances.

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Silver, Spas & Spiritual Centers: From Taxco to Tepoztlán

by Joy Hepp

It may seem as though the small towns in this region 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 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 is only a sampling of towns south and west of Mexico City. They are fascinating in their diversity, history, and mystery, and make for a unique travel experience, either on their own or combined. They vary in character from mystical villages to sophisticated spa towns, with archaeological and Colonial-Era attractions in the mix. And with their proximity to Mexico City, all are within easy reach by private car or taxi—or by inexpensive bus—in under a few hours.

The legendary silver city of **Taxco,** on the road between Acapulco and Mexico City, is renowned for its museums, picturesque hillside Colonial-Era charm, and, of course, its silver shops. North of Taxco and southwest of Mexico City, over the mountains, are the venerable thermal spas at **Ixtapan de la Sal,** as well as their more modern counterparts in **Valle de Bravo.** 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. Finally, **Tepoztlán,** with its enigmatic charms and legendary pyramid, captivates the few travelers who find their way there.

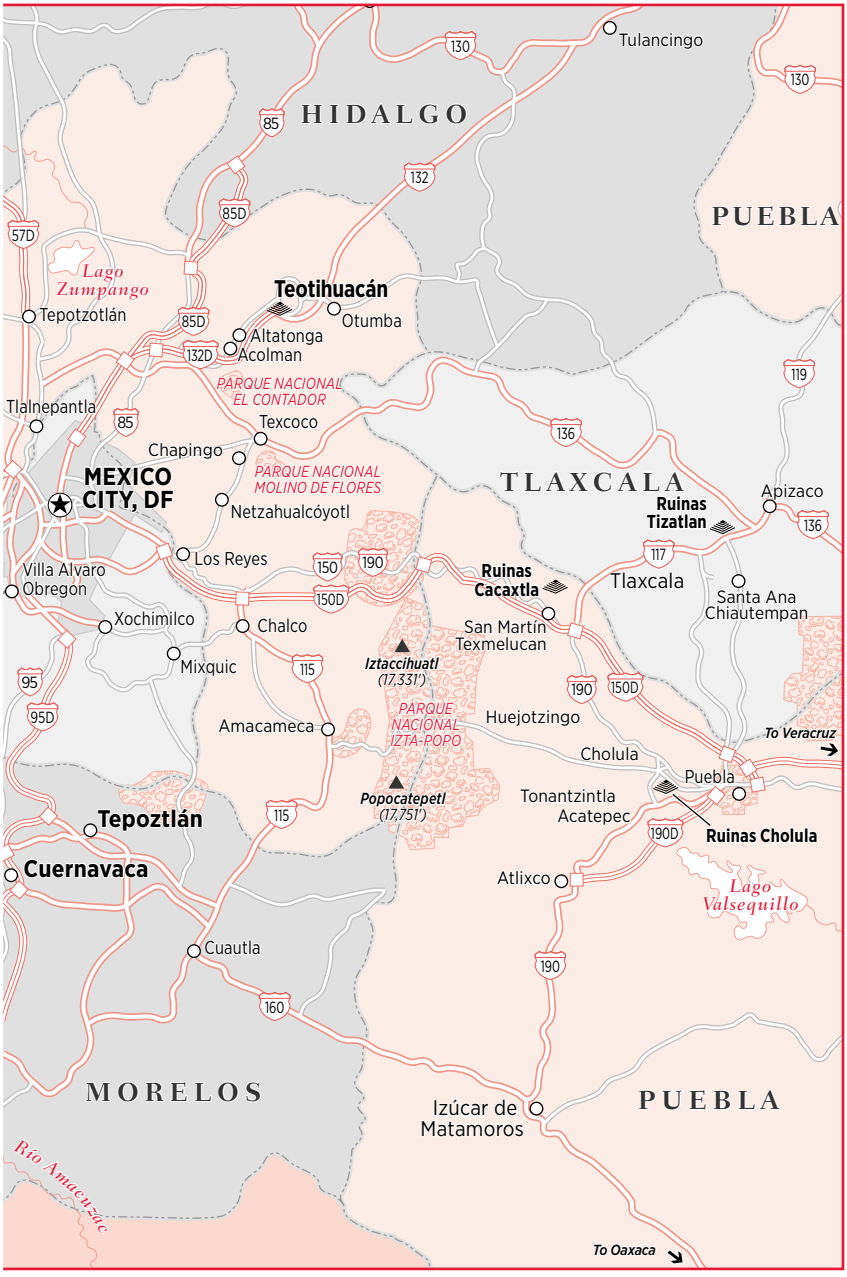
I found that the region as a whole is the perfect place for solo travel. I've never felt alone when visiting Taxco because the locals are so friendly and the whole city is bursting with tiny details. Tepoztlán is a place of reflection as its spirituality oozes from every rock and New Age shop, and in Cuernavaca you'll find plenty of out-of-town Chilangos to keep you company.

1 TAXCO: COBBLESTONES & SILVER ★★

178km (110 miles) SW of Mexico City; 80km (50 miles) SW of Cuernavaca; 296km (184 miles) 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 (4,969 ft.) on a hill among hills, and almost any point in the city offers fantastic views.

0 25 mi
0 25 km
To Querétaro
Ruinas Tula
126
57D
55
Presa Huapango
15D
MICHOACÁN
Atlacomulco
Villa del Carbon
Río Pearl
6
55D
To Guadalajara
MEXICO
55
Río Lerma
134
15
15
Zitacuaro
Ruinas Calixtlahuaca
Toluca
15D
1
Valle de Bravo
Metepec
PARQUE NACIONAL DESIERTO DE LOS LEONES
PARQUE NACIONAL NEVADO DE TOLUCA
Avándaro
Nevado de Toluca (15,026')
PARQUE NACIONAL LAGUNAS DE ZEMPOALA
Temascaltepec
55D
55
Ruinas Malinalco
134
Tenancingo
Ixtapan de la Sal
Tonatico
UNITED STATES
Gulf of Mexico
MEXICO
Mexico City
PACIFIC OCEAN
Taxco
95
GUERRERO
95D
95
To Chilpancingo & Acapulco


Tulancingo
HIDALGO
PUEBLA
Lago Zumpango
Tepotzotlán
Teotihuacán
Otumba
Altatonga
Acolman
PARQUE NACIONAL EL CONTADOR
Tlalnepantla
Texcoco
Chapingo
PARQUE NACIONAL MOLINO DE FLORES
MEXICO CITY, DF
Netzahualcóyotl
TLAXCALA
Ruinas Tizatlan
Apizaco
Los Reyes
Villa Alvaro Obregon
Ruinas Cacaxtla
Tlaxcala
Santa Ana Chiautempan
Xochimilco
Chalco
San Martín Texmelucan
Mixquic
Iztaccihuatl (17,331')
PARQUE NACIONAL IZTA-POPO
Amacameca
Huejotzingo
To Veracruz
Cholula
Puebla
Popocatepetl (17,751')
Tonantzintla
Acatepec
Ruinas Cholula
Tepoztlán
Cuernavaca
Atlixco
Lago Valsequillo
Cuautla
MORELOS
Izúcar de Matamoros
PUEBLA
Río Amacuzac
To Oaxaca

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 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 U.S. 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 winding 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 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 silversmiths' shops.

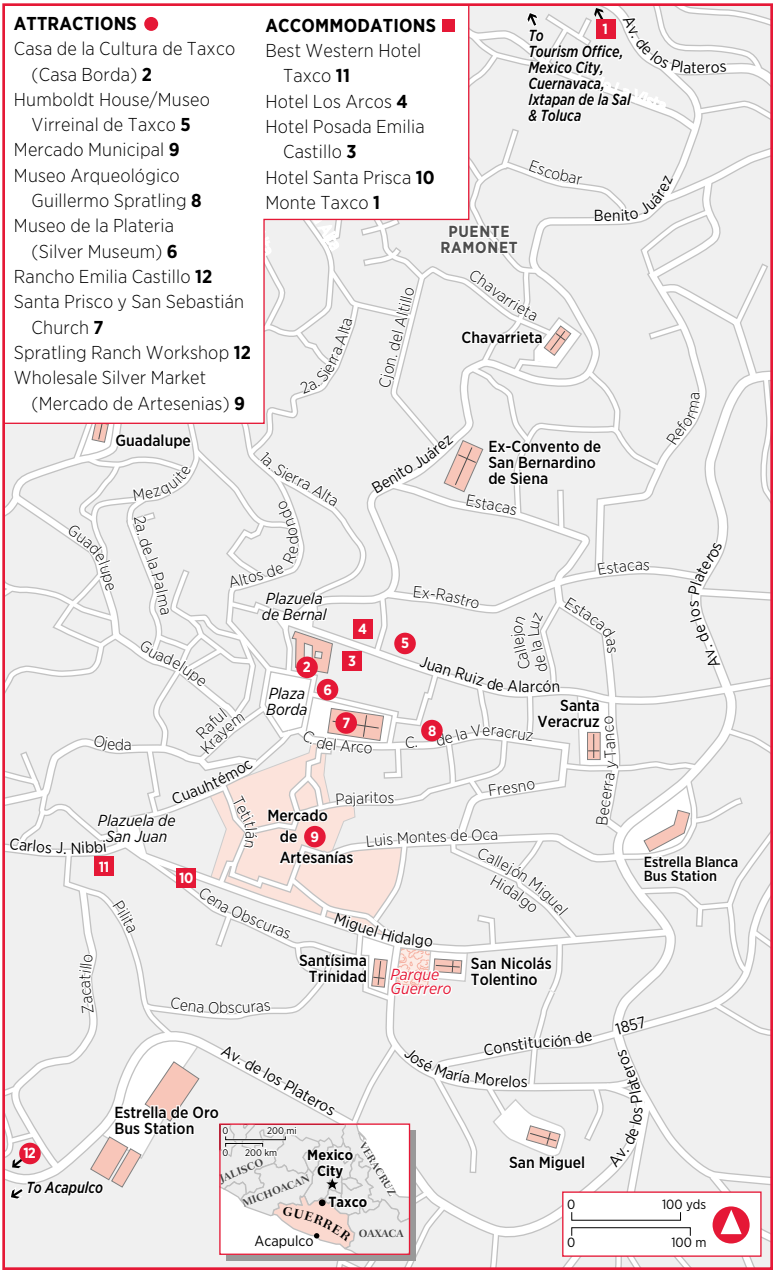
The main part of town is relatively flat. It stretches up the hillside from the highway, and it's a steep but brief walk up. White VW minibuses, called *combis,* make the circuit through and around town, picking up and dropping off passengers along the route, from about 7am until 9pm. These taxis are inexpensive (about 50 pesos from the bus station to most hotels), and you should use them even if you arrive by car, because parking is practically impossible. Also, the streets are so narrow and steep that most visitors find them nerve-racking. 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 likely approach you in the *zócalo* (Plaza Borda) and offer their services—they get a cut 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 Hwy. 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


ATTRACTIONS
Casa de la Cultura de Taxco (Casa Borda) 2
Humboldt House/Museo Virreinal de Taxco 5
Mercado Municipal 9
Museo Arqueológico Guillermo Spratling 8
Museo de la Plateria (Silver Museum) 6
Rancho Emilia Castillo 12
Santa Prisco y San Sebastián Church 7
Spratling Ranch Workshop 12
Wholesale Silver Market (Mercado de Artesenias) 9
ACCOMMODATIONS
Best Western Hotel Taxco 11
Hotel Los Arcos 4
Hotel Posada Emilia Castillo 3
Hotel Santa Prisca 10
Monte Taxco 1
To Tourism Office, Mexico City, Cuernavaca, Ixtapan de la Sal & Toluca
Av. de los Plateros
Escobar
Benito Juárez
PUENTE RAMONET
Chavarrieta
Chavarrieta
2a. Sierra Alta
Cjon. del Altillo
Reforma
Guadalupe
Ex-Convento de San Bernardino de Siena
Benito Juárez
1a. Sierra Alta
Mezquite
Estacas
Guadelupe
2a. de la Palma
Altos de Redondo
Estacas
Av. de los Plateros
Plazuela de Bernal
Ex-Rastro
Estacadas
Callejon de la Luz
Guadelupe
Juan Ruiz de Alarcón
Plaza Borda
Santa Veracruz
Raful Krayem
Ojeda
C. del Arco
C. de la Veracruz
Becerra y Tanco
Cuauhtémoc
Pajaritos
Fresno
Plazuela de San Juan
Tetitlán
Mercado de Artesanías
Luis Montes de Oca
Carlos J. Nibbi
Estrella Blanca Bus Station
Callejón Miguel Hidalgo
Pilita
Cena Obscuras
Miguel Hidalgo
Santísima Trinidad
Parque Guerrero
San Nicolás Tolentino
Zacatillo
Cena Obscuras
Constitución de 1857
Av. de los Plateros
José María Morelos
Av. de los Plateros
Estrella de Oro Bus Station
San Miguel
To Acapulco
0 200 mi
0 200 km
JALISCO
MICHOACAN
Mexico City
VERACRUZ
Taxco
GUERRER
OAXACA
Acapulco
0 100 yds
0 100 m

interchange, and proceed straight ahead for Taxco. The drive from Mexico City takes about 3½ hours.

From Acapulco, you have two options: Hwy. 95D is the toll road through Iguala to Taxco, or you can take the old two-lane road (Hwy. 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 ("Avenue of the Silversmiths," formerly Av. Kennedy). Taxis to the *zócalo* cost around 20 pesos.

VISITOR INFORMATION The **State of Guerrero Dirección de Turismo** (✆/fax **762/622-2274;** www.guerrero.gob.mx) 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 to Saturday, 9am to 8pm, and Sunday till 6pm. 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**—the best place to begin your silver shopping, to get an idea of prices for more standard designs. It's open daily from 9am to 7pm. 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 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.

Spanish Lessons & Art Classes in Taxco

The Taxco campus of the **Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México** (**UNAM;** ✆ **762/622-3410;** www.cepetaxco.unam.mx) houses the Center of Instruction for Foreign Students on the grounds of the Hacienda del Chorrillo, formerly part of the Cortez land grant. Here, students can learn folkloric dancing, Spanish, drawing, composition, and history. Classes are small, and courses generally last 3 months. The school provides a list of accommodations that consist primarily of hotels. More reasonable accommodations for a lengthy stay are available but are best arranged once you're there. At many locations all over town, you'll find notices of furnished apartments or rooms for rent. For information about the school, either contact the Dirección de Turismo (tourist office) in Taxco (see "Visitor Information," above) or write the school directly, at Hacienda del Chorrillo, 40200 Taxco, Gro.

FAST FACTS The telephone area code is **762.** The main **post office,** Benito Juárez 6, at the City Hall building (✆ **762/627-3503**), is open Monday through Saturday from 8:30am to 3:30pm. The older branch of the post office (✆ **762/622-0501**), open Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 2:30pm, is on the outskirts, on the highway to Acapulco. It's in a row of shops with a black-and-white CORREO sign.

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, on Thursday evening, lasts almost 4 hours. Villagers from the surrounding area carry 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 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. In late April to early May, **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. Art exhibits, street fairs, and other festivities are part of the dual celebration.

EXPLORING TAXCO

Shopping for jewelry and other items is the major pastime for tourists. Prices for silver jewelry at Taxco's shops are about the best in the world, and everything is available, from 10-peso trinkets to artistic pieces that cost hundreds of dollars. In addition to the workshops listed below, there are several standout shops in town, including **TeGo,** Benito Juarez 46 (✆ **762/622-0615**), which features the unique jewelry of designer Teresa Gonzalez. 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.

If you purchase a large item during your stay and need help with packaging and/or mailing it, visit the folks at **Empaques San David,** Miguel Hidalgo 15 (✆ **762/622-2036**).

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 a bookstore, library, classrooms, and exhibit halls where period clothing, engravings, paintings, and crafts are on display. The center also books traveling art exhibits, theatrical performances, music concerts, and dance events.

Plaza Borda 1. ✆ **762/622-6617.** Fax 762/662-6634. Free admission. Tues–Fri 9am–4pm; Sat–Sun 10am–5pm.

Humboldt House/Museo Virreinal 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 a recent restoration of the Santa Prisca Church. Signs with detailed information are in

Spanish and English. As you enter, to the right are very rare *túmulos funerios* (painted funerary altars). The bottom two were painted for Charles III of Spain; the top one, with a carved phoenix, was reputedly painted for the funeral of José de la Borda.

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, and on the bottom level there's an impressive 17th-century carved wood altar of Dolores. Next to it, 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 20 pesos adults, 15 pesos students and teachers with ID. Tues–Sat 10am–6pm; Sun 10am–4pm.

Mercado Municipal Located to the right of the Santa Prisca Church, behind and below Berta'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 (1900–67). 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 upper floor holds changing exhibits.

Calle Porfirio A. Delgado 1. ✆ **762/622-1660.** Admission 31 pesos adults, free for children 12 and younger; free to all Sun. Tues–Sat 9am–5pm; Sun 9am–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.

Museo de la Plateria The silver museum holds a small collection of exquisite silver pieces, the most interesting of which is *La Conquista de Anahuac,* in which copper Aztec warriors and silver Spanish conquistadors face off on a chess board made with black wood and oyster shell. The owner, Antonio Pineda, declined a $1-million offer to sell it. This museum represents his private collection and includes silver pieces from throughout the last century, such as coins, sculptures, jewelry, and crowns. A mural created by a local artist represents the history of Mexico's silver industry.

Plaza Borda 1. ✆ **762/622-0658.** www.guerrero.gob.mx Admission 10 pesos. Tues–Sun 10am–6pm. The museum is located downstairs in the Patio de las Artesanias.

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, it's one of Mexico's most impressive baroque churches. The ultracarved facade is eclipsed by the interior, with breathtakingly intricate gold-leafed saints and cherubic angels. The paintings by Miguel Cabrera, one of Mexico's most famous 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. Make sure the guide's English is passable, and establish whether the price is per person or per tour. Note that flash photos are not allowed.

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

Nearby Attractions

The impressive **Grutas de Cacahuamilpa** ★, known as the Cacahuamilpa Caves or Grottoes, lie less than a half-hour north of Taxco. Hourly guided tours run daily at the caverns, which house fascinating stalactite and stalagmite formations. 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; one-way is 50 pesos, and admission to the caves is 50 pesos. For more information, see "Sights Near Tepoztlán," later in this chapter.

Rancho Emilia Castillo Don Antonio Castillo was one of hundreds of young men to whom William Spratling taught silversmithing 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. After roaming the steep streets of Taxco, a visit to the sprawling hacienda is the perfect way to have the beauty of Guerrero spread out in front of you. The grounds are lush, with a waterfall feeding a stream that runs through the whole property. A tour includes a visit to a workshop where skilled artisans create everything from silver housewares to ceramic figures. Emilia's work is for sale on the ground floor of the Posada de los Castillo, just below the Plazuela Bernal.

8km (5 miles) south of town on the Acapulco Hwy. Also at Plazuela Bernal, Taxco. ✆ **762/622-6901.** If you take a taxi, tell them to drop you off near the crocodile sculpture. Free admission. Workshop Mon–Sat 10am–3pm and 4–7pm; open to groups at other hours by appointment only.

Silversmiths & Wordsmiths

As you walk through Taxco's cavernous marketplace, carved into the Guerrero mountainside, certainly the sights, smells, and sounds will be unfamiliar. And there's one shop owner who tries extra hard to make you think. In your exploration, you might stumble upon a Herman Hesse quote neatly written on a chalkboard among the pipes, screws, and water heater parts of an old-fashioned hardware store. It says in Spanish, "Not being loved is only a question of luck; the true tragedy is not being able to love at all." The store's owner, Miguel Angel Aviles, has been putting up intriguing phrases in front of his locale for more than 20 years and says that people often pass by just to read them. One of the biggest attention getters was this one by former Mexican President Álvaro Obregón: "Certainly bad luck exists, but god only distributes it among fools." One Uruguayan visitor liked that one so much that he turned it into his Christmas card—one of the recipients came to complain to Aviles that he'd been looking at the phrase on his refrigerator all year.

If you'd like to read Aviles's latest phrase, enter the market from the stairway on Real de Cuauhtémoc, just in front of the pharmacy. Make a quick right at the bottom of the stairs, and the hardware store will be on your immediate right.

Spratling Ranch Workshop A trip to William Spratling's hacienda-style home will show you what distinctive Spratling work was all about. Although the prices here are higher than at other outlets, the designs are unusual and considered collectible. There's no store in Taxco, and 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 (6¼ miles) south of town on the Acapulco Hwy. ✆ **762/622-0026.** Free admission. Call in advance for hours, which vary. The *combi* to Iguala stops at the ranch; fare is 18 pesos.

WHERE TO STAY

Moderate

Best Western Hotel Taxco ★★ This is the newest and most modern hotel in the town center, with professional service and an international clientele. Rooms are small but very comfortable, with white tiles and bedspreads and Mexican architectural touches. Some have windows (interior rooms do not), and the junior suite has a terrace with views of the surrounding hills. Near the Santa Prisca church, this hotel has a quality Mexican restaurant and access to a nearby pool. The friendly staff will arrange in-room massages upon request. They offer a 10% discount on cash payments.

Carlos J. Nibbi 2, Plazuela de San Juan, 40200 Taxco, Gro. ✆ **762/627-6194.** Fax 762/622-3416. www.bestwesterntaxco.com. 23 units. 1,100 pesos double; 1,500 pesos junior suite. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; access to outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Monte Taxco Overrated This resort and country club sits atop a hill near the entrance to Taxco coming from Mexico City. A longtime landmark of the city, it offers golf and tennis, spa services, and access to the mountain's cable car, which operates daily from 8am to 7pm. Colonial-style rooms are a bit dated but comfortable. Open weekends for dinner only, **Toni's** (see below) has the best city views of any restaurant in Taxco, and you can finish the night at the flashy dance club next door. You'll need to drive or take a taxi to reach the city center.

Fracc. Lomas de Taxco s/n, 40210 Taxco, Gro. ✆ **762/622-1300.** Fax 762/622-1428. www.montetaxco hotel.com. 200 units. 1,250 pesos and up double. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; dance club; 9-hole golf course; gym; heated outdoor pool; room service; spa services; 3 tennis courts; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer.

Inexpensive

Hotel Emilia Castillo Value Each room in this delightful small hotel is simply but handsomely appointed with carved doors and furniture; the small tile bathrooms have showers only. Ask for one of the interior rooms, which are much quieter than those facing the street. A high-quality silver shop lies next to the colorful lobby. The hotel does not have parking but contracts with a local parking garage.

Juan Ruiz de Alarcón 7, 40200 Taxco, Gro. ✆/fax **762/622-1396.** www.hotelemiliacastillo.com. 14 units. 500 pesos double; 550 pesos triple with TV. MC, V. 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 below). **Amenities:** Wi-Fi. *In room:* TV.

Hotel los Arcos ★ Los Arcos occupies a converted 1620 monastery. The handsome inner patio is bedecked with Puebla pottery and rustic furnishings surrounding a central fountain. Guest rooms are nicely but sparsely appointed, with natural tile floors and colonial-style furniture; the spacious junior suite has two levels. 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.

Juan Ruiz de Alarcón 4, 40200 Taxco, Gro. ✆ **762/622-1836.** Fax 762/622-7982. www.hotellosarcos.net. 21 units. 500 pesos and up. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Internet. *In room:* TV, fan.

Hotel Santa Prisca Value The Santa Prisca, 1 block from the Plaza Borda on the Plazuela San Juan, is one of the oldest and best-located hotels in town. Rooms are small but comfortable ("superior doubles" are slightly larger), 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. A reading area in an upstairs salon overlooks Taxco, as well as a garden patio with fountains.

Cenaobscuras 1, 40200 Taxco, Gro. ✆ **762/622-0080,** -0980. Fax 762/622-2938. 34 units. 500 pesos double; 300 pesos superior double; 500 pesos junior suite. AE, MC, V. Limited free parking. **Amenities:** Breakfast cafe and bar; room service. *In room:* No phone.

WHERE TO DINE

Taxco gets a lot of day-trippers, 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* (taverns) 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, and piano music accompanies dinner. The menu, mainly shrimp or beef, is limited, but the food is quite good. Try tender, juicy prime roast beef carved at your table, which comes with creamed spinach and baked potato. To reach Toni's, it's best to take a taxi. Note that it's open for dinner on weekends only.

In the Monte Taxco (see above). ✆ **762/622-1300.** www.montetaxcohotel.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses 90–260 pesos. AE, MC, V. Fri–Sun 7–10:30pm.

Moderate

Cafe Sasha ★★ INTERNATIONAL/VEGETARIAN One of the cutest places to dine in town, Cafe Sasha is very popular with locals and offers a great array of vegetarian options—such as falafel with tabouleh and vegetarian crepes, as well as Mexican and international classics. Try their Thai chicken curry or a hearty burrito. Open for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, it's also a great place for a cappuccino and pastry, or an evening cocktail. The music is hip, and the atmosphere is inviting and chic. The friendly owners, Javier and Sasha, are world travelers who delight in hearing their customers' tales.

Calle Juan Ruiz de Alarcón 1, just down from Plazuela de Berna. ✆ **762/627-6464.** Breakfast 20–70 pesos; main courses 50–80 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 8am–1am.

El Adobe ★ MEXICAN This charming restaurant is an eclectic Mexican mix of adobe, brick, and wood with decor that includes regional art, old black-and-white photos of Mexican and American entertainers, and some kitsch memorabilia. There are a number of romantic balcony tables lit with candles and lamps after dark. The hearty fare includes *cecina taxqueña* (thin strip steak served with guacamole), *pollo Guerrero* (chicken cooked with paprika, onion, small potatoes, and guacamole), and enchiladas prepared

any way you want. A guitar player/singer performs weekend nights, and brunch is offered on Sunday.

Plazuela de San Juan 13. ✆ **762/622-1416.** Breakfast 30–50 pesos; main courses 55–140 pesos. MC, V. Daily 8am–10:30pm.

El Rincon del Toril LATIN This festive restaurant combines Mexican, Spanish, Italian, and Argentine cuisines. Delicious steaks are served sizzling hot on the skillet at your table. For a meat-eating extravaganza, order the *parrillada El Toril* for two, which includes *arrachera* beef, ribs, chorizo, and an American steak. Apart from the steaks, the menu offers an enticing selection of fish, chicken, and pasta dishes. The casual and often crowded dining room is brightly decorated with mementos from Mexican bullfights. It leads to an outdoor terrace next to the Plaza Borda. Traditional Mexican music plays cheerfully in the background.

Plaza Borda 3. ✆ **762/627-6207.** Main courses 70–180 pesos. MC, V. Daily 8am–10pm.

La Terraza Café-Bar INTERNATIONAL One of two restaurants at the Hotel Agua Escondida (on the *zócalo*), the rooftop La Terraza is a scenic spot for a meal or a drink, with tasty food and a great view of the church, town, and surrounding mountains. The diverse menu includes dishes such as breaded veal, grilled pork chops, chicken fajitas, and *mole* enchiladas. Even if you're normally not into desserts, you should seriously think about ordering a delicious crepe or flan here. Frosty margaritas and rich cappuccinos are also on order. During the day, cafe umbrellas shade the sun, and you can stargaze here at night.

Plaza Borda 4. ✆ **762/622-1166.** www.aguaescondida.com/new/english/bar.htm. Main courses 40–100 pesos. MC, V. Daily noon–10:30pm.

Sotavento Restaurant Bar Galería ★★ ITALIAN/INTERNATIONAL Vibrant Mexican paintings decorate the walls of this stylish restaurant, which offers tables inside, on the balcony, or in the garden patio. The extensive menu features Italian and Mexican dishes—for starters, try the fresh spinach salad with goat cheese and bacon, followed by a large pepper steak. For vegetarians, I recommend the Spaghetti Barbara with poblano peppers, onions, avocado, and cream. Savory crepes are also available.

Benito Juárez 12, next to City Hall. ✆ **762/627-1217.** Main courses 45–150 pesos. MC, V. Tues–Sun 9am–11pm. From the Plaza Borda, walk downhill beside the Hotel Agua Escondida, and then follow the street as it bears left on Agustin de Tulsa (don't go right on Juan Ruiz de Alarcón) about 1 block; the restaurant is on the left just after the street bends left.

Inexpensive

Punta del Cielo INTERNATIONAL This coffee shop, which is a local chain, is Mexican owned and uses coffee beans from Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Veracruz at a good price. You can't beat the view from this location in Plaza Borda. Several tables are set up on a small patio that overlooks the bustling plaza and the Santa Prisca Church. The rest of the tables are spread throughout the spacious cafe, which is decorated with black-and-white photographs and has a supply of local newspapers and magazines on hand. After being served your coffee, you're invited to personalize it at a fully stocked flavor bar. Choices include amaretto, guava, mango, and hazelnut. They also offer croissants and paninis, which are perfect if you've already had your share of tacos.

Plaza Borda 4. Below Hotel Agua Escondida. ✆ **762/627-2722.** www.puntadelcielo.com.mx. Coffee 17–45 pesos; baguettes and snacks 45–70 pesos. MC, V. If you're leaving the Santa Prisa Church, it will be on your right side after you pass the Casa Borda.

TAXCO AFTER DARK

Located upstairs at Plaza Borda 12, **Acerto** (✆ **762/622-0064**) is an enticing all-purpose hangout overlooking the square. It serves as an Internet cafe, sports bar, and restaurant. Taxco's popular, modern dance club, **Windows,** sits high up the mountain in the Monte Taxco (see above; ✆ **762/622-1300**). The entire city is on view, and music runs the gamut from Latin pop to '80s hits. For 50 pesos cover, you can dance away Friday or Saturday night from 9pm to 3am. The club seldom gets crowded.

Completely different in tone is **Bar Berta's** (✆ **762/622-0172**), next to the Santa Prisca Church at Plaza Borda 9. 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. Grab a seat on the balcony overlooking the plaza and church. A Berta (the drink, of course) costs about 50 pesos; rum, the same. It's open daily from 11am to 8pm.

La Concha Nostra (✆ **762/622-7944**), has a local, edgy feel and features live rock music Saturday nights for a 25 pesos cover. It's located upstairs inside the Hotel Casa Grande at Plazuela de San Juan 7 and is open nightly until 1am. If you're looking to get down on the dance floor, **Ibiza Night Club** (✆ **762/627-1664;** www.ibizataxco.com) is the place to go. Located on Av. de los Plateros 137, it hosts local disc jockeys and theme nights; check their website for upcoming events.

2 IXTAPAN DE LA SAL: A THERMAL SPA TOWN

120km (74 miles) SW of Mexico City

The whitewashed town of Ixtapan de la Sal (not to be confused with Ixtapa, on the Pacific coast) is known for its thermal mud baths—this is an original spa town, with generations of healing traditions. Hotels in Ixtapan (pronounced "*eeks*-tah-pahn") de la Sal tend to fill up on weekends and Mexican holidays, as the town is a popular retreat from Mexico City. Cuernavaca, Taxco, and Toluca are all easy side trips.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING

By Car From Mexico City, take Hwy. 15 to Toluca. In Toluca, Hwy. 15 becomes Paseo Tollocan. Follow Tollocan south until you see signs pointing left to Ixtapan de la Sal. After the turn, continue straight for around 15km (9¼ miles). Just before the town of Tenango del Valle, you have a choice of the free road to Ixtapan de la Sal or the toll road. The free road winds through the mountains and takes 1½ hours. The inexpensive toll road has fewer mountain curves and takes around an hour—it's worth taking. The toll road stops about 15km (9¼ miles) before Ixtapan; the rest of the trip is on a curvy mountainous drive.

By Bus From Mexico City's Terminal Poniente, buses leave for Ixtapan de la Sal every few minutes. Request a bus that's taking the toll road, which cuts the travel time by 30 to 60 minutes, to about 2½ hours. To return, take a bus marked MEXICO DIRECTO, which leaves every 10 minutes and usually stops in Toluca. Buses from here also go to Cuernavaca and Taxco every 40 minutes.

A PUBLIC SPA

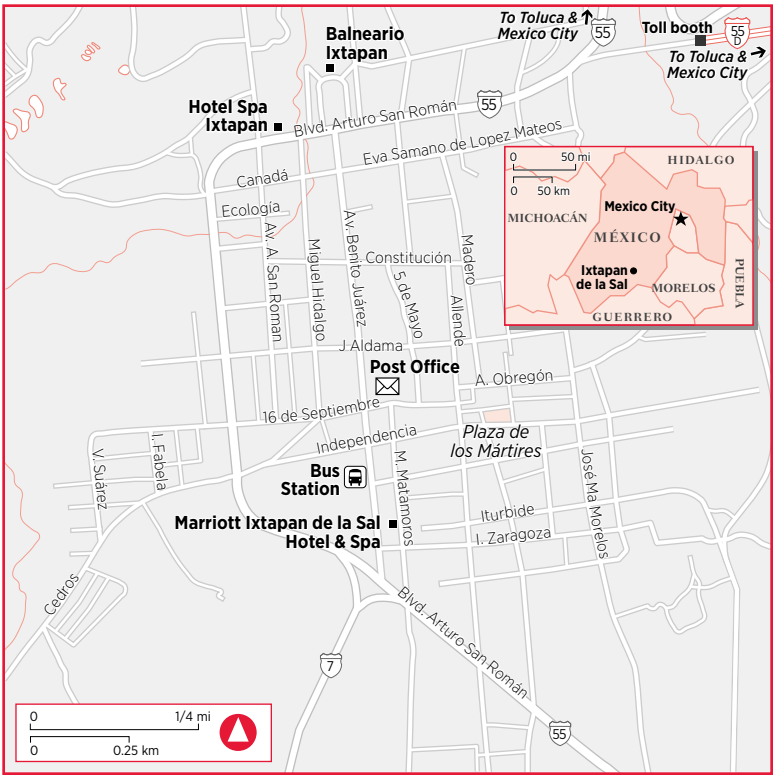
The **Ixtapan Parque Acuatico** (✆ **55/5254-0500;** www.parqueixtapan.com), next to the Hotel Spa Ixtapan, is the town's original public spa and bathhouse. It's not a modern, pampering spa, but a spa in the traditional manner—think Turkish bath. The *balneario* has melded its traditional thermal waters with some features that make it more of an aquatic park. In addition to the large pools of varying temperatures, it offers modern water slides, a slow-moving river, and other attractions. Entrance is 160 pesos for adults, 80 pesos for children between .9m and 1.2m (3–4 ft.) tall; children under .9m (3 ft.) tall enter free. The *balneario* has restaurants, so you can spend the day. The entrance fee gives you access to all of the pools and rides. Lockers are about 7 pesos. The *balneario* is open daily from 8am to 7pm (for the thermal baths); the water park is open daily from 9am to 6pm (for the rides). The traditional spa amenities and services are next door, where you can choose among private thermal water baths, massages, facials, hair treatments, and more. Prices range from 200 to 725 pesos. When you purchase a spa treatment, you can include access to the *balneario* for 90 pesos. The spa is open daily from 8am to 8pm during holiday periods; at other times, Monday through Friday from 8am to 8pm, Saturday and Sunday from 7am to 8pm.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

Hotel Ixtapan Spa & Golf Resort ★ (Value) The town's famous spa resort sits on 14 manicured and flower-filled hectares (35 acres). In operation since 1939, it feels aged, but unrenovated areas afford guests the nostalgic feel of the original hotel and spa. The resort offers golf, tennis, swimming, and miles of trails for walking, jogging, or biking. It has swimming pools, an outdoor whirlpool, and a host of spa services such as Thai massages and Balinese hot clay treatments. Rooms in the main building are slightly better furnished than the so-called "villa" rooms, but all are fairly basic. There are three restaurants: One features spa cuisine, another serves a more traditional international menu, and the third serves lunch by the pool. Many North Americans visit as part of a weight-loss program. The hotel shows movies throughout the week. Round-trip taxi transportation from the Mexico City airport can be arranged at the time of reservation for around 3,200 pesos, which can be shared by up to four people. Rates for the different packages include full American plan (three meals daily).

Bulevar San Román s/n, Ixtapan de la Sal, 51900 Edo. de México. ✆ **800/638-7950** in the U.S., or 721/143-2440. www.spamexico.com. 220 units, including 45 villas. $150–$240 double. 7-day spa package $1,175 per person double; 21-day spa package $2,950 per person double; 28-day spa package $3,930 per person double. Rates include all meals. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; bar; concierge; piano lounge; mountain bikes; private 18-hole golf course; gym; aerobics room and classes; 2 outdoor pools; 2 indoor and 1 outdoor whirlpools; room service; sauna; smoke-free rooms; 2 full-service spas; steam room; 2 tennis courts; hiking trails; Wi-Fi (in lobby). *In room:* A/C, TV.

Marriott Ixtapan de la Sal Hotel & Spa ★★ (Kids) The design of this hotel, located at the town entrance, evokes traditional Mexican style while still feeling modern. Built on several levels on the slope of a hill, the Marriott offers sweeping views of the surrounding mountains. Guest rooms are bright and spacious, with tile floors, Mexican accents, and modern amenities, like iHome, LCD TVs, and Wi-Fi. The Tecilli Spa is a full-service luxury spa that offers massages, facials, body wraps, and treatments based on the four elements. This hotel is very kid-friendly, with a go-kart racetrack, soccer fields, tree houses, a playroom designed to look like a jungle, a day care center, and a pirate ship, complete with water slides, at the outdoor pool.



José Maria Morelos s/n, Fracc. Bugambilias. ✆ **800/900-8800** or 721/143-2010. www.marriott.com/hotels/travel/mexix-ixtapan-de-la-sal-marriott-hotel-and-spa. 189 units. $119–$220 double; $180–$260 suite. AE, MC, V. Parking $9–$14. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; bar; children's center and programs, including go-kart track; small chapel; concierge; 18-hole golf course nearby; gym; 3 outdoor pools and 1 indoor pool; soccer field; smoke-free rooms; sauna; spa; steam room; tennis courts. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi (160 pesos for 24 hr.; free in lobby).

3 VALLE DE BRAVO & AVANDARO: MEXICO'S SWITZERLAND

152km (94 miles) SW of Mexico City

Valle de Bravo has been called the "Switzerland of Mexico." Ringed by pine-forested mountains and set beside a beautiful lake, Valle de Bravo is a 16th-century village with cobblestone streets and colonial structures built around a town plaza. Like San Miguel de Allende, Taxco, and Puerto Vallarta, Valle de Bravo is a National Heritage village; new construction must conform to the colonial style of the original village.

The village's cobbled streets, small restaurants, hotels, spas, and shops are full on weekends—this is a very popular retreat from Mexico City. Some shops and restaurants may be closed weekdays. The crafts market, 3 blocks from the main square, is open daily from 10am to 5pm, and colorfully dressed Mazahua Indians sell their handmade tapestries daily around the town plaza.

Sailing, windsurfing, bass fishing, and water-skiing are popular on the lake. Boats of varying speeds can be rented (along with a driver and water-ski equipment) at the dock for between 200 and 400 pesos per hour; look for the sign that says YATE CRISTAL Y LANCHAS. Excursions from Valle de Bravo include a trip to the nesting grounds of the monarch butterfly between November and February. It can be very rainy and chilly September through December, in addition to the summer rainy season.

The neighboring town of Avándaro, 6km (3¾ miles) away, is a popular place for weekend homes for well-to-do residents of Mexico City.

GETTING THERE

BY CAR From Mexico City, the quickest route is Hwy. 15 to Toluca. In Toluca, Hwy. 15 becomes Paseo Tollocan. Follow Tollocan south until you see signs pointing left to Hwy. 134 and Valle de Bravo, Francisco de los Ranchos, and Temascaltepec. After the turn, continue on Hwy. 142 until Francisco de los Ranchos, where you bear right and follow signs to Valle de Bravo. The drive from this point takes about 1½ to 2 hours.

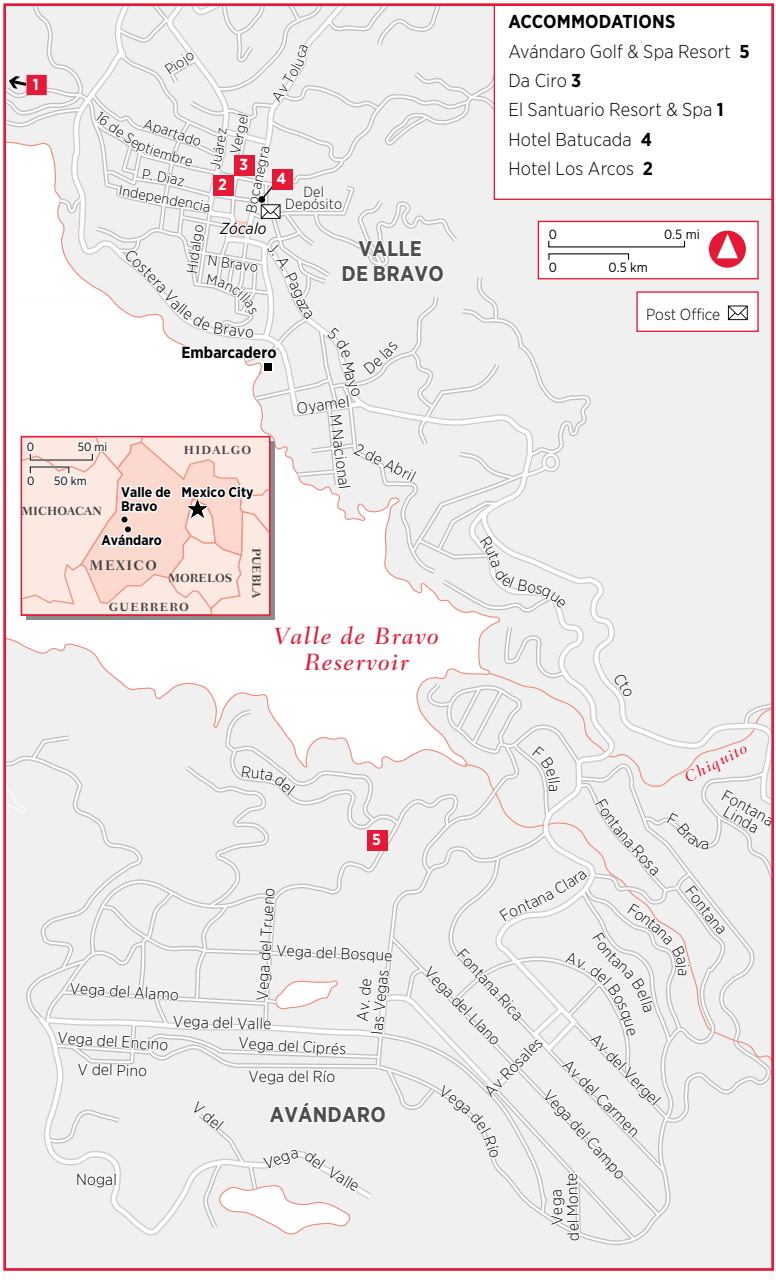
BY BUS From Mexico City's Terminal Poniente, buses leave every 20 minutes for the 3-hour journey. First-class buses depart hourly.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

For a meal amid flowering gardens and trickling fountains, the wonderful Italian restaurant **Da Ciro,** Virgel 201 (✆ **726/262-0122;** reservations recommended; main courses 110–180 pesos; American Express, MasterCard, Visa; Fri–Sat 1pm–midnight, Sun 1–8pm), is just a short walk from the town's central square. If you come for lunch, ask for a table on the idyllic outdoor terrace. At night, the dining room with brick walls, wood-beam ceilings, Tiffany lamps, and floor-to-ceiling windows transforms into a romantic hideaway. Start with a Caprese salad followed by a mouthwatering homemade pizza. The house specialty is pasta, including an incredibly delicious spaghetti Parmesan prepared tableside. Also excellent are risotto with shrimp, *osso buco,* and sea bass stuffed with shrimp in cognac. Like many places in Valle de Bravo, Da Ciro is open only on weekends.

Avándaro Golf and Spa Resort ★ On 118 hectares (291 acres) amid large estates, lushly forested mountains, and a gorgeous, rolling 18-hole golf course, this resort occupies one of the loveliest settings in Mexico. Rooms come in two categories: large deluxe suites and smaller, less luxurious cabañas. Rooms have fireplaces and terraces or balconies overlooking the grounds. The extensive spa includes hot and cold whirlpools, sauna and steam rooms, and a full range of body and facial treatments. The hotel has two drawbacks: Some of the rooms need upgrading, and large tour groups often stay here. Transportation from Mexico City can be arranged.

Fracc. Vega del Río s/n. Avándaro, 51200 Valle de Bravo. ✆ **726/266-1651;** reservations 55/5280-1532, 5282-0954, 5280-5532, or 5282-0578 in Mexico City. www.hotelavandaro.com.mx. 74 units. 2,152 pesos double cabaña; 2,800 pesos deluxe suite. 7-day spa or golf package available. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; children's center; 18-hole golf course; fitness center; 25m (82-ft.) junior Olympic-size pool; hot and cold whirlpools; room service; sauna; spa w/well-trained staff and full range of services; steam rooms; 7 tennis courts. *In room:* TV, hair dryer.


ACCOMMODATIONS
Avándaro Golf & Spa Resort 5
Da Ciro 3
El Santuario Resort & Spa 1
Hotel Batucada 4
Hotel Los Arcos 2
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Post Office
VALLE DE BRAVO
Zócalo
Del Depósito
Embarcadero
Piolo
Av. Toluca
Apartado
16 de Septiembre
Juárez
Vergel
P. Diaz
Independencia
Bocanegra
Hidalgo
N Bravo
Mancillas
J. A. Pagaza
Costera Valle de Bravo
5 de Mayo
De las
Oyamel
M Nacional
2 de Abril
Ruta del Bosque
Cto
Valle de Bravo Reservoir
Ruta del
F Bella
Chiquito
Fontana Linda
F Brava
Fontana Rosa
Fontana Clara
Fontana
Fontana Baja
Fontana Bella
Fontana Rica
Av. del Bosque
Av. del Vergel
Av. del Carmen
Vega del Campo
Vega del Monte
Vega del Río
Av. Rosales
Vega del Llano
Av. de las Vegas
Vega del Trueno
Vega del Bosque
Vega del Alamo
Vega del Valle
Vega del Encino
Vega del Ciprés
V del Pino
Vega del Río
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AVÁNDARO
0 50 mi
0 50 km
HIDALGO
MICHOACAN
Valle de Bravo
Mexico City
Avándaro
MEXICO
MORELOS
PUEBLA
GUERRERO

El Santuario Resort & Spa ★★★ Set on the shores of Valle de Bravo's lake, and at the foot of an "energy-conducting" quartz mountain, this resort combines soothing natural surroundings with modern amenities, recreational activities, and spa services. Natural elements such as slate, quartz, river stones, bamboo, and shells are used in the decor details. The design includes magnificent use of water, such as infinity pools that seem to fall from the sides of the resort into the lake. The guest suites are built into the mountainside, with panoramic views of the water. Each comes with a private plunge pool. The 1,860-sq.-m (20,021-sq.-ft.) spa offers over 60 therapies in a variety of treatment rooms, including a flotation suite, as well as a cafe; oxygen bar; gym; salon; and studio for yoga, Pilates, meditation, and other mind-body activities. The signature therapy is the Yenecamú—2½ hours of treatments, which, upon request, can be performed on a pontoon boat in the middle of the lake. There's also golf, hiking, watersports on the lake, and other eco-oriented activities to while away the time.

ExHacienda San Gaspar Carretera a Colorines, Km 4.5, 51200 Valle de Bravo. ✆ **726/262-9100.** www.elsantuario.com. 64 suites. 3,000 pesos double on weekdays; 4,200 pesos double on weekends. Spa packages start at 3,200 pesos extra per person, double occupancy for 2 nights, including all meals and selected spa services. Other packages are also available. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant/bar; concierge; outdoor pool w/whirlpools; 9-hole golf course; spa; marina. *In room:* TV, hair dryer, minibar.

Hotel Batucada If you'd like to stay right in the charming town center, this is a historic option just 2 blocks from the central square. The handful of guest rooms fill the 300-year-old home and surround a flower-filled courtyard with a trickling fountain and background jazz music. The individually decorated rooms present a warm, colonial feel, with high wood-beam ceilings, rustic wood furnishings, and views of the surrounding mountains. Guests who stay 2 nights or more receive a welcome drink, fruit basket, and free continental breakfast.

Francisco González Bocanegra 207, 51200 Valle de Bravo. ✆ **726/262-0480** or 722/261-4051. Fax 726/262-0586. www.hotelbatucada.com.mx. 9 units. 1,888–2,832 pesos double. Rates include breakfast. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; concierge; room service. *In room:* TV.

Hotel los Arcos Kids The Hotel los Arcos, close to the main square, affords views of the lake and village. Two stories of rooms on one side and three stories on the other surround a swimming pool. Nineteen rooms have fireplaces, an important feature in winter here. Some rooms have balconies, and most have glass walls with views. This hotel is popular with families.

Francisco González Bocanegra 310, 51200 Valle de Bravo. ✆/fax **726/262-0042,** -0531, -0168. 24 units. Mon–Thurs 850 pesos double; Fri–Sun 1,207 pesos double. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Outdoor pool. *In room:* TV.

4 CUERNAVACA: LAND OF ETERNAL SPRING ★★★

102km (63 miles) S of Mexico City; 80km (50 miles) 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 for its perfect climate and flowering landscapes. Spa services are easy to find. More important, Cuernavaca exudes a deep sense of connection with its historical and spiritual heritage. Its palaces, walled villas, and elaborate haciendas are home to museums, spas, and extraordinary guesthouses.

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Chomilpa
Alvaro Obregón
Ricardo Linares
BARRANCA
Gómes Farías
Mariano
Calle Carlos Fuera
To Pirámide de Teopanzolco
Guadalupe Victoria
Av. Gral. José María Morelos
Matamoros
Arista
Market
Degollado
No Reelección
Guerrero
(RAVINE)
Calle de Aragón y León
Obregón
Pr. M. Salinas
Morrow
Calle de Arteaga
Pr. de Rayón
Lerdo de Tejada
Calle Central
Jardín Juárez
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Calle de Gutenberg
Jardín Borda
Entrance
Alarcón
Comonfort
Governor's Palace
Zócalo
Alameda
Salazar
To Jardín de los Héroes
Hidalgo
Plaza de Armas
Plazuela del Zacate
Callejón Borda
Bartolomé de las Casas
Palacio Municipal
Netsahualcoyotl
Galeana
Juárez
Francisco Leyva
Avenida Morelos
20 de Noviembre
Abasolo
Bus Terminal Pullman de Morelos
0 50 mi
0 50 km
HIDALGO
Mexico City
MICHOACÁN
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Fun Facts You Wouldn't Know It, But . . .

The city of Cuernavaca has nothing to do with bull's horns, as the direct translation of its name would suggest. The Aztecs were much more succinct when they named their favorite leisurely retreat Cuauhnáhuac (pronounced *kwow-nah-wak*), or place of the trees. Cortez and his men had trouble getting their tongues around that word, so they just named it after something that sounded similar.

Wander the traditional markets and you'll see crystals, quartz, onyx, and tiger's eye amid the trinkets. These stones come from the Tepozteco Mountains—for centuries considered an energy source—which cradle Cuernavaca to the north and east. Mexico begins to narrow here, and several mountain ranges converge. Cuernavaca sits at 1,533m (5,028 ft.) elevation. East and southeast of Cuernavaca are two volcanoes, also potent symbols of earth energy: **Ixtaccihuatl** (the Sleeping Woman) and the recently active **Popocatépetl** (the Smoking Mountain).

Cuernavaca, capital of the state of Morelos, is also a cultural treasure, with a past that closely follows the history of Mexico. So divine are the landscape and climate that both the Aztec ruler Moctezuma II and French Emperor Maximilian built private retreats here. Today Cuernavaca remains the most popular weekend getaway for moneyed residents of Mexico City. As a result, the roads between the capital and Cuernavaca are jammed almost every weekend, but you can avoid some of the crowds by traveling early in the morning. Cuernavaca even has a large American colony, plus many students attending the numerous language and cultural institutes.

Emperor Charles V gave Cuernavaca to Hernán Cortez as a fief, and in 1532 the conquistador built a palace (now the Museo de Cuauhnáhuac), 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.

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 of 1910.

Today Cuernavaca's popularity has brought an influx of wealthy foreigners and industrial capital. With this commercial growth, the city has also acquired the less desirable byproducts of increased traffic, noise, and air pollution—although still far, far less than nearby Mexico City, which you may be escaping.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING

By Car From Mexico City, take Insurgentes or Periférico south, which will take you to Hwy. 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 *Cuernavaca libre* (free) road on the right. The free road is slower and very windy, but more scenic. The toll road costs about 90 pesos.

By Bus ***Important note:*** Buses to Cuernavaca depart directly from the Mexico City airport. (See "Getting There & Departing: By Bus," p. 60, for details.) The trip takes an hour or longer. The Mexico City Central de Autobuses del Sur exists primarily to serve the Mexico City–Cuernavaca-Taxco-Acapulco-Zihuatanejo route. Pullman de Morelos has two stations in Cuernavaca: downtown, at the corner of Abasolo and Nezahualcóyotl (✆ **777/318-0907** or 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.

Autobuses Estrella Blanca (✆ **777/312-2626;** www.estrellablanca.com.mx) depart from the Central del Sur, with four buses daily from Mexico City. They arrive in Cuernavaca at Av. Morelos Sur 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;** www.estrelladeoro.com.mx), Morelos 900, serves Iguala, Chilpancingo, Acapulco, and Taxco.

Estrella Roja (✆ **777/318-5934;** www.estrellaroja.com.mx), 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 **Municipal Tourist Office** is at Calle Hidalgo 5, next to the Jardin Morelos (Morelos Garden; ✆ **777/314-3920;** www.cuernavaca.gob.mx). It's open daily from 9am to 6pm. The **Morelos State Tourism Office** is located on Av. Morelos Sur 187 (✆ **777/314-3881;** www.morelostravel.com). It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm. There's also a **City Tourism kiosk** (✆ **777/329-4404**) at Morelos Sur 278, beside the El Calvario Church, open daily from 9am to 5pm.

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 easygoing, 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 Cuauhnáhuac.

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

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

Banks Bank tellers (9am–4pm, 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).

Drugstore **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. Some are open 24 hours a day, while others are open daily from 7am to 10pm.

Hospital **Hospital Inovamed** is located at Calle Cuauhtémoc 305, Col. Lomas de la Selva (✆ **777/311-2482,** -2483, -2484).

Internet Access There are several Internet cafes around the city; however, they open and close frequently. Most hotels offer Internet access or can point you in the direction of a place that does.

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 8am to 6pm, Saturday from 10am to 2pm.

EXPLORING CUERNAVACA

On weekends, the whole city (including 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. The traditional ***mercado*** **(public market)** adjacent to the Cortez Palace is open daily from 10am to 10pm. The colorful rows of stands are a lively place to test your bargaining skills as you purchase pottery, silver jewelry, crystals, and other trinkets. Note that the Cuauhnáhuac museum is closed on Monday.

Catedral de Cuernavaca ★ 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, also known as the *Catedral de Asunción de María,* 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 are a symbol of the Franciscan order, which had its monastery here. The monastery is open to the public, 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.

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

The main 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) 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). ✆ **777/318-4590.** Free admission. Daily 8am–2pm and 4–7pm.

Spanish Lessons in Cuernavaca

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, and then decide. Contact the **Universidad Internacional,** San Jerónimo 304 (Apdo. Postal 1520), 62000 Cuernavaca, Morelos (✆ **800/574-1583** in the U.S., or 777/317-1087; www.spanish.com.mx); **Instituto de Idioma y Cultura en Cuernavaca** (✆ **777/317-8947;** fax 777/317-0455); or **Universal Center for Language and Social Communication: Innovative Spanish,** J. H. Preciado 171 (Apdo. Postal 1-1826, 62000 Cuernavaca, Morelos; ✆ **777/318-2904** or 312-4902; www.universal-spanish.com). The entire experience, from classes to lodging, can be quite expensive; the school may accept credit cards for the class portion.

Jardín Borda Across Morelos Street from the cathedral lies 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 kiosks and an artificial pond. Maximilian took it over as his private summerhouse in 1865. He and Empress Carlota entertained lavishly in the gardens and held concerts by the lake.

The gardens were completely restored and reopened in 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, and rowboats are for rent. The lake is artfully adapted as an outdoor theater (see website for performance information), with seats for the audience on one side and the stage on the other. Music concerts are often held on Sunday evenings. A cafe serves refreshments and light meals, and a weekend market inside the *jardín* sells arts and crafts.

Av. Morelos Sur 271, at Hidalgo. ✆ **777/318-1044.** www.arte-cultura-morelos.gob.mx. Admission 30 pesos adults, 15 pesos children. Tues–Sun 10am–5:30pm.

Jardín Etnobotánico y Museo de Medicina Tradicional y Herbolaria ★★
This serene museum of traditional herbal medicine, in the south Cuernavaca suburb of Acapantzingo, occupies a former resort 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 hundreds of orchids growing near the rear of the property.

Matamoros 14, Acapantzingo. ✆ **777/312-5955,** 312-3108, or 314-4046. www.inah.gob.mx. Free admission. Daily 9am–4:30pm. 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.

Museo Casa Robert Brady ★★ This private home and garden–turned–museum houses an eclectic collection of religious, folk, and ethnic art, including pre-Hispanic and colonial pieces; oil paintings by Frida Kahlo and Rufino Tamayo; popular Mexican art; and handicrafts 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. The brightly decorated house (tiled with hand-painted Talavera throughout) is a work of art in its own right. Brady lived in Venice for 5 years before settling in Cuernavaca in 1960. The wildly colorful rooms remain exactly as Brady left them when he died here in 1986. Admission includes a guide in Spanish; English and French guides are available if requested in advance. A small cafe in the main patio serves refreshments.

Calle Nezahualcóyotl 4 (btw. Hidalgo and Abasolo). ✆ **777/318-8554.** www.bradymuseum.org. Admission 30 pesos. Tues–Sun 10am–6pm.

Museo Regional Cuauhnáhuac ★ The Palacio Cortez, once home to Mexico's most famous conquistador, is now the Museo de Cuauhnáhuac, devoted to the history of Morelos state. It's also home to a stunning Diego Rivera mural, *The History of Cuernavaca & Morelos,* an unflinching illustrated history of the brutality and treachery of the Spanish Conquest. In one panel, a Spanish soldier holds a hot poker, poised to brand an Aztec prisoner on the neck; behind him, men in armor pour gold pieces into a large trunk while a priest blesses the transaction. True to Rivera's communist faith in the power of the Mexican people, the largest images in the gallery are full-length portraits of Emiliano Zapata, the revolutionary who fought for agrarian reform with the cry, *"¡Tierra y libertad!"* ("Land and liberty!"), and Father José Maria Morelos, a hero of the War of Independence.

On the lower level, the excellent bookstore is open daily from 11am to 8pm. Tour guides in front of the palace offer their services in the museum for about 100 pesos 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. Admission 41 pesos; free Sun. Tues–Sun 9am–6pm.

ACTIVITIES & 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 (✆ **777/314-3396;** www.tabachines.com), 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 750 pesos during the week and 2,000 pesos on weekends, with fees reduced by half after 1:30pm. American Express, Visa, and MasterCard are accepted. It's open Tuesday through Sunday from 7am to 6pm.

Also in Cuernavaca is the **Club de Golf Hacienda San Gaspar,** Av. Emiliano Zapata, Col. Cliserio Alanis (✆ **777/319-4424;** www.sangaspar.com), 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 Popocatépetl and Ixtaccihuatl volcanoes, and the Tepozteco Mountains. Greens fees are 800 pesos on weekdays, 1,400 pesos on weekends (discounted after 2pm); carts cost an additional 450 pesos for 18 holes, and a caddy is 200 pesos 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,** -7610 in Cuernavaca, or 734/345-0350; www.lasestacas.com), is a natural water park. Its clear spring waters reputedly have healing properties. In addition to the crystal-clear rivers with aquatic ropes, water swings, diving platforms, and hanging bridges, Las Estacas has two pools, wading pools for children, horseback riding, an 18-hole minigolf course, and a diving school. Several restaurants serve such simple food as quesadillas, fruit with yogurt, sandwiches, and *tortas.* Admission is 235 pesos for adults, 144 pesos for children under 1.2m (4 ft.) tall. A small, basic hotel charges 1,200 to 1,500 pesos for a double room; rates include the entrance fee to the *balneario* and breakfast. Cheaper lodging options include a trailer and camping park; you can rent an adobe or straw hut with two bunk beds for 340 pesos. Visit the website for more information. MasterCard and Visa are accepted. On weekends, the place fills with families. Las Estacas is 36km (22 miles) east of Cuernavaca. To get there, take Hwy. 138 to Yautepec, then turn right at the first exit past Yautepec.

PYRAMIDS OF XOCHICALCO ★ This pre-Columbian 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 would indicate that 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. At the observatory, from April 30 to August 15, you can follow the sun's trajectory as it shines through a hexagonal opening. The pyramids (✆ **777/314-3920** for information) are 36km (22 miles) southwest of Cuernavaca, open daily from 9am to 6pm. Admission is 51 pesos.

WHERE TO STAY

Expensive

Camino Real Sumiya ★★ About 11km (6¾ miles) south of Cuernavaca, this unusual resort 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 12 wooded hectares (30 acres). The main house, a series of large connected rooms and decks, overlooks the grounds and contains restaurants and the lobby. Sumiya's charm rests in its relaxing atmosphere, which is best midweek (escapees from Mexico City tend to fill it on weekends). Guest rooms cluster in three-story buildings bordering manicured lawns. They're simple compared to the main house's striking Japanese architecture. 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. Strategically placed rocks in the garden represent the chakras, or energy points of the human body. Some regulars who have been coming to the hotel for years have complained that service has become less personalized under new management.

Interior Fracc. Sumiya s/n, Col. José Parres, 62550 Jiutepec, Mor. ✆ **01-800/901-2300** in Mexico, or 777/329-9888. Fax 777/329-9889. www.caminoreal.com/sumiya. 163 units. $145 double; $250 suite. Low-season packages and discounts available. AE, DC, MC, V. Free parking. From the freeway, take the Atlacomulco exit and follow signs to Sumiya. Ask directions in Cuernavaca if you're coming from there, as the route is complicated. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; lobby bar; poolside snack bar; concierge; golf privileges nearby; outdoor pool; room service; tennis club; convention facilities w/translation equipment. *In room:* A/C, ceiling fan, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Las Mañanitas This hotel and garden has been Cuernavaca's most renowned luxury lodging for years. It's also a popular weekend dining spot for affluent visitors from Mexico City. Guest rooms are formal in style, with gleaming polished molding and brass accents, large bathrooms, and rich fabrics. 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. Sixteen rooms have fireplaces, and the hotel also has a heated pool in the private garden of exotic birds, flowers, and trees. Las Mañanitas is one of the only hotels in Mexico associated with the prestigious Relais & Châteaux chain. The restaurant overlooking the peacock-filled gardens is one of the country's premier dining places (see "Where to Dine," below).

Ricardo Linares 107 (5½ long blocks north of the Jardín Borda), 62000 Cuernavaca, Mor. ✆ **777/362-0000.** Fax 777/312-8982. www.lasmananitas.com.mx. 25 units. Weekdays $224–$502 suite. Rates include breakfast. AE, MC, V. Free valet parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; airport transfers (for a fee); babysitting; concierge; outdoor pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Internet.

Misión Del Sol Resort & Spa ★★★ Finds You feel a sense of peace from the moment you enter this adults-only hotel and spa, 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 house the guest rooms, villas, and common areas. Group activities, such as reading discussions, a chess club, and painting workshops, take place in the salon. Spacious rooms are designed according to feng shui principles; each looks onto its own garden or stream and has three channels of ambient music. 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. Villas feature two separate bedrooms, plus a living/dining area and a meditation room. Spa services include facials, body treatments, and massages, with an emphasis on water-based treatments.

Av. General Diego Díaz González 31, Col. Parres, 62550 Cuernavaca, Mor. ✆ **866/875-0380** from the U.S., or 777/321-0999. Fax 777/320-7981. www.misiondelsol.com. 42 units, plus 12 villas. $267–$299 deluxe double; $552–$619 2-bedroom villa (up to 4 persons); $651–$732 3-bedroom villa (up to 6 persons). Special spa and meal packages available. AE, MC, V. Free parking. No children 12 and under. **Amenities:** Restaurant; well-equipped gym; basketball; volleyball; daily meditation, yoga, and Tai Chi classes; extensive spa services; 2 tennis courts. *In room:* A/C.

Moderate

Casa Colonial ★★ Finds This splendid inn consists of only 18 guest rooms, individually decorated in a warm colonial style with dark-wood antique furnishings. The rooms surround an idyllic courtyard filled with palms, bamboo, and ficus plants, as well as a shimmering pool. An inviting breakfast patio looks upon the courtyard, which is an intimate setting for weddings and other special events. During the day, the sound of classical music fills the air. The grounds were originally part of the cathedral property, which took up much of the neighborhood. Casa Colonial lies 1 block from the central square and within easy walking distance of all sights in the historic center.

Nezahualcóyotl 37 (at Abasolo), Col. Centro, 62000 Cuernavaca, Mor. ✆ **777/312-7033.** Fax 777/310-0395. www.casacolonial.com. 18 units. 1,215–1,385 pesos double; 1,495–2,905 pesos suite. AE, MC, V. Limited free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool. *In room:* Ceiling fan, TV, minibar.

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 skylights. Suites are only slightly larger than normal rooms; junior suites have Jacuzzis. La Calandria, the handsome little restaurant, 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 popular Sunday brunch (160 pesos per person) features live classical music. The hotel is a half-block from the Palacio de Cortez.

Bulevar Juárez 300 (at Abasolo), Col. Centro (Apdo. Postal 203), 62000 Cuernavaca, Mor. ✆ **777/318-5767.** Fax 777/312-9126 or 318-2981. www.cuernavacainfo.com/mariacristina.html. 20 units. 1,349 pesos double; 1,972 pesos suite. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool. *In room:* Ceiling fan, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

WHERE TO DINE

Very Expensive

Restaurant Las Mañanitas MEXICAN/INTERNATIONAL The setting of this hotel garden and restaurant is exquisite, the service superb, and the food better than average. Tables stand on a shaded terrace with a view of gardens, strolling peacocks, and softly playing violinists or a trio playing romantic boleros. Diners have the option of ordering drinks and making their menu selections from chairs in the garden, waiting to take their seats at their tables when their meals are served. The Mexican cuisine with an international flair draws on seasonal produce. They also serve a full selection of fresh seafood, certified Angus beef, lamb chops, baby back ribs, and free-range chicken. Try the zucchini flower soup, filet of red snapper in curry sauce, and black-bottom pie, the house specialty. A tasting menu is also available.

In Las Mañanitas hotel (see above), Ricardo Linares 107 (5½ long blocks north of the Jardín Borda). ✆ **777/362-0000,** ext. 240. www.lasmananitas.com.mx. Reservations recommended. Main courses 190–400 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily breakfast 8am–noon, lunch 1–6pm, and dinner 6–11pm.

Moderate

Casa Hidalgo ★★ GOURMET MEXICAN/INTERNATIONAL Casa Hidalgo lies in a beautifully restored colonial building across from the Palacio de Cortez. The food is more sophisticated and innovative than that at most places in town. Specialties include chilled mango and tequila 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.

Jardin de los Héroes 6. ✆ **777/312-2749.** www.casahidalgo.com. Reservations recommended on weekends. Main courses 140–200 pesos. AE, MC, V. Mon–Thurs 1:30–11pm; Fri–Sat 1:30pm–midnight; Sun 1:30–10pm.

Gaia INTERNATIONAL The dining area at Gaia overlooks a classic Cuernavacan scene: a fantastically tiled swimming pool and trees and shrubs laced with twinkling lights. The food, however, is far from the usual. The house raviolis are prepared with a rich tomato sauce and garnished with sun-dried tomatoes. The tamarind shrimp is also excellent. The extensive wine menu includes selections from Baja California, and the knowledgeable waitstaff can suggest the perfect complement to your meal. If you're a fan of black-and-white Mexican movies, you'll dig Gaia even more, as it occupies the former home of Mario Moreno, aka Cantinflas, the Mexican equivalent of Charlie Chaplin.

Benito Juarez 102, Col. Centro. ✆ **777/312-3656.** www.tourbymexico.com/lagaia. Main courses 80–300 pesos. AE, MC, V. Mon–Thurs 1–11pm; Fri–Sat 1pm–midnight; Sun 1–6pm.

Restaurant La India Bonita ★★ MEXICAN Cuernavaca's oldest restaurant is housed among the interior patios and portals of the restored home—known as Casa Mañana—of former U.S. Ambassador Dwight Morrow. The beautiful setting features patio tables amid trickling fountains, palms, and flowers. Specialties include *mole poblano* (chicken with a sauce of bitter chocolate and fiery chiles) and the signature *La India Bonita* plate with steak, enchiladas, rice, and beans. There are also several daily specials. A breakfast mainstay is *desayuno Maximiliano,* a gigantic platter of chicken enchiladas with an assortment of sauces. A Mexican folkloric dance show fills the restaurant with colorful energy on Saturday nights from 8 to 9pm.

Morrow 15 (btw. Morelos and Matamoros), Col. Centro, 2 blocks north of the Jardín Juárez. ✆ **777/312-5021.** Breakfast 40–90 pesos; main courses 70–160 pesos. AE, MC, V. Tues–Sat 8am–10pm; Sun–Mon 8am–5pm.

Inexpensive

La Universal ★★ Value MEXICAN/PASTRIES This is a busy place, partly because of its great location (overlooking both the 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, green onions, beans, and tortillas, for 120 pesos. A full breakfast special (110 pesos) for two is served Monday through Friday from 9:30am to 12:30pm. Live music is played weekdays from 3 to 5pm and again from 8 to 10pm.

Guerrero 2. ✆ **777/318-6732.** Breakfast 500–800 pesos; main courses 90–140 pesos; *comida corrida* 890 pesos. MC, V. Daily 9am–10pm.

CUERNAVACA AFTER DARK

Cuernavaca has a number of cafes right off the Jardín Juárez where people gather to sip coffee or drinks till the wee hours—check out La Universal (see above). Band concerts are held in the Jardín Juárez on Thursday and Sunday evenings. **La Plazuela,** a pedestrian-only stretch across from the Cortez Palace, features cafes, kitsch stores, and live-music bars. It's geared toward a 20-something, university crowd.

5 TEPOZTLAN ★★

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 boasts a spectacular view.

Tepoztlán remains small and steeped in legend and mystery—it lies adjacent to the alleged birthplace of Quetzalcóatl, the Aztec serpent god—and comes about as close as you're going to get to an unspoiled, magical mountain hideaway. Eight chapels, each with its own cultural festival, dot this traditional Mexican village. Though the town stays tranquil during the week, escapees from Mexico City descend in droves 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. The village wears its New Age heart on its sleeve—homeopathic pharmacies and health-food stores coexist happily alongside Internet cafes, tortilla stands, and satellite-dish companies.

The town is famous throughout Mexico as a symbol of fierce civic pride and independence. In 1994, a multinational firm secretly negotiated a deal to build a Jack Nicklaus golf course and residential development on communally held lands; part of the plan involved construction of a heliport and a funicular to the top of Tepozteco pyramid. When the project came to light, townspeople joined forces, ran the city government out of town (hanging them in effigy), and occupied the *Ayuntamiento* (town hall), sealing off the city limits and repelling state military forces until the developers backed out of the project.

Aside from soaking up the ambience, two things you must do are climb up to the Tepozteco pyramid and hit the weekend folkloric market. In addition, 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.

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

GETTING THERE

BY CAR From Mexico City, the quickest route is Hwy. 95 (the toll road) to Cuernavaca; just before the Cuernavaca city limits, you'll see the clearly marked turnoff to Tepoztlán on 95D and Hwy. 115. The slower, free federal Hwy. 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 Hwy. 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.

Cooking Classes in Tepoztlán

An engaging cooking school called **Cocinar Mexicano** offers weeklong programs in Mexican cuisine. The founder, Magda Bogin, conducts class from her large, sunny outdoor kitchen, tiled in blue-and-white Talavera. Participants study recipes typical of the festival that coincides with their visit. During the Day of the Dead workshop, for example, students learn to make tamales, the traditional dish that families bring to the gravesites of deceased loved ones. For other festivals, the focus is *mole,* a typical fiesta food often made with chocolate and chiles that's arguably the most complex dish in Mexican cuisine. All the programs include a range of contemporary dishes, and participants spend a day of fine dining in Mexico City, where they meet with the country's top chefs. Prices range from $150 for a 1-day class to $2,895 for a 5-day workshop, which includes round-trip transportation from Mexico City and most meals, but not airfare or accommodations. Frommer's readers receive a $100 discount. For more information, visit **www.cocinarmexicano.com**.

You can book round-trip transportation to the Mexico City airport through **Marquez Sightseeing Tours** (www.tourbymexico.com/marqueztours) and some hotels. The round-trip is about 2,000 pesos.

EXPLORING TEPOZTLAN

Tepoztlán's **weekend folkloric market** is one of the best in central Mexico. More crafts are available on Saturdays and Sundays, but the market also opens on Wednesdays. 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* (a coarse cloth). 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 variety of food stands selling fruit and vegetables, spices, fresh tortillas, and indigenous Mexican delicacies.

A hike to the **Tepozteco pyramid** is probably one of the most rewarding experiences you will have on your journey in Mexico. The climb is steep and fairly strenuous, especially toward the end, although it is perfectly doable in a few hours and is not dangerous. I once forgot to bring along hiking shoes and bought a pair of plastic *huaraches* at the market, and I managed just fine. That being said, I know it would have been even more enjoyable had I been wearing sneakers. 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 2km (1.2-mile) winding rock trail begins where the name of Avenida 5 de Mayo changes to Camino del Tepozteco. The hike takes 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. Water and drinks are available at the top. The trail is open daily from 9am to 5:30pm and, while the hike is free, the pyramid costs 30 pesos to enter.

Also worth visiting is the **former convent, Dominico de la Navidad.** The entrance to the Dominican convent lies through the religious-themed "Gate of Tepoztlán," constructed with beads and seeds, just east of the main plaza. Built between 1560 and 1588, the convent is now a museum, open Tuesday through Sunday from 10am to 6pm; it costs 10 pesos to enter.

SIGHTS NEAR TEPOZTLAN

Many nearby places are easily accessible by car. One good tour service is **Marquez Sightseeing Tours,** located in Cuernavaca (marqueztours@hotmail.com; www.tourbymexico.com/marqueztours). Marquez has four- and seven-passenger vehicles, very reasonable prices, and a large variety of set tours. The dependable owner, Arturo Marquez Diaz, speaks better-than-passable English and will allow you to design your own tour, including to archaeological sites and museums. He also offers transportation to and from Mexico City airport for approximately 1,700 pesos for up to six people and to and from the Toluca airport for 2,000 pesos for up to six people.

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 ★, the Cacahuamilpa Caves or Grottoes, are an unforgettable system of caverns with a wooden illuminated walkway for easy access. As you pass from chamber to chamber, you'll see spectacular illuminated rock formations, including stalactites, stalagmites, and twisted rock formations with names like Dante's Head, the Champagne Bottle, the Tortillas, and Madonna with Child. Admission for 2 hours is 50 pesos. A guide for groups, which can be assembled on the hour, costs about 100 pesos. The caverns are open daily from 10am to 7pm (last tickets sold at 5pm) and are located 90 minutes from Tepoztlán and 30 minutes from Taxco.

About 50 minutes southeast of Tepoztlán is **Las Estacas,** an ecological resort with a cold-water spring that is said to have curative powers (p. 181). The ruins of **Xochicalco** (see "Cuernavaca: Land of Eternal Spring," earlier in this chapter) and the colonial town of **Taxco** (earlier in 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. In addition to the choices noted below, consider two other excellent options just outside of town. **Casa Bugambilia** ★★★, Callejón de Tepopula 007, Valle de Atongo (✆ **739/395-0158;** www.casabugambilia.com), is a nine-room hotel property 3km (1¾ miles) outside Tepoztlán. Don't confuse this hotel with Posada Bugambilia, a modest hotel in town. The spacious rooms are elegantly furnished with high-end, carved Mexican furniture, and every room has a fireplace. Doubles average 250 pesos, including breakfast. **Las Golondrinas** ★★★, Callejón de Términas 4 (✆ **739/395-0649;** www.mexonline.com/lasgolondrinas.htm), is a three-bedroom B&B in the area behind Ixcatepec church; it's so far off the beaten track that even cabdrivers have trouble finding the place. Owner Marisol Fernández has imbued the house with her tranquil, down-to-earth charm; the guest rooms open onto a wraparound terrace that overlooks the garden, a small pool, and the Tepozteco Mountains beyond. Doubles cost 1,850 pesos, including breakfast.

Hotel Nilayam Formerly Hotel Tepoztlán, this holistic-oriented retreat lies in a colonial building, but the decor has been brightened up considerably. The gracious, helpful staff offers complete detox programs and a full array of services, including body and facial treatments, reflexology, hot stone and shiatsu massages, yoga, Tai Chi, and meditation. The hotel has a great view of the mountain, and the restaurant features a creative menu of vegetarian cuisine. Spa packages are available.

Industrias 6, 62520 Tepoztlán, Mor. ✆ **739/395-0522.** Fax 739/395-0522. www.nilayam.net. 34 units. 945–1,420 pesos double. Rates include breakfast. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; outdoor pool; spa services; private *temazcal* (pre-Hispanic sweat lodge). *In room:* TV.

Posada del Tepozteco ★★ This inviting inn has magnificent views overlooking the town and down the length of the spectacular valley. Rooms are tastefully furnished in colonial style. All but the least expensive feature terraces with superb views, and the suites have small whirlpool tubs. The intimate restaurant focuses on healthy and vegetarian dishes. The grounds are exquisitely landscaped, and the atmosphere is intimate and romantic. When you check in, look for the picture of Angelina Jolie behind the reception desk; she stayed here for 3 weeks while filming *Original Sin* in 2001. The hotel reception will arrange in-room massages, and the hotel has a traditional *temazcal* with herbal healing properties. Most rates include breakfast.

Moments Tepoznieves: A Taste of Heaven

Don't leave town without stopping at one of the many **Tepoznieves** locations; Av. 5 de Mayo 21 is one of the most convenient (✆ **739/395-3813;** www.tepoznieves.com.mx). The sublime local ice-cream shop's slogan, *"nieve de dioses"* (ice cream of the gods), doesn't exaggerate. Almost 200 types of ice cream and sorbet, made only with natural ingredients, come in flavors that are familiar (vanilla, bubble gum), exotic (tamarind, rose petal, mango studded with *chile piquin*), and off-the-wall (beet, lettuce, corn). It's open daily 8am to 9pm.

Paraíso 3 (2 blocks straight up the hill from the town center), 62520 Tepoztlán, Mor. ✆ **739/395-0010.** Fax 739/395-0323. www.posadadeltepozteco.com. 21 units. $208–$245 double; $290–$430 suite. MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant w/stunning view; small outdoor pool. *In room:* Fan, hair dryer.

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, with main courses priced around 60 pesos. Also, visit **Cacao,** Revolucion 9 (✆ **739/395-3770**), a charming chocolaterie, for some of the best bitter hot chocolate you'll ever taste. Imbibe or devour your cacao for 20 pesos and up.

El Ciruelo Restaurant Bar ★★★ GOURMET MEXICAN This long-standing favorite has beautiful flowering gardens set amid the striking backdrop of the Tepoztlán mountains. The large courtyard is filled with lush potted foliage and topped by a soaring band shell meant to keep patrons dry without obscuring the fantastic view of the mountains. The service is positively charming, and the regional food is divine. House specialties include cilantro soup with almonds, *chalupas* of goat cheese, chicken with *huitlacoche,* and a regional treat: milk-based gelatin with brown sugar. Try to get a seat on the outdoor patio, where a trio often serenades the crowd.

Zaragoza 17, Barrio de la Santísima, in front of the church. ✆ **739/395-1203.** www.elciruelo.com.mx. Dinner 60–200 pesos. AE. Sun–Thurs 1–7pm; Fri–Sat 1–11pm.

Restaurant Axitla ★★ Finds GOURMET MEXICAN/INTERNATIONAL Axitla is the best restaurant in Tepoztlán. 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,* pepper steak, grilled octopus, *chile Jarral* (stuffed chile with meat in an avocado sauce), and exceptional *mole.* There are also excellent steaks and fresh seafood. And if the food isn't enough—and, believe me, it is—the enchanted setting will make your meal even more memorable. The restaurant lies at the base of the Tepozteco Pyramid (about a 10-min. walk from the town center), surrounded by 1.2 hectares (about 3 acres) of junglelike gardens that encompass a creek and lily ponds. Memo and Laura, the gracious owners, speak excellent English and are marvelous sources of information about the area.

Av. del Tepozteco, at the foot of the trail to the pyramid. ✆ **739/395-0519.** Lunch and dinner 80–150 pesos. MC, V. Wed–Sun 10am–7pm.

7

San Miguel de Allende & the Colonial Silver Cities

by David Baird

Mexico's colonial silver-mining cities—**San Miguel, Querétaro, San Luis Potosí, Guanajuato,** and **Zacatecas**—lie northwest of Mexico City in the mountains of the Sierra Madre Occidental. These cities have colonial settings with backdrops of rugged mountains, an ideal climate, local handicrafts, good food, and many memorable vistas.

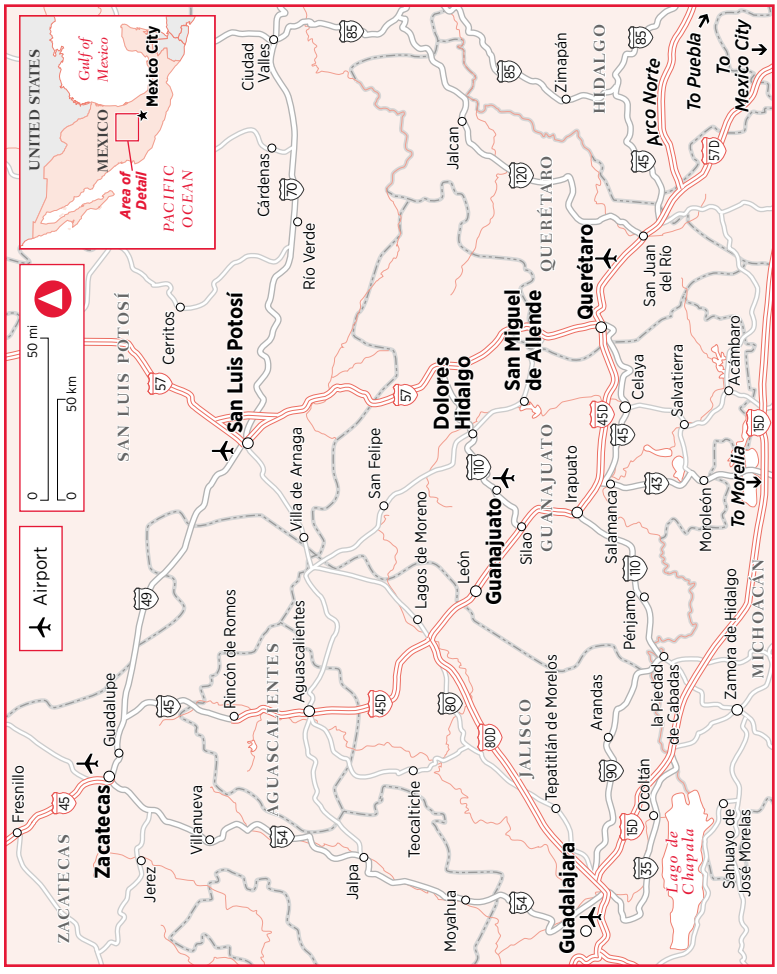
The colonial silver cities are close to the Mexican capital by modern standards, but at the time of their founding, this land was the frontier. In pre-Columbian times, the great civilizations of central Mexico never established more than a tenuous sway here. Mountainous and arid, this was the land of the Chichimeca, a large nation of nomadic tribes that occasionally banded together for raids upon their civilized neighbors to the south. After the Spanish Conquest of the Aztec Empire in 1521, the conquistadors turned their attention to this region in search of precious metals. The Chichimecans resisted the encroachers, but epidemic diseases brought from Europe soon decimated the native population. The Spanish established mining cities in quick succession, stretching from Querétaro (established in 1531) north all the way to Zacatecas (1548) and beyond. They found quantities of gold, but silver proved so plentiful that it made Mexico world famous as a land of riches.

For 3 centuries of colonial rule, much of the mines' great wealth went to build urban centers of impressive, enduring architecture. It's wonderful to stroll through these cities and view them, not one building at a time, but in broad views of colonial cityscapes. Of the five cities, four (Guanajuato, Querétaro, Zacatecas, and San Miguel) have been designated World Heritage Sites by UNESCO.

Life in these provincial cities is conducted at a relaxed pace and is savored. If you're of a disposition to handle matters quickly and get things done, try to slow down or you might get frustrated with this slower pace. Also, these cities have intimate and close-knit societies. Many people have ancestors who lived here at least a century ago, and they maintain a broad network of kinfolk, friends, and acquaintances. I've walked down streets with locals who would greet every third or fourth person we passed. Often I've had conversations in which I mention someone from a completely different context, only to hear something like, "Oh, he's married to my cousin."

EXPLORING THE SILVER CITIES

There are two common ways to get here: Fly into Mexico City and take the bus that goes directly from the airport to Querétaro, or fly into the León/Guanajuato airport. Zacatecas, San Luis Potosí, and Querétaro also have international airports that receive a few



flights from the U.S. You can also drive or take a bus from the U.S. border. From Texas, the first of the silver cities you reach will be San Luis Potosí (which, by the way, bills itself to the rest of Mexico as the "Gateway to the United States").

Once in the region, you'll find the roads are good, but not great, and the smaller ones are poorly marked. Driving within these towns can be maddening due to convoluted, narrow streets and bizarre traffic routing (especially in Guanajuato and Zacatecas). If you ever have difficulty navigating into the center of town, simply hail a cab to lead the way. Parking can also be a problem; we have included, when possible, good motels where you can park and leave your car for the length of your visit. If you prefer to travel by bus,

Celebrating Mexico

From September to December of 2010, Mexico will be celebrating the bicentennial of its independence and the centennial of the Mexican Revolution. More importance will be placed on the bicentennial, especially in this part of Mexico, which saw most of the major events of Mexico's independence movement, including the secret meetings in Querétaro, the call *(el grito)* for independence at Dolores Hidalgo, and the siege of the Alhóndiga in Guanajuato. Count on many public celebrations to commemorate those events, especially *el grito* on the eve of September 16th. Other festivities will take place on September 27th, marking the day that independence was achieved, and September 30th, José María Morelos's birthday. The principal celebration, commemorating the 100th anniversary of *La Revolución,* will take place on November 20th, 2010.

you'll find frequent, inexpensive first-class buses connecting all these cities, which are only a few hours apart from each other.

The region has a short rainy season from June through September, which is a good time to come. I also like late fall, winter, and early spring. The hottest month is May (and sometimes early June before the rains arrive). May can also be smoky because it's when many farmers burn the stubble in their cornfields before the next planting. Whichever cities you elect to visit, I recommend a stay of at least 3 days per destination—a good part of their charm will go unappreciated if you're pressing too much to see everything.

1 SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE ★★★

288km (179 miles) NW of Mexico City; 120km (74 miles) E of Guanajuato; 64km (40 miles) NW of Querétaro

San Miguel de Allende (elevation 1,862m/6,107 ft.) mixes the best aspects of small-town life with the cosmopolitan pleasures of a big city. It is the smallest of the cities covered here and perhaps the most relaxed; its wide variety of restaurants, shops, and galleries makes urbanites feel quite at home. Most of the buildings in the central part of the town date from the Colonial Era or the 19th century; the law requires newer buildings to conform to existing architecture, and the town has gone to some lengths to retain its cobblestone streets.

Living in San Miguel is a large community of Americans: some retired, some attending art or language school, and some who have come here to live simply and follow their creative muses—painting, writing, and sculpting. The center of this community is the public library in the former convent of Santa Ana. It is a good place to find information on San Miguel or just to sit on the patio and read.

A notable aspect of San Migueleña society is the number of festivals it celebrates. In a country that needs only the barest of excuses to hold a fiesta, San Miguel is known far and wide for them. Most of these celebrations are of a religious character and are meant to combine social activity with religious expression. People practice Catholicism with great fervor—going on religious pilgrimages, attending all-night vigils, ringing church bells at the oddest times throughout the night (something that some visitors admittedly might not find so amusing). See "Special Events & Festivals," below.

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING

By Plane The two major airports are the Mexico City airport, 3½ hours away (which has direct bus transportation to nearby Querétaro); and the León/Guanajuato airport, 1½ hours away.

By Car You have a choice of two routes for the 3½-hour trip from Mexico City—a Querétaro bypass or via Celaya. The former is shorter—take Hwy. 57, a four-lane freeway, north toward Querétaro. Past the Tequisquiapan turnoff is an exit on the right marked A SAN MIGUEL. This toll road bypasses Querétaro and crosses Hwy. 57 again north of town. Here it narrows to two lanes and becomes Hwy. 111. Some 30km (19 miles) farther is San Miguel.

From Guanajuato, the quick route is to go south from the city a short distance on Hwy. 110, then east on a secondary, paved road passing near the village of Joconoxtle. For the long but scenic route, which passes through Dolores Hidalgo, go northeast on Hwy. 110 through Dolores, then south on Hwy. 51. If you drive this route, take a break and experience a slice of rural Mexican life near the small community of Santa Rosa, where a few restaurants serve the local *mezcal de la sierra,* a locally distilled firewater that makes tequila taste positively smooth.

By Bus **From Mexico City airport: AeroPlus** buses (✆ **55/5786-9357**) leave directly from the airport for Querétaro about every hour or half-hour, depending on the time of day. A one-way ticket costs 256 pesos.

From Mexico City's Central del Norte: First-class buses take 4 hours (with one stop in Querétaro). The company ETN has the best service, with wide seats that recline far back (four buses per day). Primera Plus has two buses per day. Regular service is handled by Flecha Amarilla, with buses leaving every 40 minutes. Another option is to take a bus to Querétaro and change buses.

From Querétaro: Local buses run to San Miguel every 20 minutes (Flecha Amarilla and Herradura de Plata have alternating departures). If you arrive in Querétaro by first-class bus, you'll be in Terminal A. Go out the door, turn right, and walk to Terminal B.

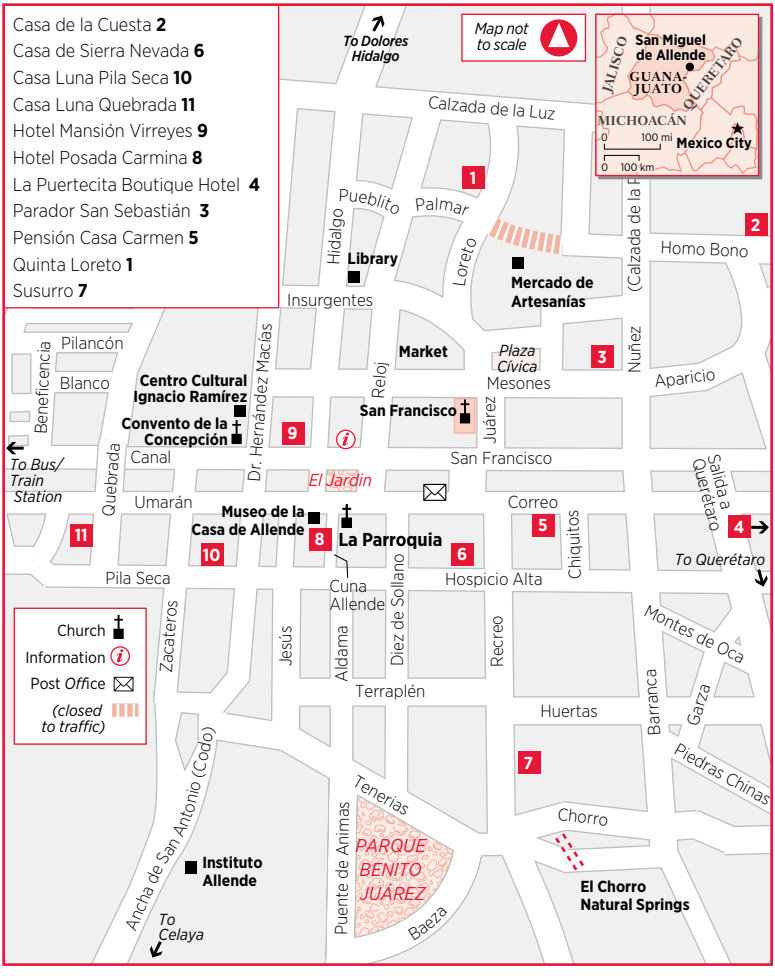
From Guanajuato: ETN has three nonstop superdeluxe buses per day. Primera Plus/Servicios Coordinados has four nonstop buses per day.

To/from Laredo and Nuevo Laredo: Four companies offer an overnight first-class bus to and from Laredo or Nuevo Laredo: **Autobuses Americanos** (✆ **415/154-8233;** www.autobusesamericanos.com.mx) crosses the border to Laredo, Texas; **Futura** (✆ **415/152-2237**), **Primera Plus** (✆ **01-800/375-7587** in Mexico), and **Omnibus de México** (✆ **01-800/765-6636** in Mexico; www.odm.com.mx) go to Nuevo Laredo. The trip takes 12 hours and costs around 850 pesos. From San Miguel, there is one departure per day per company. The four buses leave San Miguel between 6 and 7pm. Departure times from Laredo and Nuevo Laredo are also around 6 or 7pm.

The **bus station** is 2km (1¼ miles) west of town on the westward extension of Calle Canal. Taxis to town are cheap (30 pesos) and available at all hours.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The city's **tourist information office** is in the *ayuntamiento* (city hall) facing El Jardín. The address is Plaza Principal 8, and the phone is ✆ **415/152-0900.** Office hours are Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 8pm, Saturday from 10am to 8pm, and Sunday from 10am to 5:30pm.



CITY LAYOUT Carefully pruned Indian laurel trees shade San Miguel's central square, **El Jardín.** The center of city life, El Jardín is the point of reference for all places in the middle of town and is bounded by Correo (Post Office St.), San Francisco, Hidalgo, and Reloj.

GETTING AROUND Most places in San Miguel are within walking distance, so a car isn't necessary. Buses to outlying villages (La Taboada thermal pool, for example) leave from the little plaza by the *mercado.* Taxis to places inside town should not cost more than 35 pesos, unless ordered from a hotel.

Fast Facts San Miguel de Allende

Area Code The telephone area code is **415.**

Climate San Miguel can be warm in summer and cold enough for wool clothing in winter, especially at night or during the occasional cold spell.

Communication & Shipping Services Several services offer packing and shipping, mailboxes, and the like. One is **Border Crossings,** Mesones 57-A (at Reloj; ✆ **415/152-2497;** fax 415/152-3672), and **Pack 'n' Mail** is at Calle Canal 42 (✆/fax **415/152-3191**). Both keep standard office hours: weekdays from 9 or 10am to 6pm, Saturday from 10am to 2pm.

Consular Office A **U.S. Consular Agency** is at Hernández Macías 72, Int. 111 (✆ **415/152-2357**). Hours are Monday to Thursday from 9am to 1pm.

Currency Exchange **Intercam** has three locations: Juárez 27, San Francisco 4, and Correo 15. Business hours are Monday through Friday from 9am to 5:30pm, Saturday from 9am to 1pm. **CiBanco,** at Juárez and San Francisco, is open Monday through Friday from 9am to 4:30pm. Several banks have cash machines, including one on the corner of the Jardín in the Casa del Conde, and a few on Calle San Francisco.

Drugstore Try the **Farmacia Agundis** (✆ **415/152-1198**), Canal 24 at Macías. It's open daily from 9:30am to 1am.

Internet Access Several places offer Internet access around town. These businesses come and go so fast it's not worth listing them. Ask at your hotel for the nearest cybercafe.

Library The **Biblioteca Pública (Public Library),** Insurgentes 25 (✆ **415/152-0293**), is a social institution for the American community. It has a good selection of books in Spanish and English. Hours are Monday through Friday from 10am to 7pm, and Saturday from 10am to 2pm.

Newspaper An English-language paper, ***Atención,*** carries local news as well as full listings of what to see and do.

Parking San Miguel is congested, and street parking is scarce. A white pole or sign at the end of a street marks the stopping point for parking (so that other cars can make a turn). Police are vigilant about parking and ticket with glee.

Post Office The *correo,* Calle Correo 16, is open Monday through Friday from 8am to 4:30pm for all services, Saturday from 9am to 1pm.

Seasons Because of the fast freeway access from Mexico City, San Miguel is popular with weekenders from the capital. Arrive early on Friday or make a reservation ahead of time for weekends, especially long weekends. There's also a squeeze on rooms around the Christmas and Easter holidays and around the feast of San Miguel's patron saint, on September 29.

SPECIAL EVENTS & FESTIVALS

San Miguel celebrates 30 to 40 festivals a year. These are just the standouts: January 17 is the **Blessing of the Animals.** In the morning, locals bring their decorated pets and farm animals to the town's churches to be doused with holy water. The first Friday in

March celebrates **Our Lord of the Conquest,** and the day before is filled with music, fireworks, and decorated teams of oxen. After a celebratory Mass, there is dancing by the *concheros* (traditional Aztec dancers). Two weeks before Holy Week is the procession of **Our Lord of the Column.** Between then and Easter Sunday are more processions, and altars are set up in honor of **La Virgen Dolorosa.** In May is the **Festival of the Holy Cross.** In June, around Saint Anthony's Day, is the **Fiesta de los Locos (Festival of the Madmen)** ★★, when many dress up in Carnavalesque costumes and go cavorting about the center of town. August begins the preparatory festivals for September 29, the festival of San Miguel's **patron saint.** Parades, fireworks, and band concerts continue throughout September. Traditionally a *pamplonada* (running of the bulls) was held as part of the festivities, but last year it was moved to Irapuato because it was attracting too rough a crowd. At the beginning of November is the **Day of the Dead,** followed by the **Christmas fiestas.** In addition to all of this, you have the **Chamber Music Festival** in summer, **Jazz Music Festival** in the fall, and a couple of arts fairs that occur on varying dates.

EXPLORING SAN MIGUEL

It's hard to be bored in San Miguel. The shopping is excellent, and you'll run out of time before you can try all the restaurants. The town is well situated for side trips to Dolores Hidalgo, Querétaro, and Guanajuato. It's popular for Spanish and art classes.

In 2008, UNESCO declared San Miguel and the outlying religious center, Atotonilco, a World Heritage Site (three other cities in this chapter have already been designated such). The colonial architecture tends more toward domestic than monumental and offers much to see—fine courtyards, beautiful interiors, and rich architectural details. Of particular note are the town's lovely streetscapes, with narrow cobblestone lanes that invite aimless strolling and make it advisable to wear walking shoes with thick soles.

The Top Attractions

Centro Cultural Ignacio Ramírez (Bellas Artes/El Nigromante) Housed in the former Convento de la Concepción (1755), 2 blocks west of El Jardín, the Centro is a branch of the Palacio de Bellas Artes of Mexico City. The two-story cloister, surrounding an enormous courtyard with large trees and a gurgling fountain, houses art exhibits and classrooms for drawing, painting, sculpture, lithography, textiles, ceramics, dramatic arts, ballet, regional dance, piano, and guitar. A mural by David Alfaro Siqueiros and some of his memorabilia are worth seeing. A bulletin board lists concerts and lectures at this institute and elsewhere in the city. You can also dine in these pleasant surroundings at the restaurant **Las Musas,** which serves pasta, salads, sandwiches, and desserts. Before you leave, take a look at the magnificent dome behind the convent. It belongs to the Iglesia de la Concepción and was designed by the same unschooled architect who designed the Parroquia (see below).

Hernández Macías 75 (btw. Canal and Insurgentes). ✆ **415/152-0289.** Free admission. Mon–Sat 9am–7pm; Sun 10am–2pm.

La Parroquia ★★★ Looking nothing like any other church in Mexico, La Parroquia has become the emblem of San Miguel. It is an object of great pride for the citizenry and a source of discomfort for architectural purists. Originally built in the colonial style, the church was remade in the late 19th century by a local builder named Zeferino Gutiérrez, who reconstructed the towers and facade. Gutiérrez was supposedly unlettered but had seen pictures of Europe's Gothic cathedrals and worked from these alone. I find the finished product fascinating—a very personal vision of the Gothic style that owes

more to the builder's imagination and fancy than to the European churches that were its inspiration. The inside is not nearly so much fun as the outside; the church was looted on several occasions during times of social upheaval, and this kind of art criticism puts a damper on commissioning more paintings and decoration. Still, there are things to see. My favorite, and one often missed, is the crypt beneath the altar. You get to it through a door on the right side. You'll have to seek out the caretaker, who can unlock the door (for a small tip).

South side of El Jardín. No phone. Free admission. Daily 8am–2pm and 5–9pm.

Museo Casa de Allende The house of San Miguel's most famous son and namesake, the independence leader Ignacio Allende, is a museum. It is of the genre known as *museos regionales* that you will find across Mexico. The objective of these museums is to present a view of the local area from prehistoric times to recent history; to explain what roles the region played in the context of national development; and to illustrate how the great historical movements that swept across Mexico ran their courses at the local level. Featured is a small biographical exhibit on Allende as one of the initiators of the independence movement, which began in nearby Dolores Hidalgo, and on what national independence meant for San Miguel and the local area. Explanations are in Spanish only, but the artifacts—including fossils, pre-Hispanic pottery, Colonial-Era furnishings, and articles of daily life—and the beauty of the house are worth the price. The museum was recently renovated for the coming bicentennial celebration in September.

Southwest corner of El Jardín. No phone. Admission 40 pesos. Tues–Sun 9am–5pm.

More Attractions

The **House and Garden Tour** ★★, sponsored by the Biblioteca Pública, is universally enjoyed. The tour opens the doors of some of the city's most interesting colonial and contemporary houses. Tours leave Sunday at 11:30am from the library, Insurgentes 25 (✆ **415/152-0293**), and last about 2 hours. The tour costs 200 pesos, which goes to support various library projects benefiting the youth of San Miguel.

Bill Levasseur of Casa de la Cuesta Bed and Breakfast has a mask museum called **La Otra Cara de México (The Other Face of Mexico)** ★★. It's a thoughtfully arranged exhibition of masks that provides a lot of cultural context. Masks have played an important role in many of Mexico's native cultures, usually as part of a dance or ritual. Over the years, Bill has collected some great pieces and has filmed dances and performances in which the masks were used. This museum is a treat for serious collectors and casual travelers. Visits are by appointment (✆ **415/154-4324**).

A couple of the most enjoyable walks in town are to the lookout point **El Mirador,** especially at sunset, which colors the entire town and the lake beyond, and to **Parque Juárez,** a large and shady park.

Nearby Attractions

Just outside of San Miguel are several hot mineral springs that have been made into bathing spots. They're all just off the road leading to Dolores Hidalgo. **La Taboada, La Gruta,** and **Escondido** lie close to one another, just 8 to 10km (5–6¼ miles) outside San Miguel. La Gruta is perhaps the nicest, but La Taboada has a quiet old hotel reminiscent of an earlier Mexico and makes for a relaxing stay.

Near these hot springs is the sanctuary of **Atotonilco el Grande,** a complex of chapels, dormitories, dining rooms, and a church. UNESCO has declared the complex part of the World Heritage Site for San Miguel. The church was founded in 1740 by Father Luis

Learning at the Source: Going to School in San Miguel

San Miguel has several schools for learning Spanish. If you're wishing to take classes, shop around before you travel to San Miguel to find one that's a good fit for you. These schools cater to travelers and often can provide a list of apartments for long-term stays.

Instituto Allende, Calle Ancha de San Antonio 20, 37700 San Miguel de Allende, Gto. (✆ **415/152-0190;** www.instituto-allende.edu.mx), began in 1950 as a fine-arts school and later added Spanish courses. The main focus is still on the arts, with different classes and workshops offered throughout the year. Spanish students have the option of group and individual classes, short and long term. The school's credits are transferable to many colleges and universities in the United States and Canada; noncredit students are also welcome.

LanguagePoint, 20 de Enero Sur 42, 37750 San Miguel de Allende, Gto. (✆ **415/152-4115;** www.languagepoint.org), offers instruction and immersion at all levels of competency. With a maximum of three students per instructor, students get a lot of individual attention, and the teaching method leans heavily toward conversation. Emphasis at the basic level is on gaining a working knowledge of everyday Spanish as a basis for further development of language skills.

Warren Hardy Spanish, San Rafael 6, 37700 San Miguel de Allende, Gto. (✆ **415/154-4017;** www.warrenhardy.com), is a popular school for those who know little Spanish. Emphasis is on the spoken language, with special focus on the use of verbs. Mr. Hardy has taught Spanish for many years and has designed his own methodology for teaching it, which involves partnering students and using a lot of flashcards. It's best to contact the school through its website. Mr. Hardy's wife, Tuli, answers questions and handles registration.

Academia Hispano Americana, Mesones 4, 37700 San Miguel de Allende, Gto. (✆ **415/152-0349;** www.ahaspeakspanish.com), has a reputation for offering an intensive language course with an emphasis on grammar as well as conversation. Classes are limited to 12 people and are much smaller than that, on average. The school has a continuous program of study of 12 4-week sessions for 35 hours a week. Less intensive courses and private lessons are also available.

Habla Hispana, Calzada de la Luz 25, 37700 San Miguel de Allende, Gto. (✆ **451/152-0713;** www.mexicospanish.com), is a small school with four experienced and dedicated instructors, all locals. Classes are arranged in 4-week courses. Class size is limited to 10 students. The school likes to combine a personal touch with a clearly structured teaching program.

Felipe Neri Alfaro, an austere mystic. He thought the area in dire need of a religious presence, as many people would gather at the thermal springs to bathe publicly and, in his eyes, licentiously. He commissioned a local artist, Martínez Pocasangre, to paint murals illustrating the instructive verses that Alfaro wrote, with much emphasis on the dangers lying in wait for the human soul. The murals and verses cover the church's ceiling and walls, adding color to an otherwise dark structure.

Father Alfaro built his sanctuary on the spot where he was granted an ecstatic vision of Christ. The location proved providential: Seventy years later, when Father Miguel Hidalgo was in the town of Dolores, he was warned of his imminent capture, so he hastily declared independence and then marched an impromptu army toward San Miguel. En route, he stopped at Atotonilco, where he took the church's image of the Virgin of Guadalupe as his banner, declaring her the protector of the new nation—the first time that she was officially recognized as such.

The church and adjoining buildings still function throughout the year as a religious retreat for people who come from all over the country for a week of prayer, penance, and mortification. These spiritual exercises are conducted in private. You can get to Atotonilco by cab or via the bus marked EL SANTUARIO, at the market. It passes every hour on the hour and goes through Taboada on its way to Atotonilco.

SHOPPING

San Miguel is a town of artists; you'll find art for sale not only in galleries, but also in restaurants, offices, and just about anywhere there's space in a public area. San Miguel is also a town of artisans working mainly with clay, iron, brass, tin, blown glass, and papier-mâché. And San Miguel is a town of shopkeepers who sell locally produced items as well as folk art and decorative objects from across Mexico. There are so many stores, and they are so different from each other, that a list would not be helpful. The best advice I can give is to explore the streets around the main square. If you're looking for something in particular, ask around. One place that's easily walkable but a bit outside the downtown area is **Fábrica La Aurora,** an old textile mill that's been converted into galleries and shops selling art, furnishings, and antiques. The old factory is an attractive space, with lots of open areas, and includes a restaurant and a cafe. It's a bit north of downtown on Calzada de La Aurora, just past the bridge.

Stores are usually open Monday through Saturday from 9am to 2pm and 4 to 7 or 8pm. Most stores close on Sunday. If you're interested in Talavera pottery, consider going to nearby Dolores Hidalgo (see "A Side Trip to Dolores Hidalgo: Fine Pottery & Shrimp Ice Cream," later in this chapter). Also, you can find some handicrafts and fun knickknacks at the **Mercado de Artesanías (handicrafts market),** but it will require hunting through lots of goods that are either too tacky or not tacky enough. The *mercado* occupies a walkway 3 blocks long that descends from the municipal market past the Hotel Quinta Loreto.

WHERE TO STAY

For longer stays, you might check with the language schools (see "Learning at the Source: Going to School in San Miguel," above) and other bulletin boards around town for lists of apartments or rooms to rent, or check websites such as **www.internetsanmiguel.com** or **www.infosma.com**. Most apartments have kitchens and bedding; some come with maid service. San Miguel is a popular weekend getaway for residents of the capital, and several hotels raise rates on weekends. Secured parking is at a premium; if your hotel doesn't provide it, you'll pay around $12 to $16 daily in a guarded lot. Most places can arrange airport transportation. The rates listed below already include taxes, which are 17%.

Very Expensive

Casa de Sierra Nevada ★★ The hotel consists of five 16th-century town houses on a couple of streets just above El Jardín and a sixth house bordering Parque Juárez. With picturesque terraces and courtyards bedecked in flowers and plants, some affording

charming views and considerable privacy, this place feels like a true getaway from the modern world. The owner, Orient Express, operates several luxury properties and provides excellent service. Rooms and suites vary in shape and design; most are very large and have private patios or secluded entrances and working fireplaces. The hotel is 2 blocks southeast of El Jardín. Transportation from either airport is available.

Hospicio 35 (btw. Diez de Sollano and Recreo), 37700 San Miguel de Allende, Gto. ✆ **800/701-1561** in the U.S. and Canada, or 415/152-7040. Fax 415/154-9703. www.casadesierranevada.com. 33 units. 4,667 pesos deluxe; 5,620 pesos junior suite; 6,687 pesos and up suite. AE, MC, V. Valet parking 115 pesos. Children 15 and younger not accepted. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; concierge; cooking school; large outdoor heated pool; room service; smoke-free rooms; spa. *In room:* A/C in some, TV/DVD, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

La Puertecita Boutique Hotel ★★ (Kids) Those who can't find the charm in church bells and firecrackers going off at all hours of the night will appreciate this hotel, as will those who are traveling with children. Set on the side of a narrow canyon, the hotel is above and a little removed from the central part of town. A fence surrounds the grounds, with terraced gardens and the ruined remains of an aqueduct for a touch of local character. Rooms, especially deluxe units and suites, are large; many have vaulted brick ceilings, small terraces, and beautifully tiled large bathrooms. They are decorated in modern Mexican style. The junior and one-bedroom suites have living areas and, in some cases, a dining area for four. Six suites have kitchenettes. The two-bedroom suites are the equivalent of a one-bedroom suite with a deluxe room attached.

Santo Domingo 75, 37740 San Miguel de Allende, Gto. ✆ **415/152-5011.** Fax 415/152-5505. www.lapuertecita.com. 32 units. $266–$293 deluxe and junior suite; $324 1-bedroom suite; $585 and up for 2- and 3-bedroom suites. There's a 3% service charge added to the bill. AE, MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; concierge; golf and tennis at local club; exercise equipment; 2 small outdoor pools (1 heated); outdoor whirlpool; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* TV, hair dryer, Internet.

Expensive

Casa de la Cuesta ★★★ In an upper *barrio* (neighborhood) stands this magnificent house, an example of how colonial architecture can be rethought in modern terms. The entrance to the house is through a passage that opens up to the first of two courtyards. On three sides are structures of different heights, which make use, wherever possible, of rooftop terraces. Most of the guest rooms encircle the arcaded rear courtyard, with a lot of terraces and common space, much of which has a fine view of the central part of town. Most have fireplaces. Rooms are large and comfortable, with king-size beds, lots of color and detail, and a mix of modern and colonial furnishings. Two rooms come with kitchens. The house is about a 10-minute walk to the center of town, and the return is uphill. Breakfasts are great, and the hosts, Heidi and Bill Levasseur, are helpful and entertaining.

Cuesta de San José 32, 37700 San Miguel de Allende, Gto. ✆/fax **415/154-4324.** www.casadelacuesta.com. 7 units. $165 double. Rates include full breakfast. AE, MC, V (for deposits). Limited street parking. **Amenities:** Smoke-free rooms. *In room:* Hair dryer, no phone, Wi-Fi.

Casa Luna Pila Seca/Casa Luna Quebrada ★★★ Casa Luna Pila Seca and Casa Luna Quebrada are both striking to look at and fun to stay in. Both are just a few blocks below the main square. The house on Calle Quebrada is a large property, enjoys lots of open space, and is designed in the hacienda style. The original house on Pila Seca is more playful and has many nooks and crannies and riotous vegetation. Guest rooms in both houses are roughly the same in size and amenities. They have lots of color, and lots of

detail. Most rooms are large and come with a king-size bed or two twins, down comforters, gas fireplaces, and large bathrooms with tub/showers. Most have private patios. Breakfasts are delicious, and cooking classes are sometimes offered.

Pila Seca 11, 37700 San Miguel de Allende, Gto. ✆ **210/200-8758** or 415/152-1117. www.casaluna.com. 30 units. $135–$176 double. Rates include full breakfast. MC, V (for deposits). Limited street parking. Children 15 and younger not accepted. **Amenities:** Bar; Jacuzzi; small outdoor pool at Quebrada house; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* Hair dryer, no phone, Wi-Fi.

Susurro ★★★ Finds Spend any amount of time in places like San Miguel and you realize that the domestic architecture is all about the creation of serene, private spaces. Susurro (which in Spanish describes the sound made by whispering wind and trickling water) has elegant interior spaces, and with only four guest rooms, you'll find plenty of time to enjoy these all to yourself. The soft sounds of flowing water can be heard all around the house. Three of the rooms are large and come with separate terraces. The fourth, the garden room, has now been enlarged and has a lovely patio area in the rear garden. All rooms are beautifully decorated, with either a queen-size or a king-size bed. The house is a few blocks from the main square. Robert Waters, the owner, is an easygoing, agreeable man who makes an excellent host.

Recreo 78, 37700 San Miguel de Allende, Gto. ✆ **310/943-7163** in the U.S., or 415/152-1065. www.susurro.com.mx. 4 units. $155–$185 double. Rates include full breakfast. AE, MC, V for deposits only. Limited street parking. Children 12 and younger not accepted. **Amenities:** Plunge pool; smoke-free rooms; Wi-Fi (in half the property). *In room:* TV, hair dryer, no phone.

Moderate

Hotel Mansión Virreyes Soon after the Mexican Revolution ended, this became the first hotel in San Miguel. The rooms are simply furnished but comfortable. Almost all face the interior courtyard. Half are carpeted, half are tiled. Bathrooms are small to medium. On the top floor are three apartments, which are large and come with kitchenettes. These are usually rented out from January to March.

Canal 19, 37700 San Miguel de Allende, Gto. ✆ **415/152-3355,** -0851. Fax 415/152-3865. www.hotelmansionvirreyes.com. 22 units. Fri–Sun 1,300–1,650 pesos double, 1,950 pesos apt; Mon–Thurs 1,200–1,550 pesos double, 1,700 pesos apt. Rates include full breakfast. MC, V. Free secure parking 4 blocks away. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; room service; Wi-Fi (in restaurant/bar). *In room:* TV, hair dryer.

Hotel Posada Carmina ★ This centrally located hotel is comfortable, beautiful, and well managed. It's a half-block south of the plaza, next to the Parroquia, in a large colonial mansion made from the same stone as the church. The two floors of rooms surround a stately courtyard with orange trees growing around a stone fountain, and bougainvillea and *llamarada* creeping up the walls. Rooms are ample and well furnished. Most of the bathrooms are comfortably sized but simple, with small mirrors (and, in some, little counter space) and plenty of hot water. Light sleepers will find that the bells of the Parroquia prove a nuisance in the front rooms. The new section in back is quieter. Rooms there are midsize, with well-lit bathrooms and firm mattresses.

Cuna de Allende 7, 37700 San Miguel de Allende, Gto. ✆ **415/152-0458.** Fax 415/152-1036. www.posadacarmina.com. 24 units. 1,110–1,290 pesos double. Rates include full breakfast. MC, V. Limited street parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; room service; Wi-Fi (in common areas). *In room:* TV.

Pensión Casa Carmen ★ Every B&B has its own feel, and this one feels like a friendly Mexican household. It has a pretty little Mexican patio with orange trees and a fountain, and large rooms that are comfortably but simply furnished. English is spoken. All rooms have gas heaters and come with either two twins or one queen-size bed. Of

these, the penthouse is perhaps the most comfortable, but the ones in the first courtyard have the most character. Bathrooms vary in size. Breakfast (daily) and the afternoon meal (Mon–Sat) are served in a pleasant dining room; the cooking is good. You can reserve rooms by the day, week, or month, with discounts for extended stays. The location is central, just 2 blocks east of the Jardín.

Correo 31, near Recreo (Apdo. Postal 152), 37700 San Miguel de Allende, Gto. ✆/fax **415/152-0844.** www.casacarmenhotel.com. 10 units. $125 double. Rates include breakfast and lunch (breakfast only Sun). No credit cards. Limited street parking. Children 13 and younger not accepted. *In room:* No phone.

Inexpensive

Parador San Sebastián Value The San Sebastián is another colonial house–turned–hotel with a central location and comfortable rooms for the price. Standard rooms are simple and vary in size and choice of beds. Pricing is based on bed choices. The lower price is for a double bed or two twins; the higher price is for two doubles. Bathrooms are mostly medium size. Apartments come with a bedroom (double bed), a kitchen, and a living/dining area. Guests can lounge in the chairs on the courtyard and the rooftop terrace. This hotel takes only walk-ins and won't accept reservations.

Mesones 7 (btw. Colegio and Núñez), 37700 San Miguel de Allende, Gto. ✆ **415/152-7084.** 30 units. 350–570 pesos double; 500–600 pesos apt. No credit cards. Free parking. *In room:* No phone.

Quinta Loreto Value This motel is a good place to stay whether you're traveling by car or not. It has good rooms for the price, a lovely garden, and a friendly atmosphere. Rooms come with ceiling fans and heaters. The cheaper rooms, without phones or televisions, are smaller than the others. Most rooms contain one double and one twin bed. The food is good and the laundry service is a bargain. Make reservations—the Loreto is popular and often books up weeks in advance. Nonguests can come for inexpensive breakfasts and lunches. Quinta Loreto is below the crafts market off Calle Loreto, about 7 blocks from the main square.

Calle Loreto 15, 37700 San Miguel de Allende, Gto. ✆ **415/152-0042.** Fax 415/152-1304. www.quintaloreto.com.mx. 40 units. 600–750 pesos double. Weekly and monthly discounts available. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; small outdoor pool. *In room:* Some w/TV and phone, some w/neither.

WHERE TO DINE

In San Miguel, vegetarians will have no problem—most restaurants have legitimate meat-free main courses. For the best baked goods (pastries, French bread, sandwiches, croissants, and cakes), try **El Petit Four,** Calle Mesones 99. It's open Tuesday through Saturday from 8am to 8pm, Sunday from 8am to 6pm. There's a dining area in the store, or you can take your baked goods with you.

To sample some of the people's food, you might try **Cenaduría La Alborada** at Sollano 11 (✆ **415/513-0577**), by the main square. It's a traditional sort of supper place where you can get a nourishing bowl of *pozole* or a plate of enchiladas. It's open Monday to Saturday from 2pm to 1am. For tacos, try **Los Faroles,** at Ancha de San Antonio 28-C (✆ **451/152-1849**). The owners sell a variety of *tacos de parrilla* (tacos with grilled meats) and *volcanes* (a toasted tortilla topped with meat and cheese).

Another dining option is a 10-minute ride east of town. An Italian chef has taken over a small part of the former **Hacienda de Landeta** and has a "country-kitchen" thing going on there—outdoor dining, chalkboard menu, unhurried personal service (main courses typically 130–240 pesos). Local residents love it. Amid crumbling walls and ancient trees, the setting has a gracious old-world feel to it. The menu always includes fresh pasta, usually a fish dish, and three or four Italian specialties. Chef Andreas personally attends his

 customers from Thursday to Sunday starting around 2pm. He has only a few tables, so make reservations (✆ **415/120-3481**).

Moderate

Café Ibérico ★★★ TAPAS/PAELLA The tapas I tried at this small, new eatery were excellent and included the best fried calamari I've ever eaten. And the paella (either seafood or rabbit with chorizo) is just like what you get in Spain, with a chewy crust on the bottom of the pan. A couple from North Carolina, Tim and Suzanne Inscore, run the place. Tim was trained in Spain and loves to cook. He changes the list of tapas depending on what's available or what he feels like cooking, and he keeps the menu simple. Suzanne takes charge of the desserts, which are excellent. The cafe is small and attractive, with only 18 seats. So be sure to make a reservation.

20 de Enero Norte 30 (at Calle Marte). ✆ **044-415/101-8483** (cell). www.cafeiberico.com.mx. Reservations recommended on weekends. Tapas 20–95 pesos; paella 180–240 pesos. No credit cards. Tues–Thurs 1–9pm; Fri–Sat 1–10pm.

Jackie's San Antonio ★★★ MEDITERRANEAN This new restaurant is somewhat removed from central San Miguel, but it's well worth the taxi ride, since you'll find a view of the neighborhood church of Colonia San Antonio and the spires of La Parroquia from an uncommon perspective. The menu includes some unique dishes, such as duck braised in port and Turkish figs, pork tenderloin with a candied-apple stuffing, or grilled monkfish served with a sweet-pepper aioli. The chef has trained with Mónica Patiño in Mexico City.

Plaza San Antonio 4. ✆ **415/110-2223.** Reservations recommended. Main courses 130–240 pesos. MC, V. Fri–Wed 1pm–midnight; Thurs 6pm–midnight.

Planta Baja ★★ FUSION/MEDITERRANEAN Planta Baja offers inventive fusion cooking. Delve into the appetizers, which include options such as grilled swordfish with roasted sweet peppers, caramelized onion, and balsamic vinegar, or bites of tuna on potato chips with avocado sauce and a sprinkling of onion and cilantro. The shrimp and oyster soup, made at the table, is a popular choice. For a main course, try a stir-fry noodle dish or their delicious spiced salmon. Though the menu changes often, you'll always find a few steaks offered. The dining room has a hedonistic feel from the interesting combination of dramatic colors and muted lighting.

Canal 28. ✆ **415/154-6555.** www.plantabajasanmiguel.com. Reservations recommended on weekends. Main courses 135–200 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 1pm–midnight.

The Restaurant INTERNATIONAL In a colonial courtyard framed in Moorish arches, you can enjoy original dishes by chef Donnie Masterson. He and Cynthia Granado opened this restaurant in the spring of 2008. The dinner menu changes every couple of weeks, so it's difficult to focus on any particular dish. Mr. Masterson characterizes his cooking as "global comfort food"—taking the mainstays of the world's cooking (since these days, at least in our dining, we're all globalists) and tweaking them with a few changes in flavors. There's usually something Mexican-inspired on the menu, and at least one Asian dish transformed. Service is good.

Sollano 16. ✆ **415/154-7862.** www.therestaurantsanmiguel.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses 140–240 pesos; lunch 60–100 pesos. MC, V. Tues–Sat 5–10:30pm.

Vivoli Café ★★ ITALIAN This restaurant should be able to satisfy just about anyone's appetite for Italian food. The menu is large, with a wide variety of pasta, three risottos

(including a lively one with three kinds of mushrooms), various pizzas, and many different meat and seafood dishes. On my last visit I enjoyed some tender ravioli followed by pollo piccata cooked perfectly. The dining room is softly lit and the ambience is relaxing.

Hernández Macías 66. ✆ **415/152-0045.** www.vivolicafe.com/locations/sanmigueldeallende.html. Reservations accepted. Main courses 90–240 pesos. AE, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 11am–10pm; Fri–Sat 11am–11pm.

Inexpensive

El Correo ★ MEXICAN This is a small place right across from the post office. I like the owner's selection, which offers a varied sampling of Mexican standards: *sopes* (little fried *masa* cakes topped with savory meats and veggies); *caldo tlalpeño* (chicken, rice, and vegetable soup; my preference over the tortilla soup, which is what most people come for); and *enchiladas del portal,* which are made in the classic western Mexican style. Other offerings include *mole* and *arrachera a la tampiqueña* (steak with an array of side dishes, such as enchiladas, guacamole, or rice and beans).

Correo 23. ✆ **415/152-4951.** Reservations accepted. Breakfast 50–75 pesos; main courses 68–140 pesos. MC, V. Wed–Mon 8am–10:30pm.

El Pegaso Restaurant & Bar INTERNATIONAL When you're looking for only a light meal, consider dropping into this place, which is inexpensive, cheerfully lit, and has quick, friendly service. It's popular mainly for the sandwiches, salads, breakfasts, and desserts. You can get anything here from a Reuben sandwich to a tuna melt, to eggs Benedict, to shish kabobs.

Corregidora 6 (at Correo). ✆ **415/152-1351.** Breakfast 40–60 pesos; soups, salads, sandwiches 70–88 pesos; main courses 80–120 pesos. MC, V. Mon–Sat 8:30am–10pm.

La Posadita MEXICAN Mexican food with a view is the draw at this rooftop restaurant near La Parroquia. And the food is creditably executed. I tried a soup and some enchiladas and enjoyed them. The margaritas were good, too—a little small but not watered down. Other popular dishes include the *cochinita pibil,* and the tacos. If you go in the evening, try to get a table with a view of the lit-up church. And if the weather is too cold on the roof, there's indoor dining below.

Cuna de Allende 13. ✆ **415/154-8862.** Main courses 75–150 pesos. No credit cards. Thurs–Tues noon–10pm.

Olé Olé MEXICAN Festive and friendly, this small restaurant is a riot of red and yellow streamers and bullfight memorabilia. The small menu specializes in grilled main courses—beef or chicken fajitas, shrimp brochettes, and *arrachera* (steak).

Loreto 66 (btw. Insurgentes and Calzada de la Luz). ✆ **415/152-0896.** Main courses 70–120 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 1–9pm.

SAN MIGUEL AFTER DARK

To see a calendar of events, find a copy of the local paper, *Atención,* or one of the free monthly periodicals for visitors. Bellas Artes and the Angela Peralta Theater also post announcements of performances around town. Local regulations favor restaurant/bars over simple bars, so live-music acts often perform in restaurants. Clubs and dance clubs tend to spring up and then die off quickly. A couple of restaurants are popular nightspots: **Tío Lucas** (✆ **415/512-4996**) is a fun place to hear jazz and have a few drinks and perhaps a bite of dinner. It's located at Mesones 105 across from the Teatro Peralta. **Mama Mía,** Umarán 8, between Jesús and Hernández Macías (✆ **415/152-2063**), has

Tips Recommended Day-Trip Tours

Several tour guides and companies in San Miguel make trips to **Dolores Hidalgo, Guanajuato,** and **Querétaro.** It's a hurried way of seeing these places, but it can be done. **Leandro Delgado** (✆ **415/152-0155;** leandrotours@hotmail.com) is an independent tour guide who is well informed and conscientious. He speaks English, is a good driver, and is familiar with the artisans of Dolores Hidalgo and Guanajuato. Sr. Delgado and other guides offer trips to see the **monarch butterflies,** 5 hours away in the state of Michoacán (see chapter 8). This is an exhausting trip; do it in 2 days, staying overnight in the town of Angangueo, if you can. The season runs from mid- to late November to March.

a bar area where salsa and jazz bands play on the weekends. There is a cover charge of 40 pesos. In the summer, you can enjoy the late afternoon and early evening from its rooftop terrace. If all you want is a drink and a view, La Azotea Bar, next door to Mama Mía, has a lively rooftop scene all year long.

A SIDE TRIP TO DOLORES HIDALGO: FINE POTTERY & SHRIMP ICE CREAM

Dolores Hidalgo lies 40km (25 miles) northwest of San Miguel on Hwy. 35. Most people go there to shop at the Talavera pottery companies, but the town itself merits a visit. It remains a quiet, provincial place with a lovely main square and parish church; on the church steps, Father Hidalgo proclaimed the independence of Mexico. The church has a charming facade that, if pressed, I would label late Mexican baroque, but that doesn't do it justice. The interior of the church was plundered at various times but retains a couple of beautiful altarpieces.

The main square has a small-town feel to it. Vendors sell ice cream in exotic flavors—tequila, shrimp, and pulque (a fermented beverage made from agave) are just a few enticing examples—as well as mango, *guanábana,* and other more familiar standbys. It all started 30 years ago on a dare, and then caught on for the notoriety it gave the vendors. Ask for some impossibly bad flavor—such as cilantro–*mescal*–chocolate chip or chicken *mole* swirl—and, without batting an eye, they'll tell you they're fresh out and to come back tomorrow. Most of these ice creams are known as *nieves* and are low in fat; for a richer ice cream, ask for a *mantecado.* If you're hungry, the restaurant El Patio is on the east side of the square.

Dolores has two small museums. The **Casa de Hidalgo** (admission 20 pesos) is filled with letters and historical artifacts having to do with Father Hidalgo and will be of most interest to history buffs. The **Museo de la Independencia** (admission 15 pesos), a more dramatic approach to the theme of independence, also has a small collection of memorabilia of José Alfredo Jiménez, the king of *ranchera* music.

Shopping for Talavera

The **Talavera** pottery produced in Dolores is handsome and colorful, if less traditional than Talavera pottery produced in Puebla. It's also inexpensive and plentiful. You can find all kinds of objects, from sink basins to napkin rings, to hand-painted tiles. The pieces are formed with molds and then painted freehand. Prices here are considerably lower

than those in San Miguel. Workshops are usually open from 10am to 6pm but may or may not close for the afternoon meal. Almost all are closed on Sunday.

The first couple of Talavera workshops you'll encounter aren't even in town, but are on the highway just before you get there. **Talavera San Gabriel** (✆ **418/185-5037**) has a warehouse full of large and small decorative objects, including picture frames, candlesticks, and ginger jars. And **Talavera Amora** (✆ **418/185-9002**) has more dinnerware, including the popular blue-and-yellow fish pattern.

Once you get into town, you're best off just asking directions for different stores and factories. There are a lot of shops, and each seems to have a different specialty. At the entrance to the town, on the left side of the first roundabout, is **Hacienda Style** (✆ **418/182-2064** or 602/288-9122 in the U.S.). It produces tiles and sink basins and other objects in traditional and contemporary patterns. The factory has a store in San Miguel at Zacateros 83-A (✆ **415/154-7962**). Another that specializes in decorative objects and tiles is **Talavera Cortés** (✆ **418/182-0900**), at the corner of Distrito Federal and Tabasco streets. **Azulejos Talavera Vázquez** (✆ **418/182-0630**) has a large store at the corner of Puebla and Tamaulipas streets. It has a bit of everything, and at that same intersection are a couple of other stores with lots of dinnerware.

2 GUANAJUATO ★★★

354km (219 miles) NW of Mexico City; 56km (35 miles) SE of León; 93km (58 miles) W of San Miguel de Allende; 208km (129 miles) SW of San Luis Potosí; 163km (101 miles) N of Morelia; 280km (174 miles) SE of Zacatecas

If you're going to Mexico to lose yourself, you'll have no problem doing so on the streets of Guanajuato (gwah-nah-*whah*-toh). They seem designed for just that purpose as they curl this way and that, becoming alleys or stairways, and intersecting each other at different angles. At times it can seem like the Twilight Zone; I've heard of people hurriedly passing by a curious-looking shop intending to return later, and then are never able to locate it again. To make matters worse, the streets are filled with things that can draw your attention away from the business of getting from one place to another. The town is so photogenic that everywhere you look is postcard material. Most buildings, like the streets, are irregular in shape, creating a jumble of walls, balconies, and rooftops meeting at anything but a right angle. The churches are the exception, having regular floor plans, but even they show asymmetry—despite the best efforts of their builders, none has two matching towers, which only adds to their charm.

Founded in 1559, Guanajuato soon became fabulously rich, with world-famous mines (such as La Valenciana, Mineral de Cata, and Mineral de Rayas), which earned their owners titles of nobility. Along with Zacatecas and San Luis Potosí, Guanajuato was one of Mexico's most important mining cities. From the 16th through the 18th centuries, the mines in these towns produced a third of all the silver in the world, and Guanajuato bloomed with elaborate churches and mansions. Floods plagued the city until it finally diverted the river and turned the old riverbed into a road that winds into the old downtown, with cantilevered houses jutting out high above the cars. The city has also opened an impressive network of tunnels (it is, after all, a mining town).

Still, on the surface, Guanajuato seems like an old Spanish city dumped into a Mexican highland valley (at 2,008m/6,586 ft. elevation). It's one of Mexico's great colonial

cities. Picturesque and laden with atmosphere, Guanajuato should be high on your list of places to visit.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING

By Plane Air access is good, with frequent flights in and out of the León/Guanajuato (also known as León/Bajío, code BJX) airport, 27km (17 miles) from downtown Guanajuato. The taxi ride costs about 400 pesos. The airport has an ATM, pharmacy, and gift store. It also has car-rental counters: **Avis** (✆ 477/713-3003), **Budget** (✆ 477/713-1404), **Hertz** (✆ 477/771-5050), **National** (✆ 477/771-3371), and **Thrifty** (✆ 477/713-8522).

American Airlines' number in Mexico is ✆ 01-800/904-6000, **Continental**'s is ✆ 01-800/900-5000, and **Delta Airline**'s number is ✆ 01-800/902-2100. **Aeroméxico** (✆ 01-800/021-4000) and its affiliate, **Aerolitoral,** fly to and from Los Angeles, Tijuana, Mexico City, Puerto Vallarta, Monterrey, and Ciudad Juárez. **Mexicana** (✆ 01-800/502-2000) flies to and from Chicago, Oakland, Los Angeles, Denver, San Jose, Guadalajara, Mexico City, and Tijuana. **Volaris** (✆ 01-800/786-5274 in Mexico), a discount domestic air carrier, flies to and from Tijuana.

There are airline ticket offices in León and at the airport. In Guanajuato, travel agencies can arrange flight reservations.

By Car From Mexico City, take Tollway 57D north toward Querétaro and follow signs for Tollway 45D west toward Irapuato. This road bypasses the cities of Celaya, Salamanca, and Irapuato, where it turns north. Before Silao, there's a turnoff for Hwy. 110 east. The route is a four-lane road that takes 4½ hours. From San Luis Potosí, the quickest way to Guanajuato is through Dolores Hidalgo (3 hr.).

By Bus The bus station in Guanajuato is 6km (3¾ miles) southwest of town. From **Mexico City's Terminal Norte,** you'll have no trouble finding a *directo* (nonstop bus) to Guanajuato. **Servicios Coordinados/Primera Plus** (✆ **55/5567-4388**) and **Estrella Blanca** (✆ **55/5729-4388**) run express buses (5 hr.). You shouldn't have to wait more than a half-hour. Try to catch one of **ETN**'s (✆ **55/5785-1576**) super-deluxe buses with extra-wide seats that recline far back (10 per day). They're worth the extra money.

From **San Miguel de Allende,** ETN has three nonstop buses; Primera Plus/Servicios Coordinados has nine. These go *vía la Presa* (the short route—1¼ hr.). Don't take buses that go via Dolores Hidalgo. There is also service to Guadalajara (4 hr.), Morelia (usually via Irapuato, 2½ hr.), and elsewhere.

ORIENTATION

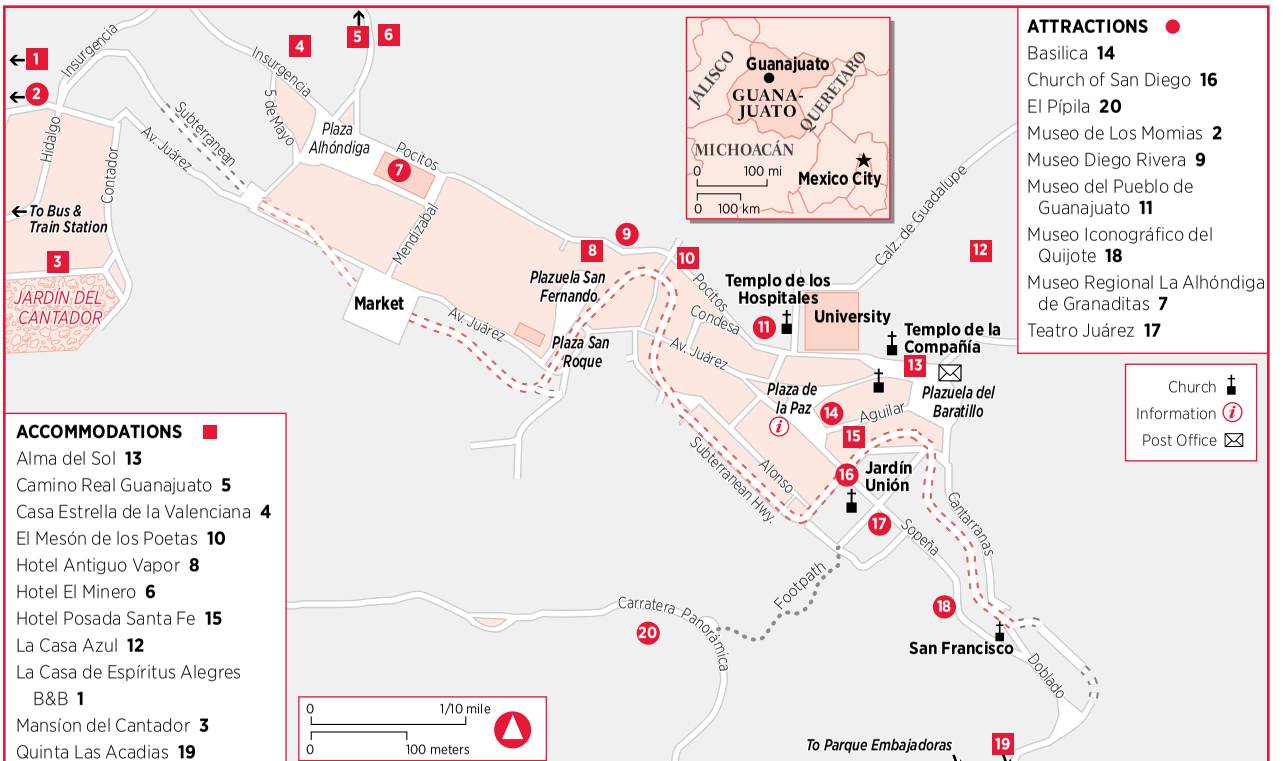
Arriving by Plane The only transportation from the León/Guanajuato airport, 27km (17 miles) from downtown, is a **private taxi.** You pay for the cab (420 pesos) inside the airport. There is no shuttle service.

Arriving by Car Try not to lose your sanity while finding a place to park. Such a winding, hilly town defies good verbal or written directions. Be alert for one-way streets. Consider parking your car until you leave town, because the frustration of driving in the city could spoil your visit.

Arriving by Bus The bus station is about 6km (3¾ miles) southwest of town, on the road to Celaya. Cabs cost about 40 pesos. At night there can sometimes be a scarcity of cabs. Try to schedule your trip to arrive during the day.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The state **tourism office** is at Plaza de la Paz 14, across from the basilica (✆ **473/732-9492**). The handiest place to get information is at a kiosk in the Jardín Unión. It's staffed daily from 9am to 8pm.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Hidalgo
Contador
Subterranean
Av. Juárez
5 de Mayo
Plaza Alhóndiga
Pocitos
Mendizábal
To Bus & Train Station
JARDÍN DEL CANTADOR
Market
Plazuela San Fernando
Plaza San Roque
Templo de los Hospitales
University
Templo de la Compañía
Plaza de la Paz
Plazuela del Baratillo
Aguilar
Alonso
Subterranean Hwy.
Jardín Unión
Soperia
Cantarranas
Footpath
Carratera Panorámica
San Francisco
Doblado
To Parque Embajadoras
Calz. de Guadalupe
Condesa
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CITY LAYOUT Guanajuato is a town of narrow streets, alleys, and stairs, and small, picturesque plazas. The hilly terrain and tangle of streets are difficult to represent on a map. You'll soon learn that maps aren't drawn to scale, nor do they show every street and stairway. The best way to get oriented is to visit the overlook at El Pípila (see "The Top Attractions," below), and one by one make out the major landmarks.

The small plaza at the center of the city, **Jardín Unión** (known as the cheese wedge, for its shape), is where students, locals, and visitors gather. Facing the Jardín from the direction of El Pípila are both the **Teatro Juárez** and **Templo de San Diego.** From this plaza, you are within walking distance of many of the major sights.

GETTING AROUND Walking is the only way to get to know the historic district of this labyrinthine town. For longer stretches, taxis are reasonably priced and abundant, except between 2 and 4pm when office workers are trying to get home for the midafternoon meal. As usual, you should establish the price before setting out.

Fast Facts Guanajuato

Area Code The telephone area code is **473.**

Climate The city has temperatures that are mild in summer, cool in winter, with the occasional freeze at night.

Drugstores **Farmacia Embajadoras** is at Paseo Madero 10 (✆ **473/732-0996**), and **Farmacia La Perla** is at Juárez 146 (✆ **473/732-1175**).

Emergency & Police Call ✆ **473/732-0266** for the police.

Hospital **Centro Médico La Presa** is at Paseo de la Presa 85 (✆ **473/731-1074**).

Internet Access There are several Internet cafes in the downtown area, with a lot of turnover.

Post Office The *correo,* on the corner of Ayuntamiento and San José, near the Templo de la Compañía, is open Monday through Friday from 8am to 4:30pm, and Saturday 9am to 1pm.

Seasons The rainy season is June through September. Occasionally the rain is hard, but mostly it's afternoon showers and presents no problems for travelers. The coldest part of the year is December and January; the hottest is April, May, and some of June, before the rains come.

SPECIAL EVENTS & FESTIVALS

Every year in October, the state of Guanajuato sponsors the **Festival Internacional Cervantino (International Cervantes Festival)** ★★, 3 weeks of performing arts from all over the world. In recent years, the festival has featured marionettes from the Czech Republic, the Eliot Feld Ballet from New York, the Kiev Ballet, and a host of Mexican artists. The shows are held in open plazas and theaters all over town. Book rooms well in advance during the festival; if Guanajuato is full, consider staying in San Miguel de Allende.

The main office for the festival is in Mexico City (✆ **55/5615-9417;** www.festivalcervantino.gob.mx). The local office is in Plaza San Francisquito 1, 36000 Guanajuato,

Language School

Of the five language schools in Guanajuato, the best known is **Academia Falcón,** Paseo de la Presa 80 (✆ **473/731-0745;** www.academiafalcon.com; mailing address: Callejón de la Mora 158, 36000 Guanajuato, Gto.). The institute provides skilled and dedicated tutors for those at all levels and gets high marks from students. It can also arrange boarding with local families.

Gto. (✆ **473/731-1161**). You can order tickets through **Ticketmaster** in Mexico City (✆ **55/5325-9000**). Keep your confirmation number; you'll need it to pick up your tickets in Guanajuato. The best time to be at the festival is during the week; on weekends it's absolute madness.

EXPLORING GUANAJUATO

The Top Attractions

El Pípila This is the best vantage point in Guanajuato for photographs—the entire city unfolds below you, with great views in every direction. A funicular railway runs up the hill from behind the church of San Diego. You can also climb the hill on foot, up a rugged winding pathway. Just look for signs that read AL PÍPILA ("to El Pípila").

The statue is the city's monument to José de los Reyes Martínez, better known as El Pípila. According to the story, El Pípila (if he really existed) was a brave young miner in Father Hidalgo's ragtag army of peasants and workers fighting for Mexican independence. Guanajuato was the first real battle of the war. The royalist forces took up their position inside the Alhóndiga de Granaditas. It seemed impregnable to Hidalgo's army, which lacked artillery. But El Pípila managed to breach the Spanish defenses by tying a flagstone to his back as protection, crawling to the fortress doors, and setting them ablaze. Today El Pípila's statue raises a torch high over the city in everlasting vigilance; the inscription at his feet proclaims AUN HAY OTRAS ALHÓNDIGAS POR INCENDIAR ("There still remain other *alhóndigas* to burn").

Free admission. Daily 24 hr.

Museo del Pueblo de Guanajuato ★★ Just north of the Plaza de la Paz is this 17th-century mansion that once belonged to the Marqués San Juan de Rayas. On permanent display is a fascinating collection of Colonial-Era civil and religious pieces gathered by distinguished local muralist José Chávez Morado. As a collector, Chávez Morado had an eye for the macabre, acquiring death portraits, some even eerier portraits of the living, and religious paintings on the subject of mortality. Also in the collection are some paintings by the gifted Hermenegildo Bustos, a portrait artist of the 19th century. A couple of Chávez's murals are also on display; other works by both Bustos and Chávez can be found at La Alhóndiga, down the street. There is a small collection of pre-Hispanic artifacts and several folk-art testimonials dedicated to the miraculous powers of various saints. In 2009 the museum acquired the miniature collection of noted folk art collector Teresa Pomar.

Calle Positos 7. ✆ **473/732-2990.** www.guanajuato.gob.mx/cultura/museos/pueblo.php. Admission 15 pesos. Tues–Sat 10am–7pm; Sun 10am–3pm.

Museo Diego Rivera ★★ From the Museo del Pueblo, walk 1½ blocks farther down the street, and you'll find the house where the artist Diego Rivera was born on December 8, 1886. It has been restored and converted into a museum. The first floor is furnished as it might have been in the era of Rivera's birth. Upstairs there's a pretty good collection of his early works. He began painting when he was 10 years old and eventually moved to Paris, where he became a Marxist during World War I. The house contains a few sketches of some of the earlier murals that made his reputation, and paintings from 1902 to 1956. The third floor holds a small auditorium for lectures and conferences, and there you'll find a large representation of one of Rivera's most famous murals, *Un Sueño Dominical en la Alameda.* The museum has acquired the house next door and has begun a project to expand exhibition space into the new house; this should be completed by mid-2010.

Calle Positos 47. ✆ **473/732-1197.** www.guanajuato.gob.mx/cultura/museos/diego.php. Admission 15 pesos. Tues–Sat 10am–7pm; Sun 10am–3pm.

Museo Iconográfico del Quijote ★ Finds There are only a few universal characters in the world of Western literature: Hamlet, Faust, Don Juan, and Don Quixote come to mind. Writers far and wide have taken up these characters and reworked their stories, but Don Quixote has become a favorite subject of artists, including Dalí, Picasso, Miró, Raul Angiano, José Guadalupe Posada, Daumier, José Moreno Carbonero, and Pedro Coronel. This museum, a long block southeast of the Jardín Unión, holds a fascinating collection of art based upon Don Quixote. Particularly forceful are the sculptures and murals, but the sheer variety of forms and thematic treatment is what makes a stroll through this museum so entertaining.

Manuel Doblado 1. ✆ **473/732-6721.** www.museoiconografico.guanajuato.gob.mx. Admission 20 pesos. Tues–Sat 10am–6:30pm; Sun 10am–2pm.

Museo Regional La Alhóndiga de Granaditas ★★ On the same street as the Rivera Museum, 2 blocks farther down, is La Alhóndiga de Granaditas, which was built between 1798 and 1809 as the town granary—hard to believe, because it is such a beautiful building. The Spanish took refuge here in 1810 when El Pípila (see above) and company captured Guanajuato. A slaughter ensued that Father Hidalgo was unable to stop. This convinced many people who had been leaning toward independence to remain loyal to Spain, although when the Spanish forces under Félix Calleja retook Guanajuato, they exacted a horrible revenge on the locals suspected of collusion. (The exhibits tell the story.) By the next year, the royalist forces triumphed, and the heads of the insurrectionists Hidalgo, Allende, Aldama, and Jiménez adorned the four corners of the building, where they remained until 1821 as a dissuasive reminder.

The old granary now houses a regional museum. Two floors hold exhibits of pre-Columbian artifacts, displays on colonial history, and regional crafts. Adorning the two stairways to the second floor are the murals of José Chávez Morado, who donated his pre-Hispanic art collection to the museum (and whose Colonial-Era collection is in the Museo del Pueblo de Guanajuato). The exhibits take you through the region's Colonial Era and its role in the struggle for independence, all the way up to the Mexican Revolution. Explanatory text is in Spanish only, but the artifacts are interesting.

Mendizábal 6. ✆ **473/732-1112.** Admission 46 pesos. Use of camera 30 pesos; video camera 60 pesos. Tues–Sat 10am–6pm; Sun 10am–3pm.

Teatro Juárez Built in 1903 during the opulent era of the Porfiriato, this theater is now the venue for many productions, especially during the Festival Cervantino. The

exterior is at odds with its surroundings—Greco-Roman portico adorned with *fin de siècle* bronze lions and lanterns. The interior is eye-catching, with its mix of multiple designs and color combinations. Five tiers of box seats line the walls of the theater, and there's not a bad seat in the house.

Jardín de la Unión. ✆ **473/732-0183.** Admission 35 pesos. Use of camera 30 pesos, video camera 60 pesos. Tues–Sun 9am–1:45pm and 5–7:45pm.

More Attractions

The **Church of San Diego,** on the Jardín Unión, stands almost as it did in 1633, when it was built under the direction of Franciscan missionaries. A flood in 1760 nearly destroyed it. The reconstruction was completed in 1786, largely at the expense of the Count of La Valenciana. The pink cantera-stone facade is a fine example of the Mexican baroque.

The **Plazuela del Baratillo,** just behind the Jardín Unión, has a beautiful fountain (a gift from Emperor Maximilian) at its center. You'll always find people sitting around it peacefully, some in the shade and others in the sun. Its name derives from its former role as a weekly *tianguis* (market); vendors would yell *"¡Barato!"* ("Cheap!").

Just west of Baratillo is the **Church of the Compañía.** Built in 1747 by the Jesuit order, it was the biggest of their churches. The *churrigueresque* decoration lightens it somewhat, but the interior, which was restored in the 19th century, is neoclassical. This church was built as part of a Jesuit university, which was founded in 1732 on orders of Philip V. It's the last of 23 universities the Jesuit order built in Mexico. The main building of the **university** is on the same block as the church. Its entrance was rebuilt in 1945 in neoclassical style.

Farther west, between the main street, Juárez, and Calle Positos are three connected plazas worth seeing: **Plaza San Roque, Jardín de la Reforma,** and **Plaza San Fernando,** where you can sit at one of the outdoor tables and enjoy coffee in a perfectly charming setting. This plaza is an increasingly popular hangout.

Nearby Attractions

The following attractions are all a short distance above the city, and the best way to get to them is by taxi. You can hire one for around 140 pesos per hour. I would recommend taking the panoramic highway around the city, which allows you to pass by La Valenciana, La Cata, and La Raya; each has a mine and a church. The highway circles around to El Pípila. The drive is enjoyable and lasts about an hour, with a couple of stops and a quick drive along the submerged highway to view the houses that are perched above the road.

La Valenciana ★★★ The area around La Valenciana mine holds several attractions, shopping destinations, and a good restaurant. You might want to allot a couple of hours for a visit, but keep in mind that everything closes by 6pm. The star attraction is the magnificent **church of San Cayetano,** built toward the end of the colonial period in an opulent display of Mexican baroque. The interior is dazzling, with gilded carvings and *retablos* (altarpieces). The best time to see it is midafternoon, when sunlight pours through the windows, illuminating the golden carvings.

In the church plaza is an outstanding folk-art store called **Ojo de Venado** (see "Shopping," below), a rock-and-mineral shop, and a mezcal bar, El Fusilado, where you can pop in for something fortifying.

If you walk down toward the rear of the church, you'll come to an old entrance to the mine. A sign reads BOCAMINA SAN CAYETANO. A small cooperative offers (in Spanish only) a half-hour **tour of the mine** (25 pesos) and explains something of its operation. (Zacatecas

has a more interesting mine tour.) Across the road from the church is the house of the Count of La Valenciana, which now holds a restaurant, **La Casa del Conde de la Valenciana** (see "Where to Dine," later in this chapter).

La Valenciana silver mine has recently ceased operations. The principal mine opening is a couple of hundred yards west of the house. It's an eight-sided vertical shaft (500m/1,640 ft. deep) surrounded by a tall stone wall in the shape of a crown, with large wooden doors and a miner's chapel at the entrance.

If you keep climbing on the road that runs alongside La Valenciana, you will shortly see the driveway up to Casa de Capelo (see "Shopping," below) and to Cerámica La Cruz. Continue a few miles, and you come to the small town of Santa Rosa, where you can see yet more beautiful ceramics at Mayólica Santa Rosa (see "Shopping," below).

Templo de la Valenciana, Valenciana. Free admission. Daily 9am–6pm.

Museo de Las Momias (Mummy Museum) First-time visitors find this museum grotesque or fascinating, or both: Mummified remains of the dead, some of whom wear tattered clothing from centuries past, are on display. Dryness and the earth's gases and minerals in this particular *panteón* (cemetery) have halted decomposition. Because graveyards have limited space, bodies are eventually exhumed in Mexico to make room for newcomers. Those on display were exhumed between 1865 and 1985. The mummies stand or recline in glass cases, grinning, choking, or staring, while tour guides tell visitors macabre stories (in Spanish) of the fates of some of the deceased. Are they true? *¿Quién sabe?* But it's impossible to resist the temptation to go up and look at them. Next to the mummy museum is a small exhibit called "El Culto a la Muerte" (Worship of the Dead), which is a bad mix of morbid and hokey.

Esplanada del Panteón. ✆ **473/732-0639.** www.momiasdeguanajuato.gob.mx. Admission 50 pesos. Daily 9am–6pm. At the northwest end of town, the steep Esplanada del Panteón leads up to the municipal cemetery.

Templo de Cata Up above the city, perched on the mountain to the north, is this small, elaborate "miners' church." Cata is also the name of the mine nearby and the *barrio* (neighborhood) that surrounds the church. A lovely baroque facade, with just one

A Ranch Museum

Surrounding Guanajuato were more than 150 haciendas of wealthy colonial mine owners. Most are now either in ruins or restored and privately owned, but one has been made into the **Museo Exhacienda San Gabriel de Barrera** ★. About 3km (1¾ miles) from town on the road to Marfil, it's a lovely place noted for its elaborate gardens in different styles (Moorish, English, and Spanish, for example). The hacienda house presents a good picture of the 18th-century life of the *hacendados*. The hacienda still has its requisite chapel (baroque, of course), with a key identifying the various figures depicted in the *retablo*. There is also a state-run shop displaying all the handicrafts produced in the state. The grounds are open daily from 9am to 6pm; admission is 35 pesos. The store's hours are Wednesday through Sunday from 10am to 5pm.

tower standing, decorates the outside. Until a few years ago, this church held an enormous number of personal testimonials that covered the walls from floor to ceiling. Most of these took the traditional form of small square sheets of tin painted with scenes (in a primitive folk style) and explanatory text describing the miracles performed by the church's Señor de Villaseca. "El Trigueñito" (roughly translated as "the olive-skinned one"), as he is affectionately called, is a popular figure in Guanajuato, especially with miners and truck and taxi drivers. The testimonials were a touching display of the highly personal relationship these people have with El Trigueñito. What has become of all these testimonials is now the question. At first, their removal was supposed to be temporary, but they haven't returned. *¿Quién sabe?*

Carretera Panorámica. Free admission. Daily 9am–5pm.

SHOPPING

Stores in Guanajuato keep the usual hours—Monday through Saturday from 10am to 2pm and 4 to 8pm. The **Mercado Hidalgo,** or municipal market, is one of the most orderly in Mexico. You can browse on the main floor or watch the action from the raised walkway that encircles it. Aside from food and vegetable stalls, there is a lot of pottery and ceramic ware.

Artesanías Vázquez Outlet for a Talavera factory in Dolores Hidalgo, this place is small but loaded with the colorful Talavera-style pottery for which Dolores is famous. You'll see plates, ginger jars, frames, cups and saucers, serving bowls, and the like. Open Monday to Saturday from 9am to 9pm; Sunday 10am to 5pm. Cantarranas 8. ✆ **473/732-5231.**

Casa de Capelo Famous ceramist Javier de Jesús Hernández, known simply as "Capelo," has his workshop high above Guanajuato, past La Valenciana church. Capelo and Cerámica La Cruz have opened galleries downtown at Positos 69 (✆ **473/732-0612**) and at Ponciano Aguilar 25, in front of the church of La Compañía (no phone). Store hours for both locations are Monday through Saturday 10am to 3pm and 5 to 8pm. If you still want to go to the workshop store, take the highway to Santa Rosa/Dolores Hidalgo and, after la Valenciana, look for a sign on the left pointing to a dirt road that climbs steeply. It's open Monday through Friday from 10am to 6pm. Carretera a Dolores Hidalgo s/n. ✆ **473/732-8964.**

Cerámica La Cruz The new downtown galleries are listed above. The original store is in the area of La Valenciana, just below Capelo's place. The output is a bit different from Capelo's work. The potters here play a lot with glazes producing crackleware, among other things. Hours are Monday through Friday from 10am to 6pm. Carretera a Dolores Hidalgo s/n. ✆ **473/732-9037.**

The Gorky González Workshop This prizewinning ceramist has dedicated himself to bringing back the traditional Talavera of Guanajuato. Gorky's son, whose *nom de guerre* is GoGo, is making his own style of ceramics, which is finding favor with some collectors. The workshop is a short cab ride from the historic center. The showroom is open Monday through Friday from 10am to 2pm and 4 to 6pm, Saturday from 10am to 1pm. Call first. Calle Pastita 247 (above the baseball field). ✆ **473/731-0389.**

Mayólica Santa Rosa This factory store is in the small town of Santa Rosa, on the way to Dolores Hidalgo. It carries high-quality *mayólica* for less money than in Guanajuato. It's open Monday through Friday from 8am to 5pm. On the highway. ✆ **473/739-0572.**

Ojo de Venado A knowledgeable dealer of folk art, Randy Walz sells a variety of pieces from Guanajuato and other parts of Mexico. He's good at finding unique, highly expressive works. The store is open daily from 10am to 6pm. Plaza la Valenciana. ✆ **473/734-1435.**

Rincón Artesanal Objects in carved wood, wax, papier-mâché, pewter, and ceramic, produced in different workshops throughout the state of Guanajuato, stock this store. It also carries items from farther afield, including beautiful *catrina calaveras* (skeleton statues in fancy dress) from the state of Michoacán. The woman who owns the place is very helpful. It's open Monday to Saturday from 10am to 8pm; Sunday from 10am to 3pm. Sopeña 5 (1 block east of Jardín Unión). ✆ **473/732-8632.**

WHERE TO STAY

Hotels have high-season rates for Christmas, Easter, and the Festival Cervantino (Oct). High season at moderate and inexpensive hotels also includes July and August, when schools are out and families vacation, and any holiday weekend. During the Festival Cervantino, in October, rooms are virtually impossible to find without a reservation, and even then it's good to claim your room early in the day. Some visitors have to stay as far away as León or San Miguel de Allende. Rates quoted here include the 18% tax.

Very Expensive

Camino Real Guanajuato ★★ Kids Occupying a former hacienda, this Camino Real Property is up the hill from La Alhóndiga. A lot of investment went toward infrastructure. The rooms were completely refurnished. But the character of the property retains the feel of the old hacienda. You can still make out the old outlines of the original hacienda grounds enclosed by a massive wall (a big help if you're traveling with kids). Rooms are decorated in an understated, modern style that goes well with the bare stone walls and arcades. The sixth-floor Camino Club rooms have domed ceilings and views of the city. Most rooms are quiet, owing to the large grounds of the hotel (except perhaps for the rooms in the very back, which are closest to the street).

Alhóndiga 100, Col. San Javier, Guanajuato, Gto. ✆ **800/722-6466** in the U.S. and Canada, or 473/102-1500. Fax 473/732-0626. www.caminoreal.com.mx/guanajuato. 105 units. $142–$233 deluxe; $150–$270 club; $295–$331 junior suite; $356–$392 master suite. Lower rates are for Mon–Thurs. AE, MC, V. Valet parking 55 pesos. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; children's programs; club-level rooms; fitness room; heated outdoor pool; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Casa Estrella de la Valenciana ★★★ This beautiful modern house, on the mountainside above La Valenciana church, affords a panoramic view of the city and surrounding valley. The American owners have created comfortable, spacious interiors appointed with regional handicrafts and art. All guest rooms have a balcony or terrace; two are handicap accessible. The two superior rooms are large and have special amenities such as a private Jacuzzi (La Valenciana) or a steam locker (La Sirena); each comes with a king-size bed. Another oversize room, the San Bernabé, comes with two queens. The others have either a queen-size or a king-size bed. There is also a two-bedroom casita. Common areas include a living room, an upstairs terrace, and a poolside patio. Another thing to like about this place is the number of extras the owners provide, such as free long distance calls to the U.S., Canada, or the U.K.

Callejón Jalisco 10, Col. La Valenciana 36240 Guanajuato, Gto. ✆ **866/983-8844** in the U.S., or 473/732-1784. Fax 562/430-0648 in the U.S. www.mexicaninns.com. 8 units. $218–$242 standard; $248–$277 deluxe; $277–$312 superior; $500–$555 2-bedroom casita. Rates include full breakfast and beverages.

Promotional rates sometimes available. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Babysitting; Jacuzzi; heated outdoor pool; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* TV, DVD/VCR, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Quinta Las Acacias ★★★ The main house dates from the late 19th century, when architecture and design in Mexico were borrowing heavily from Victorian and French *(afrancesado)* styles. It has been painstakingly remodeled. The rooms are decorated and furnished with period furniture, wallpaper, and wainscoting. There are seven period rooms in the house, and in back of the property are larger modern suites, some of which have Jacuzzis. Several of these rooms, including some larger master suites, surround a large cactus garden (it feels more like a cactus forest because these ancient cacti have grown so tall) and afford views of the nearby mountains. Rooms contain one king-size or two queen-size beds and have spacious, well-equipped bathrooms. Breakfast can be served in the dining room, on the terrace, or in the guest's room.

Paseo de la Presa 168, 36000 Guanajuato, Gto. ✆ **888/497-4129** in the U.S., or 473/731-1517. Fax 473/731-1862. www.quintalasacacias.com.mx. 17 units. $199–$230 period room; $250–$295 suite with Jacuzzi; $325–$345 presidential suite. Rates include full breakfast. AE, MC, V. Free limited parking. Children 11 and younger not accepted. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; large outdoor Jacuzzi; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Expensive

Hotel Antiguo Vapor ★ Rooms at this small hotel have all the Mexican character you could wish for, from clay-tile floors to beamed ceilings, to Talavera tile bathrooms. They range in size from medium to large. All are colorful, and most have windows or balconies looking out over the city. For being downtown, the rooms are fairly quiet; there are some interior rooms that would be quite the thing for light sleepers. Room rates vary according to the choice of beds—the most economical have one queen, the most expensive have two doubles, and rooms with king-size beds are in between. Bathrooms are nicely finished and some are quite large. The location is good, close by the Diego Rivera Museum.

Galarza 5, 36000 Guanajuato, Gto. ✆ **473/732-3211.** www.hotelavapor.com. 13 units. 1,450–1,650 pesos medium double; 1,850–2,050 pesos large double; 2,600–2,800 pesos double with Jacuzzi. Higher rates are for holidays and vacation times. Rates include continental breakfast. MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** Smoke-free rooms. *In room:* TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

La Casa de Espíritus Alegres B&B and Alma del Sol ★★★ Moments Folk art and atmosphere abound in the idiosyncratic "house of happy spirits," a 16th-century colonial hacienda. Rooms are decorated and furnished in a vivacious and attractive style. Each fulfills the promise of "a skeleton in every closet" (festive *papier maché* Day of the Dead bones hang everywhere), and each has its own fireplace. The grounds are so lovely you won't want to leave. Breakfast features Californian and Mexican food. Check out the hand-painted chairs (decorated by artist friends of the owners). The B&B is 3km (1¾ miles) from downtown (10 min. by taxi).

A smaller downtown property is called **Alma del Sol** for its location on Calle Sol, across from the grand church of La Compañía. It's partly a museum/gallery of folk textiles and has only four units (two of which are two-bedroom suites) and an open rooftop terrace with a broad vista.

La Exhacienda la Trinidad 1, 36250 Marfil, Gto. ✆/fax **473/733-1013.** www.casaspirit.com. 15 units. $145–$165 double. Rates include breakfast. MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** Smoke-free rooms. *In room:* Hair dryer, no phone, Wi-Fi.

Moderate

El Mesón de los Poetas I love hotels that are unselfconscious expressions of their city, and this is just such a place. Set against a hillside, it makes the most of its space by clever positioning of rooms in an irregular jumble. Following the stairs and walkways that led to my room, I thought for a moment I was trapped in an M. C. Escher drawing. Standard rooms are decorated in Mexican style. They vary in size, and a few come with kitchenettes. The largest hold two double beds or a king. Suites have king-size beds and nicer bathrooms, and the two-bedroom suites, which go for the same price, have a living room with dining table and chairs; a sitting area; and a kitchenette. The hotel is right downtown by the Diego Rivera museum.

Positos 35, 36000 Guanajuato, Gto. ✆/fax **473/732-6657,** -0705. www.mesondelospoetas.com. 31 units. 1,150 pesos double; 1,600 pesos suite and 2-bedroom suite. Rates are higher during the festival. AE, MC, V. Limited parking. **Amenities:** Smoke-free rooms. *In room:* TV, hair dryer (upon request), Wi-Fi.

Hotel Posada Santa Fé ★ Right on the Jardín Unión, this hotel is for those who want to be in the thick of things from the moment they step out the door. It dates from the 1860s, having survived both the reform wars and the revolution, and the old lobby is a great place to have a drink. Check out the beautiful Talavera wainscoting. Rooms are small, except for the suites and some of the rooms with exterior views. They are, however, attractive, well kept, and comfortable. All come with carpeted floors and tile bathrooms. Standard rooms hold either one double or two twin beds. Exterior-view rooms and suites have larger bathrooms and fancier furniture, and double-glazed windows; most have king-size beds.

Jardín Unión 12, 36000 Guanajuato, Gto. ✆ **473/732-0084.** Fax 473/732-4653. www.posada-santafe.com. 47 units. 1,100–1,495 pesos double; 1,510–1,950 pesos double with exterior view; 1,750–2,650 pesos suite. Rates include full breakfast. AE, MC, V. Free valet parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; whirlpool; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* TV, hair dryer (upon request), Wi-Fi.

Inexpensive

Hotel El Minero Value Only 3 blocks above the Museo Alhóndiga, this four-story hotel (no elevator) has a rare commodity: cheap rooms that aren't ugly or small. Ceramic tile floors, attractive paint jobs, ceiling fans, and cleanliness are the high points. The location is good and the back rooms are quiet, but the lighting is just okay; the bathrooms are small, and the TVs don't add much to the experience of staying here. Most rooms have a double and a single bed.

Alhóndiga 12-A, 36000 Guanajuato, Gto. ✆ **473/732-5251.** Fax 473/732-4739. 20 units. 350–480 pesos double. MC, V. Limited street parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant. *In room:* TV, no phone.

La Casa Azul This house is in an upper *barrio* above the Plazuela del Baratillo, which could be good or bad, depending on how you look at it. Staying here would give you an idea of how the locals live, always going up or down through a network of alleys (good?). But staying here means you, too, will be always going up and down (bad?). You decide. It's a steep climb from the plaza to the hotel, but you get to stay in an interesting part of town for not a lot of money. The rooms have character and are well maintained. They are small to medium in size and come with either a double or a king-size bed. There's a rooftop terrace, too. ***Note:*** Don't stay here if you have a car; the alleys are too narrow.

Carcamanes 57, 36000 Guanajuato, Gto. ✆ **473/731-2288.** www.lacasaazul.com.mx. 6 units. 500–600 pesos double. Rates include continental breakfast in a restaurant on Plaza de la Paz. No credit cards. No parking. *In room:* TV, fridge, no phone.

Mansión del Cantador For a no-frills hotel, this isn't too bad. It offers large rooms on the Jardín del Cantador for a good price. Being on this square cuts down on noise, and yet it's still close to the market and the Alhóndiga. Most rooms come with two double beds. In cold weather, ask at the desk for extra blankets. The bathrooms are small but in good repair.

Cantador 19, 36000 Guanajuato, Gto. ✆ **473/732-6888.** hmcr84@hotmail.com. 42 units. 650–750 pesos double. Rates include full breakfast. MC, V. Limited street parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; Wi-Fi (in lobby). *In room:* TV, hair dryer, no phone.

WHERE TO DINE

Restaurants in the downtown area are improving. In addition to the ones I list below, try an outdoor table at the restaurant of the **Hotel Posada Santa Fé** (see above), which affords a way to enjoy the Jardín de la Unión. The Jardín has a closed, intimate feel; if you want something more open with longer vistas, try the **Plaza de la Paz,** a block away. Here you can sit, have a drink, and perhaps nibble on an appetizer at one of the outdoor cafes in front of Guanajuato's cathedral. If you're in search of coffee, the best in town is at **Café Tal** (✆ **473/732-6212**). It's on Sangre de Cristo, which is the section of the main street running between Jardín Unión and Plaza Embajadoras.

Expensive

La Casa del Conde de la Valenciana MEXICAN/INTERNATIONAL Dine in the former home of the Count of La Valenciana, across the street from his other creation, La Valenciana church. You can eat on the patio or in one of the dining rooms. The menu combines old standards and original recipes. For an appetizer, try a fresh salad or refreshing gazpacho served in a vessel encased in ice. For a main course, you can choose one of Mexico's traditional dishes, such as chicken *mole* or *enmoladas* (chicken-filled tortillas rolled in *mole*), or perhaps chicken breast *a la flor de calabaza* (in a mild, satisfying cream sauce of blended squash flowers and poblano chile). The shady patio is so relaxing that many linger here over coffee and dessert.

Carretera Guanajuato-Dolores Km 5, opposite La Valenciana church. ✆/fax **473/732-2550.** Reservations accepted. Main courses 130–235 pesos. MC, V. Mon–Wed noon–6pm; Thurs–Sat noon–10pm.

Moderate

El Abue ★ MEXICAN/ITALIAN A small, comfortable downtown restaurant, El Abue keeps it simple with a small menu that includes a lot of favorites. The cooking is good, and the dining room is pleasant. Dishes include the *sopa azteca* (tortilla soup), the *tostadas yucatecas* with *cochinita pibil,* and enchiladas El Abue (made with a base of chile *guajillo* that's not too spicy). A few standard Italian dishes are usually on the chalk board. This is a good place for breakfast, too.

San José 14 (at the top of the Plazuela del Baratillo). ✆ **473/732-6242.** www.elabue.com. Reservations accepted. Main courses 95–140 pesos; breakfast 45–70 pesos. MC, V. Daily 8:30am–10:30pm.

El Claustro MEXICAN Locals like this downtown hole in the wall. Tables are outside on the square or inside in what was once a cellar bodega. Everybody orders the enchiladas (especially the *mineras*) and the *enmoladas,* which make good use of a locally made *mole.* The *pollo con mole* offers another way to enjoy it. Other dishes include various *antojitos.* The Jardín facing Juárez was the site of a convent, but some lonely columns and a section of the facade are all that remain of it.

Jardín de la Reforma 13-B. No phone. Main courses 55–120 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 8am–10pm.

México Lindo y Sabroso ★★★ MEXICAN As its name implies, this restaurant is a celebration of Mexican cooking, and the thing to like most about it is that the owners keep to tradition and don't take commercial shortcuts the way chain restaurants do. It's in the quiet Paseo de la Presa neighborhood. You can take a cab there and then walk or grab a bus going back down to the city center. The best time to avoid crowds is after 5pm. The surroundings are attractive, and the service is great. You can dine on the front veranda overlooking the street, in an attractive interior patio, or inside in one of the dining rooms. On the menu are many of the dishes that Mexico is known for. The tostadas, the green *pozole,* and the flautas were all great. On the menu are some Yucatecan specialties, such as *cochinita pibil* and *panuchos*—these were delicious, too. Try one of the natural fruit-flavored *aguas frescas.*

Paseo de la Presa 154. ✆ **473/731-0529.** Reservations accepted. Main courses 60–130 pesos. MC, V. Daily 9am–10pm.

Inexpensive

El Midi ★ SALADS/MEDITERRANEAN At this small place on the Plazuela San Fernando, you can pick and choose from a salad bar and hot trays and can serve yourself only as much food as you want. Then you can sit outside at a table on the Plazuela San Fernando, far from the noise and bustle of the street. The food is delicious, healthful, and fresh. The offerings change daily—different salad fixings, different quiches, different vegetables, different desserts. There's usually one main course such as coq au vin or rabbit cooked in the style of Provence. On Thursday and Friday evenings, you can get a cheese–and–cold cuts plate, which goes well with the house bread and table wine. The owner, Véronique Marconnet, is a sweet woman from southern France who has been living in Guanajuato for a few years. She bakes a lot of cakes, pies, and other sweets.

Plazuela San Fernando 41. No phone. Main courses 75–115 pesos; salad, quiche, desserts sold by weight. No credit cards. Wed–Mon 10:30am–10pm.

Truco 7 Value MEXICAN With its economical prices and warm atmosphere, this place is a solid choice for any meal. The three dining rooms are small and a bit crowded, furnished with leather *equipal* (a rustic Mexican style of furniture). The restaurant occupies an 18th-century structure originally built for members of the Valenciana silver family. Calle Truco, a short street south of the basilica, runs between the Jardín Unión and the Plaza de la Paz.

Truco 7. ✆ **473/732-8374.** Reservations not accepted. Breakfast 30–50 pesos; *comida corrida* (2–4pm only) 42–47 pesos; main courses 50–90 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 8:30am–11:30pm.

GUANAJUATO AFTER DARK

If city planners had known the **Jardín Unión** would be so popular, they might have made it larger. This tiny plaza, shaded by Indian laurel trees, is the heart of the city and the best hangout. No other spot in town rivals its benches and sidewalk restaurants.

You can catch some worthwhile free **theater** in Plazuela de San Roque at 8pm on Sunday when the university is in session. Students perform short theatrical pieces known as *entremeses* (interludes). These are usually costumed period pieces that rely more on action than dialogue, so you don't need to understand too much Spanish to get the point. The costumes are great and look curiously appropriate in this *plazuela.*

If you're looking for a place just to have a drink, try **La Clave Azul** (✆ **473/732-1561**), at Cantaritos 31. It's a small bar tucked away off Plaza San Fernando, and it's very much a product of its environment. A couple of small, irregularly shaped rooms with

Moments The Redolent Mexican Cantina

If you're curious about Mexican cantinas, swinging saloon doors and all, Guanajuato is a good place to do your fieldwork. You should know, however, that most of these are *men-only* drinking dives.

The town's favorite son is José Alfredo Jiménez, the undisputed master of *ranchera* music. This is the quintessential drinking music (long laments punctuated by classic Mexican yelps) that drives most non-Mexicans screaming from the building. But after downing a few *copitas,* you may warm up to it, and after asking about Jiménez, you'll probably get a few more drinks on the house. Around the Jardín Unión, a couple of cantinas aren't bad; I always enjoy a few shots at one called **El Incendio (the Fire),** Cantarranas 15. Unlike most cantinas, this place welcomes women. It opens at 10am and closes at 4am.

You may be surprised to see an open urinal at the end of the bar. While this is a standard feature in cantinas and part of the, er, authentic flavor, you still may wish to opt for a seat at the opposite end.

rock walls and rustic furniture are connected to each other by narrow stairways. It's a popular spot with the city's bohemians, especially Thursdays and Fridays. Hours are 1 to 9 or 10pm daily (open later on weekends).

More conventional nightspots—such as dance clubs—aren't difficult to find; ask at your hotel. **La Dama de las Camelias,** Sopeña 32 (no phone) is an unpretentious second-floor bar that doesn't get going until late in the evening. The music is all classic recordings of *danzón,* mambo, *son cubano,* and salsa. It opens at 8pm, starts getting busy around midnight, and closes at 4am. **Bar Ocho** (no phone), another salsa bar, is behind the San Diego church at the foot of the hill where El Pípila stands.

3 SANTIAGO DE QUERETARO ★★★

213km (132 miles) NW of Mexico City; 96km (60 miles) SE of San Miguel Allende; 200km (124 miles) S of San Luis Potosí

Querétaro is the most historic city in the region. During the Colonial Era, it was the point of departure for all the expeditions headed into the northern frontier. Later it played a central role in the three wars that forged the Mexican nation: La Independencia, La Reforma, and La Revolución. Downtown Querétaro is lively, pedestrian-friendly, and filled with eye-opening colonial architecture. The local government has spruced up the city, keeps it neat with round-the-clock cleaning crews, and provides street vendors with attractive stands, regulating them so that they don't obstruct public streets and walkways. In the evenings, the downtown area fills with people who stroll about the plazas and *andadores* (pedestrian walkways), and eat at one of the restaurants, outdoor cafes, or food stands. Since the city is only an hour by bus from San Miguel, it makes an easy day trip. But once you come, you'll be tempted to stay longer and get better acquainted with this lovely city.

The Spanish founded Querétaro in 1531 during their first large-scale expedition into the northern stretches of their new territory. During a skirmish with the Chichimeca, Santiago (St. James) appeared in the clouds. Santiago is the patron saint of Spain and of La Reconquista, the 7-century struggle to recapture all of Spain from the Moors, which had ended barely 40 years earlier. It is no wonder that the Spanish hoped he would again lend a hand in this new struggle for territory. For his appearance, Santiago also became the patron saint of Querétaro. (When you visit the Jardín Zenea at the center of town, look up at the facade of the church of San Francisco, and you will see a depiction of Santiago in battle, lopping off the turbaned head of a Moor.)

While the conquistadors were setting out to conquer lands for the crown, the religious orders were setting out to win souls for Christ. The Franciscans established a large community in Querétaro and eventually a college for the propagation of the faith, the first such institution in the New World. From here, the missionaries set out (always on foot, as the Franciscan Rule forbade riding on horseback or in carriages) to evangelize and establish missions as far away as Texas and California. Some of their histories are nothing short of astounding. Among them was Junípero Sierra, who went all the way to California, establishing missions there.

Centuries later, Mexican independence began in Querétaro with the conspiracy of 1810 (of which Father Hidalgo was a member). A little more than 50 years after that, Querétaro was again in the thick of things when Emperor Maximilian made his last stand here and was captured and executed. Another 50 years passed, and the city became the site of the laborious constitutional convention during the Mexican Revolution. The document that it produced, the Constitution of 1917, remains the law of the land.

ESSENTIALS

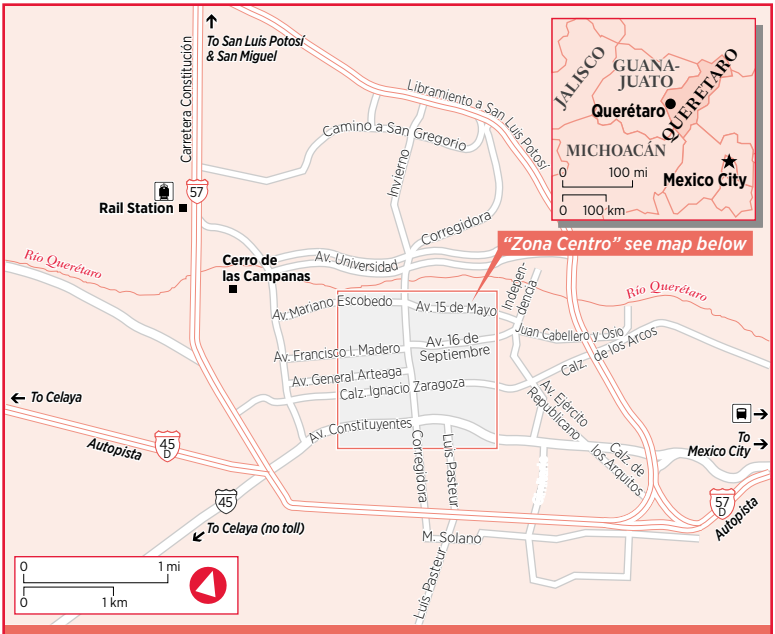
GETTING THERE & DEPARTING

By Plane Most visitors still fly to Mexico City and then take the bus that leaves directly from the airport's main terminal to Querétaro. Look about for an escalator in the E-2 area. Take it up to an elevated concourse, which leads to the bus ticket counters. A one-way ticket costs 256 pesos. Departures are about every half-hour, and the trip takes 3 hours.

Querétaro's new airport has limited international service and is a half-hour from downtown. **Continental ExpressJet** (✆ **800/231-0856** in the U.S., or 01-800/900-5000 in Mexico) flies to and from Houston. **Delta Airlines** (✆ **800/241-4141** in the U.S., or 01-800/902-2100 in Mexico) flies to and from Atlanta. In the future, some of Mexico's newborn discount carriers might be introducing international service. There are also connecting flights from nearby Mexico City.

By Car From Mexico City, take the super toll road Hwy. 57D (2½ hr.). From San Miguel, take Hwy. 111 to Hwy. 57D, and then turn right (1 hr.). From San Luis Potosí, take Hwy. 57D south (2½ hr.). It's now possible to drive from Querétaro to Puebla while bypassing Mexico City. A new toll road called Arco Norte connects to 57D just south of the turnoff for Tula, Hidalgo and connects to Hwy. 150D near San Martín Texmelucan, west of Puebla.

By Bus For directions from the Mexico City airport, see "By Plane," above. From Mexico City's northern bus terminal (Central del Norte), buses leave every 15 minutes. Make sure you get a *directo* (nonstop). From San Miguel, second-class buses leave every 20 minutes. The bus station is south of town. Look for a booth in the terminal that sells cab tickets. A cab ride downtown costs about 40 pesos. There are now direct buses to/from Puebla. Futura/Chihuahuenses has 10 departures per day. The trip takes 4 hours and costs 300 pesos.


To San Luis Potosí & San Miguel
Carretera Constitución
Libramiento a San Luis Potosí
Camino a San Gregorio
Invierno
Corregidora
Rail Station
57
Río Querétaro
Cerro de las Campanas
Av. Universidad
"Zona Centro" see map below
Av. Mariano Escobedo
Av. 15 de Mayo
Independencia
Av. Francisco I. Madero
Av. 16 de Septiembre
Juan Caballero y Osio
Av. General Arteaga
Calz. Ignacio Zaragoza
Calz. de los Arcos
Av. Ejército Republicano
To Celaya
Autopista
45 D
Av. Constituyentes
Corregidora
Luis Pasteur
To Mexico City
Calz. de los Arquitos
57 D
45
To Celaya (no toll)
M. Solano
0 1 mi
0 1 km
JALISCO
GUANAJUATO
Querétaro
QUERÉTARO
MICHOACÁN
0 100 mi
0 100 km
Mexico City

Zona Centro

Av. Mariano Escobedo
Av. 15 de Mayo
Ignacio Allende
Luis Pasteur
Prospero C. Vega
Ignacio M. Altamirano
Av. José Ma. Morelos
Av. 16 de Septiembre
Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera
Damián Carmona
Cerro de las Campanas
Av. Hidalgo
Jardín de la Corregidora
San Francisco Church
Jardín Zenea
Casa de la Corregidora
Templo de Santa Clara
Casa de Ecala
Galería Libertad
Río de la Loza
Av. 5 de Mayo
Balvarena
Palacio Municipal
Museo Regional
Mesón de Santa Rosa
V. Carranza
Felipe Luna
Av. Francisco I. Madero
Casa de la Marquesa
Casa Queretana de Artesanía
Plaza de la Independencia
Av. Independencia
Convento de la Santa Cruz
Aqueduct
Melchor Campo
Vicente Guerrero
Museo de Arte
Casa de la Zacatecana
Av. Pino Suárez
Av. Juárez
Corregidora
Reforma
Vergara
Ezequiel Montes
Av. General Arteaga
Templo de Santa Rosa de Viterbo
Av. 20 de Noviembre
Calzada Ignacio Zaragoza
Av. 21 de Marzo
Av. Industria
ALAMEDA HIDALGO
Jalcan
Fernando de Tapia
Av. Constituyentes
Bus
Information
Post Office
Train
Andadores (road closed to traffic)
0 1/4 mi
0 .25 km

VISITOR INFORMATION There is a good **tourism information office** at Pasteur Norte 4, just off the Plaza de la Independencia on the north side. It's open daily from 9am to 8pm. The phone numbers are ✆ **888/811-6130** in the U.S., or 442/238-5067; or visit **www.venaqueretaro.com**. One-hour tours of the city by trolley-style bus are now operated by private companies who also staff the information kiosks in some of the plazas. You can get info from the staff at these kiosks, but you'll also get a pitch to take a bus tour. These concessions are, thus far, on a trial basis. Tourism still offers a self-guided audio walking tour of the *centro histórico.* At the information office, you can rent a digital player for $5 per day, using a credit card voucher for a deposit.

CITY LAYOUT The heart of downtown is the Jardín Zenea, at the intersection of the main north-south and east-west streets, Corregidora and Madero. Just east is the Plaza de Armas, and farther east are the Convento de la Cruz and the famous aqueduct. West of Jardín Zenea are several plazas, churches, convents, and museums.

Fast Facts Querétaro

Area Code The telephone area code is **442.**

Climate The average temperature in summer is 24°C (75°F), in winter 13°C (56°F).

Elevation Querétaro sits at 1,818m (5,963 ft.).

Emergency The central emergency number (similar to 911) is ✆ **066.**

Hospital The local hospital is the **Hospital Angeles** (✆ **442/215-5901** or 216-2751), at Bernardo del Razo 21, Colonia Ensueño.

Internet Access Cybercafes and Internet access providers are everywhere in the central historic district.

Parking To find parking in the downtown area, look for white square signs with the capital letter E in light blue. There are a couple of places at Pino Suárez 45 and 17. Rates run about 10 pesos for the first hour, and a little less thereafter.

Post Office The *correo,* Arteaga 5, is open Monday through Saturday from 9am to 2:30pm.

A STROLL AROUND THE HISTORIC CENTER

In the center of Querétaro, you'll notice right away how many plazas, churches, and convents there are. If you're really observant, you'll notice that the plazas are frequently next to the churches. In fact, most of these plazas were formed at the cost of the convents, which lost much of their real estate to the government during la Reforma. This is true of the town's most important plaza, **Jardín Zenea,** where we will begin. This plaza was part of the atrium of San Francisco Church and Convent, which you see facing the park across Corregidora Street. This park is popular every night, but especially on Sunday, when the municipal band plays dance music of the '40s, '50s, and '60s. Great fun! The old bandstand dates from 1900.

Turn toward **San Francisco Church** to see the depiction of St. James on the facade (mentioned earlier). From the beginning, this church was the most important in town; it remains so today, the more recent cathedral notwithstanding. It and the attached

All Things Querétaro

Walking up Andador Libertad, you will see a pergola of bougainvillea. Just past it, on the right side is the state-run store for arts and crafts, **Casa Queretana de Artesanía,** Andador Libertad 52 (✆ **442/224-3456**). Even though Querétaro is a small state, it has a wide variety of craft traditions. You can see a sampling of these in the three rooms in this part of the store, and in another three rooms that are farther up the walkway. Everything in this store was made in the state. Hours are Tuesday and Wednesday 11am to 2pm and 4 to 7pm, Thursday and Friday 11am to 2pm and 4 to 8pm, Saturday 11am to 8pm, and Sunday 11am to 4pm.

cloister are all that remain of a large complex that included several chapels and an orchard that extended a few blocks east and south. Inside the church, you will see a few interesting remains of baroque decoration. The main altar is a rather uninteresting piece of neoclassicism that replaced what reputedly was a masterpiece of baroque design. This is a common story with churches in Querétaro. Many of the baroque *retablos* escaped the plunderers, only to fall prey to the "improvers," as was the case here.

Next door to the church is the cloister, which is now the **Museo Regional** ★. It's open Tuesday through Sunday from 10am to 6pm. Admission is 41 pesos. Exhibits include artifacts from pre-Hispanic, colonial, and republican times. The architecture shows common traits of Franciscan design in the simplicity of its lines and decoration, which you can contrast with the rich decoration (caryatids and all) of the former Augustinian convent, now a museum of colonial art (see below). Leaving the museum, turn left and then left again, and you'll be on the pedestrians-only Andador Libertad. This leads to the small Plaza de Independencia or Plaza de Armas, with its carefully pruned Indian laurel trees, outdoor restaurants, and colonial mansions.

At the Plaza de Independencia you'll find **Galería Libertad,** on your right just as you get to the plaza. It's free, and in past visits, I've come upon some entertaining exhibits. At the far end of the plaza is the **Casa de la Corregidora.** As you walk toward it, you will pass on your left the **Casa de Ecala,** a baronial mansion with magnificent balconies and wrought iron, which dates from the 18th century.

"La Corregidora" was the wife of the mayor *(corregidor)* at the beginning of the struggle for independence. Her full name was Doña Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez. She was a member of the conspiracy to liberate Mexico from Spain. As the wife of Querétaro's mayor, she was in a useful position for gathering information. When the conspiracy was discovered, she was put under house arrest but still managed to get a warning to Father Hidalgo. He eluded capture and rushed to Dolores, where he gave his famous *grito* (the cry for independence). For her actions, La Corregidora was imprisoned several times between 1810 and 1817. She died impoverished and forgotten, but was later remembered and became the first woman to appear on a Mexican coin.

The fountain in the middle of the plaza honors Querétaro's greatest benefactor, a Spanish grandee named Don Juan Antonio de Urrutia y Arana, who built a large aqueduct to bring water to the city. This colonial aqueduct is the most famous landmark in the city. To view it, continue east on Andador Libertad. It ends in 1 block, so you must

dogleg to the next eastbound street, either Independencia or Carranza. The street gently climbs toward the **church and convent of la Santa Cruz** ★★, where missionaries were trained to evangelize the heathens as far away as California and Nicaragua. The church has one bell tower with an attractive tile dome. It and the convent are Franciscan. The convent continues in operation. You can take a short tour, usually led by an elderly monk, Fray Jesús Guzmán de León, who speaks English. He will show you how the water from the aqueduct arrived here and how it fed a system of fountains known as *cajas de agua* that provided water throughout the old city. From these, the citizens of Querétaro would fill their buckets. He will also show you a thorn tree said to have grown from the walking stick of Friar Antonio Margil de Jesús, a famous missionary who covered vast territories on foot. This thorn tree is considered miraculous because its thorns grow in the shape of the cross. The tour is free, but you will be given an opportunity to make a contribution to the preservation of the convent and church.

Behind the church is a small plaza from which you can view the aqueduct. Follow the rough stone wall partially covered by the branches of mesquite trees, and you can't miss it. The aqueduct extends across an expanse of bottomland from the hill in front. This feat of engineering required the construction of 74 arches. Work began in 1726 and finished in 1738.

From here, make your way back to the Jardín Zenea. If you go by way of Calle Independencia, you can pop into **La Casa de la Zacatecana** (look for a banner), Independencia 59 (✆ **442/224-0758**). It presents a vision of what many colonial mansions were like in Querétaro, with period furnishings and decor. Hours are from Tuesday to Sunday 10am to 6pm in winter (11am-7pm in summer). Admission costs 30 pesos. Associated with this house (as with a couple of others in town) is a tale of illicit love, murder, and retribution. Colonial Mexico is a fertile land for Gothic tales.

Back at Jardín Zenea, head west on Calle Madero. At the first corner, just before the street becomes an *andador,* is **La Casa de la Marquesa** ★★★, an opulent colonial residence–turned–hotel. Walk in and check out the courtyard lobby, which has elaborate *mudéjar* style (a Spanish architectural style with Moorish influences) arches and patterned walls.

Cater-cornered from this hotel is the **church and former Convent of Santa Clara** ★★★. The church is a must-see; inside are six astonishing baroque *retablos* and a choir loft, all gilded and each a self-contained composition. In prominent positions are sculptures and paintings of saints; here and there, the faces of angels appear out of the enveloping, thickly textured ornament. Gazing upon these is like gazing upon a mandala. The juxtaposition of straight lines and multiple facets with overflowing curves that move inward and outward make the *retablos* appear fluid and rigid at the same time. The key to enjoying these *retablos* is not to look for proportion, balance, or an underlying composition, but to look at them as the expression of an ecstatic religious sentiment that rejects these very notions.

For a greater acquaintance with the colonial religious mind, walk south 1 block on Allende. On your right will be the **Museo de Arte** ★★★ (✆ **442/212-3523**), in the former **convent of San Agustín.** Admission is 30 pesos; it's free on Tuesday. The museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 10am to 6pm. It contains one of the great collections of Mexican colonial art, but the architecture of the former convent alone is worth the price of admission. Highly stylized human forms, complex geometric lines, and vegetal motifs are everywhere. The art is organized by style of painting. The collection has works by Europeans, but its focus is on painters in New Spain, including the most famous of the land.

Tips Shopping for Opals

The small state of Querétaro is one of the two principal places in the world that mine opals commercially (the other is southern Australia). The opal is a soft stone noted for its iridescent color. Prices vary depending on size, color, shape, and transparency. A few stores in Querétaro, usually called *lapidarias,* sell locally mined opals and other semiprecious stones. One is the **Lapidaria de Querétaro,** Corregidora Norte 149-A, a few blocks north of Jardín Zenea (✆ **442/212-0030**), open Monday through Friday from 10am to 2pm and 5 to 8pm, and Saturday 10am to 3pm. Or stop by **El Artesano,** a shop at Corregidora Norte 42, near the Jardín Zenea. Owner Alfredo Vázquez, who carves miniatures out of opals and other semiprecious stones, speaks mostly Spanish and is a font of information on opals and the trade. He keeps interesting store hours: 1 to 9pm Monday through Saturday. Also try **Lapidaria Ramírez,** Pino Suárez 98.

If you're still in the mood for colonial splendor, walk west 2 blocks on Pino Suárez. After you cross Melchor Ocampo, turn left down a narrow street graced with bougainvillea and you'll come to the **church and former convent of Santa Rosa de Viterbo** ★★★. Like Santa Clara, it is a masterpiece of baroque architecture. On the outside, notice the scroll-shaped flying buttresses (a style that, as far as I know, is unique to Querétaro) and the imaginative tower. Inside, the church is much like Santa Clara, with magnificent gilt *retablos* occupying all available wall space. Also like Santa Clara, the main altar failed to escape the "improvers."

Farther west (a bit too far to walk) is the **Cerro de las Campanas (Hill of Bells),** where Maximilian was executed. You'll find a large, ugly statue of Juárez installed there by the Mexican government to counter a small and sad memorial chapel for Maximilian erected by his brother, Emperor Franz Josef of Austria. Immediately south of downtown is a park called Alameda Hidalgo, which is a lovely setting for a walk.

WHERE TO STAY

Rates below include the 18% tax. Most of the downtown hotels have high and low season. High season is Easter, July, August, December, and any long weekend. The city is a favorite weekend getaway from Mexico City; it's much easier to find a room during the week.

Very Expensive

La Casa de la Marquesa ★★★ Few hotels in Mexico can match this one for sheer colonial opulence. Even if you don't stay here, make a point of walking into the courtyard lobby. Built by the Marqués de Urrutia for his wife, the house, with Moorish arches and tiles, and intricate patterned walls, has an Andalusian feel. Rooms are large, have all the amenities, and are furnished with period pieces and Persian rugs. Bed choices include one queen-size, two queen-size, or one king-size. The least expensive rooms (deluxe) are across the street in another colonial house, La Casa Azul. The hotel, a member of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World, prides itself on the attention it gives its guests. The location is excellent.

Madero 41, 76000 Querétaro, Qro. ✆ **442/212-0092.** Fax 442/212-0098. www.lacasadelamarquesa.com. 25 units. $212 deluxe; $248 royal suite; $412 imperial suite. AE, MC, V. Valet parking 80 pesos. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; concierge; room service; smoke-free rooms; spa. *In room:* A/C, TV (w/DVD in most rooms), hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Expensive

Gran Hotel ★★★ The Gran Hotel has a lavish use of space that is decidedly uneconomical (and attention-grabbing for precisely that reason). A grand stairway and cavernous galleries with vaulted ceilings lead the way to your room. The rooms have high ceilings and carpeted floors, and are large and comfortable, with independently controlled air-conditioning and beautifully finished bathrooms. The hotel is set between two plazas, and most rooms have a view of one plaza or the other (with double-glazed windows and French doors). Noise is not a problem, but for the very light sleeper, the hotel has a few interior rooms, which are oversize and come with a few extra amenities for virtually the same price as standard rooms.

Juárez Sur 5 (btw. Jardín Zenea and Plaza Constitución), 76000 Querétaro, Qro. ✆ **442/251-8050.** www.granhoteldequeretaro.com.mx. 42 units. 1,920 pesos interior suite; 2,033–2,150 pesos suite with view; 2,508 pesos executive suite; 3,950 pesos corner suite. AE, MC, V. Valet parking 50 pesos per day. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; bar; babysitting; membership in local spa; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Moderate

Santa Rosa Hotel ★ (Value) With its large open courtyards, clean lines, and simple stone and iron work, this hotel presents a colonial architecture that contrasts sharply with La Casa de la Marquesa (see above). There are three courtyards, variously holding a pool, a fountain, and a stone trough for watering your horses (a vestige of the original tavern, which served wagon and mule drivers). Rooms are quiet, large, and comfortable, with high ceilings, carpeted floors, and boring furniture and decoration. Standard rooms come with either two doubles or a king-size bed; superior rooms are much larger. Higher rates are for remodeled rooms with air-conditioning. The location, at the southwest corner of the Plaza de Armas, is ideal.

Pasteur 17 Sur (on Plaza de Armas, access from 5 de Mayo), 76000 Querétaro, Qro. ✆ **442/224-2623** or 227-0600. Fax 442/212-5522. www.hotelsantarosa.com. 21 units. 1,462 pesos standard double; 1,968 pesos superior double. AE, DC, MC, V. Valet parking 92 pesos. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; midsize heated outdoor pool; room service. *In room:* A/C (in 7 rooms), TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Inexpensive

Hotel Acueducto ★ (Value) This new hotel, owned and managed by the same people behind the Hotel Posada Acueducto (see below), has a number of things going for it. One is that it's a relatively large property for downtown Querétaro. This results in a good bit of space, a nice pool, lots of common areas, and large rooms—all for a bargain price. Standard rooms can have one double, one queen-size, or one king-size bed, and are priced accordingly. All the floors are ceramic tile, including the bathrooms. All rooms have windows opening to the common areas, but none face the street, which means that guests don't hear much in the way of traffic noise. This is a family hotel, but because of the pool, the management doesn't want guests with small children 7 and under. There is a game room and talk of creating an exercise room.

Pino Suárez 11 (btw. Juárez and Allende), 76000 Querétaro, Qro. ✆ **442/224-3083.** 24 units. 600–800 pesos standard double; 950–1,100 pesos oversize double. AE, MC, V. Secure parking ½-block away 20 pesos. **Amenities:** Heated outdoor pool; smoke-free rooms, Wi-Fi (in common areas). *In room:* A/C (not installed in all rooms yet), TV, no phone.

Hotel Posada Acueducto Value You get a good room for the money at this hotel. The rooms are on two floors running along one side of the narrow property. Almost all face a thin strip of patio. Most are in back, in the new section (slightly preferable). They are mostly medium size with ample bathrooms. The one upstairs in the very back (no. 111) has a king-size bed and a little porch. The lower price listed is for a room with one double bed, the higher price is for a room with a king-size bed; somewhere in between is the price for a room with two beds.

Juárez 64 Sur (btw. Arteaga and Zaragoza), 76000 Querétaro, Qro. ✆ **442/224-1289.** 15 units. 280–350 pesos double. No credit cards. Street parking. *In room:* A/C, TV, no phone.

Hotel Señorial This is a simple hotel with plainly furnished, medium-size rooms. By and large, they are a little more attractive than the rooms at Posada Acueducto (see above). The carpeting has been replaced with laminate flooring (bathrooms still have tile) in almost all the rooms. The beds (usually two twins or two doubles) are comfortable. Be sure to reserve an even-numbered room; odd-numbered rooms are in the south wing, which has plumbing so noisy you think it will bring down the building.

Guerrero Norte 10-A (corner of Hidalgo), 76000 Querétaro, Qro. ✆/fax **442/214-3700.** www.senorialqro.com. 63 units. 520–680 pesos double. MC, V. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; room service, smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C (in 13 rooms), TV, Wi-Fi.

Mesón del Obispado For better or worse, this colonial hotel is in the middle of the most popular part of downtown. For better, it's on a pedestrian *andador* and is close to everything. For worse, it's by the Plaza de la Corregidora, which doesn't settle down on weekends until well after midnight. The rooms in front have balconies overlooking the *andador* and are popular with the vacationing crowd that isn't going to bed early anyway. I had a room in back that looked out toward the courtyard of the hotel, and it was perfectly quiet. The rooms are medium to large in size, usually with two double beds or a king. The furniture is plain.

Andador 16 de Septiembre 13, 76000 Querétaro, Qro. ✆ **442/224-2464.** www.depuebloenpueblo.com.mx. 16 units. 620 pesos double. AE, DC, MC, V. Limited street parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* TV.

WHERE TO DINE

In addition to the restaurants listed below, you might want to try the restaurant at the Mesón de Santa Rosa (in the Santa Rosa Hotel, see above), on the Plaza de Armas. One local dish I can't recommend is the enchiladas queretanas. The problem is that the enchiladas typically come buried in a mountain of salty fresh cheese that completely overpowers the mild sauce. For fancy baked goods, try **Panadería El Globo (✆ 442/212-8883)**, at Corregidora Sur 41. Tip: Late breakfasts are popular on weekends. If you're not eating breakfast at your hotel, you can beat the crowds by showing up at a restaurant by 9am.

Expensive

El Caserío ★★ SPANISH The favorite dining spot for Querétaro's well-heeled denizens, El Caserío owes its popularity in part to the stylish, comfortable, no-nonsense dining areas; in part to the cooking and the service, which are both good; and, I suspect, in part to its ample off-street parking (not that common in this city). The menu is broad enough to please a variety of tastes—with steaks cut to order, classic Mexican soups, and pleasing salads—but Spanish food is the main attraction. Specialties include *lechón segoviano* (roast suckling pig), *pescado a la sal* (fish cooked under a layer of rock salt—allow

Finds

Hot Tamales

Tamales are a Mexican comfort food that just don't taste the same outside Mexico. Restaurants don't usually offer them, and when they do, the tamales are disappointing. Of course, tamales vary a great deal from region to region, but I have a special fondness for those of central Mexico. There are a couple of shops on the same block of Arteaga Street between Allende and Guerrero. Look for a bare white light (the universal sign of tamal vendors). These places offer two styles: I like the traditional ones better than the Oaxacan style because the *masa* tends to be lighter. They usually come with a choice of filling (pork, chicken, or cheese) and kind of sauce (red or green) and there might be cheese with slices of poblano chile *(rajas con queso)*. Two make for a nice breakfast or supper and would run you 18 pesos. These shops also serve flavored *atole*, a hot corn-based beverage.

extra time), and paella. I had the *crema de tres quesos* (three-cheese soup) and the *pescado a la sidra seca* (fish cooked in a seafood broth with apple cider). Both were good. It's a long walk from the Jardín Zenea; take a cab. On my last visit, the restaurant hosted flamenco performances most afternoons from 3:30 to 5:30pm.

Constituyentes Poniente 101 (near intersection with Ezequiel Montes). ✆ **442/216-1777.** www.elcaserio.com.mx. Reservations recommended for dinner. Main courses 150–240 pesos. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 1pm–midnight; Sun 1–6pm.

San Miguelito ★★ MEXICAN This restaurant occupies the restored Casa de los Cinco Patios, which had been closed to the public for years. The main patio (which is the main dining area) impresses with the height of its arches and the fine wrought-iron work. It's beautifully lit at night, too. For appetizers, try the *infladitas* (small puffy tostadas topped with Yucatecan-style pork). Most of the main courses are steaks prepared with a variety of sauces. (***Tip:*** To request your steak cooked to taste, see p. 769, "Dining Terminology.") On one side of the main entrance is the bar **La Viejoteca,** with live music on the weekends. On the other side is **La Antojería,** which serves traditional supper foods—tacos and such. The decor is folksy and nostalgic for Mexicans. It's a fun place to have a bite.

Andador 5 de Mayo 39 (btw. Corregidora and Vergara). ✆ **442/224-2760.** Reservations recommended on weekends. Main courses 135–188 pesos. AE, MC, V. Tues–Sat 6–11pm.

Moderate

Apolonia ★★ NUEVA COCINA At this restaurant not far from the Plaza de Armas, you can dine on some inventive dishes in attractive surroundings. There's a good selection of soups and salads, including a savory strawberry soup served hot, and a green salad with mango and cashews. The main courses include a chicken breast in a pool of apple/corn/poblano sauce, or shrimp with tequila and roasted cactus leaves. Servings aren't overly large, and the desserts are mostly light dishes.

Andador Libertad 46. ✆ **442/212-0389.** Reservations recommended. Main courses 80–180 pesos. AE, MC, V. Wed–Sun 1:30pm–midnight.

Parrilla Leonesa (Finds) TACOS This place inside the Hotel Flamingo serves the best tacos in the city. Choose from a variety of grilled meats. The popular *parrillada leonesa* grilled combo includes chicken, beef, and pork served on a small brazier on a bed of grilled onions and chile slices, with *queso fundido* on the side. I prefer the smaller taco plates, each of which comes with enough meat for three tacos. Tortillas are handmade. Salsas are fresh. I suggest taking a cab here. ***Note:*** This place specializes in *tacos de parrilla* (grill). To try another variety of taco—the *tacos de guisos* or *de cazuela* (both casserole tacos)—consider **Tacos del 57** (✆ **442/224-2211**), at Calle del 57 #21; it's 1 block west of Ezequiel Montes, right before you get to the first traffic light (there's no sign).

Constituyentes Poniente 138 (at Av. Technológico). ✆ **442/216-2123.** Taco plates 27 pesos; *parrilladas* 152–167 pesos. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 8am–midnight; Sun 8am–11pm.

Restaurante Bar 1810 MEXICAN/INTERNATIONAL This is one of the restaurants on the Plaza de Armas across from the house of La Corregidora. With a large and varied menu, it's the perfect place to enjoy a meal. Your best bet is to stick with traditional Mexican specialties, such as the *mole queretano* or the *chile en nogada.* Saturday and Sunday brunch is popular (8:30am–12:30pm).

Andador Libertad 62 (on the Plaza de Armas). ✆ **442/214-3324.** Reservations not accepted. Main courses 140–200 pesos. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 8am–midnight; Sun 8am–10pm.

Inexpensive

Cafetería Bisquets (Value) MEXICAN This modest restaurant serves inexpensive *comida casera* (home cooking) on a little patio and in adjoining dining rooms. One of the specialties is paper-thin *milanesa* served with green enchiladas on the side. Breakfasts are popular. Avoid the *bisquet*—something like an American biscuit, but larger and heavier—and try the *chilaquiles con pollo y crema* or any of the egg dishes and the *café con leche.* The *menú del día* is a bargain.

Pino Suárez 7 (btw. Juárez and Allende). ✆ **442/214-1481.** Main courses 55–70 pesos; *menú del día* 50–80 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 7:30am–11pm.

Cafetería La Mariposa MEXICAN The favorite thing to order here is the chicken enchiladas (green or red) and for breakfast the *molletes con salsa verde* (a Mexican version of cheese toast, with mashed beans and a fresh chile sauce). The full breakfasts are probably better at Bisquets, but this place makes its own breads and yogurt and is a nice spot for a light meal. The old-time dining room is comfortable (less cramped than at Bisquets). For lunch or dinner, you'll find the Mexican standards.

Angela Peralta 7 (just off Corregidora). ✆ **442/212-1166.** Main courses 45–85 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 8am–9:30pm. From the Jardín Zenea, walk north 2 blocks on Corregidora and turn left.

La Fonda de Santa María (Value) MEXICAN You can get good cooking for little money at this small restaurant. It's located at the intersection of two andadores. Look for a door leading to a sunken dining room with 12 tables. I really enjoyed the long *flautas,* the *sopes,* and the *enmoladas.* There's an economical fixed menu in the afternoon and several larger dishes on the menu if you have an appetite. La Fonda is popular and stays pretty busy, but the service is fast and efficient.

Andador Pasteur Norte 11 (at Andador 16 de Septiembre). ✆ **442/214-4205.** Main courses 90–120 pesos; *antojitos* 20–50 pesos. MC, V. Thurs–Tues 8:30am–10:30pm.

4 ZACATECAS ★★★

627km (389 miles) NW of Mexico City; 198km (123 miles) NW of San Luis Potosí; 322km (200 miles) NE of Guadalajara; 298km (185 miles) SE of Durango

Zacatecas, like Guanajuato, owes its beauty to the wealth of silver extracted from its mines. The farthest-flung of the silver cities, it still feels like an outpost of civilization. High above the center of town looms a rocky hill with a distinctive crest, which is accessible by cable car. From the summit, you have a panoramic view of the wild and desolate terrain that surrounds the city. The scene makes you realize what a frontier town Zacatecas must have been, and after you have been in town for a few days, you appreciate its present sophistication all the more. You will find surprisingly good museums, beautiful architecture, and good restaurants. The city has gone to the enormous trouble of burying all of its power and telephone cables, which adds greatly to the beauty of the town and makes strolling along the streets a pleasure.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING **By Plane** **Mexicana** (✆ **800/531-7921** in the U.S., 01-800/502-2000 in Mexico, or 492/922-7429) and **American Airlines** (✆ **800/223-5436** in the U.S., or 01-800/904-6000 in Mexico) fly nonstop to and from Los Angeles. Seats are hard to come by around Christmas, when native Zacatecans fly home in large numbers. Domestic carriers link Zacatecas to other points in the country.

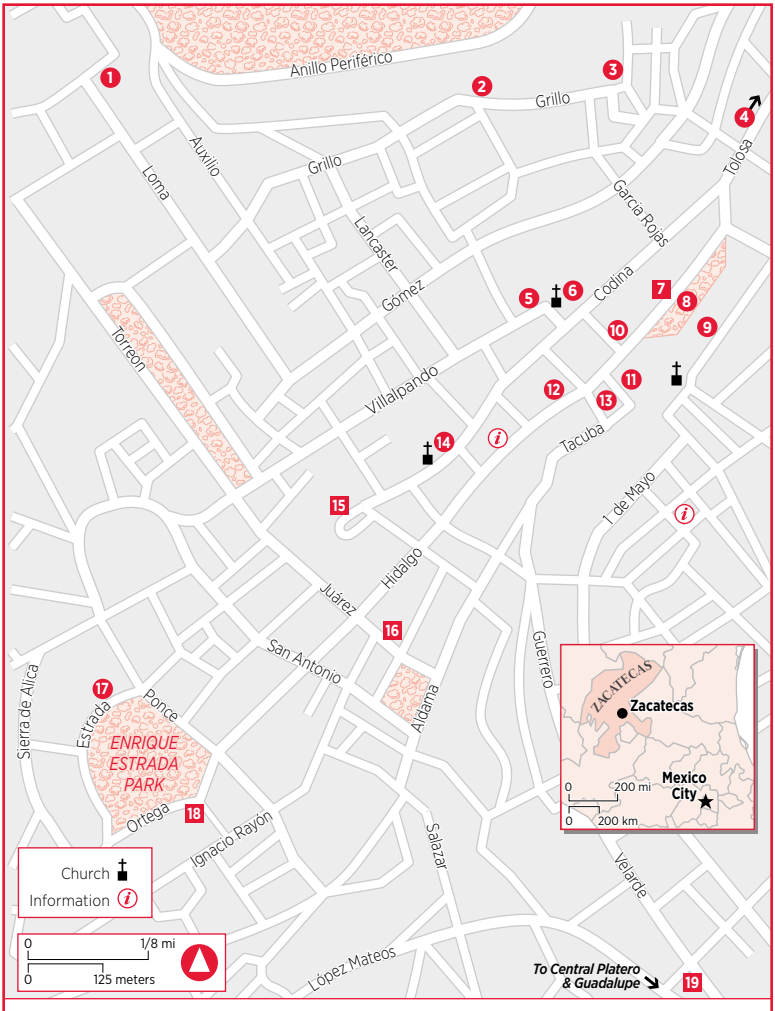
Taxis from the airport, 29km (18 miles) north of Zacatecas, cost 200 pesos.

By Car From the south, you can take Hwy. 45D, a toll road, from Querétaro through Irapuato, León, and Aguascalientes (a 6-hr. drive). It's expensive (about 300 pesos) but fast. Hwy. 54 heads northeast to Saltillo and Monterrey (a 5- to 6-hr. drive) and southeast to Guadalajara (a 4½-hr. drive). Hwy. 49 leads north to Torreón (4 hr.) and southeast to San Luis Potosí (3 hr.). Hwy. 45 heads to Durango (4 hr.).

By Bus Omnibus de México, Estrella Blanca, and their many affiliates handle first-class bus travel to and from Zacatecas. Together they operate 20 buses a day to and from Guadalajara; 20 to and from León (where you would change buses for Guanajuato); 30 buses that go to and from Mexico City, stopping in Querétaro; and 12 per day to and from San Luis Potosí. The **Central Camionera** (bus station) is on a hilltop a bit out of town. The taxi ride costs 35 pesos. You can check schedules and buy tickets from several travel agencies in town. Ask at your hotel.

VISITOR INFORMATION The downtown office is at Hidalgo 401 at Callejón de la Caja (✆ **492/924-4047** or 925-1277); it's open Monday to Saturday from 9am to 9pm and Sunday from 9am to 5pm. Sometimes there's an information desk outside on Hidalgo.

CITY LAYOUT Understanding traffic circulation in the middle of town requires an advanced degree in chaos theory. I either walk or let the cabdriver handle it. The city's main axis is Hidalgo. From the **Plaza de Armas (main square),** it goes 8 blocks southwest to the Enrique Estrada Park and Hotel Quinta Real (changing names as it goes); in the opposite direction, it reaches another 8 blocks to the Rafael Coronel Museum (again making a name change). The historical center of town extends several blocks on either side of this 1.5km (1-mile) stretch of Hidalgo.



ACCOMMODATIONS

Hotel Condesa **16**
Hotel Emporio Zacatecas **7**
Hotel Quinta Real **18**
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ATTRACTIONS

Catedral **11**
Church of San Agustín **14**
Church of Santo Domingo **6**
La Mina "El Edén"
(front entrance) **1**
(back entrance) **2**
Mercado Jesús González Ortega **13**
Museo F. Goitia **17**
Museo Pedro Coronel **5**
Museo Rafael Coronel **4**
Palacio del Gobierno **9**
Palacio de la Mala Noche **10**
Plaza de Armas **8**
Teatro Calderón **12**
Teleférico Station (Cable Car Station) **3**

GETTING AROUND I enjoy walking around Zacatecas, but the terrain is hilly and the air is thin. Cabs are inexpensive and readily available. Their availability declines somewhat between 2 and 4pm, during the midafternoon meal.

Fast Facts Zacatecas

Area Code The telephone area code is **492.**

Climate It can get very cold in winter here. At other times it can be chilly in the evenings. The weather has been changing and is getting warmer in the summer, to the extent that some upmarket hotels have installed air-conditioning.

Elevation The city is at a lofty 2,485m (8,151 ft.). The air is crisp and cool, but a tad thin for some people.

Emergency & Police The emergency number is ✆ **066.**

Hospital The two hospitals in town are **Clínica Santa Elena,** Av. Guerrero 143 (✆ **492/922-6861**), and **Hospital San José,** Cuevas Cancino 208, near the clinic (✆ **492/922-3892**).

Internet Access Internet cafes are cheap and very popular. Ask at your hotel or get directions from any young person you meet on the street.

Post Office The *correo,* at Allende 111, a half-block from Avenida Hidalgo, is open Monday through Friday from 9am to 3pm, Saturday from 10am to 2pm.

SPECIAL EVENTS & FESTIVALS

During Semana Santa (Holy Week), Zacatecas hosts an **international cultural festival** that the town hopes will eventually rival the Festival Cervantino in Guanajuato. Painters, poets, dancers, musicians, actors, and other artists converge on the town.

The annual **Feria de Zacatecas,** which celebrates the founding of the city, begins sometime during the first week of September and lasts for 2 weeks, incorporating the national Fiestas Patrias (independence celebration). Cockfights, bullfights, sporting events, band concerts, and general hoopla prevail. Famous bullfighters appear, and the cheap bullfight tickets go for around 100 pesos.

EXPLORING ZACATECAS

In town you can partake of an old tradition called *callejoneadas.* On Saturday nights, people go strolling and singing with tambourines, drums, and a burro laden with *mezcal* through the winding streets and *callejones* (alleyways) of the city. Zacatecas remains largely neglected by foreign tourists, though it is popular with Mexicans. Consequently, the various sights provide little descriptive material in English.

A Stroll Around Town

The **Plaza de Armas,** the town's main square on Avenida Hidalgo, is where you'll find the **cathedral** ★★★, with its famous facade. Nowhere else in Mexico is there anything like this; the depth of relief in the carving and wealth of detail create the impression that the images are formed not in stone, but in some softer material, such as cake icing. The cathedral took 23 years to build (1729–52), and the final tower wasn't completed until 1904.

To the left of the cathedral, on the Plaza de Armas, is the 18th-century **Palacio de Gobierno,** where governors lived in colonial times. By the time of Mexico's revolt against Spain in 1810, Don Miguel de Rivera (Count of Santiago de la Laguna) owned it. Since 1834, it's been a government building. Inside is a modern **mural** (c. 1970) by Antonio Pintor Rodríguez showing the history of Zacatecas. It is a straightforward chronological presentation of history from left to right, except for the center panel, which represents prominent Zacatecans. Below the mural is a stone frieze depicting the economic underpinning that supports society and drives historical events. It flows into the mural's central panel, tying society's leaders to the soil of their motherland.

To the left of the Palacio de Gobierno is the **Residencia de Gobernadores,** with its multicolor stonework. This building is newer than the Palacio and served as the governor's house until 1950. Across the street from the plaza are the **Palacio de la Mala Noche (Palace of the Sleepless Night)** and the Hotel Emporio. The palace's name comes from the mine that brought great wealth to its original owner, Manuel de Rétegui, a philanthropic Spaniard. In case you're thinking that such fine stonework is becoming a lost art, look at the hotel's facade, which was done within the last 40 years.

Climb the small street next to the Palacio de la Mala Noche, and you'll face the massive walls of the **church of Santo Domingo,** which fronts an open space that it shares with the Museo Pedro Coronel (see "Museums," below). This church and the building that houses the museum belonged to the Jesuits, until their expulsion in 1767. Afterward, the Dominicans occupied the church and convent. Inside are some lovely baroque gilt *retablos.*

Two blocks south of Santo Domingo, on Calle Dr. Hierro (the mostly level street that parallels Hidalgo), is another grand church, **San Agustín.** This one is in partial ruins. During the Reform Wars, Zacatecas's liberal leaders kicked out the Augustinian friars, converted the church and convent into a brothel and casino, and destroyed the reportedly beautiful gilt altarpieces. The bishop of Zacatecas promptly excommunicated these Philistines. Twenty years later, a Presbyterian missionary society bought the property and dismantled the ultrabaroque facade that decorated the east door. Again, excommunication for all who aided the missionaries. Now the government has begun restoration of the church and has converted the inside into exhibition space.

Turn and go downhill, and you'll be back on Avenida Hidalgo. Walk back toward the cathedral (left), and you'll pass on your left the **Teatro Calderón** (inaugurated first in 1836 and again in 1891 after a fire). A stately building with lovely stained-glass windows, it is also a favorite spot for people to sit and watch passersby. The opera star Angela Peralta sang here several times in the 1800s. Zacatecas has a flourishing music school, and occasionally it offers performances here. A little farther down Hidalgo, a block before the cathedral on the same side of the street, is the 19th-century **Mercado Jesús González Ortega,** which used to be the town's main market. This pleasant, old-fashioned market now holds small stores selling handicrafts and some regional wines.

Backtrack along Hidalgo, and over the next few blocks you will pass by some lovely buildings and climb up to **Enrique Estrada Park** (the street changes names and becomes Av. General Jesús González Ortega). The **equestrian statue** (1898) portrays none other than the general himself, hero of the Battle of Calpulalpan. Behind it are a gazebo with marvelous acoustics and a pleasant, shady park that is a romantic spot for young couples at night. Beginning at Estrada Park and extending southward are the lovely arches of the **Aqueduct of Zacatecas.** Two of these arches frame the doorway to the Quinta Real Hotel, which you can enter to see the town's old bullring, a lovely sight. Go to the hotel bar and order a margarita—another lovely sight.

A Ride up Cerro de la Bufa ★★★

To get to the cable car station from the Plaza de Armas, you must climb one of the streets or alleys that lead up the hill that faces the cathedral. But first, glance up to see if the cars are running; if it's windy, they won't be. The first cross-street will be Villalpando or Hierro; go right, and make a left when you get to the Callejón (alley) de García Roja. If you're unaccustomed to the thin air, this is quite a climb. An easier way to get there is to catch bus no. 7, which you can pick up along Juárez, or take a cab. The cable car (✆ **492/922-5694**) is operated by the state. The ride up to the Cerro de la Bufa is gorgeous, and the view from La Bufa is best in the late afternoon and early evening, when the sun is low in the sky. The cable car normally runs from 10am to 6pm, with a one-way ticket costing 27 pesos. But recently, it has been running at night from Thursday to Saturday 7pm to midnight, with a one-way ticket costing 40 pesos. And the company has opened a panoramic bar at the top that is quite a pleasant place to have a drink. If you're so inclined, there is a nice pedestrian walkway that leads down the hill and back to the city center.

On Cerro de la Bufa is the **Museo de la Toma de Zacatecas,** which will be of most interest to Spanish-speaking history buffs. It displays artifacts and enlarged newspaper articles about the capture of Zacatecas by Pancho Villa. This was a decisive battle of La Revolución, and one of Villa's greatest victories. The museum is in need of investment; admission is 20 pesos. Beside the museum is the beautiful church **La Capilla de la Virgen del Patrocinio,** patroness of Zacatecas. Around the far side of the **La Bufa** is the **Mausoleo de los Hombres Ilustres de Zacatecas,** where many of the city's heroes are entombed.

Museums

La Mina "El Edén" ★ This mine is a giant gash carved diagonally through the core of a mountain following the trail of a silver vein deeper and deeper underground. To see this gash and think that all the stone and ore that once occupied this space was mined and extracted by hand provokes a sense of wonder. The mine opened in 1586, using forced Indian labor. Accidents, tuberculosis, and silicosis caused the workers' early deaths. The mine was extremely rich, yielding gold, copper, zinc, iron, and lead in addition to silver, but it eventually closed when an attempt to use explosives resulted in an inundation of water in the lower levels. English-speaking guides are available only sporadically, although the tour is eye-opening even for those who don't speak Spanish. A visit also includes a short, unremarkable train ride.

The mine's back entrance is a block from the cable-car terminal. I prefer this entrance because most people start at the main entrance, so you can avoid the crowds. When you get to the ticket office, buy your ticket right then. According to the rules, a tour must begin within 15 minutes after the first ticket is purchased. Often, I've had the guide all to myself (a tip is appreciated). After the tour is over, you can exit by the front entrance, which puts you on Juárez, a few blocks above Hidalgo.

For directions on getting to the front entrance, see La Mina Club, below, under "Zacatecas After Dark."

Cerro Grillo. ✆ **492/922-3002.** Admission 70 pesos (includes train and tour). Daily 10am–6pm.

Museo F. Goitia ★★ Zacatecas has been the homeland for an impressive number of talented artists, most of whom left town to make their names known in Mexico City and abroad. The names of Francisco Goitia, Manuel Felguérez, and the Coronel brothers are well known in Mexico. This small museum pays tribute to them, as well as to other native sons Julio Ruelas and José Kuri Breña. It occupies an impressive one-time residence built as a governor's mansion. The permanent collection is small—five rooms on the first

floor—and holds just a few pieces by each artist. The upstairs gallery is used for temporary exhibits.

Enrique Estrada 102, Col. Sierra de Alica. ✆ **492/922-0211.** Admission 30 pesos. Tues–Sun 10am–5pm.

Museo Pedro Coronel ★★ Pedro Coronel, in addition to being an artist, was a collector of inspired tastes. He acquired works from all over the world, but the strongest parts of the collection are the works of European modern masters (Dalí, Picasso, Miró, Kandinsky, Braque, Rouault), pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, and West Africa. Many of the modern pieces are illuminating. Some date from early in the artist's career, and some display a seminal character that points in the direction of later works. This collection is not large; after a while, you drift into the Mesoamerican room—seeing this beautiful stuff so quickly after the modern art gets your mind working out strange and improbable connections. There is no filler here; all of the pieces are outstanding.

Plaza de Santo Domingo. ✆ **492/922-8021.** www.pedrocoronelbienal.com. Admission 30 pesos. Fri–Wed 10am–5pm.

Museo Rafael Coronel ★★★ An unexpected pleasure offered by this mask museum is the gardens and picturesque ruins of the former Franciscan convent, filled with trailing blossoms and framed by crumbling arches and the open sky. Once you step inside the museum, you'll find room after room of bizarre and fantastical masks from all over Mexico. The making and using of masks for ceremonial or ritualistic purposes has been entwined in Mexican culture for millennia. Some of the earliest artifacts we have of the Olmec and Teotihuacán cultures are masks. A visit here only touches on a few aspects of what masks mean for the various peoples of Mexico, but it is fascinating. The museum has over 4,500 masks. Explanatory text is in Spanish.

One wing of the museum is dedicated to puppets. Dioramas show a bullfight, battling armies, and even a vision of hell. The puppets are some of the hundreds created during the last century by the famous Rosete-Aranda family of Huamantla, Tlaxcala. Also in the museum, to the left after you enter, is the Ruth Rivera room, where some of Diego Rivera's drawings are on display. Ruth Rivera is the daughter of Diego Rivera and the wife of Rafael Coronel.

Calle Chevano (btw. Abasolo and Matamoros). ✆ **492/922-8116.** Admission 30 pesos. Thurs–Tues 10am–5pm.

A Side Trip to Nearby Guadalupe

In the nearby town of Guadalupe, now almost a suburb of Zacatecas, is a large Franciscan convent and evangelical college founded by a famous member of the evangelical college of Querétaro, Fray Antonio Margil de Jesús. It remains an active monastery, but a part of the convent houses a wonderful museum of colonial art, which will impress anyone interested in art and painting of any kind. Some people might skip this one because they suppose colonial art to be staid, scholastic, and full of arcane symbolism. Not true. The paintings, mostly from the 1700s, are by some of the greatest painters of New Spain (colonial Mexico)—Cabrera, Villalpando, Correa, and others. They are detailed, expressive, dramatic, and eye-catching for their use of anachronisms and fantastical themes.

I usually take a taxi (about 50 pesos) and, to save money and chat with locals, grab a city bus for the return. The convent's church has a lovely facade and holds the famous 19th-century Capilla de Nápoles, a chapel with lots of gilding and decoration. You cannot enter, but you can see it from the ground floor of the church or from the organ loft, which is accessible from the museum.

Convento de Guadalupe/Museo Virreinal de Guadalupe ★★★ To a dedicated museumgoer, seeing these paintings exhibited in galleries with open-air circulation and no climate control is a little unsettling. The museum has about 350 works. On the first floor are over 20 portraits depicting scenes of St. Francis's life. The stairway to the second floor has some large, striking paintings, including Cabrera's *Virgin of the Apocalypse* and Arnáez's *The Triumph of the Sweet Name of Jesus,* which is an amusing propagandistic work showing the victory of Rome over the pagans and the Reformation. Highlights on the second floor include the organ loft, 14 oval paintings by Cabrera, 4 by Villalpando, and the surprising work of a local artist named Gabriel José de Ovalle, who distorts space and deforms human features in a style that seems much more modern than the 1700s. Guides are available for a tour of the museum and to view the Capilla de Nápoles (if the monks aren't celebrating Mass).

Jardín Juárez, Oriente, Guadalupe. ✆ **492/923-2089,** -2386. Admission 41 pesos. Daily 9am–5:30pm.

SHOPPING

Zacatecan handicrafts include stone-carving, leatherwork, and silver jewelry. Examples can be found in shops inside the old **Mercado González Ortega** on Hidalgo, next to the cathedral. There are a lot of silver jewelry shops in the center of town. A few other stores on Hidalgo and Tacuba sell crafts and antiques. Huichol Indians occasionally sell their crafts around the Plaza Independencia. Zacatecas is well known for its stone carvings. Many architects and builders from the United States come to Zacatecas when they need fancy stonework.

WHERE TO STAY

Zacatecas has a great selection of hotels. Each of the expensive hotels that I've selected has something that sets it apart from the rest. The Quinta Real has the classic old bullring. The Emporio is on the square, and its front rooms have a great view of the Cerro de la Bufa. El Jobito captures the air of an old *vecindad.* In the fall and winter, heat can come in handy. Of the hotels listed here, all but the Condesa have heaters in the rooms, but many hotels in Zacatecas do not. And in the summer, air-conditioning would be nice, but very few hotels have it. Prices quoted here include the 18% tax. Highest rates are for Easter and Christmas holidays and August through September.

Very Expensive

Hotel Quinta Real ★★★ Mexico is littered with hotels occupying former mansions, convents, and haciendas, but how many have risen from bullrings? And yet, it's the beauty, not the novelty, that makes this hotel so great. It has won several design awards, undoubtedly because the architects knew enough to leave the beautiful old bullring intact and keep the hotel small enough to be unobtrusive. A few of the arches that remain from the town's colonial aqueduct frame the entrance. From the lobby, you can survey the entire arena. The rooms were built along the outside of the bullring, and their windows open onto a small courtyard. Rooms are large, with well-equipped bathrooms, a writing desk, and a couch. Master suites are one room with a king-size or two double beds; *gran clase* suites are larger, with a sitting area and a whirlpool tub.

Av. Rayón 434, 98000 Zacatecas, Zac. ✆ **866/621-9288** in the U.S. and Canada, or 492/922-9105. Fax 492/922-8440. www.quintareal.com. 49 suites. High season 3,380 pesos master suite, 3,673 pesos *gran clase* suite; low season 2,870–3,260 pesos master suite, 3,160–3,560 pesos *gran clase* suite. The higher rates during low season are for weekends. AE, MC, V. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; concierge; golf privileges at local club; fitness center; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Internet, minibar.

Expensive

Hotel Emporio Zacatecas ★★ A comfortable hotel across from the Plaza de Armas, it is a popular choice with Mexican tourists and businesspeople. The spacious rooms on its six floors are carpeted and well furnished. Rooms in the back are quiet. The rooms in front, mostly junior suites, are sunny and have balconies with good views of the cathedral and Cerro de la Bufa. The ones I like most are those on the fourth floor, which have terraces. These are set back a little and offer more shielding from street noise. The rooms in back face a small interior patio, complete with gurgling fountain. They contain one king-size or two double beds, and midsize bathrooms.

Av. Hidalgo 703, Col. Centro, 98000 Zacatecas, Zac. ✆ **492/925-6500.** Fax 492/922-6245. www.hotelesemporio.com. 113 units. 1,450–1,930 pesos double; 1,685–2,165 pesos junior suite. AE, MC, V. Sheltered parking 20 pesos. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; fitness center; room service; sauna; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Mesón de Jobito ★★ This two-story hotel occupies a traditional *vecindad,* which was a common form of housing for the lower classes in olden days. The buildings ramble back from the entrance, forming private alleys decorated with ornamental plants and flowerpots, and painted in traditional Mexican colors. The hotel feels intimate. Most rooms are large, carpeted, and furnished with queen- or king-size beds. Junior suites are larger and have more flair. Rates vary seasonally and are highest from September to December. The hotel's main restaurant is a good place to enjoy the afternoon meal. The hotel is 5 blocks from the cathedral and a block above Hidalgo.

Jardín Juárez 143, 98000 Zacatecas, Zac. ✆/fax **492/924-1722,** or 01-800/021-0040 in Mexico. www.mesondejobito.com. 53 units. 1,250–1,680 pesos double; 1,455–1,840 pesos suite. AE, MC, V. Free valet parking. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; babysitting; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Inexpensive

Hotel Condesa (Value) The good location, well-kept rooms, and economical price are the main attractions here. Many rooms, especially on the lower floors, have been remodeled and have modern furniture, cheerful paint, and new bathroom tile. These rooms have interior views. Rooms on the third floor have new bathrooms. Those facing east overlook Cerro de la Bufa and the market below the hotel. Rooms are small to medium. Most come with one or two double beds.

Av. Juárez 102, 98000 Zacatecas, Zac. ✆/fax **492/922-1160.** www.hotelcondesa.com.mx. 52 units. 550–630 pesos double; 800–900 pesos minisuite. AE, MC, V. No parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; cafe/bar; babysitting; room service. *In room:* TV, Wi-Fi.

Motel Zacatecas Courts Rooms have carpeting and comfortable beds. It is a 10-minute walk from the main square. Be sure to get a room in the back, away from the street. Also, ask to have the heat turned on in the room and for extra blankets in winter.

López Velarde 602, 98000 Zacatecas, Zac. ✆ **492/922-0328.** Fax 492/922-1225. 92 units. 678 pesos double. MC, V. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; room service. *In room:* TV.

WHERE TO DINE

The dining in Zacatecas is good. Besides the establishments listed below, I've eaten well at the Quinta Real and Mesón del Jobito. The *gordita,* a thick tortilla that is split open and stuffed with any of several cooked fillings, might be considered the state food of Zacatecas, and the most popular *gordita* place is **Gorditas Doña Julia,** which operates three or four locations. The best coffee in town is at **Café San Patrizio,** in the courtyard at Hidalgo 403. It's open from Monday to Saturday from 9am until 10pm.

Café Nevería Acrópolis MEXICAN/COFFEE SHOP This coffee shop/restaurant with soda fountain is a popular meeting spot for the locals. I like the feel of the place, the breakfasts, the light fare of sandwiches or quesadillas, and the desserts, but for dinner I usually go elsewhere.

Av. Hidalgo and Rinconada de Catedral. ✆ **492/922-1284.** Breakfast 45–75 pesos; main courses 70–110 pesos. MC, V. Daily 8am–10pm.

El Pueblito MEXICAN I like the menu here. It's not fancy; it's not overreaching. It includes some of my favorite Mexican dishes, and the kitchen does a credible job—*asado de boda, milanesa a la plancha* (home-style breaded steak), *enchiladas zacatecanas,* and lighter fare such as *tacos al pastor* are all good. This is also a comfortable place to take the weight off your feet and enjoy a beer and a guacamole salad. The surroundings are comfortable, attractive, and not too noisy. The nonsensical decor, which I initially found to be off-putting, is actually an homage to the town of Sombrerete, from whence hails the owner.

Hidalgo 802. ✆ **492/924-3818.** Reservations accepted. Main courses 75–135 pesos. MC, V. Wed–Mon 1–11pm.

La Cantera Musical Restaurant Bar ★ MEXICAN/REGIONAL This restaurant is best known for its regional cooking, especially typical dishes such as *asado de boda* (a pork dish made with cinnamon and *ancho* and *guajillo* chiles) and *mole zacatecano* (a sweet and spicy chicken dish). You can also get a number of Mexican standards. The dining room is attractive. The restaurant is below the Mercado González Ortega, by the cathedral.

Tacuba 2, Centro Comercial El Mercado. ✆ **492/922-8828.** Main courses 95–140 pesos. MC, V. Mon–Sat 1–11pm; Sun 2–10pm.

Los Dorados de Villa ★★ MEXICAN If your grandmother were Mexican, this is how you would want her to cook. The green *pozole* is excellent. The enchiladas, which come in many varieties (I recommend the *valentinas* and the *rojas*), are delicious, too. Other menu items include tostadas, tacos, soups, and guacamole. What's for dessert? *Buñuelos,* of course. The name of the place refers to "the golden ones"—Pancho Villa's honor guard. The owner is a collector of memorabilia. Artifacts and reproductions from La Revolución cover the walls of the small dining room. Decorative paper cutouts hang from the ceiling, making the room feel even smaller, but festive, too. Diners need to ring the doorbell to enter; adults only after 8pm.

Plazuela de García 1314. ✆ **492/922-5722.** Reservations recommended. Main courses 60–100 pesos. No credit cards. Mon–Sat 3pm–1am; Sun 3pm–midnight.

ZACATECAS AFTER DARK

La Mina Club Dance music in a mine deep inside the earth—does "Disco Inferno" ring a bell? Whose life could be considered complete without having made the scene here? The entrance is at the end of Calle Dovali. From Hidalgo, walk up Juárez, which turns into Torreón. Just past the Seguro Social building on Avenida Torreón, you'll find Dovali; turn right. Take a cab if you don't want to be so bushed that you can't boogie. The club is open Thursday through Sunday from 9:30pm to 2am. Mina El Edén, Calle Dovali. ✆ **492/922-3727.** Cover 115 pesos.

5 SAN LUIS POTOSI

418km (259 miles) N of Mexico City; 346km (215 miles) NE of Guadalajara; 202km (125 miles) N of Querétaro; 189km (117 miles) E of Zacatecas

San Luis Potosí, a mile high in central Mexico's high-plains region, was among the country's most prosperous mining cities. It's now the largest and most industrial silver city, with almost a million inhabitants, but you would never know it if you stayed in the historic central district. It has rich colonial architecture and is known for its great plazas. Capital of the state of the same name, San Luis Potosí was named for Louis IX, sainted king of France. *Potosí* is a reference to the rich Bolivian Potosí mines.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING **By Plane** The airport code for San Luis is SLP. **Continental ExpressJet** (✆ **800/231-0856** in the U.S., or 01-800/900-5000 in Mexico) and **American Eagle** (✆ **800/433-7300** in the U.S., or 01-800/904-6000 in Mexico) fly to and from Houston and Dallas. Several domestic carriers have flights to Mexico City and other destinations within the country. The **airport** is 11km (6¾ miles) from downtown. A taxi to the city center is 350 pesos.

By Car From Mexico City, take Hwy. 57D; from Guadalajara, take Hwy. 80. If you're coming from the north, it takes 6 to 7 hours to drive the 536km (332 miles) from Monterrey.

By Bus The large Central Camionera is 3km (1¾ miles) east of downtown on Guadalupe Torres at Diagonal Sur. Most of the bus travel is through Estrella Blanca and its many affiliates, which occupy the counters to the left as you enter. You can buy a ticket for any of the affiliates from any counter. To the right as you enter are three other first-class bus companies: ETN, Primera Plus, and Omnibus de Mexico.

VISITOR INFORMATION The **State Tourism Office** (✆ **444/812-9939,** -9943) is at Manuel Jose Othon 130, to one side of the cathedral. The information office has a helpful staff, a good map of the city and historic district, and lots of brochures. It's open Monday through Friday from 8am to 9pm, Saturday from 9am to 2pm.

CITY LAYOUT The **Plaza de Armas** is the center of the historic district. All the streets bordering it are pedestrian only. The principal pedestrian street runs north-south in front of the plaza; the southern part (called **Zaragoza**) extends 8 blocks to the Jardín Colón, and the northern part (called **Hidalgo**) runs 5 blocks to the main market. The city also has many plazas and a large downtown park called **La Alameda. Avenida Carranza** heads east from the Plaza de Armas, passes by the Plaza de Fundadores, and extends out to the main commercial and residential section of the city. Fronting this street are many banks, clubs, and restaurants.

Fast Facts San Luis Potosí

Area Code The telephone area code is **444.**

Climate San Luis is on the high plateau more than a mile above sea level, but the weather can get hot during May, June, and sometimes July. In winter it

occasionally drops to freezing at night. Rain is rare, with an average total of 14 inches per year; it falls between May and November, mostly in August.

Consular Agency San Luis Potosí has a **U.S. Consular Agency** at Av. Venustiano Carranza 2076-41 (✆ **444/811-7802,** -7803; Mon–Fri 8:30am–12:30pm).

Currency Exchange Four *casas de cambios* near the main post office offer better rates and better service than the banks. Two are in the arcade on Julián de los Reyes, and two are on Mariano Escobedo. This is just a few blocks northeast of the Plaza de Armas. All are open Saturday. The historic district has many ATMs.

Emergency San Luis's central emergency number is ✆ **060.**

Hospital The **Hospital Centro Médico,** Antonio Aguilar 155 (✆ **444/813-3797**), is one of the best in the country.

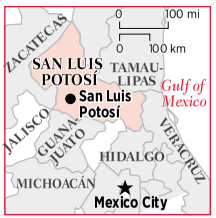
Post Office The *correos,* Universidad 526-A, is by the church of San Agustín. Hours are Monday through Friday from 8am to 5pm, Saturday 3am to 2pm.

A STROLL AROUND THE HISTORIC CENTER

San Luis has more streets dedicated solely to the use of pedestrians than any of the other silver cities. The center of town is the **Plaza de Armas,** dating from the mid-1700s and shaded by magnolia and *flamboyán* trees. The **bandstand** in the center of the plaza was built in 1947 (in colonial style), using pink volcanic stone. Free concerts usually begin on Thursday and Sunday at around 7:30 or 8pm. On the west side of the plaza is the **Palacio de Gobierno.** It has been much repaired, restored, and added to through the centuries—the back and the south facade were redone as recently as 1950. The front of the building retains much of the original 18th-century decoration. Upstairs, you'll find the rooms that Juárez occupied when he established his temporary capital here in 1863 and again in 1867. It's worth a peek. You can see it only at designated hours Monday to Friday at 10am, noon, and 2pm. There is a short tour of this room and a couple of others. The tour is free.

Across the plaza from the Government Palace is the **cathedral.** The original building had only a single bell tower; the one on the left was built in 1910 to match, although today the newer tower looks older. The Count of Monterrey built the **Palacio Municipal,** on the north side of the cathedral, in 1850. He filled it with paintings and sculptures, few of which survived the city's stormy history. When the count died in 1890, the palace was taken over by the bishop and, in 1921, by the city government. Since then, it has been San Luis's city hall. On January 1, 1986, it was firebombed during a riot. It has been restored and functions again.

East of the plaza is one of the city's most famous squares, **Plazuela del Carmen,** named for the **Templo del Carmen** ★★ church. From the *jardín,* walk east along Madero-Othón to Escobedo. The entire area you see was once part of the extensive grounds of the 18th-century Carmelite monastery. The church has a beautiful and complex facade, in which appear Elijah and Elisha, two prophets in the Old Testament who lived on Mount Carmel and are considered by the Carmelite order as spiritual founders. The other two large figures are St. Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, mystics who, in the 16th century, reformed the order in Spain and founded the congregation of the Discalced Carmelites, who held to stricter vows of poverty than the rest of the order. Inside the church are some beautiful baroque altarpieces.

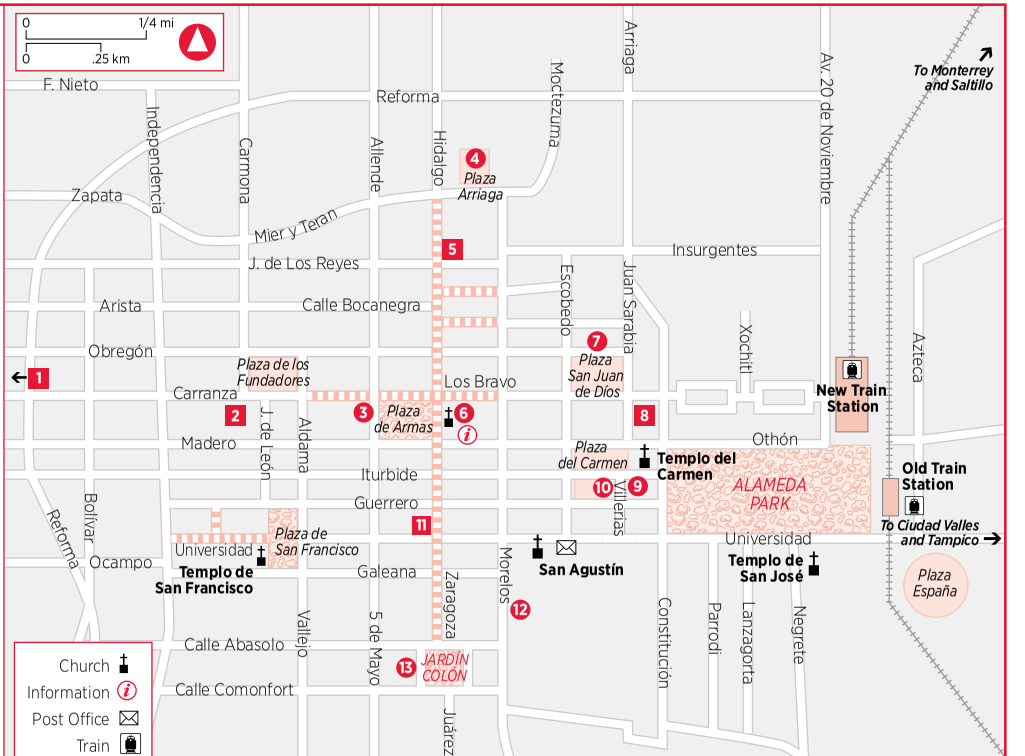


ATTRACTIONS ●

Cathedral **6**
FONART crafts store **12**
La Casa del Artesano **13**
Mercado Hidalgo **4**
Museo Federico Silva **7**
Museo Nacional de la Máscara **10**
Palacio de Gobierno **3**
Palacio Municipal **6**
Teatro de la Paz **9**

ACCOMMODATIONS ■

Hotel Filher **11**
Hotel María Cristina **8**
Hotel Panorama **2**
Hotel Real Plaza **1**
Westin San Luis Potosí **5**



The **Museo Nacional de la Máscara** (no phone) faces the plaza, too. The museum has recently reopened, but no longer has such a large collection of masks as it did before. The cost of admission is 15 pesos, which allows you to see the mask exhibit and the house, which was built in the 1890s, and has some great architectural features. The upstairs rooms have been restored to their original condition. Hours are Tuesday to Friday 10am to 6pm, Saturday from 10am to 5pm, and Sunday from 10am to 3pm.

Facing the museum from across the plaza is the **Teatro de la Paz,** built in the 1890s, too. It's difficult to get in to view the old auditorium, but attached to it is the **Sala German Gedovius** (✆ **444/812-2698**), with four art galleries. It's open Tuesday through Sunday from 10am to 2pm and 4 to 6pm. Admission is free.

One block north of El Carmen is another plaza called San Juan de Dios. Here you'll find **Museo Federico Silva** (✆ **444/812-3848**). This is a brilliant museum dedicated to the modern sculpture of Federico Silva, one of the masters of contemporary sculpture in Mexico. This museum is necessarily large, as it must accommodate Silva's massive pieces constructed of steel, stone, and concrete, including his modern take on the ancient rain god Tlaloc. The museum is open from Tuesday to Saturday 10am to 6pm, and Sunday 10am to 2pm. Admission is 30 pesos.

One block east of the Plaza del Carmen is a large urban green area known as **La Alameda.** Vendors sell handicrafts, fruit, and all manner of snacks. Facing the park on Negrete is the **Templo de San José,** with lots of ornate gold decorations, huge religious paintings, and *El Señor de los Trabajos,* a miracle-working statue with many *retablos* testifying to the wonders it has performed.

Plazas

San Luis Potosí has more plazas than any other colonial city in Mexico. In addition to those mentioned above, the **Plaza de San Francisco** is south of the Plaza de Armas along Aldama, between Guerrero and Galeana. This shady square takes its name from the Franciscan monastery on the south side of the plaza and the church on the west side. The church holds some beautiful stained glass, many Colonial-Era statues and paintings, and a crystal chandelier shaped like a sailing ship.

Another square is **Plaza de los Fundadores (Founders' Square),** at the intersection of Obregón and Aldama, northwest of the Plaza de Armas. Facing it is the **Loreto Chapel,** with its exquisite baroque facade. The neighboring church of **El Sagrario** belonged to the Jesuits before the order was expelled from Mexico.

SHOPPING

The best shopping in San Luis is at two stores. The state-run store **La Casa del Artesano** (✆ **444/814-6999**), at Jardín Colón 23, has five rooms filled with merchandise from all parts of the state. It's open Monday through Friday from 10am to 8pm and Saturday from 10am to 5pm. The **FONART** crafts store, operated by the federal government (✆ **444/814-3868**), at Morelos 1055, is around the corner from the church of San Agustín. It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 2pm and 4 to 7pm, Saturday 10am to 5pm. The hand-woven *rebozos* (shawls) from the town of Santa María del Río are what the state is most known for, but the state offers several other crafts, such as the brightly colored bags of woven *ixtle* (agave fibers).

Several blocks along the pedestrian Calle Hidalgo north of Jardín Hidalgo, you'll find the city's **Mercado Hidalgo,** a large building devoted mostly to food, but also offering, among other things, baskets, *rebozos* (shawls), and straw furniture. The walk along

Hidalgo is an introduction to the city's commercial life. Hardware stores, crafts shops, shoe stores, groceries, and taverns crowd the street. Past the Mercado Hidalgo is another big market, the Mercado República.

A well-loved local candy factory is **Constanzo,** which has several outlets throughout the city, including three on Carranza (including an old-style candy shop at Carranza 325). Most outlets are open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 1:30pm and 4 to 8:30pm.

WHERE TO STAY

There are no luxury hotels in the historic center. Most of them (the María Dolores, Real de Minas, and Holiday Inn) are to the east, where the highway from Mexico City enters the town. The Westin and the Camino Real are to the west, along the highway to Guadalajara. All rates listed below include the 17% tax. Expect higher rates for Easter, Christmas, and, in some hotels, August.

Expensive

Westin San Luis Potosí ★★ Perhaps the loveliest hotel in San Luis, the Westin offers comfort and service in modern surroundings with traditional colonial design elements. The rooms are on three sides of a three-story building enclosing a wide garden courtyard. Stone arcades flank two sides. Rooms are large, carpeted, and sharply designed. They come with the Westin's signature beds, either two full- or one king-size. Bathrooms are large, with marble tiles, and lots of counter space. Suites are even larger and offer a stereo with a CD player and a whirlpool tub. They offer views of the courtyard and are worth the extra money. The center of town is 15 to 20 minutes away by car. Internet rates here can be heavily discounted—sometimes below $100.

Real de Lomas 1000, 78210 San Luis Potosí, S.L.P. ✆ **800/228-3000** in the U.S., or 444/825-0125. Fax 444/825-0200. www.westinslp.com.mx. 123 units. $175 double; $185 suite. Rates include airport transfers. AE, MC, V. Free valet parking. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; babysitting; concierge; fitness center; access to nearby health club w/tennis and racquetball; small heated outdoor pool; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Moderate

Hotel Panorama ★ Aptly named, this hotel is in a 10-story glass building near the Plaza Fundadores. Rooms have floor-to-ceiling views. (As long as you're above the fourth floor, you'll have something to look at, especially to the north or east.) Many years ago, it was *the* hotel in San Luis. Newer, fancier competitors now exist, but none in the downtown area. Rooms vary, but are medium size, and most rooms come with two full-size beds, carpeting, and attractive furniture. *Premier* rooms (executive level), on the 6th and 8th floors, have better lighting and more attractive furniture.

Av. Carranza 315, 78000 San Luis Potosí, S.L.P. ✆ **444/812-1777.** Fax 444/812-4591. www.hotelpanorama.com.mx. 126 units. 860 pesos double; 1,260 pesos premier; 1,900–2,500 pesos suite. AE, MC, V. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; cafe; 2 bars; babysitting; executive-level rooms; midsize heated outdoor pool; room service; smoke-free rooms; Wi-Fi (in lobby). *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Internet.

Hotel Real Plaza (Value) A modern nine-story hotel 8 blocks from the Plaza de Armas, the Real Plaza offers comfort and quiet at a good price. The midsize rooms are carpeted and the same size as the double in the Hotel Panorama. They are not quite as nice but are comfortable and a good value for the money. Bathrooms are a little larger than at the Panorama, but some rooms have no view. The rooftop pool has a great view and an attractive patio area. In high season, the snack bar offers food and drink service.

Av. Carranza 890, 78250 San Luis Potosí, S.L.P. ✆ **444/814-6969.** Fax 444/814-6639. www.realplaza.com.mx. 268 units. 690 pesos double; 1,800–2,200 pesos suite. AE, MC, V. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; fitness center; heated outdoor pool; room service; Wi-Fi (in lobby). *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer.

Inexpensive

Hotel Filher Value Good location and medium-to-large rooms are the high points of this economical three-story hotel. It will be closed for much of 2010 for remodeling, but the management says that when it reopens it will keep its economical rates.

Av. Universidad 375 (at Zaragoza), 78000 San Luis Potosí, S.L.P. ✆ **444/812-1562.** Fax 444/812-1564. 50 units. 540 pesos double. MC, V. Free parking 3 blocks away. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; room service. *In room:* TV.

Hotel María Cristina The María Cristina is in a narrow nine-story building around the corner from the Plaza del Carmen. It's next door to (and often confused with) the Hotel Nápoles. All rooms are small and have a ceiling fan, and most don't offer much of a view. The bathrooms are small, with little counter space. Rooms are quiet, carpeted, and warmer in the winter than the rooms at the Filher (see above).

Juan Sarabia 110, 78000 San Luis Potosí, S.L.P. ✆ **444/812-9408.** www.mariacristina.com.mx. 74 units. 630 pesos double. MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; room service. *In room:* TV.

WHERE TO DINE

Downtown San Luis doesn't have any outstanding restaurant, but you can eat well here, so long as you stick to the local food.

Moderate

Cielo Tinto MEXICAN This is a beautiful place to dine—just stick to the Mexican dishes, such as the *Chamorro Pibil,* the enchiladas (several kinds), the *arrachera,* and a few other cuts of meat. The restaurant is in a 19th-century house with simple, elegant columns and stonework. There are four dining rooms, each a bit different, and a courtyard with retractable roof. At night the place is lit dramatically.

Carranza 700. ✆ **444/814-0040.** Reservations Recommended. Main courses 120–170 pesos. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 8am–1:30am; Sun 8am–6pm.

El Callejón de San Francisco ★ MEXICAN If the night air is comfortable, there's no lovelier place for dinner than this restaurant's rooftop terrace, with San Francisco's cupola and bell towers for a backdrop. Even if it's a tad too chilly, you can still enjoy yourself; just ask the waiter for a *jorongo* (hoh-*rohn*-goh), a traditional woolen wrap for the shoulders. There's also a dining room downstairs. The menu has a number of Mexican standards at reasonable prices. The restaurant is on a pedestrian street beside San Francisco church.

Callejón de Lozada 1. ✆ **444/812-4508.** Reservations recommended on weekends. Main courses 90–160 pesos. AE, MC, V. Mon–Fri 6pm–midnight; Sat 2pm–midnight.

La Virreina ★ REGIONAL/MEXICAN Opened in 1959, this restaurant has for years been one of the places Potosinos go to dine when there's something to celebrate. It has the feel of an old-time Mexican restaurant—the staff talk in a soft-spoken, slightly formal way, the background music is mostly orchestral productions of Mexican favorites from the '60s and '70s, and the tables even have old-fashioned place settings. The kitchen also pays attention to the details missed by others. The *enchiladas potosinas* (ask for them

with strips of poblano chile instead of cheese) are the best I've had in San Luis. If you order the *carne asada a la virreina,* you'll get a couple of enchiladas on the side. This dish is a steak topped with a little cheese and a sauce flavored with Mexican sausage. A more moderate option is the pepper steak or the baked fish with bleu cheese and bread crumbs.

Av. Carranza 830. ✆ **444/812-3750.** www.lavirreina.com.mx. Reservations accepted. Main courses 95–200 pesos. AE, MC, V. Tues–Sat 1–11pm; Sun–Mon 1–6pm.

Inexpensive

La Parroquia MEXICAN This is a standard no-frills restaurant with lots of local dishes on the menu. It's got picture windows looking out on Plaza Fundadores, booths upholstered in vinyl, and tables with Formica tops. And yet there's something very Mexican about this place. It attracts lots of office workers for its bargain priced *menú del día.* Favorite dishes include *tacos arrieros* served with guacamole, *enchiladas huastecas,* and *costillas de cerdo en salsa cascabel* (pork ribs in a dark chile sauce).

Carranza 303. ✆ **444/812-6681.** Reservations not accepted. Main courses 70–130 pesos. 5-course *menú del día* 78 pesos. MC, V. Daily 7am–midnight.

Restaurant Orizatlán ★ HUASTECAN This colorful restaurant specializes in the traditional Huastecan cooking of eastern San Luis Potosí. If you are hungry, try the *parrillada a la Huasteca.* A large sampling of typical dishes, it includes portions of the *zacahuil,* Mexico's largest tamal. The waiters will keep the Huastecan enchiladas coming until you beg them to stop. Less ambitious eaters can order a la carte. After dinner, the restaurant serves a complimentary home-style cordial made from the fruit of the *jobito* (something similar to a sour plum).

Pascual M. Hernández 240. ✆ **444/814-6786.** Breakfast 45 pesos; main courses 60–120 pesos. AE, MC, V. Mon–Thurs 8am–10pm; Fri–Sat 8am–11pm; Sun 8am–7pm. 8 blocks south of Plaza de Armas on Zaragoza, turn left at Jardín Colón; restaurant is about 30m (98 ft.) down.

SAN LUIS AFTER DARK

The most popular clubs in town are those where you can sit down to a late supper or drinks, and hear guitarists and vocalists. Most of the music is romantic—*trovas,* or ballads. In the downtown area, a number of bars offer this kind of entertainment, usually on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights. They include **La Compañía,** Mariano Arista 350 (✆ **444/812-9693**); **Restaurant Bar 1913,** Galeana 205 (✆ **444/812-8352**); and **Café Olé,** Zaragoza 665 (no phone). For more raucous entertainment, try **Los Frailes,** a bar at Callejón de San Francisco 165 (no phone).

8

Michoacán

by David Baird

West of Mexico City and southeast of Guadalajara lies the state of Michoacán (mee-choh-ah-*kahn*), the homeland of more than 200,000 Tarascan Indians, properly known as the Purépecha. The land is mountainous in the east, north, and center. In the south and west, it drops to a broad lowland plain that meets the Pacific Ocean. The state gets more rain and thus is greener than its neighbors Jalisco and Guanajuato. Many Mexicans consider it the most beautiful state in their country, yet it remains relatively unvisited by foreigners.

High in the mountains, in the northeastern part of the state, a miraculous ritual occurs every year. Millions of monarch butterflies congregate in an isolated highland forest. They are the final link in a migratory chain stretching from Mexico to as far away as Canada and back. During peak season (Dec–Mar), the tree limbs bend under their cumulative weight, and the undulation of so many wings creates a dazzling spectacle. (See "Michoacán's Monarch Migration," later in this chapter.) In the center of the state, highland lakes and colorful Indian towns evoke the Mexico of old. These towns are known for their handicrafts and all-night celebrations on the Day of the Dead. Farther west and south is the famous volcano El Paricutín, the only major volcano born in modern times (1943).

The two most important cities in Michoacán, **Morelia** and **Pátzcuaro,** present contrasting visions of the colonial past. Morelia is a city built of chiseled stone, planned with architectural considerations, and possessed of a clear-cut geometry. Pátzcuaro is all about undulating adobe walls, crooked red-tile roofs, and narrow meandering streets. While the former is proud of its Spanish heritage, the latter remains rooted in its Indian origins.

The native Purépecha are an intriguing people. Where they came from and how they got here we don't know. Their language is unlike any other in Mexico; the closest linguistic connection is with native peoples in Ecuador. Their civilization developed contemporaneously with that of the Aztec, and they successfully defeated Aztec expansionism—the only highland civilization to do so.

Since they were not vassals of the Aztec, they didn't simply submit to Spanish rule after the collapse of the Aztec empire. In the history of the conquest and conversion of the Purépecha, two men represent the polar extremes of Spanish attitudes toward the Indians. One was the conquistador Nuño de Guzmán, a man so rapacious and cruel that he became infamous even among his fellow conquistadors. He was later imprisoned in Spain for his crimes. The other was Vasco de Quiroga, a humanist who believed in the ideas of Erasmus and Sir Thomas More. He joined the church late in life and came to Michoacán as the first bishop of the Purépecha, establishing his see, or religious jurisdiction, in Pátzcuaro. Here he strove to build a utopian society of cooperative communities, organizing and instructing each village in the practice of a specific craft. To this day, his organization of crafts among the different villages is largely followed.

Travel in Violent Times

Michoacán has recently been in the headlines of many news stories about *La Familia,* a local drug cartel. Over the last 2 years, the army and police have captured the cartel's most important leaders and have managed to intercept much of its product. The cartel has retaliated with daylight attacks against targets such as police stations and army convoys. These attacks have taken place in all parts of the state. On my last trip I noticed little evidence of this struggle except for a larger police presence and didn't note any change in people's attitudes or outlook. Society has clearly not been affected by this struggle to the same degree as in the border areas. Still, before going you should check for travel advisories with the U.S. State Department at www.state.gov/travel.

EXPLORING MICHOACAN

Travel between the major cities of Michoacán takes only an hour or two at most, and public transportation is frequent. You should plan 3 days in **Morelia** (more if you intend to see the butterflies) and a minimum of 3 days in **Pátzcuaro,** but more like a week if you're interested in taking day trips to the lakes and the villages in the region and want to look into the local handicrafts. **Uruapan,** another important town, is an easy day trip from either city, although you may want to stay longer to visit **El Paricutín volcano.** During Easter week or Day of the Dead observances (Nov 1–2), the Plazas Grandes in Pátzcuaro and Uruapan overflow with regional crafts. Reserve rooms in advance for these holidays. With the highway from Ixtapa, it's possible to plan a vacation that combines the colonial cities of Michoacán with quality beach time.

1 MORELIA ★

312km (193 miles) NW of Mexico City; 365km (226 miles) SE of Guadalajara

The first viceroy of Mexico ordered the founding of the city in 1541 under the name Valladolid. After independence, that name was changed to Morelia to honor the revolutionary hero José María Morelos, who was born here.

Morelia was intended as a bastion of Spanish culture for the region's large population of Indians. The adjective people most frequently use to describe Morelia is *aristocratic.* Indeed, the city's greatest appeal lies in its grand colonial architecture.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There & Departing

BY PLANE The airport code for Morelia is MLM. **Continental** (✆ **800/231-0856** in the U.S., or 01-800/900-5000 in Mexico) has direct flights from Houston. **Mexicana** (✆ **800/531-7921** in the U.S., or 443/324-3808) has flights to and from several California destinations and Chicago. Several domestic carriers connect Morelia to other cities in Mexico.

Morelia's airport is **Aeropuerto Francisco J. Mújica,** a 45-minute drive from the city center on Km 27 of the Carretera Morelia-Zinapécuaro. A new toll road connects the

airport to the city and shaves 20 minutes off the drive. Taxis meet each flight. **Budget** has a car-rental office there (✆ **800/527-0700** in the U.S. and Canada, or 443/313-3399).

BY CAR The slow route from either Mexico City or Guadalajara is Hwy. 15—a winding and narrow road with beautiful vistas, which can be appreciated at leisure because you inevitably get stuck behind an old truck that can barely climb the mountains (Morelia sits at 1,950m/6,396 ft. elevation). The fast way is the modern **toll highway** that connects Mexico City and Guadalajara. Exit at the turnoff for **Hwy. 43.** It's clearly marked. To Morelia from either city is about 3½ hours and 200 pesos. From Guanajuato (2½ hr.), take this same Hwy. 43. From Morelia to Pátzcuaro (1 hr.), there is **Hwy. 120,** a four-lane road. The toll road from the Ixtapa beach resort connects to this highway. From Ixtapa to Morelia now takes about 4 hours and costs 200 pesos.

BY BUS Buses to Morelia from Mexico City depart from the Observatorio station. ETN, Pegasso, Primera Plus/Servicios Coordinados, and Autovías all go to Morelia. Make sure to request a *directo* or *via autopista.* The trip takes 4 hours, and there are usually three or four departures every hour. ETN offers the best service. You will arrive at the new **Central Camionera** in the far-northwest side of town, near the soccer stadium. First-class and deluxe bus service to and from Morelia uses Terminal A, and regional service to and from Pátzcuaro uses Terminal B. Service from Guadalajara is also frequent. From Guanajuato, your best bet is Primera Plus and Servicios Coordinados, usually changing buses in Irapuato. From Ixtapa, Autovías has two departures per day; Parhikuni has six. You can buy bus tickets from most travel agencies in town.

Orientation

VISITOR INFORMATION The city government, in association with local guides, has a tourist information kiosk on the Plaza de Armas (main square). It's open Monday to Saturday from 9am until 8pm. The city operates a website (**www.visitmorelia.com**) and prints a free quarterly magazine with a calendar of events ***(La Guía de Morelia),*** which is handy.

CITY LAYOUT The heart of the city is the **cathedral,** with the Plaza de Armas on its left (west side) and the Plaza Melchor Ocampo on its right (east side). The wide street passing in front of the cathedral is **Avenida Madero,** the city's main street. It meets the lovely colonial aqueduct 1km (a half-mile) east of the cathedral. This segment of Madero, along with several blocks to either side, is the old part of town (see "Other Attractions," below.) From the fountain, the **aqueduct** heads southeast toward what has become the fashionable part of town.

GETTING AROUND Taxis are a bargain here. Still, you should settle the fare before you enter the cab.

Fast Facts Morelia

Area Code The telephone area code is **443.**

Climate Morelia can be a bit chilly in the morning and evening, especially from November through February.

Emergencies The local number for emergencies is ✆ **066.**

ATTRACTIONS

- Casa de las Artesianías **16**
- Casa Museo de Morelos **15**
- Catedral **11**
- College of San Nicolás de Hidalgo **3**
- Conservatorio de las Rosas **1**
- Instituto Michoacano de Cultura **8**
- Museo de Arte Colonial **7**
- Museo del Estado **2**
- Museo Regional Michoacano **12**
- Palacio del Gobierno **10**

ACCOMMODATIONS

- Best Western Hotel Casino **5**
- Cantera Diez **9**
- Hotel D'Atilanos **13**
- Hotel de la Soledad **6**
- Hotel Virrey de Mendoza **4**
- Villa Montaña Hotel and Spa **14**

Hospital The best in town is the **Sanatorio de la Luz,** Calle Bravo 50, in the Chapultepec Norte neighborhood (✆ **443/314-4568,** -4464, or 315-2966).

Internet Access You can find Internet service without much effort in the Centro Histórico (Historic District).

Post Office In the Palacio Federal, on the corner of Madero and Serapio Rendón, 5 blocks east of the cathedral. Hours are Monday to Friday from 8:30am to 4:30pm.

SPECIAL EVENTS & FESTIVALS

In April, the **International Guitar Festival** (www.feriadelaguitarra.com) attracts performers from Latin America and Europe. In May, the city holds the **International Organ Festival** (linked to the variable feast day of Corpus Christi). The cathedral has a very large pipe organ that sounds wonderful, and for the Festival four organists are invited to give concerts there in the cathedral. In October, the city holds its increasingly popular film festival, **Festival Internacional de Cine de Morelia** (www.moreliafilmfest.com). The festival has been attracting the big names of Mexico's film industry, including stars like Salma Hayak and Gael García Bernal. The **International Festival of Music** is held in November, with a series of concerts performed over 2 weeks. Performers come from all over.

The largest civic celebrations are in September, the month of the *fiestas patrias.* **Independence Day** is celebrated on September 15 and 16. Then, on September 29 and 30, Morelia celebrates the **birthday of its favorite son, José María Morelos,** a patriot and revolutionary hero. The second celebration is actually bigger than the first, but both include parades, street parties, and large fireworks displays.

EXPLORING MORELIA

A Stroll Through the Colonial Center

Downtown Morelia is a good town for walking. One comes across interesting details on just about any street. The walk outlined below could take an entire day. The museums usually open at 9am; you'll find a lot of places closed on Mondays, holidays, and between 2 and 4pm. For a guided tour of the city, contact the guide mentioned in the section on the monarch butterfly migration ("Michoacán's Monarch Migration," p. 257). He can provide colorful details about the city's history and architecture.

The **cathedral** ★★★ is the place to begin. Built with the pink volcanic stone (*cantera* in Spanish) that Morelia is famous for, it's one of the most beautiful cathedrals in Mexico. Notice how Avenida Madero widens as it passes in front of the cathedral, and how a cross street lines up with its facade. Morelia's planners sought to lend prominence to the city's churches by the placement of plazas and the alignment of streets to allow good views. This cathedral took the place of an earlier one; construction began in 1640 and ended in 1745. The new cathedral incorporated the styles of religious architecture already in the city, including *plateresque,* mannerist, and a reserved style of baroque. The cathedral's impressive size and monumental proportions were necessary to place it at the top of the hierarchy of the city's temples, and to make obvious Morelia's superiority to rival Pátzcuaro. The Italian architect who designed it worked closely with the authorities of Morelia's sizable religious community, and he did a masterful job balancing the architectural elements in the facade and shaping the proportions of the towers. The inside is stately, but many of the cathedral's most valuable possessions were plundered. Things to look for

Free-Market Forces

Morelia's **city market** is 5 blocks south of San Francisco in a plain, warehouse-like structure. If you're a veteran market shopper, you'll like this one. It's especially rich in regional manufactures, such as sombreros and huaraches, and has a good produce section where you can stock up on different kinds of dried chiles if you like cooking Mexican food.

To get to the market, go downhill from San Francisco Plaza along Calle Vasco de Quiroga. Just before you get there, you will see a little plaza and the **Templo de las Capuchinas.** It's a precious little baroque church with a gilt *retablo* (altarpiece) inside. Unfortunately, it is often closed; the best time to try is from 8 to 9am and from 5 to 6pm, when the priest opens the church for Mass. Behind the church is the market.

include the beautiful **organ** ★ with 4,600 pipes (see "Special Events & Festivals," above); the silver baptismal font where Mexico's first emperor, Agustín de Iturbide, was baptized; and the elegant choir with carved wooden stalls. ***Tip:*** If you're in Morelia on a Saturday, make sure to be around the cathedral when the lights are turned on. This is accompanied by a fireworks display.

Across Avenida Madero from the cathedral is a two-story stone building crowned with finials and fanciful decorations on the corners: the **Palacio del Gobierno,** built in 1732 as a seminary. It now holds sweeping murals depicting the history of Michoacán and Mexico. Some are the work of a well-known local artist, Alfredo Zalce.

As you leave the *palacio,* turn left and walk down Madero for 2 blocks. Turn right at a small church on your right with a tall wrought-iron fence. The name of the street is Vasco de Quiroga. Walk 1 block, and to your left you'll see a broad plaza and the **church and convent of San Francisco** ★★. This is one of the two oldest religious buildings in Morelia. It draws on the Spanish Renaissance architectural style known as *plateresque* (already antiquated by the time of construction) because the builders wanted to accentuate their Spanish heritage. The building is quite striking; it has elegant, Moorish windows on the second floor, borrowed from Spanish Mudéjar architecture. The interior courtyard, unlike any other in Morelia, has a medieval feel. Instead of being broad and open with light arches, it's closed and narrow, with heavy columns set closely together and thick buttressing. The former convent now houses a local **handicrafts museum** with interactive exhibits and some explanatory material in English. It also offers the best shopping in Morelia (see "Shopping," below).

From San Francisco (if you're not going to the market), take the street that lines up with the facade of the church and walk 2 blocks west to Calle Morelos Sur (you'll see Plaza Melchor Ocampo). Turn left. One block down, on the left side, is the **Casa Museo de Morelos,** Morelos Sur 323 (✆ **443/313-2651**). This is where José María Morelos lived as an adult (there's another Morelos museum in the house where he was born, but it has little of interest). A grand house, with furniture and personal effects that belonged to the independence leader, as well as a period kitchen, this museum is worth a visit. On my last visit it was closed for renovation in preparation for the big bicentennial celebration set for September 2010. The museum is normally open Tuesday through Sunday from 9am to 5pm; admission is 30 pesos.

A Brief Pause for the Food Cause

Behind the cathedral are two local food vendors that are institutions in the city. One is an ice-cream stand called **Nieves del Correo.** It's called that because, for the first 30 years of its existence, it occupied a bit of sidewalk on Avenida Madero in front of the post office. Now it's in the last doorway under the arches before you get to the pedestrian-only Cerrada de San Agustín. You can't miss it. The specialty is fruit flavors such as mango and mamey. The other option is to enjoy a fruit cocktail known locally as a *gazpacho* (nothing like a gazpacho in Spain). Turn left on the Cerrada and you'll come to **Gazpachos La Cerrada.** Order one and you'll get chopped fruit (mango, pineapple, and jicama) swimming in orange and lime juice with a touch of powdered chile.

The next place to see is the **Museo Regional Michoacano** ★, at the intersection of Allende and Abasolo (✆ **443/312-0407**). To get there, walk uphill the way you came, and then make a left when you get back to Plaza Melchor Ocampo. Walk through the stone arcades behind the cathedral.

Continue west to the end of the arcades. Across the street, cater-cornered to the Plaza de Armas, is the Museo Regional Michoacano. It provides a colorful view of the state from prehistoric times to Mexico's Cardenist period of the 1930s. Isidor Huarte, father of Ana Huarte, Emperor Iturbide's wife, originally owned the building, which was finished in 1775. The museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 9am to 4:45pm. Admission is 37 pesos.

To take a break, sit at one of the outdoor cafes under the stone arches along Avenida Madero. (No need, really, to overexert oneself. Besides, sitting at a table having a little coffee or beer and watching the passersby is a favorite activity of the locals.)

After having your fill of people-watching (or beer or coffee), head west on Madero for a block and you'll come to Calle Nigromante. On the right, you'll see the **College of San Nicolás de Hidalgo,** a beautiful colonial building that claims to house the oldest university in the New World. Founded in Pátzcuaro in 1540 by Vasco de Quiroga, the university moved to Morelia in 1580 and became the University of Michoacán in 1917. On the other corner is another of Morelia's oldest religious structures, the **Iglesia de la Compañía de Jesús,** built by the Jesuits. It's now a picturesque library. Through a doorway to the right of the church is the state's **tourist information office.** Attached to the church is the former convent, now called the **Palacio Clavijero.** To see the arches and rose-colored stone of its broad interior courtyard (the most photographed in Morelia), turn down Nigromante and follow it to the main entrance. The former convent now houses government offices. Once you've seen the *palacio,* continue down the street to the little park. Facing the park is the **Conservatorio de las Rosas,** a former Dominican convent. It became a music school in 1785 and is now the home of the internationally acclaimed **Morelia Boys Choir.** The choir practices on weekday afternoons. If you would like to attend a concert, ask for information inside.

At the other end of the small plaza, facing Calle Guillermo Prieto, is the **Museo del Estado** (✆ **443/313-0629**). Exhibits include a display on the archaeology and history of the area and a 19th-century apothecary shop. The museum is open Monday through

Friday from 9am to 2pm and 4 to 8pm, Saturday and Sunday from 9am to 2pm and 4 to 6pm. Admission is free. Look for, or ask about, concerts and other goings-on.

To visit another interesting museum, continue east on Santiago Tapia 2 blocks to Benito Juárez and turn north (left). The **Museo de Arte Colonial,** Av. Benito Juárez 240 (✆ **443/313-9260**), is a colonial house with an exhibition of religious art from the 16th to the 18th centuries: three rooms of crucifixes and Christ figures and two rooms of oil paintings, including a couple by Miguel Cabrera. Some of the crucifixes are made from the paste of corn stalks, using a pre-Columbian artistic technique among the Purépecha. The missionaries soon had their Indian converts using it to create the Christ figures and saints that adorn many churches in Mexico. The museum is open Monday through Friday from 10am to 8pm, Saturday and Sunday from 10am to 6pm. Admission is free.

Just around the corner from this museum (turn right as you exit) is the **Plaza del Carmen.** Across the plaza, behind a heavy wrought-iron fence, is the church and former convent of **El Carmen.** The entrance to the convent is on the opposite side of the block from the church, on Morelos Norte. The building is home to the state's **Instituto Michoacano de Cultura** (✆ **443/313-1320**), which has made this a comfortable and utilitarian destination; you can examine the calendars posted at the entrance to see whether a concert, film, or exhibition is happening during your stay. You can also view the large stone courtyard built in the style often used by the Carmelites. Around the courtyard are a cafe, a large bookstore, and a gallery. Entrance is free. The institute is open daily from 10am to 8pm.

Other Attractions

On another day you might enjoy exploring Avenida Madero, east from the cathedral. After a couple of blocks, you'll reach the **Templo de las Monjas (Nuns' Temple),** an old church with a unique twin facade and B-shaped floor plan. Beside it is the massive **Palacio Federal,** which houses, among other official bureaus, the post and telegraph offices. Continue on and you'll reach the colonial **aqueduct.** The graceful arches of the aqueduct stretch from here about a kilometer (less than a mile) eastward. A stone walkway, lined with trees and long stone benches, starts from one of the arches in front of the fountain. This is **La Calzada Fray Antonio de San Miguel** ★★. In the 1940s, this walkway was used to shoot some scenes for a Hollywood movie, with Tyrone Power, called *Captains from Castile.* The Calzada leads to the **church of San Diego** ★★, the most ornate church in Morelia; San Diego is also known as **El Santuario de Guadalupe.** It has a colorful interior done in neobaroque. In early December, food stands fill the entire plaza in front of the church, and a festival is held to celebrate the feast day of the Virgin of Guadalupe (Dec 12).

The distance from the cathedral to San Diego is about 1.6km (1 mile). You can take a taxi back or, if you still feel like walking, return by crossing the large plaza with the statue of Morelos on horseback. Go under the aqueduct, and enter Morelia's equivalent of Central Park, known as **El Bosque (The Woods).** Continue west and work your way back to the center of town. If you get turned around here, note that if you're walking on level ground, you're parallel to or heading toward Madero; if you're walking downhill, you're heading away from it.

SHOPPING

Casa de las Artesanías ★★ This place is both a museum and one of the best crafts shops in Mexico. In the showroom on the right, you'll find an array of objects produced in the Indian villages of Michoacán's central highlands, including carved-wood furniture from Cuanajo, pottery from Tzintzuntzan, wood masks from Tócuaro, lacquerware from Pátzcuaro and Uruapan, cross-stitch embroidery from Tarecuato, copperware from Santa

 Clara, guitars from Paracho, and close-woven hats from Jarácuaro. Straight ahead in the interior courtyard are showcases laden with the best regional crafts. Upstairs, individual villages have sales outlets. Sometimes artisans demonstrate their craft. The shop and museum are open Monday to Saturday from 9am to 8pm, Sunday from 9am to 3pm. Exconvento de San Francisco, Plaza Valladolid. ✆ **443/312-1248.**

Mercado de Dulces Along the back of the former Jesuit convent is the sweets market—a collection of stalls selling the typical sweets that Morelia is famous for, such as *ates* (a thick fruit paste), candied fruit wedges, pralines, toasted coconut, and milk candies. The *mercado* is open daily from 7am to 10pm. Behind the Palacio Clavijero, along Valentín Gómez Farías. No phone. From the cathedral, head west on Madero and turn right on Gómez Farías; entrance is a half-block down on the right.

WHERE TO STAY

Rates listed here include the 18% tax. Rates at the inexpensive and moderately priced hotels can go up during Christmas, Easter, Day of the Dead, holiday weekends, and the month of August.

Very Expensive

Cantera 10 ★★ High design and a different use of space set this all-suite hotel apart from the competition. Rooms are large, uncluttered, and undivided into sitting rooms/bedroom compartments (with the extra high ceilings augmenting the openness). Except where remnants of the original house remain, fixtures and furniture are modern with simple lines, and lighting that accentuates the modern feel. There is a certain richness, too, in the textures and colors, the plush mattresses and the pillow menu. Those who are looking for something different in their surroundings will like this hotel. It's directly across the street from the cathedral.

Benito Juárez 63, 58000 Morelia, Mich. ✆ **443/312-5419** or 01-800/823-5787 in Mexico. www.canteradiezhotel.com. 11 units. 2,660–4,530 pesos suite. Internet packages sometimes available. AE, MC, V. Free valet parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; concierge; massage; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Hotel Virrey de Mendoza ★★ This is one of the old-style grand hotels one occasionally finds in Mexico's colonial cities. Unlike others, this one was not allowed to decay; it's beautifully kept and most impressive. It's also right on the Plaza de Armas. Furnishings vary, but all rooms are comfortable. They have lots of character—wood floors with area rugs, period furniture, and old-fashioned tile bathrooms with tub/showers. Bed choices include two twins, one full, two queen-size, or one king-size. Standard rooms are midsize; of the eight exterior rooms, two have balconies. Suites are large, and master suites have separate sitting rooms. The *suite virreinal* (viceroy suite) is really grand, with a large third-floor terrace that looks out over the Plaza de Armas to the cathedral. Rooms have double-glazed windows, but traffic noises still leak in.

Av. Madero Poniente 310, 58000 Morelia, Mich. ✆ **866/299-7492** in the U.S., 877/889-2161 in Canada, or 443/312-0633. www.hotelvirrey.com. 55 units. 2,200 pesos double; 2,620–4,300 pesos suite. Rates include breakfast. Internet packages sometimes available. AE, MC, V. Free valet parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; lobby bar; babysitting; room service; smoke-free rooms; Wi-Fi (in lobby). *In room:* A/C (in 11 rooms), TV, hair dryer.

Villa Montaña Hotel and Spa ★★★ High above the city on the Santa María Ridge, this hotel offers beauty and tranquillity. Rooms are in a small complex of buildings on a hillside, separated by gardens and connected by footpaths. The buildings are at different levels; this, as well as the placement of the entrances, allows for privacy. Villa

Montaña, a member of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World, has no rough edges. Rooms are large and impressively furnished, and have working fireplaces. Most come with two doubles or a king-size bed. Bathrooms are large, with tub/showers and lots of counter space. Most of the junior suites have a separate living area and a small terrace with table and chairs. Master suites have a lot of architectural details. The restaurant does a great job with local dishes, and having a drink on the terrace overlooking the city is one of the delights of staying here. Service is attentive.

Patzimba 201, Col. Vista Bella 58090 Morelia, Mich. ✆ **443/314-0231,** -0179. Fax 443/315-1423. www.villamontana.com.mx. 36 units. $248 double; $342–$419 suite; $543 2-bedroom suite. Prices do not include 7.5% service charge. Internet specials sometimes available. Weekday discounts available. AE, MC, V. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; terrace bar; babysitting; concierge; golf at local country club; fitness room; heated outdoor pool; room service; spa; lighted tennis court. *In room:* TV, hair dryer.

Moderate

Best Western Hotel Casino Value A colonial hotel that's not as striking as the Hotel de la Soledad, the Best Western should still be considered for its location—across the street from the cathedral—comfort, and price. The owners continue to invest money in improvements and upgrades. They've opened three new rooms on the top floor that are large, sunny, and comfortable. Most rooms are midsize and carpeted. Some second-floor rooms in front have a balcony and view of the cathedral, but they can be noisy. Many rooms have two double beds or one double and one twin.

Portal Hidalgo 229, 58000 Morelia, Mich. ✆ **800/528-1234** in the U.S., or 443/313-1328. Fax 443/312-1252. www.bestwestern.com. 40 units. $79–$85 double. Balcony suites must be reserved directly from the hotel. AE, MC, V. Free valet parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; fitness room; room service; smoke-free rooms; Wi-Fi (in lobby). *In room:* TV, hair dryer.

Hotel de la Soledad ★ Past the massive wooden doors of this colonial hotel is a beautiful courtyard, with manicured garden. New ownership has redesigned the common areas and made improvements to the rooms, including new mattresses. In 2010 and 2011, all guest rooms will be remodeled, with new wiring, windows, and bathrooms. The location is great—1 block north of the cathedral.

Ignacio Zaragoza 90, 58000 Morelia, Mich. ✆ **800/423-4106** in the U.S. and Canada, or 443/312-1888, -1889. Fax 443/312-2111. www.hsoledad.com. 48 units. 1,500–2,000 pesos double; 2,500 pesos suite. Internet specials available. AE, MC, V. Free valet parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; room service. *In room:* TV, hair dryer (on request).

Inexpensive

Hotel D'Atilanos This is the only decent inexpensive hotel in the downtown area. Two floors of rooms surround a simple patio. The rooms are simply furnished, with one or two double beds, two twins, or one king-size bed (king rooms are more expensive). Most rooms are midsize, but bathrooms are small. I prefer the downstairs rooms, which have high ceilings. Lighting is poor.

Corregidora 465, 58000 Morelia, Mich. ✆ **443/313-3309** or 312-0121. 27 units. 465–570 pesos double. No credit cards. Limited street parking. *In room:* TV.

WHERE TO DINE

Michoacán is known for a dish of slow-cooked pork called *carnitas,* which is sold only in joints that specialize in the dish. Who serves the best *carnitas* is a never-ending discussion in Morelia. Many locals like **Los Tabachines,** in Colonia Ventura Puente. The address is Laguna de la Magdalena 430. You can eat the *carnitas* there or buy them to go. My

 favorite place is **Carnitas don Raúl,** at Carpinteros de Paracho 1007, Colonia Vasco de Quiroga. It's best to go around noon.

Cenaduría Lupita ★ ANTOJITOS Translated literally, *antojitos* means "little cravings." This is the traditional supper food of most Mexicans, but they usually eat it at home or in greasy-spoon joints whose cleanliness is dubious. A good-looking, comfortable restaurant that specializes in *antojitos* is a rarity; rarer still is one that does such a good job. Take your pick of *tacos dorados,* tostadas, tamales, *huchepos* (like tamales, but made with fresh corn), and *pozole* prepared Michoacán style. The restaurant is a half-block off Avenida Lázaro Cárdenas; take a cab.

Sánchez de Tagle 1004. ✆ **443/312-1340.** *Antojitos* 35–60 pesos. MC, V. Wed–Sat and Mon 7–11pm; Sun 7–10pm.

El Anzuelo ★★ SEAFOOD/STEAKS This simple outdoor restaurant in the modern part of town serves the best seafood in Morelia. It makes the perfect Mexican seafood cocktail and wonderful ceviche. After either of those, you might order *huachinango adobado* (red snapper in a chile-based marinade) or coconut shrimp. If you don't feel like fish, there's filet mignon. The owners are meticulous about food preparation. El Anzuelo is open only in the afternoon. On Sunday, it offers paella, and the restaurant gets very crowded. Take a taxi and keep the address handy.

Av. Camelinas 3180. ✆ **443/314-8339** or 324-3237. Reservations recommended on weekends. Main courses 135–220 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily noon–6pm.

La Casa del Portal REGIONAL/INTERNATIONAL This upstairs restaurant is in a beautiful stone mansion facing the Plaza de Armas. The floors, walls, and ceilings of the old house have remained intact, including the antique wallpaper and other details. It's good to have so much to observe, as service can be slow. There are several dining rooms, and on occasion the rooftop terrace is open for dining. Most of the furniture comes from the owner's workshop. The restaurant doubles as a sort of factory outlet, and all the furniture is for sale. What's for dinner? The menu includes several regional standards, including some of the best *sopa tarasca* I've had. The *enchiladas del portal* were also good. Other dishes include the *arrachera valladolid,* a skirt steak accompanied by a few Mexican sides.

Guillermo Prieto 30 (cater-cornered from Virrey de Mendoza; entrance is on the side street). ✆ **443/313-4899.** Main courses 70–185 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 8:30am–11pm.

Las Trojes STEAKS/REGIONAL A *troje* is the traditional dwelling of the highland Purépecha Indians, constructed of rough-cut wood planks. This restaurant is made of seven connected *trojes,* with windows added for light. For starters, try *sopa tarasca.* Main courses include *cecina,* a good steak *a la tampiqueña* (grilled and served with several Mexican sides); rib-eye; *chistorra* (Spanish-style sausage); and chicken stuffed with cheese en brochette. Take a cab and keep the address handy.

Juan Sebastián Bach 51, Col. La Loma. ✆ **443/314-7344.** Main courses 120–230 pesos. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 1pm–midnight; Sun 1–6pm.

Los Mirasoles REGIONAL Los Mirasoles serves regional fare, including *jahuácatas* or *corundas* (a kind of tamal in the form of a triangle without a filling, and served in a chile sauce with bits of pork). They also serve pork ribs marinated in a dark chile sauce spiked with *pulque.* There's a large selection of beer and wine. Service can be slow. The dining rooms are attractive, especially at night.

Av. Madero Poniente 549 (4 blocks west of Plaza de Armas, at León Guzmán). ✆ **443/317-5775.** Reservations recommended on weekends. Main courses 135–245 pesos; seafood/steaks 195–320 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 1–11pm.

Moments Michoacán's Monarch Migration

A visit to the winter nesting grounds of the monarch butterfly, high in the mountains of northeast Michoacán, is a stirring experience. It might be the highlight of your trip. The season lasts from mid- to late November to March. Tour operators in Morelia offer a day trip to see the butterflies for 650 to 750 pesos per person. The tour takes 10 to 12 hours and involves hiking up a mountain at a high altitude. You should only do this trip if you're in decent physical condition.

The best time to see the butterflies is on a sunny day, when they flutter through the air in a blizzard of orange and black. At the center of the group, the branches of the tall fir trees bow under their burden of butterflies, whose wings undulate softly as the wind blows through the forest; it's quite a spectacle.

From Morelia, you'll have no difficulty finding a tour; most hotels and all travel agencies can put you in contact with one. I particularly recommend **Luis Miguel López Alanís** (✆ **443/340-4632**). He speaks English, is federally licensed, and belongs to a small cooperative of guides called **Mex Mich Guías** (www.mmg.com.mx). The easiest way to contact him is through the website. Most tours provide transportation, guide, soft drinks, and usually lunch. A good guide is important, if only to answer all the questions that these butterflies and their strange migration provoke.

A few butterfly sanctuaries are open to the public. (The monarchs congregate at nine sites, but five are closed to visitors.) The sites with the best access are **El Rosario** (admission 40 pesos; daily 10am–5 or 6pm) and the newer **Chincua** (same admission and hours as El Rosario). It is less of a drive, but usually more of a walk to the nucleus of the butterfly group—but not always. Throughout the season, the groups shift, moving up and down the mountains and making for a longer or shorter climb. A good guide will be aware of which is the shorter walk.

If you're driving, take the *autopista* to Mexico City, exit at Maravatío, and go right. Keep right after going through Maravatío and take the narrow two-lane road toward Angangueo. When you get to a T-junction, go right, toward San Felipe. Enter the town of Ocampo and look for a small sign pointing left to get to Rosario, where you will find a parking lot near the trail head. If you want to make this a leisurely trip, spend the night in the nearby town of Angangueo at **Hotel Don Bruno** (✆ **715/156-0026;** 600 pesos per night). It's a pretty hotel but a little overpriced, so you should ask to see the room before you accept it.

Travel agencies from **San Miguel de Allende** also book monarch tours, which take 1 or 2 days. See chapter 7 for details.

San Miguelito ★★ Finds MEXICAN Perhaps the most popular restaurant in town, San Miguelito offers an inventive menu, attentive service, and a setting loaded with icons of Mexican culture. One part of the main dining room is the Rincón de las Solteronas (the bachelorette corner), where many images of Saint Anthony hang upside down—the custom in Mexico when a girl is petitioning him for a boyfriend or husband. Guests are welcome to make a petition; the staff will be happy to show you how. I especially enjoy

 the appetizers here: tacos, *chicharrón de queso* (fried crispy cheese), and other finger foods. The *sopa tarasca* is among the best I've had in restaurants. There are several steak dishes, including one in tequila, *guajillo* chile, and orange sauce. For dessert there's a delicious version of cherries jubilee. Take a cab and keep the address handy.

Av. Camelinas (at Ventura Puente). ✆ **443/324-2300.** Reservations recommended. Main courses 140–220 pesos. AE, MC, V. Mon–Wed 2–11pm; Thurs–Sat 2pm–midnight; Sun 2–5pm.

MORELIA AFTER DARK

For nighttime entertainment, be sure to check the calendar of events at the **Instituto Michoacano de Cultura** (see "A Stroll Through the Colonial Center," earlier). In addition, you can sit at one of the cafes under the stone arches across from the Plaza de Armas to do some people-watching (a very Moreliano thing to do). Aside from the dance clubs that are mostly on the fashionable east side, there are few nightlife options. The following are my favorites. For dancing, go to **La Casa de la Salsa** (✆ **443/313-9362**), a large dance hall facing Plaza Morelos at the end of the Calzada Fray Antonio de San Miguel. It's open Tuesday through Saturday from 9pm to 3am. It books live music on Friday and Saturday (50-peso cover charge). You can call ahead to reserve a table; the band plays a lot of salsa, merengue, and mambo.

If you want to hear live Latin American folk music, have a drink, and eat something, try **Peña Colibrí** (✆ **443/312-2261**), Galeana 36, behind the Virrey de Mendoza. It opens daily at 8pm and closes around midnight. There is another nearby *peña* (bar where folk music is played) at Allende 3, **Bohemia V** (no phone). The food isn't good, but the music is great.

2 PATZCUARO ★★★

370km (229 miles) NW of Mexico City; 285km (177 miles) SE of Guadalajara; 69km (43 miles) SW of Morelia

Pátzcuaro is perhaps the loveliest town in Mexico. Crooked cobblestone streets, smooth stucco walls painted white with dark red borders, blackened tile roofs that join to form ramshackle rooflines—it is a town meant to be photographed and painted. During the rainy season, when low clouds roll in and curl through the trees, and water drips from the low-slung overhangs, a sweet melancholy descends upon the town.

Pátzcuaro is in the heart of the Purépecha homeland. Beside it is Lake Pátzcuaro (one of the world's highest, at 2,200m/7,216 ft.), whose shores border dozens of Indian villages. In these villages and in town, visitors frequently hear the soft sounds of the Purépechan language in the background as they take in the sights. Although distinct regional costumes are seldom seen today, Indian women still braid their hair with ribbons and wear the blue *rebozos* (long woolen wraps).

ESSENTIALS

Getting There & Departing

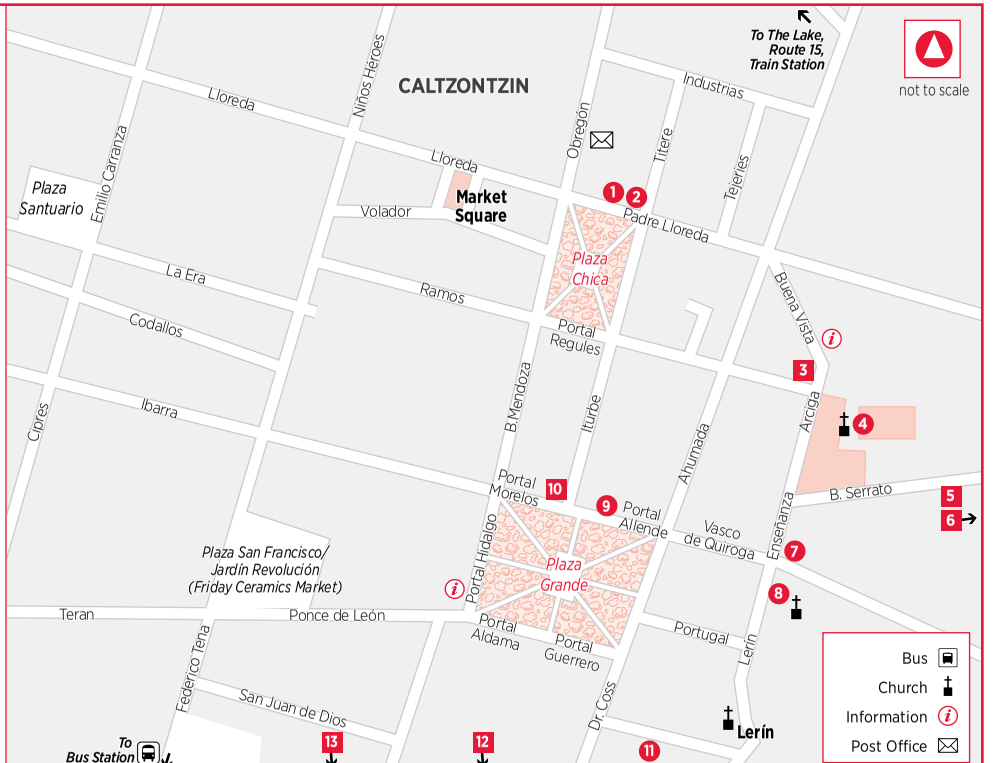
BY CAR See "Getting There & Departing" under "Morelia," earlier in this chapter, for information on arriving from Mexico City, Guadalajara, and San Miguel de Allende. From Morelia, there are two routes to Pátzcuaro; the faster is the new four-lane **Hwy. 120,** which passes near Tiripetío and Tupátaro/Cuanajo (see "Side Trips from Pátzcuaro," later in this chapter). The longer route, **Hwy. 15,** takes a little more than an hour and passes near the pottery-making village of Capula and then through Quiroga, where you

ATTRACTIONS

Basilica **4**
Casa de los Once Patios **11**
Library **2**
Museo de Artes e Industrias Populares **7**
Palacio de Huitziméngari **9**
Templo de la Compañia de Jesus **8**
Teatro Emperador Caltzontzin **1**

ACCOMMODATIONS

Hacienda Mariposas **12**
Hotel Mansión Iturbe B&B **10**
Hotel Posada de la Basilica **3**
Mesón de San Antonio **6**
Posada de la Salud **5**
Villa Victoria **13**



 follow signs to Pátzcuaro (see "Side Trips from Pátzcuaro," later). A taxi from Morelia will cost 250 pesos, a private car and driver a little more, but you travel in a larger, usually newer, vehicle.

BY BUS The bus station is on the outskirts of Pátzcuaro, 5 minutes away by taxi (30 pesos). If you're going anywhere outside of Michoacán, it's best to go to Morelia first. If you're going straight to Mexico City, the Pegaso bus company offers nonstop service. Buses between Morelia and Pátzcuaro run every 10 minutes. To visit any of the lakeside villages or nearby towns, public transportation is an option, but taxis are not that expensive. From the Pátzcuaro bus station, there are buses to Tócuaro and Erongarícuaro every 20 minutes; to Tupátaro and Cuanajo every hour; to Tzintzuntzan and Quiroga every 40 minutes; and to Santa Clara del Cobre every hour. For Ihuatzio, you can pick up a minivan or a bus from the Plaza Chica.

Orientation

VISITOR INFORMATION The **Tourism Office,** Cuesta Buenavista 7 (✆ **434/342-1214**), near the basilica, is open Monday through Saturday from 9am to 3pm and 4 to 7pm, and Sunday from 9am to 2pm. Although you might not find someone who speaks English, the staff can give you maps and point you in the right direction. There's also an office on the west side of the Plaza Grande (no phone). It keeps the same hours as the main office.

CITY LAYOUT In a way, Pátzcuaro has two town centers, both plazas a block apart. **Plaza Grande,** also called Plaza Principal or Plaza Don Vasco de Quiroga, is picturesque and tranquil, with a fountain and a statue of Vasco de Quiroga. Hotels, shops, and restaurants in Colonial-Era buildings flank this plaza. **Plaza Chica,** also known as Plaza Gertrudis Bocanegra, flows into the market, and around it swirls the commercial life of Pátzcuaro. Plaza Chica is north of Plaza Grande.

GETTING AROUND With the exception of Lake Pátzcuaro, the lookout, the bus station, and hotels on Lázaro Cárdenas, everything is within walking distance. Taxis are cheap. The lake is about a kilometer (around a half-mile) from town; buses make the run every 15 minutes from both the Plaza Grande and the Plaza Chica, going all the way to the *embarcadero* or *muelle* (pier).

Fast Facts Pátzcuaro

Area Code The telephone area code is **434.**

Climate The climate is delightful most of the year, but occasional blustery days bring gusts of chilled air from across the lake, causing everyone to retreat indoors. October through April, it's cold enough for a heavy sweater, especially in the morning and evening. Few hotels have fireplaces or any source of heat in the rooms.

Emergency Dial ✆ **434/349-0209** for emergency assistance or the national emergency number, ✆ **066.**

Hospital The **Hospital Civil Dr. Gabriel García** is at Calle Romero 18 (✆ **434/342-0285**).

Post Office The *correo,* located a half-block north of Plaza Chica, on the right side of the street, is open Monday through Friday from 10am to 2pm and 4 to 8pm.

SPECIAL EVENTS

The island of **Janitzio** has achieved international celebrity for the candlelight vigil that local residents hold at the cemetery during the nights of November 1 and 2, the Days of the Dead. **Tzintzuntzan,** a village about 15km (9¼ miles) away, also hosts popular festivities, including folkloric dances in the main plaza and in the nearby *yácatas* (pre-Hispanic ruins), concerts in the church, and decorations in the cemetery. If you want to avoid the crowds, skip Janitzio and Tzintzuntzan and go to one of the smaller **lakeside villages or other islands** on the lake that also have extraordinary rituals. The tourism office (see "Visitor Information," above) has a schedule of events for the entire area and publishes an explanatory booklet, *Días de los Muertos.*

During the week surrounding **Days of the Dead,** artisans and vendors from all over Michoacán fill the Plaza Grande in Pátzcuaro with regional crafts. **Easter week,** beginning the Friday before Palm Sunday, is special, too. Most activity centers on the basilica. There are processions involving the surrounding villages almost nightly, and in Tzintzuntzan, there's a reenactment of the betrayal of Christ and a ceremonial washing of the feet.

EXPLORING PATZCUARO: A STROLL AROUND TOWN

The **Plaza Grande** is in the middle of town, surrounded by colonial buildings. A **stone fountain** in the center of the plaza holds a large figure of the beloved Vasco de Quiroga, "Tata Vasco," depicted in a benevolent posture. On the north side of the plaza is the **Palacio de Huitziméngari,** built by the Spaniards for the Tarascan emperor. Local Indian artisans now occupy the slowly deteriorating building.

One long block north is the **Plaza Chica,** crisscrossed by walkways and adorned with the statue of Gertrudis Bocanegra, a heroine of Mexican independence. This is the commercial center of town. On the west side of the plaza are **market** stalls selling pottery, copper, *rebozos, serapes* (a woolen blanket that is sometimes carried over the shoulder), and food. On some days, the stalls extend a couple of blocks up the street. What was once San Agustín church is on the north side of the plaza. The cloister was remodeled in the 20th century and converted into the **Teatro Emperador Caltzontzin,** the municipal theater. The old church is now the **public library;** inside, all the way to the back, you'll find an early work of Juan O'Gorman—a large mural stretching the width and height of the nave.

Don Vasco built the **basilica,** on a hill just east of the Plaza Chica, although he died before it was inaugurated in 1554. It was designated a basilica by papal decree in 1907. Now reconstructed, it has survived many catastrophes, human and natural—from earthquakes to the civil war of the mid–19th century. Be sure to visit the main altar to see the **Virgen de la Salud.** She is a sacred figure to the Indians of this region, who come from the villages to pay homage to her and petition her healing power on the eighth day of each month.

Two blocks south of the basilica is the **Museo de Artes Industrias Populares** ★★ (✆ **434/342-1029**). It occupies yet another beautiful colonial building (1540), originally Don Vasco's College of San Nicolás. The rooms, filled with fine examples of regional popular art such as crafts and costumes, open to a central courtyard. The museum guides are well informed. The museum is open Tuesday through Saturday from 9am to 7pm, Sunday from 9am to 4:30pm. Admission is 37 pesos. Behind the museum are some recent excavations of Purépechan ruins.

Of the many old churches in Pátzcuaro, one of the most interesting is the **Templo de la Compañía de Jesús,** just south of the museum. This church was Don Vasco's cathedral before the basilica; afterward, it was given to the Jesuits. The buildings across the street

Tips Festival Hotel Crunch

Make hotel reservations months in advance for Holy Week or Days of the Dead. Most hotels require a 3-night minimum stay during these events. There are some other less popular festivals in Pátzcuaro and surrounding towns; check with the tourist office to see if any will occur during your visit.

from the church were once part of the complex, containing the hospital, soup kitchen, and living quarters for religious scholars.

The **Casa de los Once Patios (House of Eleven Patios)** ★, between José María Cos and Enseñanza, is another fine achievement of the colonial period. Formerly a convent belonging to the Catherine nuns, today it houses the **Casa de las Artesanías de Michoacán,** with every type of local artistry for sale (see "Shopping," below).

SHOPPING

Pátzcuaro is one of Mexico's best shopping towns: It has terrific textiles, copper, woodcarvings, lacquerwork, and straw weavings made in the region. Most shops are on the **Plaza Grande** and the streets leading from it to the **Plaza Chica,** the place of choice for copper vendors. There are also a couple of shops on the street facing the basilica. If you're interested in investigating a particular craft, you can find out which village or villages specialize in it, and whether the villages have shops or a market. Tzintzuntzan, Ihuatzio, Cuanajo, Tupátaro, and Santa Clara del Cobre all have shops (see "Side Trips from Pátzcuaro," below).

Casa de las Artesanías de Michoacán/Casa de los Once Patios This is the best one-stop shopping in the village. Small shops sell textile arts, pottery, and ceramic dishes, lacquerwork, paintings, woodcarvings, jewelry, copper work, and musical instruments (including the famous Paracho guitars). Much of the merchandise was produced in the region. Most shops are open daily from 9am to 2pm and 4 to 6pm. Calle Madrigal de las Altas Torres, btw. Dr. Coss and Lerín. No phone.

Friday Pottery Market (Finds) Early each Friday morning this plaza, 1 block west of the Plaza Grande, fills with vendors of various styles of regionally made pottery, typical for dishes intended for domestic use. There's also a lot of cheap commercially made stuff. This is a market for locals; few tourists seem to hear about it. Prices are low, but you have to really hunt for quality merchandise. Plaza San Francisco, Ponce de León at Federico Teña. No phone.

Galería del Arcángel Across from the Museo Regional, this store ("the Archangel's Gallery") offers a fine collection of quality regional pottery and hand-carved furniture, plus some of the best crafts from other parts of Mexico. It's open daily from 9:30am to 7pm. Arciga 30. ✆/fax **434/342-1774.**

Mantas Típicas (Value) A factory outlet for the company's textile mill, this is one of several textile outlets on the Plaza Grande. Colorful foot-loomed tablecloths, napkins, bedspreads, and bolts of fabric cover the shelves. There's another outlet in the Casa de los 11 Patios. It's open daily from 9am to 7pm. Dr. Coss 5. ✆ **434/342-1324.**

Market Plaza The House of Eleven Patios (see above) should be your first stop, and this your second. The entire plaza fronting the food market holds covered stalls selling

crafts, clothing, rugs, *rebozos,* and more. Locally knitted sweaters are a good buy. Streets surrounding the plaza churn with exuberant sellers of fresh vegetables and caged birds. West of Plaza Chica. No phone.

Palacio Huitziméngari On the north side of the Plaza Grande, in a colonial house, are a few shops run by folk from neighboring towns. Most of the merchandise is pottery and woodcarvings. Open daily from 8am to 10pm. Plaza Grande. No phone.

Telares García Gallardo This store, on the south side of the Plaza Grande, has a wide selection of wool weavings, including area rugs, throw rugs, and *gabanes* (much like a poncho, heavier than a *serape*). It's open daily from 10am to 7pm. Plaza Vasco de Quiroga 62. ✆ **434/342-6620.**

WHERE TO STAY

There are several good, comfortable hotels in Pátzcuaro. In choosing properties, I generally went with those that best reflected in some way the character of the town. Most of these are small properties; a good choice among the large hotels is **La Parroquia,** Plaza Bocanegra 24 (✆ **434/342-2515**). Another option would be to stay in **Casa Santiago,** a small B&B in Ihuatzio, one of the lakeside villages (discussed later). Rates include 18% tax.

Expensive

Hacienda Mariposas ★★★ Kids This hotel is a retreat into the Mexican countryside, just outside Pátzcuaro. Located on 5 hectares (12 acres) of forested land above town, the hotel consists of separate or semidetached bungalows. The rooms are big, and the bathrooms are spacious and well equipped. Master suites come with Jacuzzi tubs. Emphasis is on personal attention and ecological practices. The hotel has plenty of educational activities for kids, such as egg collecting and other farm activities, hiking, and pony riding. The entire hotel is smoke-free. Breakfasts feature healthy versions of regional specialties, and there is a separate dining area with a low-fat menu. This is the first hotel in Mexico to be certified as ecological by the Mexican government. Service is attentive, and the spa is a big plus.

Carretera Pátzcuaro–Santa Clara Km 3, 61600 Pátzcuaro, Mich. ✆ **434/342-4728.** www.hacienda mariposas.com. 25 units. 1,180 pesos suite; 1,770 pesos junior suite; 2,360 master suite. Rates include full breakfast, horseback rides, spa, and afternoon *antojitos.* AE, MC, V. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; children's activities; Jacuzzi; room service; smoke-free rooms; spa; steam room; Wi-Fi (in common areas). *In room:* CD player and music library, hair dryer, minibar w/organic snacks.

Hotel Mansión Iturbe Bed and Breakfast ★★ Located on the north side of the Plaza Grande, this 17th-century mansion has kept more of its original character than any of the other colonial buildings–turned–hotels. The owners have worked hard to keep the old local touches, such as raised thresholds. Rooms are on the second floor and have the original plank flooring, along with heavy, dark, Spanish-style wooden furniture and fresh-cut flowers. Exterior rooms have double-glazed windows to keep the noise down. Most bathrooms are large. All rooms are smoke-free. Purified ice, instant coffee, and hot water are available. The free cocktail hour every night allows guests to make acquaintances and share experiences. Guests have the use of a solarium, a library, and a study. The restaurant (p. 265) and **Viejo Gaucho** (p. 266) are two of this hotel's key amenities.

Portal Morelos 59, 61600 Pátzcuaro, Mich. ✆ **434/342-0368,** -3628. Fax (for reservations only) 443/313-4593. www.mansioniturbe.com. 14 units. 900–1500 pesos double. Rates include full breakfast. Ask about special promotions. AE, MC, V. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Tips If Pátzcuaro's Packed Solid . . .

During Easter week and Days of the Dead, Pátzcuaro's hotels fill up; visitors should be aware of three inexpensive hotels in the nearby town of Santa Clara. The **Hotel Oasis,** Portal Allende 144 (✆ **434/343-0040**), is the better of the two on the town's main plaza; **Hotel Real del Cobre,** Portal Hidalgo 19 (✆ **434/343-0205**), has a restaurant. The third hotel, **Camino Real** (✆ **434/343-0281**), is a few blocks away and is comparable to the Oasis.

Hotel Posada la Basílica ★ This colonial-style hotel in a great location across from the basilica has a lovely patio. The rooms, which border the patio on three sides, have tile floors and fireplaces. Seven have small balconies overlooking the street. The restaurant has a fabulous view of the mountains, the tile rooftops, and the lake. Rooms come with one or two double beds.

Arciga 6 (at La Paz), 61600 Pátzcuaro, Mich. ✆ **434/342-1108.** Fax 434/342-0659. www.posadalabasilica.com. 12 units. 1,500 pesos double; 2,200 pesos suite. AE, MC, V. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; room service; Wi-Fi (in common areas). *In room:* TV, hair dryer.

Villa Victoria ★ This small B&B is located in a traditional Pátzcuaro house about 2 blocks from Plaza Grande. The rooms are beautifully decorated with warm colors and local handicrafts. All have fireplaces and heated floors in the bathrooms. Most have a queen-size bed. There's plenty of outdoor space and a beautiful garden. The Canadian owners are in Pátzcuaro for only part of the year.

Navarrete 45, 61600 Pátzcuaro, Mich. ✆ **434/342-5237.** www.villavictoriapatzcuaro.com. 6 units. $125 double. 2-night minimum stay. No walk-ins. Rates include full breakfast. AE, MC, V (for deposits only). Street parking. **Amenities:** Babysitting; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Moderate

Mesón de San Antonio ★ Retired agronomist Alfredo del Rio Mora runs this small B&B, which retains the feel of a country house in its informality and simple adornment. Nothing cutesy or clichéd is to be found here. The rooms are large and comfortable, and have lots of character, including working fireplaces. The bathrooms are large, too, and well finished.

Serrato 33, 61600 Pátzcuaro, Mich. ✆/fax **434/342-2501.** www.mesondesanantonio.com. 7 units. 720–780 pesos double. Rates include continental breakfast. No credit cards. Off-site parking 30 pesos. **Amenities:** Smoke-free rooms. *In room:* TV, no phone, Wi-Fi (in some).

Inexpensive

Posada de la Salud Value This *posada* (inn) offers two floors of quiet, basic rooms built around an attractive courtyard. Rooms are clean and have simple wooden furniture. Two units have fireplaces. Rooms have one double bed, two double beds, two twins, or one twin and one double (the higher price listed below is for two doubles). The location is great—near the basilica, to the right, a half-block down.

Serrato 9, 61600 Pátzcuaro, Mich. ✆ **434/342-0058.** www.posadadelasalud.com.mx. 12 units. 350–490 pesos double. No credit cards. Limited street parking. *In room:* No phone.

WHERE TO DINE

Restaurants here are okay but not great. I usually try to get by on simple local fare. In the evenings at the Plaza Chica, you can get a meal of chicken with simple enchiladas and heaps of fried potatoes and carrots. Look for a stand called **Don Emilio.** You can also get *buñuelos,* giant cornflakes that drip with cane syrup.

Tip: In the same market area, you can sometimes find good tamales. But if you want tamales in a relaxing setting, have them for breakfast at the restaurant of the **Gran Hotel,** Plaza Bocanegra 6-B (✆ **434/345-0659**), under the arches on the south side of the Plaza Chica. As a rule in Mexico, you don't find fresh tamales in restaurants, but this place is the exception. The other breakfast items, mostly *antojitos,* are good, too.

Another place to eat well and for little money is at a little *fonda* called **Mamá Lupe** (no phone). It serves food in a small patio off Calle Benito Mendoza. Look for a doorway opposite the Bancomer bank offices. It opens around 9am and closes around 6:30pm. In the early afternoon, it offers a good *comida corrida* with three courses and a drink for around 50 pesos.

El Patio MEXICAN/REGIONAL High ceilings, good lighting, and paintings of local scenes make this a pleasant place to dine. Specialties include *sopa tarasca, trucha salmonada al vino blanco* (farm-raised trout that are fed achiote to give the flesh a salmon color). Standard Mexican dishes include *arrachera a la tampiqueña* (skirt steak with various sides) and more. El Patio is on the south side of Plaza Grande.

Plaza Grande 19. ✆ **434/342-0484.** Breakfast 45–70 pesos; main courses 80–110 pesos. MC, V. Daily 8am–10pm.

El Primer Piso MEXICAN/INTERNATIONAL El Primer Piso, which means "the first floor" (second floor in American usage), offers a bit of everything but focuses mostly on dishes of its own creation: *pechuga enogada* (chicken breast in walnut cream sauce) with cashews, for instance, and *pescado en salsa negra* (fish in a three-chile vinaigrette). These are good, as are the appetizers. The soups are more conventional—Tarascan, French onion, and Provençal. The restaurant is on the same block as El Patio. Service can be slow.

Vasco de Quiroga 29. ✆ **434/342-0122.** Main courses 110–130 pesos. AE, MC, V. Mon and Wed–Sat 1–10pm; Sun 1–8pm.

Mistongo MEXICAN/INTERNATIONAL Simple and gracious surroundings reflect the taste of the owner, Susana, an Argentine who was trained formally as an architect but whose heart was always more inclined toward entertaining and cooking. You can enjoy various salads here, Argentine empanadas, grilled fajitas, even Mexican specialties such as chile relleno. The menu is simple, and most everything is very fresh. Occasionally, there are performances in the evening.

Dr. Coss 4. ✆ **434/342-6450.** Reservations recommended during holidays. Main courses 90–160 pesos. MC, V. Tues–Sun 1–10:30pm.

Restaurant Doña Paca ★ MICHOACAN This is a good place to try regional Michoacán cuisine. It serves fish in several ways, including in cilantro sauce, *al mojo de ajo* (this is the most popular way of eating fish in Mexico—it's griddled with tiny toasted bits of garlic), or cooked in herbs. The restaurant also serves a fixed-price menu, which includes a glass of wine. The dining room is in the colonial Hotel Mansión Iturbe and is comfortable and welcoming. In the afternoon, you can order at the tables outside under the archway.

 Hotel Mansión Iturbe (p. 263), Portal Morelos 59. ✆ **434/342-3628.** Breakfast 70–110 pesos; main courses 85–120 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 8:30–10:30am and 1–8pm. Closed Sun night during low season.

PATZCUARO AFTER DARK

Pátzcuaro generally closes down before 10pm, so bring a good book or plan to rest up. Late-night-music lovers can go to **Viejo Gaucho** to hear Latin American folk music. The small restaurant serves salads and hamburgers. It's in the Hotel Mansión Iturbe (✆ **434/342-3627;** p. 263); enter from Calle Iturbe. It's open Wednesday through Saturday from 6pm to midnight. Music starts between 8:30 and 9pm.

SIDE TRIPS FROM PATZCUARO

EL ESTRIBO: A SCENIC OVERLOOK For a good view of the town and the lake, head for the lookout at El Estribo, on the hill 3km (1¾ miles) west of town. Driving from the main square on Calle Ponce de León and following the signs takes 10 to 15 minutes on an unpaved road. Walking up the steep hill will take about 45 minutes. Once you reach the gazebo, you can climb more than 400 steps to the summit of the hill. The gazebo area is great for a picnic; there are barbecue pits and sometimes a couple selling soft drinks and beer.

JANITZIO No visit to Pátzcuaro would be complete without a trip on the lake to one or more of the islands. A hilltop statue of José María Morelos dominates the island of **Janitzio** ★★. The village church is famous for the annual **Day of the Dead** ceremony, held at midnight on November 1. Villagers climb to the churchyard carrying lit candles in memory of their dead relatives and then spend the night in graveside vigil. The long day begins October 30 and lasts through November 2.

The cheapest way to get to Janitzio is by *colectivo* launch, which makes the trip when enough people have gathered to go, about every 20 to 30 minutes from about 7:30am to 6pm. It's best to go during the week when fewer travelers are around. Round-trip fare is 50 pesos; children 4 and younger ride free. A private boat costs around 750 pesos for a trip to Janitzio for 1 hour and then a cruise by the other three islands. Sometimes the cooperative has launches available that are significantly cheaper. The **ticket office** on the pier, or *embarcadero* (✆ **434/342-0681**), is open daily from 8am to 6pm. The pier is a kilometer (about a half-mile) from the main square, and the 5-minute taxi ride costs 30 pesos.

At the ticket office, a map of the lake posted on the wall details boat trips to various islands and lakeshore towns. Launches will take you wherever you want to go. Up to 20 people can split the cost.

TZINTZUNTZAN: RUINS & HANDICRAFTS Tzintzuntzan (tzeen-*tzoon*-tzahn) is an ancient village 15km (9¼ miles) from Pátzcuaro on the road to Quiroga (see "By Bus," under "Getting There & Departing," earlier in this chapter). In earlier centuries, Tzintzuntzan was the capital of the Purépechan kingdom (a confederation of more than 100 towns and villages). On a hill on the right before you enter town, pyramids, called *yácatas,* remind visitors of the town's past. Today the village is known for its pottery and woven goods. Several open-air **woodcarving workshops,** full of life-size wooden saints and other figures, are across from the basket market.

There is also an interesting church and former convent that dates from the time of Don Vasco. Parts of the convent have been restored, and there are plans to restore the rest. To get to it you will walk through a wide *atrio* (enclosed area in front of a church) populated by ancient, gnarled olive trees brought from Spain more than 400 years ago. The Franciscan convent is austere, but with a few surprising details, such as the ruins of

an intricate ceiling of Moorish design, and building stones etched with non-Christian symbols, which obviously must have been taken from native constructions. The short tour costs 15 pesos and is led by one of the community's members charged with preserving the convent. None of the guides speak English.

LAKESIDE VILLAGES: A PORTRAIT OF INDIAN LIFE For a close-up view of the Purépecha, contact **Kevin Quigley** and **Arminda Flores,** who live in Ihuatzio (see below for contact info). Arminda is Purépecha and can explain much of what you'll see and hear when visiting the villages in the area. Another good guide is **Miguel Angel Nuñez** (✆ **434/344-0108;** casadetierra@hotmail.com). He's a Mexican anthropologist who has lived in the area for years.

SANTA CLARA DEL COBRE: COPPER SMITHERY About 30 minutes away by car, **Santa Clara del Cobre** ★ is a good side trip if you want to purchase copper items or see how copper is worked. Although the copper mines of pre-conquest times have disappeared, local artisans still make copper vessels using the age-old method of hammering pieces out by hand. They don't work on Sunday and are strict observers of "San Lunes"—taking Monday off to recover from the weekend. On other days, the sound of hammering fills the air. If you want to see someone practicing the craft, go to one of the larger stores and ask if you can visit the *taller* (studio). You can also visit the **Museo del Cobre (Copper Museum),** a half-block from the main plaza at Morelos and Pino Suárez. The museum section of the building displays copper pieces that date to pre-Columbian times. A sales showroom to the left of the entrance features the work of local craftsmen. Admission is 10 pesos. The museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 10:30am to 3pm and 5 to 7pm.

The **National Copper Fair** is held here each August. It coincides with the **Festival de Nuestra Señora de Santa Clara de Asis** (second week in Aug), with folk dancing and parades. For information, call the tourism office in Morelia.

Buses for Santa Clara leave every few minutes from the Pátzcuaro bus station. If you want to spend the night in town, see "If Pátzcuaro's Packed Solid . . . ," on p. 264.

TUPÁTARO & CUANAJO: A HISTORIC CHURCH & HAND-CARVED FURNITURE Just off Hwy. 120 between Morelia and Pátzcuaro is the village of **Tupátaro** (pop. 600), which in Tarascan means "place of reeds."

The village church is the **Templo del Señor Santiago Tupátaro.** It was built in 1775. Indian artists painted the entire wood-plank ceiling with scenes of the life and death of Christ and the Virgin Mary. The gilt *retablo* (altarpiece) is adorned with Solomonic columns and paintings. Santiago (St. James) is in the center of the *retablo,* and the face of the Eternal Father is above him. The symbol of the dove crowns the *retablo.* The church and its ceiling were restored in 1994 by the National Institute of Anthropology and History, which oversees its maintenance. There's no admission charge, and photography is not permitted. The church is open daily from 8am to 5pm. Days of religious significance include the Tuesday of Carnaval week and July 25, which honors Santiago. From Tupátaro, you can get back on Hwy. 120 or take a small road that leads to Cuanajo 8km (5 miles) away. From Cuanajo, a small road leads directly to Pátzcuaro; it's not designated yet by any number.

Cuanajo (pop. 8,000) is a village of woodcarvers who make brightly painted pine furniture. On the road as you enter, and around the pleasant, tree-shaded main plaza, you'll see storefronts with **colorful furniture** inside and on the street. Parrots, plants, the sun, the moon, and faces are carved on the furniture. Furniture is also sold at a **cooperative** on the main plaza. Here you'll also find soft-spoken women who weave tapestries

and thin belts on waist looms. Everything is for sale. It's open daily from 9am to 6pm. Festival days in Cuanajo include March 8 and September 8, both of which honor their patron saint, La Virgen María de la Natividad.

IHUATZIO: TULE FIGURES & PRE-HISPANIC ARCHITECTURE This little lakeside village is known for its **weavers of tule figures**—fanciful animals such as elephants, pigs, and bulls, made from a reed that grows on the edge of the lake—and for some pre-Columbian ruins nearby. Kevin Quigley, an American from San Francisco, and Arminda Flores, a Purépechan, live just outside the village (✆ **434/344-0880;** www.casasantiagomex.com). They live in a beautiful house and rent comfortable rooms to guests at economical rates. Both Kevin and Arminda take people around the area, explaining the local culture, the society, and the local crafts (and Arminda is a good cook). The turnoff to Ihuatzio is a paved road a short distance from the outskirts of Pátzcuaro on the road to Tzintzuntzan.

3 URUAPAN: HANDICRAFTS & VOLCANOES

61km (38 miles) SW of Pátzcuaro; 105km (65 miles) SW of Morelia

Uruapan has long been a commercial center for western Michoacán. It's a larger, busier town than Pátzcuaro; it's not very pretty, but it's set in some beautiful country. This is a rich agricultural area—the avocado capital of Mexico. Coffee and pistachios are also popular cash crops. Uruapan is useful as a base for some interesting side trips, the most famous of which is to **El Paricutín volcano** and the lava-covered church and village near **Angahuan.** See "Angahuan & El Paricutín Volcano," below.

ESSENTIALS

From Morelia, take the modern toll road Autopista Morelia Uruapan. Officially, the road is **Hwy. 14D** or **120** (the same road that heads to Pátzcuaro) but you won't find that on many maps. Buses leave every half-hour from either Terminal A or B of Morelia's bus station (1st or 2nd class). Driving will take an hour and a half, and the first-class bus takes a little less than 2 hours.

The **tourist office** (✆ **452/524-0667**) is at Emilio Carranza 20. It's open Monday through Saturday from 9am to 2pm.

The main plaza, **Jardín Morelos/Plaza de los Mártires,** is a long, narrow rectangle running east to west, with the churches and La Huatápera Museum on the north side and a few hotels on the south.

EXPLORING URUAPAN & BEYOND

Uruapan's main plaza fills with artisans and craft sellers from around the state before and during **Easter week.** Vendors sell an unbelievable array of wares.

La Huatápera ★, attached to the church on the main square, is a good museum of regional crafts. It occupies a former hospital built in 1533 by Fray Juan de San Miguel, a Franciscan. It's open daily from 10am to 2pm and 4 to 6pm. Admission is free.

For the finest in woven, brilliantly colored tablecloths, bedspreads, and other **textiles,** pay a visit to **Telares Uruapan** ★★★ (✆ **452/524-0677,** -6135), in the **Antigua Fábrica San Pedro,** Calle Miguel Treviño s/n. The old factory makes for an interesting visit, and the colorful fabrics are quite popular. The owners, Bundy and Walter Illsley, came to Mexico in the early '50s and started up a number of rural development projects

before deciding to go into the weaving business. In my travels, I come across their distinctive fabrics a lot in establishments across central Mexico. Hours are Monday to Saturday 10am to 7pm.

When you enter the **Parque Nacional Eduardo Ruiz,** a botanical garden 8 blocks west of the main plaza, you'll feel as if you're deep in the Tropics. This semitropical paradise contains jungle paths, deep ravines, rushing water, and clear waterfalls. The garden is open daily from 8am to 6pm, and there is a small admission fee.

A Waterfall Outside Uruapan

Eight kilometers (5 miles) outside of town is the **Tzaráracua** waterfall. The falls are pretty but not spectacular, and sometimes they smell bad. The real reason to come here is for the walk—a descent that takes you from cool pine forest to warm subtropical vegetation in no time. The return ascent takes 40 minutes, and the trail is good, with handrails in the steeper areas. You can catch a bus from Uruapan's bus station or take a cab, which costs only 75 pesos. Either one will drop you off at the trail head.

Angahuan & El Paricutín Volcano ★★

About 34km (21 miles) from Uruapan is **Angahuan,** a village serving as the point of departure for trips to **El Paricutín volcano.** The volcano was born in 1943 and grew quickly, eventually enveloping portions of a village in lava. A taxi costs 200 pesos. There's also a bus.

In the afternoon of February 20, 1943, a local man was plowing his cornfield in the valley when the ground began to boil and fissures opened up, emitting steam. At first he tried to plug it up; when that proved impossible, he fled. By that evening, the earth was spitting fire and smoke. Some villagers fled that night; others, days later. The volcano remained active and continued to grow. This was not a violent eruption, but an almost constant belching forth of ash and lava until on March 6, 1952, it ceased as suddenly as it had begun.

USING A GUIDE Angahuan has a little tourist center that rents cabins and runs a small cafeteria (✆ **452/520-8786**). It affords a good view of the volcano and the tower of the **Church of San Juan Parangaricutiro,** which is half-buried in lava. It takes 2½ hours to get to the volcano, because you have to take a roundabout path to get there. The best way to go is with a horse and a guide. A horse costs 200 pesos. A guide costs the same. All the guides are villagers of Angahuan. Some speak Spanish; some don't. But it doesn't make much of a difference; they're mostly there to lead the way, which is circuitous. Many visitors elect to go only as far as the church; it takes 45 minutes one-way, and you don't need a horse.

CLIMBING THE VOLCANO Allow at least 7 hours from Angahuan. The route to the foot of the volcano makes a big loop around a lava field, before approaching the cone along a "sandy" wash (the texture only seems sandy; it's actually black volcanic cinder). The approach is mostly flat, with some rises toward the end. The only way to climb the crater is on foot; the trek is exhilarating but exhausting because of the footing. It's like climbing a giant pile of loose rock; for every step up, you slide back down a few inches. On the way to the top, you pass by a fumarole. The day I was there, it rained briefly as we were approaching the volcano, which is common (all guides carry rain ponchos for their customers). By the time we got to the fumarole, steam was rising from all the crevasses in the rock. The scene, so barren and vaporous, looked either primeval or apocalyptic, depending on your point of view. At the top of the cone, the view of the surrounding mountains is splendid, and you can clearly make out the lines of the lava flows on the floor of the valley.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

The best hotel in town is the **Hotel Cupatitzio** (✆ **452/523-2022**), next to the national park. It has plenty of amenities, including a large pool and garden. A room for two people costs 1,000 pesos. On the main square, the best option is **Hotel Plaza Uruapan** (✆ **452/523-3599;** www.hotelplazauruapan.com.mx). Two inexpensive options are the **Hotel Villa de Flores,** Emiliano Carranza 15 (✆ **452/524-2800**), and the slightly less desirable but slightly cheaper **Hotel Nuevo Alameda,** Av. 5 de Febrero 11 (✆ **452/523-3635**). Rooms go for 500 pesos in the former and about 400 pesos in the latter.

The restaurant at the Hotel Plaza is good. Another popular place to eat is **Café Tradicional** (✆ **452/523-5680**), just off the plaza, at Carranza 5-B.

9

Guadalajara

by David Baird

As the homeland of mariachi music, the *jarabe tapatío* (the Mexican hat dance), and tequila, Guadalajara is widely considered the most Mexican of cities. Despite the fact that it's the nation's second-largest metropolis (with four million inhabitants, it's a very distant second to Mexico City), it isn't hard to navigate, and residents are friendly and helpful. Visitors can enjoy big-city pleasures without the big-city hassles that would beset them in the capital.

While in Guadalajara, you will undoubtedly come across the word *tapatío* (or *tapatía*). In the early days, people from the area were known to trade in threes, called *tapatíos.* The locals came to be called Tapatíos as well, and now the word tapatío has come to mean any person, thing, or even style that comes from Guadalajara.

1 ORIENTATION

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING

BY PLANE Guadalajara's airport (GDL) is a half-hour ride from the city. Taxi tickets, priced by zone, are for sale in front of the airport (220 pesos to downtown).

See "Airline & Car Rental Websites," p. 764, for a list of websites for international airlines serving Mexico. Numbers in Guadalajara are: **AeroMar** (✆ 33/3615-8509), **Aeroméxico** (✆ 01-800/021-4010), **American** (✆ 01-800/904-6000), **Click** (✆ 01-800/1225425), **Continental** (✆ 01-800/900-5000), **Delta** (✆ 33/3630-3530), **Mexicana** (✆ 01-800/502-2000), and **United** (✆ 33/3616-9489).

Of the smaller airlines, **Azteca** (✆ 33/3630-4615) offers service to and from Mexico City, and from there to several cities in Mexico. **Allegro** (✆ 33/3647-7799) operates flights to and from Oakland and Las Vegas via Tijuana. **Alaska Airlines** (✆ 01-800/426-0333) flies to Los Angeles and Reno.

BY CAR Guadalajara is at the hub of several four-lane toll roads (called *cuotas* or *autopistas*), which cut travel time considerably but are expensive. From Nogales on the **U.S. border,** follow Hwy. 15 south (21 hr.). From **Tepic,** a quicker route is toll road 15D (5 hr.; 320 pesos). From **Puerto Vallarta,** go north on Hwy. 200 to Compostela; toll road 68D heads east to join the Tepic toll road. Total time is 5½ hours, and the tolls add up to 300 pesos. From **Barra de Navidad,** on the coast southeast of Puerto Vallarta, take Hwy. 80 northeast (4½ hr.). From **Manzanillo,** you might also take this road, but toll road 54D through Colima to Guadalajara (3½ hr.; 260 pesos) is faster. From **Mexico City,** take toll road 15D (7 hr.; 550 pesos).

BY BUS Two bus stations serve Guadalajara. The old one, south of downtown, is for buses to Tequila and other nearby towns; the new one, 10km (6¼ miles) southeast of downtown, is for longer trips.

The Old Bus Station For destinations within 100km (62 miles) of town, including the Lake Chapala area, go to the old bus terminal, on Niños Héroes off Calzada Independencia Sur. For Lake Chapala, take **Transportes Guadalajara-Chapala,** which runs frequent buses and *combis* (minivans).

The New Bus Station The **Central Camionera** is 15 to 30 minutes from downtown (more or less 125 pesos by taxi). The station has seven terminals connected by a covered walkway. Each terminal houses bus lines, offering first- and second-class service for different destinations. Buy bus tickets ahead of time from a travel agency in Guadalajara. Ask at your hotel for the closest to you. There are several major bus lines. The best service (big seats and lots of room) is provided by **ETN.**

VISITOR INFORMATION

The **State of Jalisco Tourist Information Office** is at Calle Morelos 102 (✆ **33/3668-1600,** -1601; http://visita.jalisco.gob.mx) in the Plaza Tapatía, at Paseo Degollado and Paraje del Rincón del Diablo. It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 7pm, and Saturday 10am to 2pm. You can get maps, a monthly calendar of cultural events, and good information. Of the **city tourist information booths,** one is in Plaza Liberación (directly behind the cathedral), and another is in Plaza Guadalajara (directly in front of the cathedral). These are open daily from 9am to 1pm and 3 to 7pm. Ask at either of these about free weekend walking tours.

CITY LAYOUT

The **Centro Histórico (city center),** with all its plazas, churches, and museums, will obviously be of interest to the visitor. The **west side** is Guadalajara's modern, cosmopolitan district. In the northwest corner is **Zapopan,** home of Guadalajara's patron saint. On the opposite side of the city from Zapopan, in the southeast corner, are the craft centers of **Tlaquepaque** and **Tonalá.**

The main artery for traffic from downtown to the west side is **Avenida Vallarta.** It starts downtown as **Juárez.** The main arteries for returning to downtown are **México** and **Hidalgo,** both north of Vallarta. Vallarta heads due west, where it intersects another major artery, **Avenida Adolfo López Mateos,** at **Fuente Minerva** (or simply La Minerva, or Minerva Circle). Minerva Circle, a 15-minute drive from downtown, is the central point of reference for the west side. To go to Zapopan from downtown, take **Avenida Avila Camacho,** which you can pick up on Alcalde; it takes 20 minutes by car. To Tlaquepaque and Tonalá, take **Calzada Revolución.** Tlaquepaque is 8km (5 miles) from downtown and takes 15 to 20 minutes by car; Tonalá is 5 minutes farther. Another major viaduct, **Calzada Lázaro Cárdenas,** connects the west side to Tlaquepaque and Tonalá, bypassing downtown.

THE NEIGHBORHOODS IN BRIEF

Centro Histórico The heart of the city encompasses many plazas, the cathedral, and several historic buildings and museums. Here, too, are the striking murals of José Clemente Orozco, one of the great Mexican muralists. Theaters, restaurants, shops, and clubs dot the area, and an enormous market rounds out the attractions. All of this is in a space roughly 12 blocks by 12 blocks—an easy area to explore on foot, with several plazas and pedestrian-only areas. To the south is a large green space called Parque Agua Azul.

West Side This is the swanky part of town, with the fine restaurants, luxury hotels, boutiques, and galleries, as well as the American, British, and Canadian consulates. It's a large area best navigated by taxi.

Zapopan Founded in 1542, Zapopan is a suburb of Guadalajara. In its center is the 18th-century basilica, the home of Guadalajara's patron saint, the Virgin of Zapopan. The most interesting part of Zapopan is clustered around the temple and can be explored on foot. It has a growing arts and nightlife scene.

Tlaquepaque This was a village of artisans (especially potters) that grew into a market center. In the last 30 years, it has attracted designers from all over Mexico. Every major form of art and craft is for sale here: furniture, pottery, glass, jewelry, woodcarvings, leather goods, sculptures, and paintings. The shops are sophisticated, yet Tlaquepaque's center retains a small-town feel that makes door-to-door browsing enjoyable and relaxing.

Tonalá This has remained a town of artisans. Plenty of stores sell mostly local products from the town's more than 400 workshops. You'll see wrought iron, ceramics, blown glass, and papier-mâché. A busy street market operates each Thursday and Sunday.

2 GETTING AROUND

BY TAXI Taxis are the easiest way to get around town. Most have meters, and though some drivers are reluctant to use them, you can insist that they do. There are three rates: for day, night, and suburbia. On my last visit, typical fares were downtown to the west side, 70 to 90 pesos; downtown or west side to Tlaquepaque, 70 to 100 pesos; to the new bus station, 90 pesos; to the airport, 180 to 220 pesos.

BY CAR Familiarize yourself with the main traffic arteries (see "City Layout," above) before you get behind the wheel. Several important freeway-style thoroughfares crisscross the city. **Dr. R. Michel** leads south from the town center toward Tlaquepaque. Use **González Gallo** for the return direction. **Avenida Vallarta** starts out downtown as **Juárez,** heads west past La Minerva, and eventually feeds onto **Hwy. 15,** bound for Tequila and Puerto Vallarta.

BY BUS For the visitor, the handiest route is the TUR **706,** which runs from the Centro Histórico southeast to Tlaquepaque (10 pesos), the Central Camionera (the new bus station), and Tonalá. You can catch this bus on Avenida 16 de Septiembre. The same bus runs in the reverse direction back to the downtown area.

The **electric bus** is handy for travel between downtown and the Minerva area (5 pesos). It bears the sign PAR VIAL and runs east along Hidalgo and west along the next street to the north, Calle Independencia (not Calzada Independencia). Hidalgo passes along the north side of the cathedral. The Par Vial goes as far east as Mercado Libertad and as far west as Minerva Circle. The city also has a light rail system, **Tren Ligero,** but it doesn't serve areas that are of interest to visitors.

Fast Facts Guadalajara

Area Code The telephone area code is **33.**

Business Hours Store hours are Monday through Saturday from 10am to 2pm and 4 to 8pm.

Climate & Dress Guadalajara's weather is mostly mild. From November through March, you'll need a sweater in the evening. The warmest months, April and May, are hot and dry. From June through September, the city gets afternoon and evening showers that keep the temperature a bit cooler, but it seems as though the local climate is getting warmer. Dress in Guadalajara is conservative; attention-getting sportswear (short shorts, halters, and the like) is out of place.

Consulates The **American Consular offices** are at Progreso 175 (✆ **33/3268-2200,** -2100). Other consulates include the **Canadian Consulate,** Mariano Otero 1249, Col. Rinconada del Bosque (✆ **33/3671-4740**); the **British Consulate,** Calle Jesús Rojas 20, Col. Los Pinos (✆ **33/3343-2296**); and the **Australian Consulate,** López Cotilla 2018, Col. Arcos Vallarta (✆ **33/3615-7418**). These offices all keep roughly the same hours: Monday through Friday from 8am to 1pm.

Currency Exchange Three blocks south of the cathedral, on López Cotilla, between Corona and Degollado, are more than 20 *casas de cambio.* Almost all post their rates, which are usually better than bank rates, minus the long lines.

Elevation Guadalajara sits at 1,700m (5,576 ft.).

Emergencies The emergency phone number is ✆ **060.**

Hospitals For medical emergencies, visit the **Hospital México-Americano,** Cólomos 2110 (✆ **33/3642-7152** or 3641-3141).

Internet Access Most of the big hotels have business centers that you can use. There are many Internet cafes in the Centro Histórico.

Newspapers & Magazines Many newsstands sell the two English local papers, the *Guadalajara Reporter* and the *Guadalajara Weekly.*

Police Tourists should first try to contact the Jalisco tourist information office in Plaza Tapatía (✆ **33/3668-1600**). If you can't reach the office, call the municipal police at ✆ **33/3668-7983.**

Post Office The *correo* is at the corner of Carranza and Calle Independencia, about 4 blocks northeast of the cathedral. Standing in the plaza behind the cathedral, facing the Degollado Theater, walk to the left, and then turn left on Carranza; walk past the Hotel Mendoza, cross Calle Independencia, and look for the post office on the left. It's open Monday through Thursday from 9am to 5pm, Saturday from 10am to 2pm.

Safety Guadalajara doesn't have as much crime as Mexico City. Rarely do you hear of muggings. Crimes against tourists and foreign students are infrequent and most often take the form of purse snatching. Criminals usually work in teams and target travelers in busy places, such as outdoor restaurants. Keep jewelry out of sight. Should anyone spill something on you, be alert to your surroundings and step away—accidental spills are a common method for distracting the victim.

Language Classes

Foreigners can study Spanish at the **Foreign Student Study Center,** University of Guadalajara, Calle Tomás V. Gómez 125, 44100 Guadalajara, Jal. (✆ **33/3616-4399**). **IMAC** is a private Spanish school at Donato Guerra 180, in the Centro Histórico (✆ **33/3613-1080**).

3 WHERE TO STAY

The rates below are the standard rack rates and include the 18% tax. Big hotels are apt to offer business discounts, especially if there's no convention in town. Guadalajara's hotels thrive on convention business. Most of the luxury hotels in Guadalajara are on the west side, which has the majority of the shopping malls, boutiques, fashionable restaurants, clubs, and the Expo (convention center). The Centro Histórico is also a good option because there's a lot to do, all in walking distance. And Tlaquepaque is a comfortable place to stay—it's relaxing and is perfect for shoppers; the only drawback is that almost everything shuts down by 7 or 8pm.

Chain hotels not included below are Hilton, Marriott, Camino Real, Howard Johnson, Crowne Plaza, and Best Western. In some of the cheaper, older large hotels, air-conditioning can be a bit feeble.

VERY EXPENSIVE

Hotel Presidente InterContinental ★★★ This hotel offers the most comprehensive list of services and amenities in Guadalajara. The health club here is a standout. The entire hotel was remodeled in 2009 and 2010. Guest rooms have a much sharper look, with better appliances, bathroom fixtures, carpeting, furniture, and lighting. They are comfortable and quiet. Standard rooms come as "superior" or "deluxe." Superior rooms cost only a little more and have a better view and one or two small improvements in amenities. Club rooms have discreet check-in, are on limited-access hallways, and come with extras. The extra privacy and services are good for Mexican soap opera stars or repeat guests who like having their preferences known in advance. If you're neither of these, opt for one of the other rooms. Suites are large and come with oversize bathrooms with extra fixtures. The lobby bar is popular; during the season, bullfighters relax here after *la corrida.*

Av. López Mateos Sur and Moctezuma (west side), 45050 Guadalajara, Jal. ✆ **800/327-0200** worldwide, or 33/3678-1234. Fax 33/3678-1222. www.intercontinental.com. 423 units. $200–$211 double; $223–$235 feature or club double; $318 and up for suite. Promotional rates available. AE, DC, MC, V. Valet parking 50 pesos. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; concierge; executive-level rooms; golf at nearby clubs; health club w/saunas, steam rooms, and whirlpools; outdoor heated pool; room service; smoke-free rooms; spa. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, MP3 stereo, Wi-Fi.

Quinta Real ★★★ This chain specializes in properties that are suggestive of Mexico's heritage. No glass skyscraper here—two five-story buildings made of stone, wood, plaster, and tile capture the feel of Mexican colonial architecture. Suites vary quite a bit: Eight have brick cupolas, and some have balconies. All are large, with a split-level layout and antique decorative touches. And all come with large, great bathrooms with tub/

showers. The "grand-class" suites are larger and come with a few extras, such as a stereo and big bathrooms with Jacuzzi tubs. You can choose between two doubles or one king-size bed. The hotel is 2 blocks from Minerva Circle in western Guadalajara. Ask for a room that doesn't face López Mateos.

Av. México 2727 (at López Mateos, west side), 44690 Guadalajara, Jal. ✆ **866/621-9288** in the U.S. and Canada, or 33/3669-0600. Fax 33/3669-0601. www.quintareal.com. 76 suites. $205–$230 master suite; $225–$250 grand-class suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; concierge; fitness room; outdoor heated pool; room service; smoke-free rooms; discounts at local day spa. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Internet, minibar.

Villa Ganz ★★★ This small hotel offers the most personal service in Guadalajara. You can relax here and have just about any service the city offers brought to the hotel. Or the hotel can provide a car and driver to take you where you need to go. Rooms are big, well furnished, and decorated with flair. Bathrooms are large and well lit. Bed choices include a king, a queen, or two twins. They come with down comforters (hypoallergenic option available). The hotel occupies a classic old mansion with a garden and patio in the rear. Rooms facing the garden are the quietest, but those facing the street are set back from the traffic and have double-glazed windows. The common rooms and rear garden are agreeable places to relax. A sister property with less service and lower prices can work for anyone interested in extended stays.

López Cotilla 1739 (btw. Bolivar and San Martín, west side), 44140 Guadalajara, Jal. ✆ **800/728-9098** in the U.S. and Canada, or 33/3120-1416. www.villaganz.com. 10 suites. $244 junior suite; $305 master suite; $342 grand master suite. Rates include continental breakfast. Internet specials often available. AE, MC, V. Free secure parking. Pets accepted with prior notification. Children 11 and younger not accepted. **Amenities:** Bar; concierge; fitness room; golf and tennis at local club; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, MP3 stereo, Wi-Fi.

EXPENSIVE

Holiday Inn Hotel and Suites Centro Histórico ★★ Of the large downtown hotels, this one has the most comfortable rooms. It is conveniently located near the area's most popular restaurants and just a few blocks from the cathedral. Guest rooms are attractive, if blandly modern with a few Mexican accents, and have comfortable mattresses, and good light. The size is good, and the furniture is functional and attractive. Bathrooms in standard rooms are midsize and well equipped, with ample counter space. The suites are larger, with a few more amenities. Room rates include transportation to (but not from) the airport.

Av. Juárez 211, Centro Histórico, 44100 Guadalajara. Jal. ✆ **800/465-4329** in the U.S. and Canada, 01-800/009-9900 in Mexico, or 33/3560-1200. www.holiday-inn.com. 90 units. $115–$152 double; $136–$162 suite; $170–$221 suite with Jacuzzi. AE, MC, V. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; ground transportation; fitness room; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Hotel de Mendoza On a quiet street next to the Degollado Theater and Plaza Tapatía, 2 blocks from the cathedral, the Mendoza has perhaps the best location of any downtown hotel. The decor would best be described as a stab at old Spanish, with wood paneling and old-world accents. Rooms face the street, an interior courtyard, or the pool. Most standard rooms are midsize; though there are a few larger ones that are split level with laminate floors, and exterior windows and go for the same price. Bed choices are one queen, two full, or two queens. Many of the mattresses here are pretty firm. Bathrooms are midsize, with so-so lighting. Junior suites have an additional sitting area and larger bathrooms, with the recent addition of Jacuzzi tubs.

Carranza 16, Centro Histórico, 44100 Guadalajara, Jal. ✆ **33/3942-5151.** Fax 33/3613-7310. www.demendoza.com.mx. 104 units. 1,687 pesos double; 1,947 pesos junior suite. Discounts sometimes available. AE, MC, V. Secure parking 40 pesos. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; fitness room; Jacuzzi; small outdoor pool; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

MODERATE

Hotel Morales ★★ A historic hotel that's attractive and comfortable, the Morales is a good choice for anyone wishing to stay downtown. The standard rooms are called either *suite sencilla* (one queen-size bed) or *suite doble* (two double beds). The rooms are medium or large and come with laminate floors. The bathrooms are attractive, with ceramic-tile floors and good-looking countertops. The showers are strong. The rooms that face the street have balconies with double-glazed windows that do a good job at screening the noise. The imperial suites offer a lot for the money, with super-large bathrooms equipped with a two-person Jacuzzi tub and a separate shower. All rooms are set around an arcaded lobby holding an attractive bar area. There's live music on Wednesday and Friday evenings.

Av. Corona 243 (corner of Prisciliano Sánchez) Centro Histórico, 44100 Guadalajara, Jal. ✆ **33/3658-5232.** Fax 33/3658-5239. www.hotelmorales.com.mx. 64 units. 1,290 pesos double; 1,590 pesos junior suite; 1,990 pesos imperial suite. AE, MC, V. Free sheltered parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; fitness room; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Internet.

La Villa del Ensueño ★ This B&B in central Tlaquepaque is a lovely alternative to big-city hotels. A modern interpretation of traditional Mexican architecture, it contains small courtyards and well-tended grounds bordered by old stucco walls, with an occasional wrought-iron balcony or stone staircase. The rooms have more character than most hotel lodgings. Doubles have either two twin or two double beds. The hotel is about 8 blocks from the main plaza.

Florida 305, 45500 Tlaquepaque, Jal. ✆ **800/220-8689** in the U.S., or 33/3635-8792. Fax 818/597-0637. www.villadelensueno.com. 20 units. $1,298 double; $1,475 deluxe double; $1,711 junior suite. Rates include full breakfast and light laundry service. AE, MC, V. Free valet parking. **Amenities:** Bar; indoor/outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Old Guadalajara ★★ This downtown bed-and-breakfast recommends itself in many ways. In a colonial house, it's well located, quiet, and beautiful. The rooms reflect the local scene; they speak of Mexico without shouting it. They are large and airy, with high ceilings, tile floors, and comfortable bathrooms. The colonial architecture makes it possible to live without air-conditioning in the warm months, and every room is equipped with a ceiling fan. The central courtyard is cool and shaded by tall bamboo. The common rooms are open to the courtyard and are stocked with material for readers curious about the city. Paul Callahan prepares filling breakfasts for his guests using only natural ingredients.

Belén 236, Centro Histórico, 44100 Guadalajara, Jal. ✆/fax **33/3613-9958.** www.oldguadalajara.com. 4 units. $110 double. Rates include full breakfast. AE, MC, V for deposit; no credit cards at B&B. Children 17 and younger not accepted. **Amenities:** Smoke-free rooms. *In room:* Hair dryer, no phone.

Quinta Don José ★★ (Value) Good value, great location, friendly English-speaking owners—there are a lot of reasons to like this small establishment just 2 blocks from Tlaquepaque's main square. Rooms run the gamut from midsize to extra large. They are comfortable, attractive, and quiet, with some nice local touches. Most of the standard and deluxe doubles have a king-size or two double beds and an attractive, midsize bathroom. A couple of them have small private outdoor spaces. Some of the suites in back come with a full kitchen and lots of space—more than twice the size of the usual suite,

 with one king-size and one double bed. The breakfasts are good, and recently the owners have installed a full restaurant open for dinner. Some lodgings just have a good feel to them, and this is one of them.

Reforma 139, 45500 Tlaquepaque, Jal. ✆ **866/629-3753** in the U.S. and Canada, or 33/3635-7522. www.quintadonjose.com. 15 units. $88 standard; $100 deluxe; $129–$175 suite. Rates include full breakfast. AE, MC, V. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; free airport transfers; babysitting; heated outdoor pool; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

INEXPENSIVE

Hotel Cervantes ★ (Value) This six-story downtown hotel offers modern amenities at a good price. The rooms are attractive and midsize. They have laminate flooring and tile bathrooms with ample sink areas. The air-conditioning was weak the last time I stayed here. The lower price is for one double bed; the higher price is for a king or two doubles. This is not a noisy hotel, but if you require absolute quiet, request an interior room. The Cervantes is 6 blocks south and 3 blocks west of the cathedral.

Prisciliano Sánchez 442 (corner of Donato Guerra), Centro Histórico, 44100 Guadalajara, Jal. ✆/fax **33/3613-6816.** www.hotelcervantes.com.mx. 100 units. 595–650 pesos double; 1,045 pesos suite. AE, MC, V. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; lobby bar; small outdoor heated pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV, Wi-Fi.

Hotel San Francisco Plaza (Value) This colonial-style downtown hotel is both pleasant and a bargain. Most rooms are medium to large and comfortable, with attractive furnishings. All have rugs or carpeting, and most have tall ceilings. The hotel is built around four courtyards, which contain fountains and potted plants. Rooms along the Sánchez Street side are much quieter now that the management has installed double windows. Some units along the back wall of the rear patio have small bathrooms. Most rooms have ceramic tile flooring; some have carpeting. The San Francisco Plaza is 6 blocks south and 2 blocks east of the cathedral.

Degollado 267, Centro Histórico, 44100 Guadalajara, Jal. ✆ **33/3613-8954**, or -8971. Fax 33/3613-3257. www.sanfranciscohotel.com.mx. 76 units. 600 pesos double. AE, MC, V. Free sheltered parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV, Wi-Fi.

Gran Hotel Los Reyes (Value) The rooms in this 10-story downtown hotel aren't anything special, but they do have good, individually controlled air-conditioning and strong showers, a rarity for budget hotels. The location is downtown near the market, which is central but in a somewhat decayed part of town. For entertainment, there's a modern multiplex cinema across the street that shows first-run Hollywood movies. Guest rooms are midsize; most have a king-size bed. Those on the mezzanine level are larger and often cost the same. Ask for a room facing away from the busy Calzada Independencia. The small bathrooms are clean, with good water pressure and plenty of hot water. The hotel plans to renovate the guest rooms one floor at a time in 2010.

Calzada Independencia Sur 168, 44100 Guadalajara, Jal. ✆ **33/3613-9781.** Fax 33/3614-0367. www.granhotellosreyes.com.mx. 181 units. 550 pesos double. AE, MC, V. Free valet parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; outdoor heated pool; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, Wi-Fi.

4 WHERE TO DINE

Guadalajara has many excellent restaurants either for fine dining or for typical local fare. Good local fare can be had in the Centro Histórico, but for fine dining, head to western

Guadalajara or, if it's early in the day, to Tlaquepaque. For a quick bite, there are several **Sanborn's** in the city. This is a popular national chain of restaurants known for their *enchiladas suizas* (enchiladas in cream sauce). If you're downtown and looking for baked goods and coffee, go to **El Globo** (✆ **33/3613-9926**), an upscale bakery at the corner of Pedro Moreno and Degollado; this chain has a couple more locations around Guadalajara. ***Tip:*** When taking a taxi, keep the address of the restaurant handy; taxi drivers cannot be relied upon to know where even the most popular restaurants are.

Local dishes include *birria* (goat or lamb covered in maguey leaves and roasted). It comes in a tomato broth or with the broth on the side. Another favorite is the *torta ahogada,* a sandwich with pork bathed in a tomato sauce. I'm not particularly fond of them. The most popular drink here is the *paloma,* which combines tequila, lots of lime juice, and grapefruit soda on ice. I am fond of these.

EXPENSIVE

Adobe Fonda ★★★ NUEVA COCINA This restaurant shares space with a large store on pedestrian-only Independencia. The dining area is open and airy. Homemade bread and tostadas come to the table with an olive oil–based chile sauce, *pico de gallo,* and *requezón de epazote* (ricotta-like cheese with a Mexican herb). Among the soups are *crema de cilantro* and an interesting mushroom soup with a dark-beer broth. The main courses present some difficult decisions, with intriguing combinations of Mexican, Italian, and Argentine ingredients. Shrimp quesadillas accompanied by *chimichurri* with *nopal* cactus, filet in creamy *chile ancho* sauce, and the crab salad tower are all excellent. Sample the margaritas, too.

Francisco de Miranda 27 (corner of Independencia, Tlaquepaque). ✆ **33/3657-2792.** www.adobefonda.com. Reservations recommended on weekends. Main courses 150–230 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 12:30–6:30pm.

Chez Nené ★★★ FRENCH In a small and pleasant open-air dining room, you can enjoy a quiet and leisurely meal of delicious French food. After doing just this, I had to meet the owner to see who was behind such work. He turned out to be a French expatriate (whose Mexican wife, Nené, is the restaurant's namesake) with strong ideas about food and dining. Freshness and quality of ingredients are what matter most, and everything (except stews and such) is cooked to order. The daily menu is on a chalkboard and depends on what the owner finds that morning at the market. The waiter answered every question I put to him and gave excellent service.

Juan Palomar y Arias 426 (continuación Rafael Sanzio, west side). ✆ **33/3673-4564.** Reservations recommended on weekends. Main courses 140–250 pesos. AE, MC, V. Tues 4–11pm; Wed–Sat 1–5:30pm and 7:30–11:30pm; Sun 1–6pm.

El Sacromonte ★★★ ALTA COCINA The food is so exquisite that I try to dine here every time I'm in Guadalajara. El Sacromonte emphasizes artful presentation and design: Order "Queen Isabel's Crown," and you'll be served a dish of shrimp woven together in the shape of a crown and covered in divine lobster-and-orange sauce. Or try quesadillas with rose petals in a deep-colored strawberry sauce. For soup, consider *el viejo progreso* for its unlikely combination of flavors (blue cheese and chipotle chile). The menu features amusing descriptions in verse. The main dining area is a shaded, open-air patio. The restaurant isn't far from the downtown area, on the near west side. Next door is a good steakhouse operated by the same owners.

Pedro Moreno 1398 (corner of Calle Colonias, west side). ✆ **33/3825-5447** or 3827-0663. www.sacromonte.com.mx. Reservations recommended. Main courses 130–210 pesos. MC, V. Mon–Sat 1:30pm–midnight; Sun 1:30–6pm.

La Matera ★ STEAKS/PIZZA The steaks are good, and the surroundings are inviting in this two-story open brick structure. The cuts come from the U.S. and Mexico, the lamb from New Zealand, and the wine from all over. La Matera has a decided Argentine influence, which of course means Italian influence. Pizzas are a popular menu item; the seafood is beautifully grilled. The bar is downstairs and most of the dining area is upstairs. In good weather it's very pleasant.

Av. México 2891 (west side). ✆ **33/3616-1626.** http://lamatera.tripod.com. Reservations recommended on weekends. Steaks 185–310 pesos; pizzas 100–140 pesos. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 1pm–midnight; Sun 1–6:30pm.

La Tequila ★★ MEXICAN Contemporary and traditional Mexican cooking is on the menu in this large, popular restaurant. You'll find dishes such as a pasta stuffed with shrimp and *huitlacoche,* and a *chamorro adobado* (pork shoulder marinated in a chile sauce) wrapped in maguey leaves and cooked in the ground with a wood fire. On my last visit I tried the shrimp in a sweet-and-sour tamarind sauce, as well as tacos "plaza de toros." Both of these were excellent—the tacos were beef tips and bits of Mexican sausage on fresh tortillas served with their own sauce; the shrimp were tangy and different. The bar, too, has started making original concoctions, such as the "tequilibrio." La Tequila can get pretty lively, and the decorative touches, such as trimmed agaves, give the dining areas a regional point of reference. Indoor/outdoor dining areas and a popular upstairs bar make up most of the restaurant.

Av. México 2830 (at Napoleón, west side). ✆ **33/3640-3440** or 3640-3110. www.latequila.com. Reservations recommended on weekends. Main courses 120–189 pesos. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 1pm–midnight; Sun 1–6pm.

MODERATE

Hostería del Angel ★★ TAPAS/WINE BAR Sip wine and munch on a few tapas in this comfortable patio restaurant and wine bar just a few blocks from the basilica in Zapopan. The chef-owner cooked for years in Spain, where he became fascinated with the making of cheeses and deli meats such as Spanish *jamón serrano.* He serves a variety of tapas and popular baguette sandwiches. The menu doesn't do a good job of explaining the dishes, so don't hesitate to ask the waitstaff for explanations. Most of the tapas are under the heading "Por la noche," which also includes sandwiches and the *rotolata*—vegetables and cold cuts surrounded by a thin layer of crispy cheese, which is a house specialty. Acoustic music plays from 9 to 11pm Tuesday through Saturday. The restaurant is a half-block off the pedestrian-only *calzada,* which leads to the plaza in front of the basilica. For breakfast you can get the traditional *molletes.*

5 de Mayo 260, Zapopan (west side). ✆/fax **33/3656-9516.** www.hosteriadelangel.com. Reservations recommended on weekends. Tapas 40–90 pesos; main courses 100–150 pesos. MC, V. Mon–Sat 9am–midnight; Sun 9am–8pm.

I Latina FUSION Warehouse chic with a porcine motif (the owner tells me that the pig is a symbol of abundance in Thailand) is the look here. The menu is absurdly small but is supplemented with lots of daily specials. Usually there's a steak of some kind, cooked a bit differently, also some Asian fusion, including at least one noodle dish. This is a good place for people-watching—you get to see a portion of Guadalajara's hip, artsy crowd, who enjoy the antiestablishment surroundings, including the metal and plastic tables and chairs. My main problem is the noise, which at times gets to be too much. If you're looking for quiet dining, go elsewhere. Cabs have a hard time finding this place, despite the fact that it's almost right off of Minerva Circle. It's not that difficult—Inglaterra faces the railroad tracks.

Av. Inglaterra 3128 (west side). ✆ **33/3647-7774.** www.ilatinarest.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses 90–180 pesos. MC, V. Wed–Sat 7:30pm–1am; Sun 2–6pm.

La Fonda de San Miguel Moments MEXICAN My favorite way to enjoy a good meal in Mexico is to have it in an elegant colonial courtyard. I love the contrast between the bright, noisy street and the cool, shaded patio. This restaurant is in the former convent of Santa Teresa de Jesús. While you enjoy the stone arches and gurgling fountain, little crisp tacos and homemade bread appear at the table. For main courses, try the shrimp *al tequila,* or perhaps the *chiles en nogada* if it's the season. Traditional *mole poblano* is also on the menu. Wednesday to Saturday, musicians perform from 3 to 5pm and 9 to 11pm.

Donato Guerra 25 (and Pedro Moreno, downtown). ✆ **33/3613-0809.** www.lafondadesanmiguel.com. Reservations recommended on weekends. Breakfast 50–80 pesos; main courses 125–165 pesos. AE, MC, V. Mon 8:30am–6pm; Tues–Sat 8:30am–midnight; Sun 8:30am–9pm.

La Trattoria Pomodoro Ristorante ★ ITALIAN Good food, good service, and moderate prices make this restaurant perennially popular. The price of pastas and main courses includes a visit to the well-stocked salad bar. Recommendable menu items include the combination pasta plate (lasagna, fettuccini Alfredo, and spaghetti), shrimp linguine, and chicken parmigiana. The Italian owner likes to stock lots of wines from the motherland. The dining room is attractive and casual, with comfortable furniture and separate seating for smokers and nonsmokers.

Niños Héroes 3051 (west side). ✆ **33/3122-1817.** Reservations recommended, but not accepted during holidays. Pasta 80–100 pesos; main courses 80–120 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 1pm–midnight.

Mariscos Progreso SEAFOOD The action occurs in a rustic, open patio shaded in parts by trees or tile roofs over the common *equipal* furniture. The seafood cocktails are excellent and not loaded with as much ketchup as in other joints. You can order one of these or a ceviche, which I found fresh on my last visit. The menu includes all the Mexican standards—fish in toasted garlic butter *(al mojo de ajo)* or with strips of *guajillo* chile *(al ajillo).* Sometimes there's quite a bit of ambience, with mariachis adding to the commotion. At other times, the crowd thins and one can rest peacefully from the exertions of shopping with a cold drink. It's a half-block from the Parián.

Progreso 80, Tlaquepaque. ✆ **33/3639-6149.** Reservations not accepted. Main courses 100–150 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–7pm.

INEXPENSIVE

Café Madrid MEXICAN This little coffee shop is like many coffee shops used to be—a social institution where people come in, greet each other and the staff by name, and chat over breakfast or coffee and cigarettes. Change comes slowly here. For example, despite the fact that it's an informal place, the waiters wear white jackets with black bow ties, as they did 30 years ago. The coffee and Mexican breakfasts are good, as is the standard Mexican fare served in the afternoon. Most popular dishes include the enchiladas and the *chilaquiles.* The front room opens to the street, with a small lunch counter and another room in the back.

Juárez 264 (btw. Corona and 16 de Septiembre, downtown). ✆ **33/3614-9504.** Breakfast 35–50 pesos; main courses 55–95 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 7:30am–10pm.

La Chata Restaurant REGIONAL/MEXICAN If you're staying downtown, don't let this place slip off your radar. It does a good job with all the Mexican classics and some regional specialties as well. Unlike most restaurants, this one has the kitchen in front and

the dining area in back. For a reasonable sum, you can get a filling bowl of *pozole.* They also offer *flautas, sopes,* quesadillas, and guacamole. There's also traditional *mole* and a couple of combination plates. The chairs are comfortable, and you hang out with lots of locals.

Corona 126 (btw. Juárez and López Cotilla, downtown). ✆ **33/3613-0588.** www.lachata.com.mx. Reservations not accepted. Breakfast 40–60 pesos; main courses 60–105 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 8am–midnight.

La Fonda de la Noche ★★ Finds MEXICAN For a host of reasons, this is my favorite place in the city for a simple supper. The limited menu is excellent, the surroundings are comfortable and inviting, the lighting is perfect, and there's a touch of nostalgia for the Mexico of the '40s, '50s, and '60s. It's not far from downtown or the west side; take a cab to the intersection of Jesús and Reforma, and, when you get there, look for a door behind a small hedge. There's no sign. It's a house with five fun dining rooms. Only Spanish is spoken, and the menu is simple. To try a little of everything, order the *plato combinado,* a combination plate that comes with an *enchilada de medio mole,* an empanada called a *media luna,* a *tostada,* and a *sope.* The owner is Carlos Ibarra, an artist from the state of Durango. He has decorated the place with traditional Mexican pine furniture and cotton tablecloths and his personal collection of paintings, mostly the works of close friends. On weekends, La Fonda offers *chiles en nogada.*

Jesús 251 (corner with Reforma, Col. El Refugio). ✆ **33/3827-0917.** Reservations not accepted. Main courses 60–100 pesos. MC, V. Tues–Sun 7:30pm–midnight.

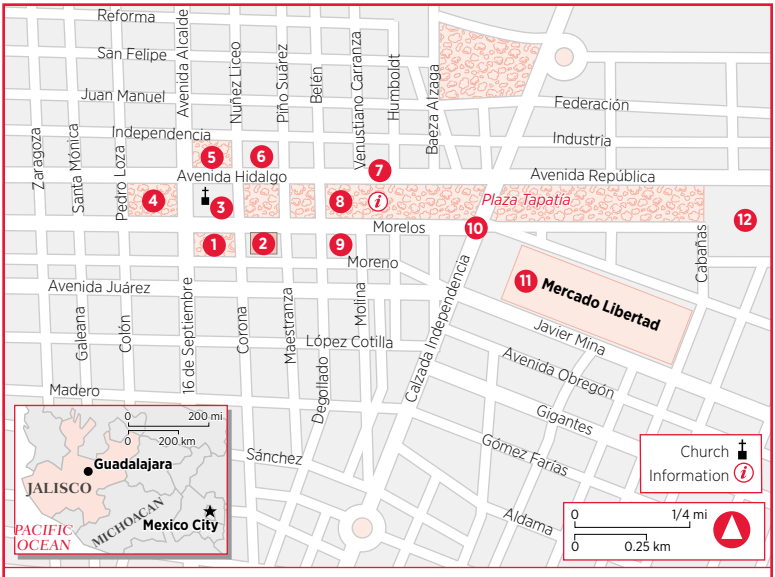
Los Itacates Restaurant ★ Value MEXICAN *Itacate* is Spanish for lunchbox, and the name implies Mexican home cooking at reasonable prices. Office workers pack the place between 2 and 4pm weekdays, and there's a good crowd on weekend nights, but at other times you'll have no problem finding a table. You can dine outdoors in a shaded sidewalk area, in one of the three dining rooms, or in the terrace in back that overlooks a small playscape, which was recently installed. The rooms are brightly decorated, with traditional, painted wood furniture. Specialties include *lomo adobado* and chiles rellenos. *Pollo Itacates* is a quarter of a chicken, two cheese enchiladas, potatoes, and rice. Los Itacates is 5 blocks north of Avenida Vallarta. In the evenings, they serve tacos and other *antojitos.*

Chapultepec Norte 110 (west side). ✆ **33/3825-1106,** or -9551. Reservations accepted. Breakfast buffet 88 pesos; tacos 15 pesos; main courses 50–105 pesos. MC, V. Mon–Sat 8am–11pm; Sun 8am–7pm.

5 EXPLORING GUADALAJARA

SPECIAL EVENTS

There's always something going on from September to December. In September, when Mexicans celebrate independence from Spain, Guadalajara goes all out, with a full month of festivities. The celebrations kick off with the **Encuentro Internacional del Mariachi** (www.mariachi-jalisco.com.mx), in which mariachi bands from around the world play before knowledgeable audiences and hold sessions with other mariachis. Bands come from as far as Japan and Russia, and the event takes on a curious postmodern hue. Concerts are held in several venues. In the Degollado Theater, you can hear orchestral arrangements of classic mariachi songs with solos by famous mariachis. You might be acquainted with many of the classics without even knowing it. The culmination is a parade of thousands of mariachis and *charros* (Mexican cowboys) through downtown. It starts the first week of September.



Cathedral **3**
Church of Santa María de Gracia **7**
Instituto Cultural Cabañas **12**
Mercado Libertad **11**
Museo Regional de Guadalajara **5**
Palacio del Gobierno **2**
Plaza de Armas **1**
Plaza Guadalajara **4**
Quetzalcoatl Fountain **10**
Rotonda de los Hombres Ilustres **4**
Teatro Degollado **8**
Universidad de Guadalajara Facultad de Música & Iglesia de San Agustín **9**

On **September 15,** a massive crowd assembles in front of the Governor's Palace to await the traditional ***grito*** (shout for independence) at 11pm. The *grito* commemorates Father Miguel Hidalgo de Costilla's cry for independence in 1810. The celebration features live music on a street stage, spontaneous dancing, fireworks, and shouts of *"¡Viva México!"* and *"¡Viva Hidalgo!"* The next day is the official Independence Day, with a traditional parade; the plazas downtown resemble a country fair and market, with booths, games of chance, stuffed-animal prizes, cotton candy, and candied apples. Live entertainment stretches well into the night.

On **October 12,** a **procession** ★★ honoring Our Lady of Zapopan celebrates the feast day of the Virgin of Zapopan. Around dawn, her small, dark figure begins the 5-hour ride from the Cathedral of Guadalajara to the suburban Basilica of Zapopan (see "Other Attractions," below). The original icon dates from the mid-1500s; the procession began 200 years later. Today, crowds spend the night along the route and vie for position as the Virgin approaches. She travels in a gleaming new car (virginal, in that it must never have had the ignition turned on), which her caretakers pull through the streets. During the months leading up to the feast day, the figure visits churches all over the city. You will

Guadalajara Bus Tours

Two companies are now offering bus tours of the city. One is a local company, **Tranvías Turísticos** (no phone), which offers two tours on small buses that look like trolley cars. Get info and buy tickets from the kiosk in Plaza Guadalajara (in front of the cathedral) from 10am until 7pm. There are two routes. One is a circuit through downtown and surrounding neighborhoods. It lasts 1 hour and 10 minutes. The second is a slightly longer tour, going to Tlaquepaque. It lasts 1½ hours. Both cost 90 pesos. The other company, **Tapatío Tours** (✆ **33/3613-0887;** www.tapatiotour.com), has modern, bright red double-decker buses. Its tour goes from downtown to western Guadalajara to Tlaquepaque. The tour costs 90 pesos on weekdays and 110 pesos on weekends. It goes farther out, into western Guadalajara. There are 10 stops; you can get off at any one and catch the next bus when it passes by, which is every 45 minutes to an hour. Catch the bus in the plaza on the north side of the cathedral after 10am.

likely see neighborhoods decorated with paper streamers and banners honoring the Virgin's visit to the local church.

The celebration has grown into a month-long event, **Fiestas de Octubre,** which kicks off with an enormous parade, usually on the first Sunday or Saturday of the month. Festivities include performing arts, *charreadas* (rodeos), bullfights, art exhibits, regional dancing, a food fair, and a Day of Nations incorporating all the consulates in Guadalajara. By the time this is over, you enter the **holiday season of November and December,** with Revolution Day (Nov 20), the Virgin of Guadalupe's feast day (Dec 12), and several other celebrations.

DOWNTOWN GUADALAJARA

The most easily recognized building in the city is the **cathedral** ★, around which four open plazas form the shape of a Latin cross. Later a long swath of land was cleared to extend the open area from Plaza Liberación east to the Instituto Cultural Cabañas, creating **Plaza Tapatía.**

Construction on the cathedral started in 1561 and continued into the 18th century. Over such a long time, it was inevitable that remodeling would take place before the building was ever completed. The result is an unusual facade—an amalgam of several styles, including baroque, neoclassical, and Gothic. An 1818 earthquake destroyed the original large towers; their replacements were built in the 1850s, inspired by designs on the bishop's dinner china. Blue and yellow are Guadalajara's colors. The nave is airy and majestic. Items of interest include a painting in the sacristy ascribed to the 17th-century Spanish artist Bartolomé Estaban Murillo (1617–82).

On the cathedral's south side is the **Plaza de Armas,** the oldest and loveliest of the plazas. A cast-iron Art Nouveau bandstand is its dominant feature. Made in France, it was a gift to the city from the dictator Porfirio Díaz in the 1890s. The female figures on the bandstand exhibited too little clothing for conservative Guadalajarans, who clothed them. The dictator, recognizing when it's best to let the people have their way, said nothing.

Facing the plaza is the **Palacio del Gobierno** ★★, a broad, low structure built in 1774. The facade blends Spanish and Moorish elements and holds several eye-catching details. Inside the central courtyard, above the staircase to the right, is a spectacular mural of Hidalgo by the modern Mexican master José Clemente Orozco. The Father of Independence appears high overhead, bearing directly down on the viewer and looking as implacable as a force of nature. On one of the adjacent walls, Orozco painted *The Carnival of Ideologies,* a dark satire on the prevailing fanaticisms of his day. Another of his murals is inside the second-floor chamber of representatives, depicting Hidalgo again, this time in a more conventional posture, writing the proclamation to end slavery in Mexico. The *palacio* is open daily from 10am to 8pm.

In the plaza on the opposite side of the cathedral from the Plaza de Armas is the **Rotonda de los Hombres Ilustres.** Sixteen white columns, each supporting a bronze statue, stand as monuments to Guadalajara's and Jalisco's distinguished sons. Across the street from the plaza, in front of the Museo Regional, you will see a line of horse-drawn buggies. A carriage ride around the Centro Histórico lasts almost an hour and costs 200 pesos for one to four people.

Facing the east side of the rotunda is the **Museo Regional de Guadalajara,** Liceo 60 (✆ **33/3613-2703**). Originally a convent, it was built in 1701 in the baroque style and contains some of the region's important archaeological finds, fossils, historic objects, and art. Among the highlights are a giant reconstructed mammoth's skeleton and a meteorite weighing 772 kilograms (1,702 lb.), discovered in Zacatecas in 1792. On the first floor, there's a fascinating exhibit of pre-Hispanic pottery and some exquisite pottery and clay figures recently unearthed near Tequila during the construction of the toll road. On the second floor is a small ethnography exhibit of the contemporary dress of the state's indigenous peoples, including the Coras, Mexicaneros, Nahuas, and Tepehuanes. It's open Tuesday through Saturday from 9am to 5:30pm and Sunday from 9am to 4:30pm. Admission is 41 pesos.

Behind the Cathedral is the Plaza Liberación, with the **Teatro Degollado** (deh-goh-*yah*-doh) on the opposite side. This neoclassical 19th-century opera house was named for Santos Degollado, a local patriot who fought with Juárez against Maximilian and the French. Apollo and the nine muses decorate the theater's pediment, and the interior is famous for both the acoustics and the rich decoration. It hosts a variety of performances during the year. It's open Monday through Friday from noon to 2pm and during performances.

To the right of the theater, across the street, is the sweet little **church of Santa María de Gracia,** built in 1573 as part of a convent for Dominican nuns. On the opposite side of the Teatro Degollado is the **church of San Agustín.** The former convent is now the **University of Guadalajara School of Music.**

Behind the Teatro Degollado begins the Plaza Tapatía, which leads to the Instituto Cabañas. It passes between a couple of low, modern office buildings. The **Tourism Information Office** is in a building on the right side.

Beyond these office buildings, the plaza opens into a large expanse, now framed by department stores and offices, and dominated by the abstract modern **Quetzalcóatl Fountain.** This fluid steel structure represents the mythical plumed serpent Quetzalcóatl, who figured so prominently in pre-Hispanic religion and culture, and exerts a presence even today.

At the far end of the plaza is the Hospicio Cabañas, formerly an orphanage and known today as the **Instituto Cultural Cabañas** ★★, Cabañas 8 (✆ **33/3818-2800,** ext.

 31009). Admission is 70 pesos. This vast structure is impressive for both its size (more than 23 courtyards) and its grandiose architecture, especially the cupola. Created by the famous Mexican architect Manuel Tolsá, it housed homeless children from 1829 to 1980. Today it's a thriving cultural center offering art shows and classes. The interior walls and ceiling of the main building display murals painted by Orozco in 1937. His *Man of Fire,* in the dome, is said to represent the spirit of humanity projecting itself toward the infinite. Other rooms hold additional Orozco works, as well as excellent contemporary art and temporary exhibits.

Just south of the Hospicio Cabañas (to the left as you exit) is the **Mercado Libertad** ★, Guadalajara's gigantic covered central market, the largest in Latin America. This site has been a market plaza since the 1500s; the present buildings date from the early 1950s (see "Shopping," below).

OTHER ATTRACTIONS

At **Parque Agua Azul (Blue Water Park),** plants, trees, shrubbery, statues, and fountains create an idyllic refuge from the bustling city. Many people come here to exercise early in the morning. The park is open daily from 7am to 6pm. Admission is 10 pesos for adults, 5 pesos for children.

Across Calzada Independencia from the park, cater-cornered from a small flower market, is the **Museo de Arqueología del Occidente de México,** Calzada Independencia at Avenida del Campesino. It houses a fine collection of pre-Hispanic pottery from Jalisco, Nayarit, and Colima. The museum is open Tuesday through Friday from 10am to 2pm and 4 to 7pm, Saturday and Sunday 10am to 2pm. There's a small admission charge.

The state-run **Instituto de la Artesanía** (✆ **33/3030-9090**) is just past the park entrance at Calzada Independencia and González Gallo. It exhibits just about every kind of craft produced in the state. (There is also a store—see "Shopping," below.) Hours are Monday to Friday 10am to 4pm, Saturday and Sunday 10am to 2pm.

Also near the park is Guadalajara's rodeo arena, **Lienzo Charro de Jalisco** (✆ **33/3619-0315**). Mexican cowboys, known as *charros,* are famous for their riding and lasso work, and the arena in Guadalajara is considered the big-time. Shows and competitions are every Sunday at noon. The arena is at Av. Dr. R. Michel 577, between González Gallo and Las Palomas.

Basílica de la Virgen de Zapopan ★

A wide promenade several blocks long leads to a large plaza and the basilica. This is the religious center of Guadalajara. On the Virgin's feast day (see "Special Events," above), the plaza fills with thousands of *tapatíos.* The 18th-century church is a combination of baroque and *plateresque* styles. The cult of the Virgin of Zapopan practically began with the foundation of Guadalajara itself. She is much revered and the object of many pilgrimages. In the plaza are several stands selling religious figures and paraphernalia. On one side of the church is a museum and store dedicated to the betterment of the Huichol Indians. It is worth a visit. Admission to the Huichol museum is 10 pesos.

Main Plaza, Zapopan (10km/6¼ miles northwest of downtown). No phone. Free admission. Daily 7am–7pm. Museum Mon–Sat 9:30am–1:30pm and 3–6pm; Sun 10am–3pm.

Museo de la Ciudad

This museum would be of interest to those curious about the city's history. It occupies the main house of an 18th-century farm. The permanent collection includes prints from the 18th and 19th centuries, artifacts of daily life from those times, antique weapons, and armor. Descriptive text is in Spanish only.

Independencia 684 (at M. Bárcenas). ✆ **33/1201-8712.** 10 pesos. Tues–Sun 10am–4pm.

Museo de las Artes de la Universidad de Guadalajara Inside the main lecture hall of this building (use entrance facing Juárez) are some more murals by Orozco. On the wall behind the stage is a bitter denunciation of corruption called *The People and Their False Leaders.* In the cupola is a more optimistic work—*The Five-fold Man,* who works to create a better society and better self. The museum (use entrance facing López Cotilla) has a permanent collection of modern art, which includes the works of many local artists.

Juárez 975. ✆ **33/3134-1664.** www.museodelasartes.udg.mx. Free admission. Tues–Fri 10am–6pm; Sat–Sun 10am–4pm.

Museo Pantaleón Panduro ★★★ This museum houses a magnificent collection of ceramic works. Collectors and connoisseurs of pottery will love it, but so will casual students of Mexican popular culture and the arts. This could be one of the great museums of Mexico, but I would change a few things to make it perfect. Every year a national competition is held in Tlaquepaque among ceramists from across Mexico. Prizes are awarded in seven categories and a best of show among these. (***Tip:*** The competition is held every June, which is a good time to visit Tlaquepaque.) After the competition, many of the winning pieces become part of the museum's collection. The virtuosity manifested in some of them will take your breath away. It would be wonderful if they were organized by category, with better explanatory text. But for now, the best thing you can do is cajole someone into showing you around and explaining the pieces on display. The staff is quite knowledgeable, and at least one member speaks English. The museum occupies a third of a large complex that in colonial times housed a religious community. It's now called **Centro Cultural El Refugio,** and it's worth ambling through after you've seen the museum's collection. Some improvements have been made to lighting.

P. Sánchez 191 (at Calle Florida, Tlaquepaque). ✆ **33/3639-5656.** Free admission. Tues–Sun 10am–6pm.

6 SHOPPING

Many visitors to Guadalajara come specifically for the shopping in Tlaquepaque and Tonalá (see below). If you have little free time, try the government-run **Instituto de la Artesanía Jalisciense,** González Gallo 20 at Calzada Independencia (✆ **33/3030-9090**), in Parque Agua Azul, just south of downtown. This place is perfect for one-stop shopping, with two floors of pottery, silver jewelry, dance masks, glassware, leather goods, and regional clothing from around the state and the country. As you enter, on the right are museum displays showing crafts and regional costumes from the state of Jalisco. The craft store is open Monday through Friday from 10am to 4pm, Saturday and Sunday from 10am to 2pm.

Guadalajara is known for its shoe industry; if you're in the market for a pair, try the **Galería del Calzado,** a shopping center made up exclusively of shoe stores. It's on the west side, about 6 blocks from Minerva Circle, at avenidas México and Yaquis. There is also a section of the street Esteban Alatorre, near Parque Morelos, which has practically nothing but shop after shop of women's dress shoes. It makes for very comfortable shopping.

Women's jewelry is another good that Guadalajara is known for. There are four large buildings filled with jewelry shops on the Plaza Tapatía, by the San Juan de Dios market, also known as Mercado Libertad.

Mariachis and *charros* come to Guadalajara from all over Mexico to buy highly worked belts and boots, wide-brimmed sombreros, and embroidered shirts. Several tailor shops and stores specialize in these outfits. One is **El Charro,** which has a store in the Plaza del

 Sol shopping center, across the street from the Hotel Presidente InterContinental, and one downtown on Juárez.

To view a good slice of what constitutes the material world for most Mexicans, try the mammoth **Mercado Libertad** ★ downtown. Besides food and produce, you'll see crafts, household goods, clothing, magic potions, and more. Although it opens at 7am, the market isn't in full swing until around 10am. Come prepared to haggle.

Gonvil, a popular bookstore chain, has a branch across from Plaza de los Hombres Ilustres on Avenida Hidalgo, and another a few blocks south at Av. 16 de Septiembre 118 (Alcalde becomes 16 de Septiembre south of the cathedral). It carries few English selections. **Sanborn's,** at the corner of Juárez and 16 de Septiembre, does a good job of keeping English-language periodicals in stock, but most are specialty magazines. For the widest selection of English-language books, try **Sandi Bookstore,** Av. Tepeyac 718 (✆ **33/3121-0863**), in the Chapalita neighborhood on the west side.

SHOPPING IN TLAQUEPAQUE & TONALA

Almost everyone who comes to Guadalajara for the shopping has Tlaquepaque (tlah-keh-*pah*-keh) and Tonalá in mind. These two suburbs are traditional handicraft centers that produce and sell a wide variety of *artesanía* (crafts).

Tlaquepaque

Located about 20 minutes from downtown, **Tlaquepaque** ★★★ has the best shopping for handicrafts and decorative arts in all of Mexico. Over the years, it has become a fashionable place, attracting talented designers in a variety of fields. Even though it's a suburb of a large city, it has a cozy, small-town feel; it's a pleasure simply to stroll through the central streets from shop to shop. No one hassles you; no one does the hard sell. There are some excellent places to eat (see "Where to Dine," earlier in this chapter), or you can grab some simple fare at **El Parián,** a building in the middle of town that houses a number of small eateries.

A taxi from downtown Guadalajara costs 100 pesos, or you can take one of the TUR 706 buses that make a fairly quick run from downtown to Tlaquepaque and Tonalá (see "Getting Around," earlier in this chapter).

The **Tlaquepaque Tourism Office** (✆ **33/3562-7050,** ext. 2320; turismo tlaquepaque@yahoo.com.mx) has an information booth in the town's main square by El Parián. It's staffed from 10am to 8pm daily.

If you are interested in pottery and ceramics, make sure to see the Pantaleón Panduro Museum, listed above. Another is the **Regional Ceramics Museum,** Independencia 237 (✆ **33/3635-5404**), which displays several aspects of traditional Jalisco pottery as produced in Tlaquepaque and Tonalá. The examples date back several generations and are grouped according to the technique used to produce them. Note the crosshatch design known as *petatillo* on some of the pieces; it's one of the region's oldest traditional motifs and is, like so many other motifs, a real pain to produce. Look for the wonderful old kitchen and dining room, complete with pots, utensils, and dishes. The museum is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10am to 6pm, Sunday from 10am to 3pm; admission is free.

The following list of Tlaquepaque shops will give you an idea of what to expect. This is just a small fraction of what you'll find; the best approach might be to just follow your nose. The main shopping is along **Independencia,** a pedestrian-only street that starts at El Parián. It was recently resurfaced in stone and looks pretty sharp. You can go door-to-door visiting the shops until the street ends, and then work your way back on **Calle Juárez,** the next street over, south of Independencia.

Tips Packing It In

If you need your purchases packed safely so that you can check them as extra baggage, or if you want them shipped, talk to **Margaret del Río.** She is an American who runs a large packing and shipping company at Juárez 347, Tlaquepaque (✆ **33/3657-5652**). Paying the excess baggage fee usually is cheaper than shipping, but it's less convenient.

Agustín Parra So you bought an old hacienda and are trying to restore its chapel—where do you go to find traditional baroque sculpture, religious art, gold-leafed objects, and even entire *retablos* (altarpieces)? Parra is famous for exactly this kind of work, and the store is lovely. It's open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 7pm. Independencia 158. ✆ **33/3657-8530.**

Bazar Hecht One of the village's longtime favorites. Here you'll find wood objects, handmade furniture, and a few antiques. It's open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 2:30pm and 3:30 to 7pm. Juárez 162. ✆ **33/3657-0316.**

Sergio Bustamante Sergio Bustamante's imaginative, original bronze, ceramic, and papier-mâché sculptures are among the most sought-after in Mexico—as well as the most copied. He also designs silver jewelry. This exquisite gallery showcases his work. It's open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 7pm, Sunday from noon to 4pm. Independencia 238 at Cruz Verde. ✆ **33/3639-5519.**

Teté Arte y Diseño Architectural decorative objects—especially hand-wrought-iron hardware for the "Old Mexico" look—are the specialty here. The store also has a large collection of wrought-iron chandeliers. It's open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 7:30pm. Juárez 173. ✆ **33/3635-7347.**

Tonalá: A Tradition of Pottery Making

Tonalá ★★ is a pleasant town 10 minutes from Tlaquepaque. It is without question the largest concentration of artisans in Mexico and was a center of pottery making since pre-Hispanic times. Half of the more than 400 workshops here produce a wide variety of high- and low-temperature pottery. Other local artists work with forged iron, cantera stone, brass and copper, marble, miniatures, papier-mâché, textiles, blown glass, and gesso. This is a good place to look for custom work in any of these materials; you can locate a large pool of craftspeople by asking around a little.

Market days are Thursday and Sunday, when Tonalá is Mexico in all its chaotic glory. Expect large crowds and blocks and blocks of stalls displaying locally made pottery and glassware, cheap manufactured goods, food, and all kinds of bric-a-brac. You'll see herb men selling a rainbow selection of dried medicinal herbs from wheelbarrows, magicians entertaining crowds, and craftspeople spreading their wares on the plaza's sidewalks. All kinds of crafts are for sale, most of which can be found in various parts of Mexico, but every now and then you'll come across something unique, produced by a local artisan. Visiting Tonalá on nonmarket days is easier. You can walk around more easily and find stores and workshops. Tonalá is the place for buying sets of margarita glasses, the widely seen blue-rimmed hand-blown glassware, finely painted *petatillo* ware, and the pottery typically associated with Mexico.

Tequila: The Name Says It All

Tequila is an entertaining (and intoxicating) town, well worth a day trip from Guadalajara. Several taxi drivers charge about 650 pesos to drive you to the town, get you into a tour of a distillery, take you to a restaurant, and haul you back to Guadalajara. A few of them speak English. One recommended driver is **José Gabriel Gómez** (✆ **33/3649-0791;** jgabriel-taxi@hotmail.com); he has a new car and drives carefully. Call him in the evening. Tour companies also arrange bus trips to Tequila; ask at the ticket kiosk of Tranvías Turísticos, mentioned earlier. That company has started a weekend tour to Tequila, taking people to the Cofradía distillery.

Tequila has many distilleries, including the famous brands **Sauza** and **José Cuervo.** All the distilleries—the big, modern ones and the small, more traditional ones—offer tours.

Another approach is to take the **Tequila Express** to the town of Amatitán, home of the Herradura distillery. This excursion is more about having a good time and enjoying some of the things this area is known for than it is about sampling tequila. Serious tequila enthusiasts will be disappointed. There's a nice tour of the distillery, but most of the time is spent watching mariachis and Mexican cowboys perform. The tequila tastings are limited. Everyone has a good time and drinks a fair share, but a trip to the town proper is more informative and offers a greater opportunity for trying different tequilas.

The Tequila Express leaves from the train station on Friday and Saturday, and sometimes on Sunday during vacation and holiday season. It's well organized. You need to be there by 10am. The Guadalajara Chamber of Commerce (Cámara de Comercio), at Vallarta and Niño Obrero (✆ **33/3880-9099**), organizes this trip. Buy tickets ahead of time at the main office; at the small office in the Centro Histórico at Morelos 395; at Calle Colón (no phone); or through Ticketmaster (✆ **33/3818-3800**). Office hours are Monday through Friday from 9am to 2pm and 4 to 6pm. Tickets cost 900 pesos for adults, 500 pesos for children 6 to 12. The tour includes food and drink. It returns to Guadalajara at about 8pm. Travel time is 1¾ hours each way. For more information, see **www.tequilaexpress.com.mx**.

The **Tonalá Tourism Office** (✆ **33/1200-3912**) operates an information kiosk on the town square. It's open Monday to Friday from 9am to 2:30pm.

Tonalá is also the home of the **Museo Nacional de Cerámica,** Constitución 104, between Hidalgo and Morelos (✆ **33/3284-6000,** ext. 1523). The museum occupies most of the **Casa del Artesano,** which promotes local artisans. There is a store to the right just as you enter. You should take time to look through the store and its displays. If there's anything that interests you, ask the staff, who can tell you (in Spanish) about the different methods used to make pottery and other work and show you the difference between original methods and commercial shortcuts. If you like anything in particular they can direct you to the particular workshop where it was made and tell you of others

that make something similar. The museum and store are open Monday through Friday from 9am to 8pm. Admission is free; the fee for using a video or still camera is 85 pesos per camera.

7 GUADALAJARA AFTER DARK

MARIACHIS

You can't go far in Guadalajara without coming across some mariachis, but seeing really talented performers takes some effort. Try **Casa Bariachi,** Av. Vallarta 2221 (✆ **33/3615-0029**). In Tlaquepaque, go to **El Parián,** the building on the town square where mariachis serenade diners under the archways.

THE CLUB & MUSIC SCENE

Guadalajara, as you might expect, has a lot of variety in entertainment. For the most extensive listing of clubs and performances, get your hands on a copy of *Ocio,* the weekly insert of *Público.* You'll find listings in the back, categorized by type of music. For good mariachis, you should go to Casa Bariachi, mentioned above. Across the street from that club is another called **La Bodeguita del Medio** (✆ **33/3630-1620**), at Av. Vallarta 2320. It offers live old-school Cuban son. The groups come from Cuba and rotate every few months. The last night I visited the place, a small combo was playing in a little corner, partly mixing in with the crowd. The place is small, but people were making room to dance. Another thing to do is track down a Cuban diva, named **Rosalia,** who lives in Guadalajara. She's a great talent and always has a tight band playing with her as she belts out salsa and merengue tunes.

10

Puerto Vallarta & the Central Pacific Coast

by Shane Christensen

Known as the Mexican Riviera, Mexico's Pacific coastline—with its palm-studded jungles sweeping into the deep blue of the ocean—is a spectacular backdrop for some of the country's favored resort cities. From Mazatlán through Puerto Vallarta and curving down to Manzanillo, modern hotels, easy air access, and a growing array of activities and adventure tourism attractions have transformed this region into a premier resort area. And for those seeking an experience off the beaten track, the villages that border this stretch of coastline remain largely undiscovered.

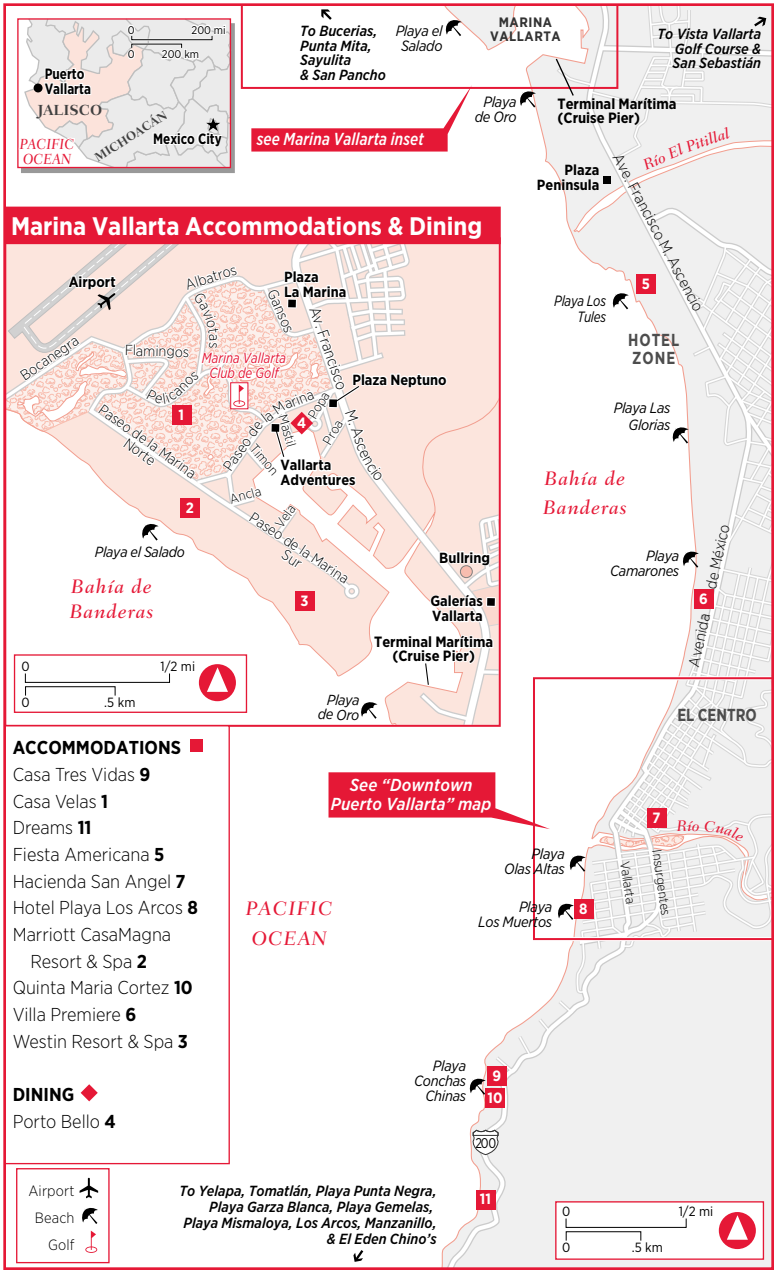
Puerto Vallarta, with its traditional Mexican architecture and gold-sand beaches bordered by jungle-covered mountains, is the second-most-visited resort in Mexico (trailing only Cancún). The original town center of Vallarta maintains a small-town charm despite its sophisticated hotels, great restaurants, thriving arts community, active nightlife, and wide variety of ecotourism attractions. **Mazatlán** may be the greatest resort value in Mexico, luring visitors with exceptional fishing, a historic downtown, and the addition of championship golf facilities and new residential developments. **Manzanillo** is surprisingly relaxed; even though it's one of Mexico's most active commercial ports, it also offers great fishing, diving, and golf. And along **Costa Alegre,** between Puerto Vallarta and Manzanillo, pristine coves are home to unique luxury and value-priced resorts that cater to travelers seeking seclusion. Just north of Puerto Vallarta, bordering Banderas Bay, are the increasingly popular coastal towns of **Nuevo Vallarta, Bucerías,** and, at the northern tip, **Punta Mita,** home of the first Four Seasons and St. Regis resorts in Latin America, and two Jack Nicklaus golf courses. Punta Mita is now considered Mexico's most exclusive luxury address.

Villages such as **Rincón de Guayabitos, Barra de Navidad,** and **Melaque** are laid-back and almost undiscovered. Starkly different from the spirited resort towns, they offer travelers a glimpse into local culture. Excursions to these smaller villages make easy day trips or extended stays.

1 PUERTO VALLARTA ★★★

885km (549 miles) NW of Mexico City; 339km (210 miles) W of Guadalajara; 285km (177 miles) NW of Manzanillo; 447km (277 miles) SE of Mazatlán; 239km (148 miles) SW of Tepic

Puerto Vallarta remains my favorite part of this colorful country, for its unrivaled combination of Mexican warmth, international diversity, and artistic charm. Beyond the cobblestone streets, graceful cathedral, and welcoming atmosphere, Puerto Vallarta offers a wealth of natural beauty and man-made pleasures, including hotels of all classes and prices, more than 250 restaurants, a sizzling nightlife, and enough shops and galleries to tempt even jaded consumers.



ACCOMMODATIONS

- Casa Tres Vidas **9**
- Casa Velas **1**
- Dreams **11**
- Fiesta Americana **5**
- Hacienda San Angel **7**
- Hotel Playa Los Arcos **8**
- Marriott CasaMagna Resort & Spa **2**
- Quinta Maria Cortez **10**
- Villa Premiere **6**
- Westin Resort & Spa **3**

DINING

- Porto Bello **4**

Ecotourism activities flourish—from canopy tours to whale-watching, ocean kayaking, and diving with giant mantas in Banderas Bay. Forty-two kilometers (26 miles) of beaches, many in pristine coves accessible only by boat, extend around the bay. High in the Sierra Madre, the mystical Huichol Indians still live in relative isolation in an effort to protect their centuries-old culture from outside influences.

Vallarta (as locals refer to it) was never a "sleepy little fishing village," as is often claimed. It began as a port for processing silver brought down from mines in the Sierra Madre—then was forever transformed by a movie director and two star-crossed lovers. In 1963, John Huston brought stars Ava Gardner and Richard Burton here to film the Tennessee Williams play *Night of the Iguana.* Burton's new love, Elizabeth Taylor, came along to ensure the romance remained in full bloom—even though both were married to others at the time. Titillated, the international paparazzi arrived, and when they weren't photographing the famous couple—or Gardner water-skiing back from the set, surrounded by a bevy of beach boys—they shot the beauty of Puerto Vallarta.

Luxury hotels and shopping centers have sprung up north and south of the original town, allowing Vallarta to grow into a city of 350,000 residents—with about three million annual visitors. And despite the ever-increasing amount of traffic to and from this Pacific paradise, downtown Vallarta retains much of its original colonial charm.

Cool breezes flow down from the mountains along the Río Cuale, which runs through the city center. Fanciful public sculptures grace the *malecón* (boardwalk), which is bordered by lively restaurants, shops, and nightclubs. The *malecón* is a magnet for both residents and visitors, who stroll the main walkway to take in an ocean breeze, a multihued sunset, or a moonlit, perfect wave.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There & Departing

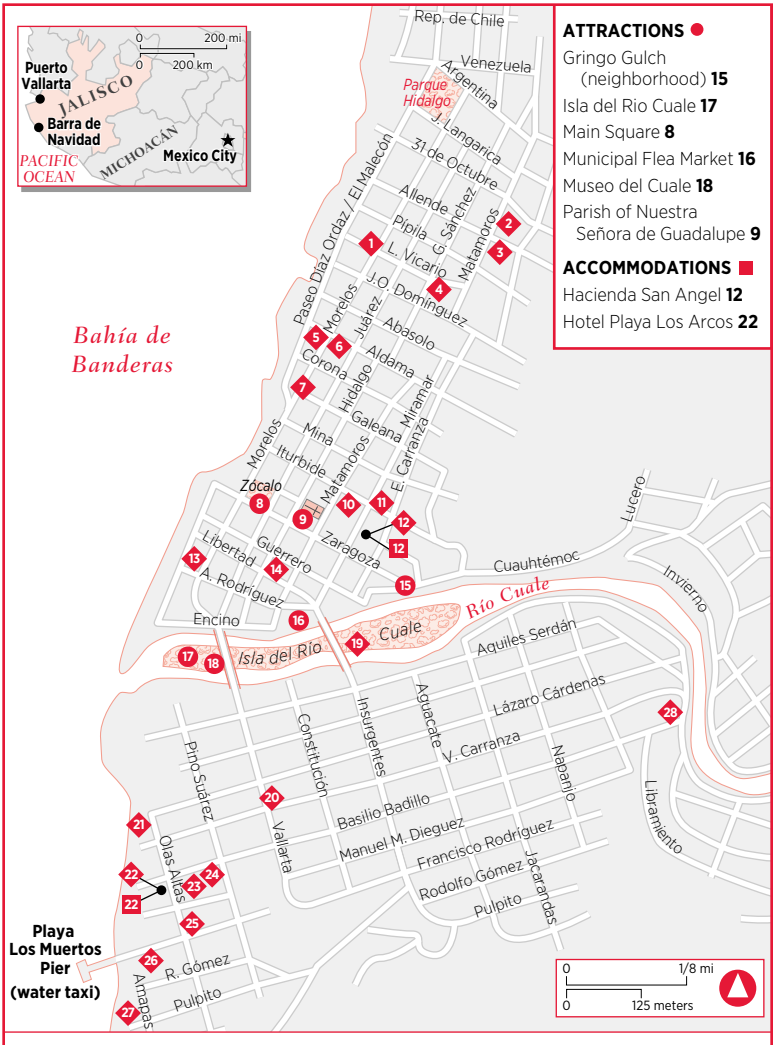
BY PLANE For a list of international carriers serving Mexico, see "Airline & Car Rental Websites," p. 764. Local numbers of some international carriers serving Puerto Vallarta are **Alaska Airlines** (✆ 322/221-1350), **American Airlines** (✆ 322/221-1799), **US Airways** (✆ 322/221-2936), **Continental** (✆ 322/221-1025), **Delta** (✆ 322/221-2425), **Frontier** (✆ 322/221-1435), and **United** (✆ 322/221-3264).

Aeroméxico (✆ **322/221-1204** or 221-1030) flies from Los Angeles, San Diego, Aguascalientes, Guadalajara, La Paz, León, Mexico City, Morelia, and Tijuana. **Mexicana** (✆ **322/224-8900** or 221-1266) has direct or nonstop flights from Chicago, Los Angeles, Guadalajara, Mazatlán, and Mexico City.

Major car-rental agencies have counters at the airport, including **Alamo** (✆ 322/221-1228), **Avis** (✆ 322/221-1657), **Budget** (✆ 322/221-1210), **Dollar/Thrifty** (✆ 322/209-1005), and **National** (✆ 322/221-1226), and are open after flight arrivals. After registering, they will send a shuttle to take you to the nearby car-rental lots. Daily rates run $40 to $80.

BY CAR The coastal Hwy. 200 is the only choice from Mazatlán (6 hr. north) or Manzanillo (3½–4 hr. south). Hwy. 15 from Guadalajara to Tepic takes 6 hours; to save as much as 2 hours, take Hwy. 15A from Chapalilla to Compostela, bypassing Tepic, and then continue south on Hwy. 200 to Puerto Vallarta.

BY BUS The bus station, **Central Camionera de Puerto Vallarta,** is just north of the airport, approximately 11km (6¾ miles) from downtown. It offers overnight guarded parking and baggage storage. Most major first-class bus lines operate from here, including TAP, Pacifico, Futura, Turistar, Elite, Primera Plus, and ETN, with transportation to



ATTRACTIONS ●
Gringo Gulch (neighborhood) **15**
Isla del Rio Cuale **17**
Main Square **8**
Municipal Flea Market **16**
Museo del Cuale **18**
Parish of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe **9**

ACCOMMODATIONS ■
Hacienda San Angel **12**
Hotel Playa Los Arcos **22**

DINING ◆
Agave Grill **7**
Archie's Wok **26**
Barcelona Tapas **2**
Cafe de Olla **23**
Cafe des Artistes **4**
Cafe Kaiser Maximilian **22**
Cafe San Angel **25**
Daiquiri Dick's **21**
de Santos **1**
El Arrayan **3**
El Planeta Vegetariano **10**
Espresso **20**
Fajita Republic **24**
Hacienda San Angel **12**
La Esquina de Los Caprichos **11**
La Palapa **27**
Las Palomas **5**
Le Bistro **19**
Red Cabbage Cafe **28**
Trio **14**
Vitea **13**
Xitomates **6**

 points throughout Mexico, including Mazatlán (350 pesos), Manzanillo (215 pesos), Guadalajara (300 pesos), Barra de Navidad (170 pesos), and Mexico City (890 pesos). Taxis into town cost approximately $10 and are readily available; public buses operate from 7am to 11pm and regularly stop in front of the arrivals hall.

Orientation

ARRIVING BY PLANE The airport is close to the north end of town near the Marina Vallarta, about 10km (6¼ miles) from downtown. **Transportes Terrestres Puerto Vallarta** minivans and **Aeromovil** taxis make the trip. They use a zone pricing system, with fares clearly posted at the ticket booths. Fares start at $16 for a ride to Marina Vallarta and go up to $28 for the south shore hotels. Federally licensed airport taxis exclusively provide transportation from the airport, and their fares are more than three times as high as city (yellow) taxi fares. A trip to downtown Puerto Vallarta costs $23, whereas a return trip using a city taxi costs only $10. Only airport cabs may pick up passengers leaving the airport. You can also buy a ticket for a *colectivo* (a shuttle van that goes every 30 min.) at the official taxi stand which, at only $9 to downtown, is the cheapest option.

VISITOR INFORMATION Prior to arrival, a great source of general information is the **Puerto Vallarta Tourism Board** (✆ **888/384-6822** in the U.S., or 322/224-1175 in Mexico; www.visitpuertovallarta.com). The office is located in the Hotel Canto del Sol in the Zona Comercial Las Glorias. It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 2pm and 4 to 7pm, and Saturday from 9am to 1pm. If you have further questions after you arrive, visit the downtown **Municipal Tourism Office** at Juárez and Independencia (✆ **322/226-8080,** ext. 230), in a corner of the white Presidencia Municipal building on the northwest end of the main square. In addition to offering a listing of current events and promotional brochures, the employees can assist with specific questions—there's usually an English speaker on staff. This is also the office of the tourist police. It's open Monday through Saturday from 8am to 8pm, Sunday from 10am to 6pm.

The **State Tourism Office,** Plaza Marina L 144, 2nd Floor (✆ **322/221-2676,** -2677, -2678), also offers brochures and can assist with specific questions about Puerto Vallarta and other points in the state of Jalisco, including Guadalajara, Costa Alegre, the town of Tequila, and the program that promotes stays in authentic rural haciendas. It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm.

CITY LAYOUT The seaside promenade, the *malecón,* is a common reference point for giving directions. It's next to **Paseo Díaz Ordaz** and runs north-south through the central downtown area. From the waterfront, the town stretches back into the hills a half-dozen blocks. The areas bordering the **Río Cuale** are the oldest parts of town—the original Puerto Vallarta. The area immediately south of the river, called **Olas Altas** after its main street (and sometimes Los Muertos after the beach of the same name), is home to a growing selection of sidewalk cafes, fine restaurants, espresso bars, and hip nightclubs. In the center of town, nearly everything is within walking distance both north and south of the river. **Bridges** on Insurgentes (northbound traffic) and Ignacio Vallarta (southbound traffic) link the two sections of downtown.

AREA LAYOUT Beyond downtown, Puerto Vallarta has grown along the beach to the north and south. Linking downtown to the airport is **Avenida Francisco Medina Ascencio,** home of many high-rise hotels (in an area called the **Zona Hotelera,** or Hotel Zone), plus several shopping centers with a variety of dining options.

Marina Vallarta, a resort city within a city, lies at the northern edge of the Hotel Zone, just a few minutes from the airport. It boasts a number of excellent hotels, condominiums,

and homes; a huge marina with 450 yacht slips; a golf course; restaurants and bars; and several shopping plazas. Because it was originally a swamp, the beaches are somewhat less desirable, with darker sand and seasonal inflows of cobblestones. The Marina Vallarta peninsula faces the bay and looks south to the town of Puerto Vallarta.

Nuevo Vallarta is a planned resort north of the airport, across the Ameca River in the state of Nayarit (about 13km/8 miles north of downtown). It houses a number of all-inclusive hotels, condominiums and timeshares, and a yacht marina, with a selection of restaurants and shopping. Most hotels here cater to families, with some of the finest beaches in the bay, but guests usually travel into Puerto Vallarta (about $25 a cab ride) for anything other than poolside or beach action. Regularly scheduled public bus service costs about $2 and runs until 10pm.

Bucerías, a small beachside village of cobblestone streets, villas, excellent seafood restaurants, and just a few art galleries and small hotels, sits farther north along Banderas Bay, 30km (19 miles) beyond the airport. Past Bucerías, following the curved coastline of Banderas Bay, you'll find **La Cruz de Huanaxcle,** a new mega marina project, but still an authentic, colorful seaside town. Continue to the end of the road and you'll reach **Punta Mita.** Once a rustic fishing village, it has been artfully developed as an exclusive luxury destination. Although the fishing village still exists, it has been all but eclipsed by the large gated community of Punta Mita that houses private villas, a few world-class resorts, and two championship golf courses. The site of an ancient celestial observatory, it is an exquisite setting, with white-sand beaches and clear waters. The northern shore of Banderas Bay is emerging as the area's most exclusive address for luxury villas and accommodations.

The southern coastal highway stretches south from downtown Vallarta in the direction of Manzanillo and the Costa Alegre. Immediately south of town lies the exclusive residential and rental district of **Conchas Chinas.** Ten kilometers (6¼ miles) south, on **Playa Mismaloya** (where *Night of the Iguana* was filmed), lies the Barceló La Jolla de Mismaloya resort. There's no road on the southern shoreline of Banderas Bay, but three small coastal villages are popular attractions for visitors to Puerto Vallarta: **Las Animas, Quimixto,** and **Yelapa,** all accessible only by boat. The tiny, pristine cove of **Caletas,** site of John Huston's former home, is a popular day- or nighttime excursion (see "Boat Tours," later). Dreams Resort also lies south of town at Playa Las Estacas.

GETTING AROUND **By Taxi** Taxis are plentiful and relatively inexpensive. Most trips from downtown to the northern Hotel Zone and Marina Vallarta cost 50 to 100 pesos; to or from Marina Vallarta to Mismaloya Beach (to the south) costs 130 to 170 pesos. Rates are charged by zone and are generally posted in the lobbies of hotels. Taxis can also be hired by the hour or day for longer trips. Rates run about 200 pesos per hour, with discounts available for full-day rates—consider this an alternative to renting a car.

By Car Rental cars are readily available at the airport, through travel agencies, and through the most popular U.S. car-rental services, but unless you're planning a distant side trip, don't bother. Car rentals are expensive, especially because of insurance rates, and parking around town is very challenging, unless you opt for one of the two new parking garages constructed on either end of the *malecón* zone (at Park Hidalgo to the north, and adjacent to the northern border of the Cuale River to the south). If you see a sign for a cheap car or jeep rental, be aware that these are lures to get folks to attend timeshare presentations. Unless you are interested in a timeshare, stopping to inquire will be a (possibly annoying) waste of your time.

By Bus City buses, easy to navigate and inexpensive, will serve just about all your transportation needs. They run from the airport through the Hotel Zone along Morelos Street (1 block inland from the *malecón*), across the Río Cuale, and inland on Vallarta, looping back through the downtown hotel and restaurant districts on Insurgentes and several other downtown streets. To get to the northern hotel strip from old Puerto Vallarta, take the ZONA HOTELES, IXTAPA, or LAS JUNTAS bus. These buses may also post the names of hotels they pass, such as Krystal, Sheraton, and others. Buses marked MARINA VALLARTA travel inside this area, stopping at the major hotels there.

Other buses operate every 10 to 15 minutes south to either Mismaloya Beach or Boca de Tomatlán (a sign in the front window indicates the destination) from Constitución and Basilio Badillo, a few blocks south of the river. Buses run generally from 6am to 11pm, and it's rare to wait more than a few minutes for one. The fare is about 6 pesos. You do not have to have exact change; the driver will make change.

By Boat The *muelle* (cruise-ship pier), also called Terminal Marítima, is where **excursion boats** to Yelapa, Las Animas, Quimixto, and the Marietas Islands depart. It's north of town near the airport, an inexpensive taxi or bus ride from town. Just take any bus marked IXTAPA, LAS JUNTAS, PITILLAL, or AURORA and tell the driver to let you off at the Terminal Marítima. ***Note:*** Oddly enough, you must pay a nominal federal tax to gain access to the pier—and your departing excursion boat.

Water taxis to Yelapa, Las Animas, and Quimixto leave multiple times per day starting at 9:30am and continuing until 4:30pm from the pier at Los Muertos Beach (south of downtown), on Rodolfo Rodríguez next to the Hotel Marsol. A round-trip ticket to Yelapa (the farthest point, which takes about 45 min. each way) costs 250 pesos. The latest return time is usually 4:30pm, but confirm the pickup time with your water taxi captain. Other water taxis to Yalapa depart from Boca de Tomatlán, about 30 minutes south of town by public bus. These can be a better option if you want more flexible departure and return times from the southern beaches. Generally, they leave on the hour for the southern shore destinations, or more frequently if there is traffic. Prices run about $15 round-trip, with rates clearly posted on a sign on the beach. A private water taxi costs $60 to $120, depending on your destination, and allows you to choose your own return time. They'll take up to eight people for that price, so often people band together at the beach to hire one. There's also water taxi service from Los Muertos Beach to Paradise Village in Nuevo Vallarta for 150 pesos round-trip.

Fast Facts Puerto Vallarta

Area Code The telephone area code is **322.**

Climate It's sunny and warm all year, with tropical temperatures; however, evenings and early mornings in the winter can turn quite cool. Summers are very hot, 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.

Currency Exchange Banks are found throughout downtown and in the other prime shopping areas. Most banks are open Monday through Friday from 9am

to 4pm, with shorter hours on Saturday. ATMs are common throughout Vallarta, including the central plaza downtown. They are becoming the most favorable way to exchange currency, with bank rates plus 24-hour convenience. *Casas de cambio* (money-exchange houses), located throughout town, offer longer hours than the banks, with only slightly lower exchange rates.

Drugstores **CMQ Farmacia,** Basilio Badillo 365 (✆ **322/222-1330**), is open 24 hours and makes free deliveries to hotels between 11am and 10pm with a minimum purchase of $20. **Farmacias Guadalajara,** Emiliano Zapata 232 (✆ **322/224-1811**), is also open 24 hours.

Embassies & Consulates The **U.S. Consular Agency** office (✆ **322/222-0069;** www.guadalajara.usconsulate.gov/puerto_vallarta.html) is located in Nuevo Vallarta at Paseo de los Cocoteros 85, in the Paradise Plaza, Local L-7, on the second floor. It's open Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 12:30pm. The **Canadian Consulate** (✆ **322/293-0099,** -0098; 24-hr. emergency line 01-800/706-2900 in Mexico) is located in Plaza Las Glorias, Blvd. Francisco Medina Ascencio 1951, Edificio Obelisco, Loc. 108 (you'll see the Canadian flag hanging from the balcony). It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 3:30pm.

Emergencies **Police** emergency, ✆ **060** or **066;** local police, ✆ **322/290-0513,** -0512; intensive care ambulance, **Cruz Roja (Red Cross),** ✆ **322/222-1533** and **San Javier Marina Hospital Ambulance Service** (✆ **322/226-1010,** ext. 340).

Hospitals The following offer U.S.-standards service and are available 24 hours: **Ameri-Med Urgent Care,** Avenida Francisco Medina Ascencio at Plaza Neptuno, Loc. D-1, Marina Vallarta (✆ **322/226-2080;** www.amerimed-hospitals.com); **San Javier Marina Hospital,** Av. Francisco Medina Ascencio 2760, Zona Hotelera (✆ **322/226-1010**); and **Cornerstone Hospital,** Av. los Tules 136 (behind Plaza Caracol; ✆ **322/224-9400**).

Internet Access Most Vallarta hotels have Wi-Fi, and the resorts typically offer business centers. You can also get access at **PVCafe.Com** (✆ **322/223-3308**), located in the old town at Olas Altas 246. It's open daily from 8am to 11pm and charges 35 pesos per hour for computer use.

Newspapers & Magazines ***Vallarta Today,*** a weekly English-language newspaper (✆ **322/225-3323;** www.vallartatoday.com), is a good source for dining, cultural events, retirement information, real estate, and healthy living in Vallarta. The bilingual quarterly city magazine ***Vallarta Lifestyles*** (✆ **322/221-0106**) is also very popular. Both are for sale at area newsstands and hotel gift shops. The weekly English-language ***P.V. Tribune*** (✆ **322/223-0585**) is distributed free throughout town and offers an objective local viewpoint. ***PV Mirror*** (**www.pvmirror.com**) is another English-language city paper and online site that offers local news and visitor information.

Post Office The *correo* is at Colombia Street, behind Hidalgo park, and is open Monday through Friday from 9am to 6pm, Saturday from 9am to 1pm.

Safety Puerto Vallarta enjoys a very low crime rate. Public transportation is safe to use, and Tourist Police (dressed in white safari uniforms with white hats) are available

to answer questions, give directions, and offer assistance. Most encounters with the police are linked to using or purchasing drugs—so don't (see chapter 3). ***Note:*** The tourist police sometimes conduct random personal searches for drugs. If this happens, you are within your rights to request the name of the officer. Report any unusual incidents to the local consular office.

WHERE TO STAY

Beyond a varied selection of hotels and resorts, Puerto Vallarta offers many alternative accommodations. Oceanfront or marina-view condominiums and elegant private villas can offer families and small groups a better value and more ample space than a hotel. For short-term rentals, check out **www.costavallartaboutiquevillas.com**, ✆ **800/728-9098** toll-free in the U.S. and Canada, or 01-800/508-7923 toll-free in Mexico. Office hours are Monday through Friday 9am to 6pm, Saturday 9am to 2pm. Prices start at $100 a night for nonbeachside condos and reach into the thousands of dollars for penthouse condos or private villas. **Bayside Properties** (✆ **322/222-8148;** www.baysidepropertiespv.com) located at Francisco Rodríguez 160, on the corner of Olas Altas, rents condos, villas, and hotels for individuals and large groups, including gay-friendly accommodations. Another reputable full-service travel agency is **Puerto Vallarta Villas** (✆ **415/704-0455** in the U.S. or 322/221-5495; www.puertovallartavillas.com). For the ultimate, indulge in a Punta Mita Villa rental within this exclusive resort. Contact **Mita Residential** (✆ **877/561-2893** toll-free in the U.S., or 329/291-5300; www.mitaresidential.com).

This section lists hotels from the airport south along Banderas Bay.

Marina Vallarta

Marina Vallarta is the most modern and deluxe area of hotel development in Puerto Vallarta. Located immediately south of the airport and just north of the cruise-ship terminal, it's a planned development whose centerpiece is a 450-slip modern marina.

In addition to the hotels reviewed below, an excellent choice is **Casa Velas,** on the golf course at Pelícanos 311 (✆ **866/529-8813** in the U.S., or 322/226-6688; www.hotelcasavelas.com). High-season rates start at $250 per person, all-inclusive.

Marriott CasaMagna Resort & Spa ★★ (Kids) Set on a lovely stretch of beach in Marina Vallarta, the family-friendly CasaMagna underwent a $10.7-million renovation in 2008. Guest rooms, all of which are accessed through open-air hallways, have been upgraded with contemporary Mexican styling, marble floors, and flower accents, and bougainvillea hangs from each balcony overlooking the pool and bay. Pool activities and beach watersports are offered throughout the day, and there's a luxurious yet reasonably priced spa. Among the many diversions for children is a turtle-preservation program that runs from June to November and provides guests the chance to release baby turtles into the sea. The resort houses four restaurants, including the teppanyaki-style (cook at your table) Mikado, as well as the colonial-designed Mexican La Estancia. Executive Chef Fred Ruiz offers interactive cooking classes ($90 per person), beginning with a tour of the hotel's own chile, herb, and cactus garden. Service in the hotel, which has wonderful energy, is first-rate.

Paseo de la Marina Norte 435, Marina Vallarta, 48354 Puerto Vallarta, Jal. ✆ **800/223-6388** in the U.S., or 322/226-0000. Fax 322/226-0060. www.puertovallartamarriott.com. 433 units. High season $279–$309 double, $459–$479 suite; low season $179–$199 double, $359–$389 suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; deli; 3 bars including Champion's Sports Bar, lobby bar, and pool bar; concierge; golf privileges at Marina Vallarta Golf Club; kids' club; state-of-the-art fitness center and spa w/ classes (fee), sauna, steam room, and whirlpool; oceanside pool; room service; 2 lighted grass tennis courts. *In room:* A/C, flatscreen TV, i-Home, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi (for a fee).

Westin Resort & Spa Puerto Vallarta ★★ Stunning architecture and vibrant colors are the hallmark of this award-winning property. Although the grounds are large—over 8.5 hectares (21 acres) with 268m (879 ft.) of beachfront—the warm service creates the feeling of an intimate resort. Hammocks are strung between the palms closest to the beach, where there are also private beach cabañas. All rooms have balconies with ocean views and are contemporary in style, with oversize wood furnishings, tile floors, original art, and tub/showers; a certain number of them have been designated as "Westin Workout rooms." Eight junior suites and some double rooms have Jacuzzis, and the five grand suites consist of two levels, with spacious living areas. Two floors of rooms make up the Royal Beach Club with VIP services, including a private lounge with continental breakfast and evening drinks included. The hotel features an excellent spa and fitness center, as well as an exclusive beach area with pergolas available for daily rent.

Paseo de la Marina Sur 205, Marina Vallarta, 48354 Puerto Vallarta, Jal. ✆ **800/228-3000** in the U.S., or 322/226-1100. Fax 322/226-1144. www.starwoodhotels.com/westin. 280 units. High season $309–$539 double, $555–$839 suite; low season $150–$400 double, $440–$700 suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 3 bars; beach club; concierge; kids' club; golf privileges at Marina Vallarta Golf Club; 4 free-form pools; room service; full-service spa and health club w/sauna and steam room; 3 lighted grass tennis courts. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi (for a fee).

The Hotel Zone

The main street running between the airport and town is Avenida Francisco Medina Ascencio. The hotels here offer excellent wide beachfronts with generally tranquil waters for swimming. From here it's a quick 50 peso taxi or bus ride to downtown.

Fiesta Americana Puerto Vallarta ★★ Kids The Fiesta Americana's towering, three-story, thatched *palapa* lobby is a landmark in the Hotel Zone, and the resort is known for its excellent beach, quality rooms, and friendly service. An abundance of plants, splashing fountains, constant breezes, and comfortable seating areas in the lobby create a casual South Seas ambience. The nine-story terra-cotta building embraces a large beachfront plaza and pool bustling with activities. Marble-trimmed rooms in neutral tones with pastel accents contain carved headboards and comfortable rattan-and-wicker furniture. All have private balconies with ocean and pool views. Beachside massages continue from morning to sunset, and there's now a full-service spa. The hotel is especially popular with Mexican and North American families.

Av. Francisco Medina Ascencio Km 2.5, 48300 Puerto Vallarta, Jal. ✆ **322/226-2100.** Fax 322/224-2108. www.fiestaamericana.com. 291 units. High season $200–$400 double; low season $145–$250 double; year-round $400 and up suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Limited free parking. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 3 bars; kids' club; fitness center; large pool w/activities; room service; full-service spa. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi (for a fee).

Villa Premiere Puerto Vallarta Hotel & Spa ★★ Located just a few blocks north of the start of Puerto Vallarta's *malecón,* the Premiere lies within walking distance of downtown restaurants, shops, galleries, and clubs. With a first-rate spa and a policy that restricts guests to ages 16 and older, it's a place that caters to relaxation. Four types

of rooms are available, but all are decorated in warm colors with tile floors and light wood furnishings. Deluxe rooms have ocean views, a small seating area with comfortable chairs, and a sizable private balcony. Spa suites offer Jacuzzis in the bedrooms. The stunning bi-level spa is the real attraction of this hotel—scented with aromatherapy and glowing with candlelight, it uses top-notch, 100% natural products, most based on Mexico's natural treasures like coconut, aloe, and papaya. The Premiere also offers an all-inclusive option, with all meals and drinks included.

San Salvador 117, behind the Buenaventura Hotel, Col. 5 de Diciembre, 48350 Puerto Vallarta, Jal. ✆ **877/886-9176** in the U.S., or 322/226-7001, -7040. Fax 322/226-7043. www.premiereonline.com.mx. 83 units. Room only: High season $185–$430 double; low season $135–$370 double. All-inclusive: High season $335–$560 per person, based on double occupancy; low season $185–$360 per person, double. AE, MC, V. Limited street parking. Children 15 and younger not accepted. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; fitness center; yoga classes and meditation workshops; outdoor pool; room service; full spa w/sauna and steam room; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar.

Downtown to Los Muertos Beach

This part of town has undergone a renaissance; economical hotels and good-value guesthouses dominate. Several blocks off the beach, you can find numerous budget inns offering clean, simply furnished rooms; most offer discounts for long-term stays. Many hotels in Viejo Vallarta (the old town, south of the Rio Cuale) are gay and straight friendly.

Hacienda San Angel ★★ Finds This is Puerto Vallarta's most upscale boutique hotel, with a more formal feel than most Vallarta accommodations. Although it's not on the beach, you'll hardly miss the surf since the hotel offers beautiful vistas of the city and Bay of Banderas. Once the home of Richard Burton, it lies just behind Puerto Vallarta's famed church and, in fact, looks somewhat like a church itself (guests can request to stay in Burton's former room, "Celestial"). The Hacienda consists of four rustic colonial villas; the first two are joined to the third villa by a path that winds through a lovely terraced tropical garden with statuary and a fountain. The inn recently expanded across the street to an old chapel with seven guest rooms decorated in rich colonial furnishings and tapestries; many have antiques and claw-foot tubs. The heated pool and deck lie next to the elegant open-air restaurant, and a second sun deck overlooks the church and sea beyond. Each morning, continental breakfast is served outside your suite at the hour you request.

Miramar 336, Col. Centro, 48300 Puerto Vallarta, Jal. ✆ **877/815-6594** or 322/222-2692. www.haciendasanangel.com. 20 units. High season $485 and up double; low season $435 and up double. All rates include daily continental breakfast. Rates for the entire Hacienda or separate villas consisting of 3 suites each are also available. AE, MC, V. Very limited street parking available. **Amenities:** Full menu of en-suite breakfast, lunch, and dinner, or private chef available; restaurant; concierge; Internet; 3 outdoor pools. *In room:* A/C, TV/DVD, CD player, hair dryer.

Hotel Playa Los Arcos ★★ This is one of Vallarta's perennially popular hotels, with a stellar location in the heart of Los Muertos Beach, central to the Olas Altas sidewalk-cafe action. The lovely four-story structure is U-shaped and faces the ocean. Guest rooms are small and draped in white, with carved wooden furniture. They have balconies that overlook the courtyard pool that almost extends into the lobby. The hotel grounds include a *palapa* beachside bar with occasional live entertainment, a gourmet coffee shop, and the popular Kaiser Maximilian's gourmet restaurant (see "Where to Dine," below). It's 7 blocks south of the river in the old section of downtown.

Olas Altas 380, 48380 Puerto Vallarta, Jal. ✆ **800/648-2403** in the U.S., or 322/226-7100. Fax 322/226-7104. www.playalosarcos.com. 171 units. $120–$150 double; $150–$200 suite. All-inclusive packages available. MC, V. Limited street parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; lobby bar; outdoor pool; Wi-Fi (in lobby). *In room:* A/C, TV.

South to Mismaloya

Casa Tres Vidas ★★ (Value) Set on a stunning private cove, Tres Vidas gives you the experience of your own private villa, complete with service staff. It offers outstanding value for the location—close to town, with panoramic views from every room. Each villa has at least two levels and over 460 sq. m (4,951 sq. ft.) of mostly open living areas, plus a private swimming pool, heated whirlpool, and air-conditioned bedrooms. The Vida Alta penthouse villa has three bedrooms, plus a rooftop deck with pool and bar. Vida Sol villa's three bedrooms sleep 10 (two rooms have two king-size beds each). Directly on the ocean, Vida Mar is a four-bedroom villa, accommodating eight. The staff prepares gourmet meals in your villa twice a day—you choose the menu and pay only for the food. Service is consistently excellent.

Sagitario 132, Playa Conchas Chinas, 48300 Puerto Vallarta, Jal. ✆ **888/640-8100** toll-free in the U.S., or 322/221-5317. Fax 322/221-53-27. www.casatresvidas.com. 3 villas. High season $750–$800 villa; low season $550–$600 villa. Rates include services such as housekeeping and meal preparation. Special summer 1- or 2-bedroom rates available; minimum 3 nights. AE, MC, V. Very limited street parking. **Amenities:** 2 prepared daily meals; concierge; private outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, TV, Wi-Fi.

Dreams Puerto Vallarta Resort & Spa The all-inclusive Dreams Resort sits on a beautiful beach with soft white sand in a private cove. Set apart from other properties, with a lush mountain backdrop, it's still only a 10-minute ride to town. The hotel consists of two buildings: the 250-room main hotel, which curves gently with the shape of the Playa Las Estacas, and the newer 11-story Club Tower, also facing the beach and ocean. Standard rooms in the aging main building are large; some have sliding doors opening onto the beach, and others have balconies. Preferred Club suites have access to a private lounge, expanded marble bathrooms with upgraded amenities, and balconies with whirlpool tubs. All rooms feature ocean views, vibrant colors, marble floors, and local artwork. The grounds include two swimming pools, health club, and spa; activities are offered day and night. Food served in the resort is so-so.

Carretera Barra de Navidad Km 3.5, Playa Las Estacas, 48300 Puerto Vallarta, Jal. ✆ **866/237-3267** in the U.S. and Canada, or 322/226-5000. Fax 322/221-6000. www.dreamsresorts.com. 337 units. All-inclusive rates are per person and include all meals, premium drinks, activities, airport transfers, tips, and taxes. $320 and up double; $440 and up junior suite; $700 and up oceanview suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Free secured parking. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants; lobby bar; pool bar; kids' club; fully equipped health club; yoga; 3 outdoor pools w/daytime activities; room service; shows at night in high season; spa; 2 lighted grass tennis courts; nonmotorized watersports. *In room:* A/C, TV, MP3 players, hair dryer, minibar.

Quinta María Cortez ★★ (Finds) An eclectic, imaginative B&B on the beach, this is Puerto Vallarta's most original place to stay—and one of Mexico's most memorable inns. Most of the seven large suites, uniquely decorated with antiques, whimsical curios, and original art, have a kitchenette and balcony. Sunny terraces, a small pool, and a central gathering area with fireplace and *palapa*-topped dining area (where an excellent full breakfast is served) occupy different levels of the seven-story house. A rooftop terrace offers another sunbathing alternative—and is among the best sunset-watching spots in town. The quinta sits on a beautiful cove on Conchas Chinas beach. A terrace fronting the beach accommodates chairs for taking in the sunset.

Sagitario 132, Playa Conchas Chinas, 48300 Puerto Vallarta, Jal. ✆ **888/640-8100** toll-free in the U.S., or 322/221-5317. Fax 322/221-5327. www.quinta-maria.com. 7 units. High season $140–$260 double; low season $120–$195 double. Rates include breakfast. AE, MC, V. Very limited street parking. Children 17 and younger not accepted. **Amenities:** Concierge; small outdoor pool; Wi-Fi (in common areas). *In room:* A/C, fridge, hair dryer.

Verana ★★★ Moments Verana is a secluded retreat tucked in the hills overlooking sleepy Yelapa, a natural paradise offering spectacular views of the tropical landscape and ocean before it. Couples make up most of the adults-only clientele, and they're spread out among eight accommodations ranging from the tranquil two-bedroom "stone house" to the more expensive "tea house" that resembles an enchanted open-air tree house with a private pool. The houses feature king-size beds with mosquito nets, beautiful bathrooms, and private terraces, and while there are no TVs or telephones, Wi-Fi is available. Guests have access to two full-service spas, kayaks, and snorkeling equipment, and the European-trained chef prepares exquisite cuisine. Verana is reached via a 30-minute water taxi from Boca de Tomatlán (south of Puerto Vallarta, p. 298) followed by a 10-minute hike up a fairly steep trail from the boat launch (mules are available by prior arrangement for people with mobility difficulties). The town of Yelapa lies about a half-hour walk from the inn.

Calle Zaragoza 404, 48304 Yelapa, Jal. ✆ **866/687-9358** or 310/455-2425 in the U.S., or 322/222-0878. www.verana.com. 8 villas. Winter/high season $360–$480 villa per night with 5-night minimum; $750 3-bedroom Casa Grande per night; extra person $70 per night. AE, MC, V. Optional daily breakfast, lunch, and dinner charge $80 per person; alcoholic beverages extra. Shorter stays based on availability. Closed during summer months. Management helps arrange transportation from Puerto Vallarta to Boca, where a private boat runs to Yelapa; from there, Verana is a 10-min. hike. **Amenities:** Restaurant/bar; morning yoga classes; library; outdoor pool; spa w/massage services; snorkeling equipment; kayaks; Wi-Fi. *In room:* No phone.

WHERE TO DINE

Puerto Vallarta has an exceptional dining scene. Over 250 restaurants serve cuisines from around the world, in addition to fresh seafood and regional dishes. Chefs from France, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, and Argentina have come for visits and stayed to open restaurants. In celebration of this diversity, Vallarta's culinary community hosts a 2-week-long gourmet dining festival each November.

Of the inexpensive local spots, one favorite is **El Planeta Vegetariano,** Iturbide 270, just down from the main church (✆ **322/222-3073**), serving an inexpensive and delicious vegetarian buffet, which changes for breakfast and lunch/dinner. It's open daily. Breakfast (50 pesos) is served from 8am till noon; the lunch and dinner buffets (75 pesos) are served from noon to 10pm; no credit cards are accepted.

Marina Vallarta

Most of the best restaurants in the Marina are in hotels, but a number of quality options line the boardwalk bordering the marina yacht harbor as well. This is the best place to dine if you don't want to travel into town.

Porto Bello ★★ ITALIAN One of the first restaurants in the marina, Porto Bello serves flavorful Italian dishes to the backdrop of docked sailboats and motor yachts. For starters, the fried calamari is delicately seasoned, and the grilled vegetable antipasto could easily serve as a full meal. Signature dishes include fusilli prepared with artichokes, black olives, lemon juice, basil, olive oil, and Parmesan cheese; and sautéed fish filet with white wine, spinach, and arugula. I love the lightly broiled butterfly shrimp served with spaghetti or, for a splurge, the pecan-crusted rack of French lamb. The elegant indoor dining room is air-conditioned, and there's also open-air seating with white linen tables.

Marina Sol, Loc. 7 (Marina Vallarta *malecón*). ✆ **322/221-0003.** www.portobellovallarta.com. Reservations recommended for dinner. Main courses 195–495 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily noon–11pm.

Downtown

Expensive

Café des Artistes/Thierry Blouet Cocina del Autor ★★★ FRENCH/INTERNATIONAL The award-winning chef and owner, Thierry Blouet, is both a member of the French Academie Culinaire and a Maitre Cuisinier de France. The Café includes the upscale Bar Constantini martini lounge and the Thierry Blouet Cocina del Autor dining area. The Café's menu consists of French gourmet bistro fare, drawing on Chef Blouet's French training and incorporating regional specialty ingredients. Noteworthy entrees include sea bass filet served with a lentil, bacon, and coriander stew and roasted duck glazed with honey, soy, ginger, and lime sauce, served with a pumpkin risotto. At the Cocina del Autor, the atmosphere is sleek and stylish, and the fixed-priced tasting menu (prices depend on the number of plates you select, from 4 to 12) offers a choice of the chef's most sumptuous creations. Choose any combination of starters, entrees, and desserts. Portions are generally small. After dining, you're invited to the cognac and cigar room, an exquisite blend of old adobe walls, flickering candles, and elegant leather chairs.

Guadalupe Sánchez 740, corner with Vicario. ✆ **322/222-3228,** -3229, -3230. www.cafedesartistes.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses 185–355 pesos. Cocina del Autor tasting menu 650–1,450 pesos without wine, 1,050–2,100 pesos with wine. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 6–11:30pm (lounge until 2am).

Moderate

de Santos ★★ MEDITERRANEAN De Santos remains a Vallarta spot to see and be seen, a trendy restaurant co-owned by one of the members of the wildly popular Latin group Maná. The menu is Mediterranean inspired; best bets include lightly breaded calamari, paella Valenciana, and thin-crust pizza. The cool, refined interior feels more urban than resort oriented, and the sound system is the best in town (a DJ spins to match the mood of the crowd). Guests can also dine on the open-air terrace in the back. Prices seem quite reasonable, given the restaurant's quality and popularity. The adjacent club remains among the hottest nightspots in town (see "Puerto Vallarta After Dark," later). De Santos has a sister restaurant in Manhattan as well.

Morelos 771, Centro. ✆ **322/223-3052.** www.desantos.com.mx. Reservations recommended during high season. Main courses $13–$30. AE, MC, V. Daily 6pm–midnight. Bar closes at 4am on weekends.

Hacienda San Angel ★ MEXICAN In addition to the exquisite beauty of the Hacienda itself, diners are treated to one of the most stunning views of town, overlooking the city lights and the bay beyond. The menu changes periodically and features classic Mexican fare along with international favorites. Starters include crispy fried calamari with a selection of sauces, grilled seasonal vegetables in a tomato, olive oil, and basil balsamic vinaigrette, and a shrimp and coconut cream soup accented with brandy. The house specialty is the grilled *Cabreria,* a tender bone-in steak, served with garlic mashed potatoes, a portobello mushroom ragout, and a three-chile sauce. Other standouts include chicken *mole* and the herb-crusted rack of lamb in a green-pepper sauce. Start the evening by arriving between 7:30 and 9:30pm for a sunset cocktail hour often featuring live mariachi music—you may also enjoy strolling the grounds.

Miramar 336, Centro. ✆ **322/222-2692.** www.haciendasanangel.com. Reservations required. Main courses $15–$39, with 20% gratuity added to all checks. AE, MC, V. Daily 6–10pm.

Las Palomas ★ MEXICAN One of Puerto Vallarta's first restaurants, this is the power-breakfast place of choice—and a popular hangout for everyone else throughout the day. Authentic in atmosphere and menu, it's one of Puerto Vallarta's few genuine

Mexican restaurants. Breakfast is the best value. The staff pours mugs of steaming coffee spiced with cinnamon as soon as you're seated. Try classic *huevos rancheros* or *chilaquiles* (tortilla strips, fried and topped with red or green spicy sauce, cream, and cheese, with fried eggs or shredded chicken). Lunch and dinner offer traditional Mexican specialties, such as chiles rellenos, enchiladas, fajitas, and carne asada, plus a selection of stuffed crepes. The best places for checking out the *malecón* and watching the sunset while sipping an icy margarita are the spacious bar and the upstairs terrace.

Paseo Díaz Ordaz 610. ✆ **322/222-3675.** www.laspalomaspvr.com. Breakfast 50–110 pesos; lunch and dinner 70–260 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 8am–11pm.

Trio ★★★ (Finds) INTERNATIONAL Trio is the darling of Vallarta restaurants, with diners beating a path to the modest but stylish cafe where chef-owners Bernhard Güth and Ulf Henricksson's undeniable passion for food imbues each dish. Trio is noted for its perfected melding of Mexican and Mediterranean flavors and exquisite presentation. Consider starting with the cilantro-ginger-marinated calamari with avocado and a jalapeño salsa. For a main course, I recommend ricotta spinach ravioli with sun-dried tomatoes, or the pan-roasted sea bass with glazed grapes, mashed potatoes, and sauerkraut in a white-pepper sauce. These dishes may not be on the menu when you arrive, though—it's a constantly changing work of art. In high season, the rooftop dining area allows for a more comfortable wait for a table or for after-dinner coffee, and a trio plays live music during dinner. Most locals will tell you this is their favorite restaurant in town. The same owners run Vitea, below.

Guerrero 264. ✆ **322/222-2196.** www.triopv.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses 175–320 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 6–11:30pm.

Xitomates ★ MEXICAN The warmly lit dining room of this creative Mexican restaurant is accented with tin star lamps and flickering candles. The menu mixes Mexican with Caribbean, Asian, and Mediterranean influences, and the presentation is as creative as the preparation. Starters include the signature coconut shrimp in a tangy tamarind sauce, thinly sliced scallops with cucumber and jicama julienne, or mushrooms stuffed with shrimp or *huitlacoche* (a mushroom that grows on corn stalks). Main courses range from grilled salmon filet in a poblano chile sauce, to a tender rib-eye steak with grilled veggies and *chipotle* sauce. There are numerous vegetarian selections, and the chef will accommodate most any dietary request—vegan, gluten-free, low-sodium, and more. The house specialty dessert is a Toluca ice-cream cake. An excellent wine list and full bar complement the exquisite dining.

Morelos 601, corner with Aldama. ✆ **322/222-9434.** www.losxitomates.com.mx. Main courses 128–318 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 6pm–midnight.

Inexpensive

Agave Grill ★ MEXICAN Agave Grill has gradually taken over the space at the Casa de Tequila in central downtown. The location is lovely, in a beautiful garden setting within a classic hacienda-style building. Start with fresh salsa made at your table (spiced to your preference), and follow with the *pulpo* (octopus) sautéed to tenderness in a delectable chile and garlic sauce. My favorite main courses include seafood enchiladas, and beef tenderloin prepared with *mole.* For a sweet finish, you'll love the chocolate "tamal" served with homemade vanilla ice cream. All tortillas and savory salsas are handmade. An elegant bar serves Vallarta's most original selection of fine tequilas, many from small distilleries.

Morelos 589. ✆ **322/222-2000.** Main courses 148–298 pesos; chef's tasting menu 350 pesos. MC, V. Mon–Sat noon–11pm; Sun 4–11pm.

Tapas, Anyone?

Certainly much of modern Mexico's culture draws on the important influence of Spain, so it only makes sense that Spanish culinary traditions would be evident as well. Of the many options, these are my favorites: the long-standing **Barcelona Tapas,** Matamoros and 31 de Octubre streets (✆ **322/222-0510**), a large and lovely restaurant on a terrace built high on a hillside, with sweeping views of the bay. They serve tapas and a selection of Spanish entrees, including paella, from 5pm to midnight. **La Esquina de los Caprichos,** Miramar 402, corner of Iturbide (✆ **322/222-0911**), is a tiny place near Hacienda San Angel known as having the most reasonably priced (35–85 pesos) tapas in town, and perhaps the tastiest. Hours are Monday to Saturday from 1 to 10pm; cash only. It closes from July to the end of August.

El Arrayán ★★★ Finds MEXICAN The spirited Arrayán, up a steep sidewalk, offers rewarding, authentic Mexican cuisine. The casual open-air dining area surrounds a cozy courtyard, while its exposed brick walls and funky-chic decor showcase a modern view of Mexican classics. Start with an order of delicious ceviche, sumptuous plantain empanadas filled with black beans, or a traditional salad of diced *nopal* cactus paddles with fresh cheese. Favorite main courses include chiles rellenos packed with shrimp, and Mexican duck *carnitas* served in an *arrayán*-orange sauce. (*Arrayán,* the namesake of the place, is a small sweet-and-sour fruit native to the region.) The homemade ice creams and sorbets make for a tasty and refreshing finish to your meal. The full bar offers an extensive selection of original cocktails (check out the "mojo-basil grapefruit mojito"), tequilas, Mexican wines, and nonalcoholic *aguas frescas*—a blended drink of fresh fruit and water. There is excellent service.

Allende 344, just past Matamoros, on the corner with Miramar. ✆ **322/222-7195.** www.elarrayan.com.mx. Reservations recommended. Main courses 150–245 pesos. AE, MC, V. Wed–Mon 5:30–11pm. Closed Tues.

Vitea ★★★ Finds INTERNATIONAL This beachfront bistro opened in late 2004 by the chef/owners of Trio, and their recipe for success took hold from day one—the bustling restaurant has become a favorite among locals. Due to strategically placed mirrors on the back wall, every seat has a view of the ocean, while the interior is cheerful and inviting. Starters include succulent shrimp tempura with pumpkinseeds, spicy garlic, and chile or a fresh Greek salad that just explodes with flavor. Main courses change regularly and may include barbecue red snapper with wilted spinach, eggplant ravioli with portobello mushrooms, or Angus beef tips sautéed with wine. Dinner selections offer a choice of smaller or larger portions. Lunch offers lighter fare, and breakfast is now served as well.

Malecón no. 2, at Libertad. ✆ **322/222-8703.** www.viteapv.com. Reservations recommended during peak dining hours. Main courses 85–320 pesos. MC, V. Daily 8am–11:30pm.

South of the Río Cuale to Olas Altas

South of the river is the densest restaurant area, where you'll find Basilio Badillo, the street nicknamed "Restaurant Row." A second main dining drag has emerged along Calle Olas Altas, with a variety of cuisines and price categories. Cafes and espresso bars, generally open from 7am to midnight, line its wide sidewalks, and there are a number of casual seafood eateries open along the beachfront during high season.

Archie's Wok ★★★ Finds ASIAN/SEAFOOD Since 1986, Archie's has been legendary in Puerto Vallarta for serving original cuisine influenced by the intriguing flavors of Southeast Asia, and today the restaurant remains as impressive as ever. Archie was Hollywood director John Huston's private chef during the years he spent in the area. Today his family upholds his legacy at this tranquil Asian-inspired retreat, where fountains trickle and table candle lights flicker by night. The Thai Mai Tai and other tropical drinks, made from only fresh fruit and juices, are a good way to kick off a meal, as are the consistently crispy and delicious Filipino spring rolls. The popular Singapore fish filet features lightly battered filet strips in sweet-and-sour sauce; the delicious barbecue pork riblets are baked for 5 hours and then served with a rich oyster sauce. Friday and Saturday from 7:30 to 10:30pm, there's live classical harp and flute in Archie's Oriental garden.

Francisca Rodríguez 130 (a half-block from the Los Muertos pier). ✆ **322/222-0411.** Main courses 117–221 pesos. MC, V. Mon–Sat 2–11pm. Closed Sept.

Café Kaiser Maximilian ★★ INTERNATIONAL Designed to resemble a 19th-century Viennese cafe, Kaiser Maximilian presents a casually elegant atmosphere with a genuine European feel. It's the prime place to go if you want to combine exceptional food with great people-watching. Austrian-born owner Andreas Rupprechter is almost always on hand to ensure that the service is impeccable and the food delicious. Indoor, air-conditioned dining takes place at cozy tables; sidewalk tables are larger and great for groups of friends. The cuisine merges old-world European preparations with regional fresh ingredients (think Wiener schnitzel with a Mexican touch). My favorites are filet of trout with spinach and a celery purée; rack of lamb with polenta, mustard crust, and green beans; and seared scallops with butternut squash purée. The gourmet coffees and desserts made in the adjacent cafe and pastry shop are famous throughout the town: I'd try the warm pecan chocolate bourbon tart if I were you.

Olas Altas 380-B (at Basilio Badillo, in front of the Hotel Playa Los Arcos), Zona Romántica. ✆ **322/223-0760.** www.kaisermaximilian.com. Reservations recommended in high season. Main courses 178–328 pesos. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 6–11pm.

Daiquiri Dick's ★★★ PACIFIC RIM/MEDITERRANEAN While Puerto Vallarta is replete with ideal "people-watching" perches, come to Daiquiri Dick's if you want to enjoy some fantastic "food-watching." Each dish is festively prepared, served steaming hot from the kitchen and bursting with color and artistic garnishes. You'll be tempted to try each dish that passes your table. For light fare, try the Asian chicken salad, which blends tender chicken, crunchy vegetables, and a savory ginger sesame dressing. For something more substantial, the barbecue pork spareribs as well as the crispy cornmeal-crusted perch with toasted garlic-ancho chile vinaigrette remain house favorites. Don't forget to order a daiquiri with your meal. The restaurant lies at the northern edge of Viejo Vallarta, set against a lovely section of beach with palm trees wrapped in white lights that provide a warm glow at dinner.

Olas Altas 314. ✆ **322/222-0566.** www.ddpv.com. Main courses 185–265 pesos. MC, V. Daily 9am–10:30pm. Closed Sept.

Espresso ★★ ITALIAN This popular eatery is Vallarta's best late-night dining option. The two-level restaurant is on one of the town's busiest streets—across from El Torito's sports bar—meaning that traffic noise is a factor but not a deterrent. The cuisine is superb, the service attentive, and the prices more than reasonable. Owned by a partnership of lively Italians, it serves authentic Italian food, from thin-crust, brick-oven pizza

to savory homemade pastas and oven-baked breads. My favorite pizza is the Quattro Stagioni, topped with artichokes, black olives, ham, and mushrooms. Excellent calzones and panini (sandwiches) are also options. I prefer the rooftop garden area for dining, but many patrons gravitate to the air-conditioned downstairs, which features major sports and entertainment events on satellite TV. Espresso also has full bar service and draft beer.

Ignacio L. Vallarta 279. ✆ **322/222-3272.** Entrees 98–189 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily noon–1am.

Fajita Republic ★ MEXICAN/SEAFOOD/STEAKS Fajita Republic has hit on a winning recipe: delicious food, ample portions, welcoming atmosphere, and low prices. The specialty is, of course, fajitas, grilled to perfection in every variety: steak, fish, chicken, vegetarian, shrimp, combo, and occasionally lobster. This "tropical grill" also serves sumptuous barbecued ribs, Mexican *molcajetes* with incredibly tender strips of marinated beef filet, and grilled shrimp. Starters include fresh guacamole served in a giant spoon and the ever-popular Maya cheese sticks (breaded and deep-fried). Try an oversize mug or pitcher of Fajita Rita Mango Margaritas.

Basilio Badillo 188, 1 block north of Olas Altas. ✆ **322/222-3131.** Main courses 82–188 pesos. MC, V. Daily 5–11pm.

La Palapa ★★★ Finds SEAFOOD/MEXICAN This beachside *palapa* restaurant is absolutely enchanting, a decades-old favorite with beautiful amber lamps, candles, and lanterns illuminating the night. With each visit, I've found the quality of the food and the service keeps improving. For lunch and dinner, seafood is the specialty; featured dishes include miso Chilean sea bass, pepper-crusted yellowfin tuna, and grilled shrimp in coconut and tequila. The Palapa's location, in the heart of Los Muertos Beach, makes it an excellent place to start or end the day, but it's most enticing for dinner while watching the moon over the bay. The bar opens to the dining area and features acoustic guitars and vocals nightly from 8 to 11pm, performed on Monday and Tuesday nights by the owner, Alberto. Other nights, an incredibly talented flutist who looks a bit like Moses joins the duo.

Pulpito 103. ✆ **322/222-5225.** www.lapalapapv.com. Reservations recommended for dinner in high season. Breakfast 60–120 pesos; main courses 200–410 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 8am–11:30pm.

Moderate

Le Bistro ★★ INTERNATIONAL I love this place, a French-inspired bistro with a large garden deck set right over the river. Le Bistro's specialty is crepes, with delicious options such as shrimp with broccoli or chicken with squash blossoms. The lunch-and-dinner menu offers fine international cuisine, including filet mignon, duck in a blackberry sauce, and rock Cornish hen stuffed with herbed rice, dried tropical fruit, and nuts, finished in mango-cilantro sauce. The menu also features tasty Mexican dishes like crab enchiladas and grilled steak served with guacamole, rice, and beans. An extensive wine list and ample selection of specialty coffees complement the menu, and live jazz music normally plays Thursday through Saturday nights.

Isla Río Cuale 16-A (just east of northbound bridge). ✆ **322/222-0283.** www.lebistro.com.mx. Reservations recommended for dinner in high season. Main courses 125–325 pesos. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat noon–11pm.

Inexpensive

Café de Olla ★★ Value MEXICAN One of my favorite Vallarta restaurants, the Café de Olla serves up the most consistently delicious Mexican food in town. The atmosphere is simple and festive, and the typically packed dining room is served by a staff that's quick and efficient. Large portions of enchiladas, quesadillas, chiles rellenos, fajitas,

and tacos come sizzling hot out of the open kitchen and grill. I recommend an order of fresh, thick guacamole to start or accompany your meal. The margaritas are terrific. Don't come here for romance or refinement, but do come here for great authentic fare, friendly service, and a fun experience. Only cash is accepted.

Francisco I. Madero 218. ✆ **322/223-1626.** Main courses 70–230 pesos. No credit cards. Wed–Mon 9am–11pm. Closed Tues.

Café San Angel Moments CAFE This classic sidewalk cafe is a local gathering place from sunrise into the wee hours. For breakfast, choose a three-egg Western omelet, such Mexican classics as huevos rancheros or *chilaquiles,* or a tropical fruit plate. Deli sandwiches, crepes, pastries, and simple Mexican plates like burritos and enchiladas round out the small but ample menu. The cafe also serves exceptional fruit smoothies and perfectly made espresso and other coffee drinks. Although the service is occasionally slow, keep in mind that this place affords the best people-watching in the area. Bar service and Internet access are available.

Olas Altas 449 (at Francisco Rodríguez). ✆ **322/223-1273.** Breakfast 35–85 pesos; main courses 58–105 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 8am–2am.

Red Cabbage Café (El Repollo Rojo) ★★★ Finds MEXICAN The tiny, hard-to-find cafe is worth the effort—a visit here will reward you with exceptional traditional Mexican cuisine and a whimsical crash course in contemporary culture. The small room is covered wall-to-wall with photographs, paintings, movie posters, and news clippings about the cultural icons of Mexico. Frida Kahlo figures prominently in the decor, and a special menu duplicates dishes she and husband Diego Rivera prepared for guests. Specialties from all over Mexico include *chiles en nogada* (poblanos stuffed with ground beef, pine nuts, and raisins, topped with a sweet walnut cream sauce sprinkled with pomegranates and served cold); intricate chicken *mole* from Puebla; and a hearty Mexican plate with steak, a chile relleno, quesadilla, guacamole, rice, and beans. In addition, the vegetarian menu is probably the most diverse and tasty in town.

Calle Rivera del Río 204A (across from Río Cuale). ✆ **322/223-0411.** www.redcabbagepv.com. Main courses 110–240 pesos; tasting menu 375 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 5–10:30pm.

BEACHES, ACTIVITIES & EXCURSIONS

Travel agencies can provide information on what to see and do in Puerto Vallarta and can arrange tours, fishing trips, and other activities. Most hotels have a tour desk on-site. Of the many travel agencies in town, I highly recommend **Tukari Servicios Turísticos,** Av. España 316 (✆ **322/224-7177;** www.tukari.net), which specializes in ecological and cultural tours. Another source is **Xplora Adventours** (✆ **322/223-0661**), in the Huichol Collection shop on the *malecón.* It has listings of all locally available tours, with photos, explanations, and costs; however, be aware that a timeshare resort owns the company, so part of the information you receive will be an invitation to a presentation, which you may decline. One of the tour companies with the largest—and best-quality—selection of boat cruises and land tours is **Vallarta Adventures** ★★★ (✆ **888/526-2238** in the U.S., or 322/297-1212; www.vallarta-adventures.com). I can highly recommend any of their offerings.

The Beaches

For years, beaches were Puerto Vallarta's main attraction. Although visitors today are exploring more of the surrounding geography, the sands are still a powerful draw. Over

42km (26 miles) of beaches extend around the broad Bay of Banderas, ranging from action-packed party spots to secluded coves accessible only by boat.

IN TOWN The easiest to reach is **Playa Los Muertos** (also known as Playa Olas Altas or Playa del Sol), just off Calle Olas Altas, south of the Río Cuale. The water can be rough, but the wide beach is home to a diverse array of *palapa* restaurants that offer food, beverage, and beach-chair service. The most popular are the adjacent El Dorado and La Palapa, at the end of Pulpito Street. On the southern end of this beach is a section known as "Blue Chairs"—the most popular gay beach. Vendors stroll Los Muertos, and beach volleyball, parasailing, and jet-skiing are all popular pastimes. The **Hotel Zone** is also known for its broad, smooth beaches, accessed through the resorts.

SOUTH OF TOWN **Playa Mismaloya** is in a beautiful sheltered cove about 10km (6¼ miles) south of town along Hwy. 200. The water is clear and ideal for snorkeling off the beach. Entrance to the public beach is just to the left of the **Barceló La Jolla de Mismaloya** (✆ **322/226-0600**). This is where the *Night of the Iguana,* the movie that made Puerto Vallarta famous with the international jet set, was filmed.

The beach at **Boca de Tomatlán,** just down the road, houses numerous *palapa* restaurants where you can relax for the day—you buy drinks, snacks, or lunch, and you can use their chairs and *palapa* shade. The boat to Verana (p. 292) also goes from here.

The two beaches are accessible by public buses, which depart from Basilio Badillo and Insurgentes every 15 minutes from 5:30am to 10pm and cost 6 pesos.

Las Animas, Quimixto, and **Yelapa** beaches are the most secluded, accessible only by boat (see "Getting Around," earlier, for information about water-taxi service). They are larger than Mismaloya, offer intriguing hikes to jungle waterfalls, and are similarly set up, with restaurants fronting a wide beach. Overnight stays are available at Yelapa (see "Side Trips from Puerto Vallarta," later in this chapter).

NORTH OF TOWN The beaches at **Marina Vallarta** are the least desirable in the area, with darker sand and seasonal inflows of stones. The entire northern coastline from Bucerías to Punta Mita is a succession of sandy coves alternating with rocky inlets. For years the beaches to the north, with their long, clean breaks, have been the favored locale for surfers. The broad, sandy stretches at **Playa Anclote, Playa Piedras Blancas,** and **Playa Destiladeras,** which all have *palapa* restaurants, have made them favorites with local residents looking for a quick getaway.

You can also hire a *panga* (small motorized boat) at Playa Anclote to take you to the **Marietas Islands** ★★★ just offshore. These uninhabited islands are a great place for bird-watching, diving, snorkeling, or just exploring. Blue-footed booby birds (found only here and in the Galápagos) dawdle along the islands' rocky coast, and giant mantas, sea turtles, and colorful tropical fish swim among the coral cliffs. The islands are honeycombed with caves and hidden beaches—including the stunning Playa de Amor (Beach of Love) that appears only at low tide. Humpback whales congregate around these islands during the winter months, and *pangas* can be rented for a do-it-yourself whale-watching excursion. Trips cost about $40 per hour. You can also visit these islands aboard one of the numerous day cruises that depart from the cruise-ship terminal in Puerto Vallarta.

Organized Tours

BOAT TOURS Puerto Vallarta offers a number of boat trips, including sunset cruises and snorkeling, swimming, and diving excursions. They generally travel one of two routes: to the **Marietas Islands,** a 30- to 45-minute boat ride off the northern shore of

Banderas Bay, or to **Yelapa, Las Animas,** or **Quimixto** along the southern shore. The trips to the southern beaches make a stop at **Los Arcos,** an island rock formation south of Puerto Vallarta, for snorkeling. Prices range from $45 for a sunset cruise or a trip to one of the beaches with open bar, to $85 for an all-day outing with open bar and meals. Travel agencies sell tickets and distribute information on all cruises.

One of the best outings is a day trip to **Las Caletas** ★★, the cove where John Huston made his home for years. **Vallarta Adventures** (✆ **888/303-2653** in the U.S., or 322/297-1212; www.vallarta-adventures.com) has done an excellent job of restoring Huston's former home, adding exceptional day-spa facilities, and landscaping the beach, which is wonderful for snorkeling. The trip ($85 per person, $60 for children 4–11) sets out every Monday through Saturday from Nuevo Vallarta at 8:30am or from Vallarta's Maritime Terminal at 9am, and includes a light continental breakfast, buffet lunch, open bar, snorkeling and kayaking equipment, and guided tours.

Whale-watching tours become more popular each year. Viewing humpback whales is almost a certainty from mid- to late November to March. The majestic whales have migrated to this bay for centuries (in the 17th c. it was called "Humpback Bay") to bear their calves. The noted local authority is **Open Air Expeditions,** Guerrero 339 (✆/fax **322/222-3310;** www.vallartawhales.com). It offers ecologically oriented, oceanologist-guided 4-hour tours on the soft boat *Prince of Whales,* the only boat in Vallarta specifically designed for whale-watching. Cost is $95 for adults, $82 for children 5 to 10, and travel is in a group of up to 12 (there's a discount for booking online). The tour departs at 9:30am.

LAND TOURS **Tukari Servicios Turísticos** (see "Beaches, Activities & Excursions," above) can arrange trips to the fertile birding grounds near **San Blas,** 3 to 4 hours north of Puerto Vallarta in the state of Nayarit, and shopping trips to **Tlaquepaque** and **Tonalá** (6 hr. inland, near Guadalajara). A day trip to **Rancho Altamira,** a 20-hectare (49-acre) working ranch, includes a barbecue lunch and horseback riding, and then a stroll through **El Tuito,** a small nearby Colonial-Era village. The company can also arrange an unforgettable morning at **Terra Noble Art & Healing Center** ★★ (✆ **322/223-0308;** www.terranoble.com), a mountaintop day spa and center for the arts where participants can get a massage, *temazcal* (ancient indigenous sweat lodge—available only for groups), or treatment; work in clay and paint; and have lunch in a heavenly setting overlooking the bay.

Hotel travel desks and travel agencies, including Tukari and American Express, can also book the popular **Tropical Tour** or **Jungle Tour** ($70), a basic orientation to the area. These excursions are expanded city tours that include a drive through the workers' village of Pitillal, the affluent neighborhood of Conchas Chinas, the cathedral, the market, the Taylor-Burton houses, and lunch at a jungle restaurant.

The **Sierra Madre Expedition** is another excellent tour offered by **Vallarta Adventures** (see "Boat Tours," above). The excursion offered Monday through Thursday travels in Mercedes all-terrain vehicles north of Puerto Vallarta through jungle trails, stops at a small town, ventures into a forest for a brief nature walk, and winds up on a pristine secluded beach for lunch and swimming. The $88 outing is worthwhile because it takes tourists on exclusive trails into scenery that would otherwise be off-limits.

Staying Active

DIVING & SNORKELING Underwater enthusiasts, from beginner to expert, can arrange scuba diving or snorkeling through **Vallarta Adventures** (✆ **888/303-2653** in the U.S., or 322/297-1212, ext. 3; www.vallarta-adventures.com), a five-star PADI dive

center. You may snorkel or dive at Los Arcos, a company-owned site at Caletas Cove (where you'll dive in the company of sea lions), Quimixto Coves, the Marietas Islands, or the offshore La Corbeteña, Morro, and Chimo reefs. The company runs a full range of certification courses. **Chico's Dive Shop** (✆ **322/222-1895;** www.chicos-diveshop.com), with its main shop at Díaz Ordaz 772–5, near Punto V bar, offers similar diving and snorkeling trips and is also a PADI five-star dive center. Chico's is open daily from 8am to 10pm, with branches at the Barceló, Fiesta Americana, Marriott, and Playa Los Arcos. You can also snorkel off the beaches at Mismaloya and Boca de Tomatlán; elsewhere, there's not much to see besides a sandy bottom. Expect to pay about $100 for a two-tank boat dive to Los Arcos, and about $40 for a snorkeling trip there.

ECOTOURS & ACTIVITIES **Open Air Expeditions** (www.vallartawhales.com) offers nature-oriented trips, including birding and ocean kayaking in Punta Mita. **Ecotours de México,** Ignacio L. Vallarta 243 (✆/fax **322/222-6606;** www.ecotoursvallarta.com), runs eco-oriented tours, including whale-watching, snorkeling, scuba diving, sea kayaking, hiking, and seasonal (Aug–Dec) trips to a turtle preservation camp where you can witness hatching baby Olive Ridley turtles.

A popular Vallarta adventure activity is **canopy tours.** You glide from treetop to treetop, getting an up-close-and-personal look at a tropical rainforest canopy and the trails far below. Tours depart from the **Vallarta Adventures** (see "Diving & Snorkeling," above) offices in both Marina Vallarta and Nuevo Vallarta at 8am, returning at 2pm. The price ($79 for adults, $55 for children 8–11) includes the tour, bottled water, and light snacks.

A second option is available in the southern jungles of Vallarta, over the Orquidias River, through **Canopy Tours de Los Veranos** (✆ **877/563-4113** toll-free in the U.S. or 322/223-6060; www.canopytours-vallarta.com). This tour will pick you up at the Canopy office, near the south-side Pemex station, to transport you to their facilities upriver from Mismaloya. Departures are on the hour, from 9am to 2pm. In addition to the 14 cables—the longest being a full 350m (1,148 ft.)—it offers climbing walls and water slides. Price is $79 for adults, or $58 for children ages 6 and older.

FISHING Arrange fishing trips through travel agencies or through the **Cooperativa de Pescadores (Fishing Cooperative),** on the *malecón* north of the Río Cuale, next door to the Rosita Hotel (✆ **322/222-1202**). Fishing charters cost $160 per person, for one to six people; or select from other options where the price varies with the size of the boat; a boat can be rented for 8 hours for $450 (up to eight people). It's open daily from 9am to 9pm, but make arrangements a day ahead. You can also arrange fishing trips at the Marina Vallarta docks, or by calling **Fishing with Carolina** (✆ **322/224-7250;** www.fishingwithcarolina.com), which uses a 9m (30-ft.) Uniflite sportfisher, fully equipped with an English-speaking crew. There are 4-, 6-, and 8-hour fishing trips starting at about $350 for four people.

GOLF Puerto Vallarta is an increasingly popular golf destination. The Joe Finger–designed private course at the **Marina Vallarta Golf Club** (✆ **322/221-0073;** www.marinavallartagolf.com) is an 18-hole, par-74 course that winds through the Marina Vallarta peninsula and affords ocean views. It's for members only, but most luxury hotels in Puerto Vallarta have memberships for their guests. Greens fees are $130 year-round, and $100 after 2pm. Fees include golf cart, range balls, and tax. A caddy costs about $15.

North of town in the state of Nayarit, about 15km (9¼ miles) beyond Puerto Vallarta, is the 18-hole, par-72 **Los Flamingos Club de Golf** (✆ **329/296-5006;** www.flamingosgolf.com.mx). It features beautiful jungle vegetation and is open from 7am to 7pm daily,

with a full pro shop and *palapa* restaurant and bar. The daylight greens fee is $141, which drops to $90 after 2pm. It includes the use of a golf cart; hiring a caddy costs $20 plus tip, and club rental is $35 to $45. Free transportation is offered to and from local hotels.

There are two breathtaking Jack Nicklaus Signature courses at the **Punta Mita Golf Club** ★★★ (✆ **329/291-6000;** www.fourseasons.com/puntamita), with the newest addition opened in October 2008. The original "Pacifico" course features eight ocean-front holes and an ocean view from every hole. The second Jack Nicklaus Signature course, "Bahia," intertwines with the original course and also affords stunning seaside holes; its finishing hole is adjacent to the new St. Regis Resort. The courses are open only to members or guests staying in the Punta Mita resorts, or to other golf club members with a letter of introduction from their pro. Greens fees are $210 for 18 holes and $135 for 9 holes, including cart, with (Calloway) club rentals for $75.

Another Jack Nicklaus course is located at the **Vista Vallarta Golf Club** (✆ **322/290-0030;** www.vistavallartagolf.com), along with one designed by Tom Weiskopf. These courses were the site of the 2002 PGA World Cup Golf Championships. A round costs $196 per person, including cart, or $136 after 2pm. Club rentals are available for $50.

The Robert von Hagge–designed **El Tigre** course at Paradise Village (✆ **866/843-5951** in the U.S., or 322/297-0773; www.eltigregolf.com), in Nuevo Vallarta, is a 7,239-yard course on a relatively flat piece of land, but the design incorporates challenging bunkers, undulating fairways, and water features on several holes. Greens fees are $150 a round, or $98 if you play after 2pm. Club rentals are $45.

HORSEBACK-RIDING TOURS Travel agents and local ranches can arrange guided horseback rides. **Rancho Palma Real,** Carretera Vallarta, Tepic 4766 (✆ **322/222-0501**), has an office 5 minutes north of the airport; the ranch is in Las Palmas, 40 minutes northeast of Vallarta. It is by far the nicest horseback-riding tour in the area. The price ($70; American Express or cash only) includes continental breakfast, drinks, and lunch.

Another excellent option is **Rancho El Charro,** Av. Francisco Villa 895 (✆ **322/224-0114,** cell 044-322/294-1689; www.ranchoelcharro.com), which has beautiful, well-cared-for horses and a variety of rides for all levels, departing from their ranch at the base of the Sierra Madre Mountains. Rides range in length from 3 to 8 hours, and in price from $62 to $120. Rancho El Charro also has multiple-day rides—check their website for details. **Rancho Ojo de Agua,** Cerrada de Cardenal 227, Fracc. Las Aralias (✆/fax **322/224-0607;** www.ranchojodeagua.com), also offers high-quality tours, from its ranch located 10 minutes by taxi north of downtown toward the Sierra Madre foothills. The rides last 3 hours (10am and 3pm departures) and take you up into the mountains overlooking the ocean and town. The cost is $62. Both of the ranches listed above have other tours available, as well as their own comfortable base camp for serious riders who want to stay out overnight.

SWIMMING WITH DOLPHINS **Dolphin Adventure** ★★★ (✆ **888/526-2238** in the U.S., or 322/297-1212; www.vallarta-adventures.com) operates an interactive dolphin-research facility—considered the finest in Latin America—that allows limited numbers of people to swim with dolphins Monday through Saturday at scheduled times. Cost for the **Dolphin Signature Swim** is $149. Reservations are required, and they generally sell out at least a week in advance. **Dolphin Encounter** ($79) allows you to touch and learn about the dolphins in smaller pools, so you're ensured up-close-and-personal time with them. The **Dolphin Kids** program, for children ages 4 to 8, is a gentle introduction to dolphins, featuring the Dolphin Adventure baby dolphins and their mothers interacting with the children participants ($75).

TENNIS Many hotels in Puerto Vallarta offer excellent tennis facilities; they often have clay courts. The full-service **Canto del Sol Tennis Club** (✆ **322/226-0123;** www.cantodelsol.com) is at the Canto del Sol hotel in the Hotel Zone. It offers indoor and outdoor courts, a full pro shop, lessons, clinics, and partner matches.

A Stroll Through Town

Puerto Vallarta's streets retain a cobblestone charm that weaves its way through time; they're full of tiny shops, rows of windows edged with curling wrought iron, and vistas of red-tile roofs and the sea. Start with a walk up and down the *malecón.*

Among the sights you should see is the **municipal building** on the main square (next to the tourism office), which has a large Manuel Lepe mural inside in its stairwell. Nearby, right up Independencia, sits the picturesque **Parish of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe church,** Hidalgo 370 (✆ **322/222-1326**), topped with a curious crown held in place by angels—a replica of the one worn by Empress Carlota during her brief time in Mexico as Emperor Maximilian's wife. On its steps, women sell religious mementos; across the narrow street, stalls sell native herbs for curing common ailments. Services in English are held each Saturday at 5pm and Sunday at 10am. Regular hours are Monday through Saturday from 7:30am to 8:30pm, Sunday from 6:30am to 7:30pm. Note that entrance is restricted to those properly attired—no shorts, sleeveless shirts, or cellphones allowed. Three blocks south of the church, head east on Libertad, lined with small shops and pretty upper windows, to the **municipal flea market** by the river. After exploring the market, cross the bridge to the island in the river; sometimes a painter is at work on its banks. Walk down the center of the island toward the sea, and you'll come to the tiny **Museo Arquelogico del Cuale** (no phone; Tues–Sat 10am–2pm and 3–6pm; free admission), which has a small but impressive permanent exhibit of pre-Columbian figurines.

Retrace your steps to the market and Libertad, and follow Calle Miramar to the brightly colored steps up to Zaragoza. Up Zaragoza to the right 1 block is the famous **pink arched bridge** that once connected Richard Burton's and Elizabeth Taylor's houses. In this area, known as **"Gringo Gulch,"** many Americans have houses.

SHOPPING

For years, shopping in Puerto Vallarta was concentrated in small, eclectic shops rather than impersonal malls. Although plenty of independent stores still exist, it's now home to large, modern shopping centers between the marina and hotel zone areas as well. Vallarta is known for having the most diverse and impressive selection of **contemporary Mexican fine art** outside Mexico City. It also has an abundance of **silver jewelry,** beachwear, and Mexican souvenirs.

The Shopping Scene

The key shopping areas are central downtown, the Marina Vallarta *malecón,* the popular *mercados,* and the beach—where the merchandise comes to you. Some of the more attractive shops are 1 to 2 blocks in **back of the *malecón.*** Start at the intersection of Corona and Morelos streets—interesting shops spread out in all directions from here. **Marina Vallarta** has two shopping plazas, Plaza Marina and Neptuno Plaza, on the main highway from the airport into town, which offer a limited selection of shops, with Plaza Neptuno primarily featuring home decor shops.

An addition to Vallarta's shopping and dining scene is **Plaza Peninsula** (located on Av. Francisco Medina Ascencio 2485, just south of the cruise-ship terminal and north of the Ameca River bridge; no phone number or website), in front of a large waterfront condominium

development of the same name. It's home to more than 30 businesses, including Vallarta's first **Starbucks,** as well as art galleries, boutiques, and a varied selection of restaurants. The **Centro Comercial Galerias Vallarta** (on Av. Francisco Medina Ascencio 2920, adjacent to Wal-Mart and directly across from the cruise-ship terminal; ✆ **322/209-1520;** www.galeriasvallarta.com.mx), is a large shopping and entertainment mall anchored by the high-end Mexican department store Liverpool. It houses a variety of boutiques, including Levi's, Nine West, and United Colors of Benetton. Among the selections for dining are Chili's, Subway, and Sirloin Stokade. For entertainment, there's a 10-screen movie theater. The mall is open daily from 8am to 2am; most stores are open from 11am to 9pm.

Puerto Vallarta's **municipal flea market** is just north of the Río Cuale, where Libertad and A. Rodríguez meet. The *mercado* sells clothes, jewelry, serapes, shawls, leather accessories and suitcases, papier-mâché parrots, stuffed frogs and armadillos, and, of course, T-shirts. The market is open daily from 9am to 7pm. Upstairs, a **food market** serves inexpensive Mexican meals. An **outdoor market** is along Río Cuale Island, between the two bridges. Stalls sell crafts, jewelry, gifts, folk art, and clothing.

One place to learn more about the Huichol is **Huichol Collection,** Morelos 490, across from the sea-horse statue on the *malecón* (✆ **322/223-2141**). Not only does this shop offer an extensive selection of Huichol art in all price ranges, but it also has a replica

Fun Facts

A Huichol Art Primer

Puerto Vallarta offers the best selection of Huichol art in Mexico. Descendants of the Aztec, the Huichol are one of the last remaining indigenous cultures in the world that has remained true to its ancient traditions, customs, language, and habitat. Huichol art falls into two main categories: yarn paintings and beaded pieces. All other items you might find in Huichol art galleries are either ceremonial objects or items used in everyday life.

Yarn paintings are made on a wood base covered with wax and meticulously overlaid with colored yarn. Designs represent the magical vision of the underworld, and each symbol gives meaning to the piece. Paintings made with wool yarn are more authentic than those made with acrylic; however, acrylic yarn paintings are usually brighter and more detailed because the threads are thinner. It is normal to find empty spaces where the wax base shows. Usually the artist starts with a central motif and works around it, but it's common to have several independent motifs that, when combined, take on a different meaning.

Beaded pieces are made on carved wooden shapes depicting different animals, wooden eggs, or small bowls made from gourds. The pieces are covered with wax, and tiny *chaquira* beads are applied one by one to form designs. Usually the beaded designs represent animals; plants; the elements of fire, water, or air; and certain symbols that give a special meaning to the whole. Deer, snakes, wolves, and scorpions are traditional elements; other figures, such as iguanas, frogs, and any animals not indigenous to Huichol territory, are incorporated by popular demand. Beadwork with many small designs that do not exactly fit into one another is more time-consuming and has a more complex symbolic meaning.

of a Huichol adobe hut, informational displays explaining more about their fascinating way of life and beliefs, and usually a Huichol artist at work. However, note that this is a timeshare sales location, so don't be surprised if you're hit with a pitch for a "free" breakfast and property tour. **Peyote People,** Juarez 222 (✆ **322/222-2302** or 222-6268; www.peyotepeople.com), is a more authentic shop specializing in Huichol yarn paintings and bead art from San Andres Cohamiata, one of the main villages of this indigenous group, up in the high Sierra. The shop is open Monday through Friday from 10am until 9pm, and Saturday and Sunday 10am to 6pm.

Clothing

Vallarta's locally owned department store, **LANS,** has branches in downtown at Juárez 867 (✆ **322/226-9100;** www.lans.com.mx) and in both Plaza Peninsula and Plaza Caracol. LANS offers a wide selection of name-brand clothing, accessories, footwear, cosmetics, and home furnishings.

Contemporary Art

Known for sustaining one of the stronger art communities in Latin America, Puerto Vallarta has an impressive selection of fine galleries featuring quality original works. Several dozen galleries get together to offer art walks every Wednesday from 6 to 10pm between November and April. Most of the participating galleries serve complimentary cocktails during the art walks. It's a very popular weekly event among the local expat residents.

Ana Romo This contemporary gallery opened in 2009 featuring works of Guadalajara artist Ana Romo. You'll find an impressive selection of abstract paintings, blown-glass vases, and glass sculptures—all at very reasonable prices when compared with galleries featuring art of similar quality. Open Monday through Saturday noon to 2pm and 4 to 9pm. Guadalupe Sanchez 803A, next to Pipila. ✆ **322/223-5666.** www.anaromoart.com.

Corsica Among the best of Vallarta's galleries, Corsica features an exquisite collection of sculptures, installations, and paintings, from world-renowned contemporary artists from Mexico. There are two locations—at Guadalupe Sanchez 735 and Leona Vicario 230. Open Monday through Saturday 11am to 2pm and 5 to 10pm. ✆ **322/223-1821.** www.galeriacorsica.com.

Galería des Artistes This stunning gallery features contemporary painters and sculptors from throughout Mexico, Europe, and Latin America, including the renowned original "magiscopes" of Feliciano Bejar. Paintings by Vallarta favorite Evelyn Boren, as well as a small selection of works by Mexican masters, including Orozco, can be found here. There's an impressive new collection of sculptures from Guadalajara as well. It's open Monday to Saturday 11am to 10pm. Just across the street, affiliate **Galería Omar Alonso** exhibits photography by internationally renowned artists. Open Monday through Saturday 11am to 10pm. Leona Vicario 248. ✆ **322/222-5587.**

Galería Pacífico Since opening in 1987, Galería Pacífico has been considered one of the finest in Mexico. On display is a wide selection of sculptures and paintings in various mediums by midrange masters and up-and-comers alike. The gallery is just a short walk inland from the fantasy sculptures on the *malecón.* Among the artists whose careers Galería Pacífico has influenced are rising talents Alfredo Langarica and Brewster Brockman, internationally renowned sculptor Ramiz Barquet, and David Leonardo. Open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 8pm, Sunday by appointment. Between June and October, check for reduced hours or vacation closings. Aldama 174, 2nd floor, above La Casa del Habano cigar store. ✆ **322/222-1982.** www.galeriapacifico.com.

Galería Uno One of Vallarta's first galleries, the Galería Uno features an excellent selection of contemporary paintings by Latin American artists, plus a variety of posters and prints. In a classic adobe building with open courtyard, it's also a casual, salon-style gathering place for friends of owner Jan Lavender. Open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 8pm. Morelos 561 (at Corona). ✆ **322/222-0908.**

Gallería Dante This gallery-in-a-villa showcases contemporary art including sculptures and paintings against a backdrop of gardens and fountains. Works by more than 100 Mexican and international artists are represented, including the acclaimed Oscar Solis, Guillermo Gomez, Israel Zzepda, Alejandro Colunga, and Tellosa. The gallery, which is the largest in Puerto Vallarta, is open during the winter Monday through Friday from 10am to 5pm, and by appointment. Basilio Badillo 269. ✆ **322/222-2477.** www.galleriadante.com.

Crafts & Gifts

Alfarería Tlaquepaque Opened in 1953, this is Vallarta's original source for Mexican ceramics and decorative crafts, all at excellent prices. Open Monday through Saturday 9am to 9pm and Sunday from 9am to 3pm in high season, with reduced hours in low season. Av. México 1100. ✆ **322/223-2121.**

La Casa del Feng Shui I am enchanted by this shop's selection of Australian and local crystals, candles, talismans, fountains, and wind chimes—along with many more items designed to keep the good energy flowing in your home, office, or personal space. Open Monday through Saturday from 9am to 8pm. Corona 165, around the corner from Morelos. ✆ **322/222-3300.**

Safari Accents Flickering candles glowing in colored-glass holders welcome you to this highly original shop overflowing with creative gifts, one-of-a-kind furnishings, and reproductions of paintings by Frida Kahlo and Botero. Open daily from 10am to 6pm. Olas Altas 224, Loc. 4. ✆ **322/223-2660.**

Decorative & Folk Art

Banderas Bay Trading Company ★ This shop features fine antiques and one-of-a-kind decorative objects for the home, including contemporary furniture, antique wooden doors, religious-themed items, original art, hand-loomed textiles, glassware, and pewter. Open Monday to Saturday 10am to 6pm. Lázaro Cárdenas 263 (near Ignacio L. Vallarta). ✆ **322/223-4352.** There's also a bodega (warehouse) annex of the shop located at Constitución 319 (at Basilio Badillo). ✆ **322/223-9817.** www.banderasbaytradingcompany.com.

Lucy's CuCu Cabaña Finds Owners Lucy and Gil Gevins have assembled an entertaining and eclectic collection of Mexican folk art. Each summer they travel through Mexico and personally select the handmade works created by over 200 indigenous artists and artisans. Open Monday through Friday from 10am to 8pm, and Saturday from 10am to 3pm. Basilio Badillo 295 (at Constitución). ✆ **322/222-1220.**

Olinala This shop contains two floors of fine indigenous Mexican crafts and folk art, including a collection of museum-quality masks and original contemporary art by gallery owner Brewster Brockman. Open Monday through Friday from 10am to 2pm and 5 to 8pm, Saturday from 10am to 2pm. Lázaro Cárdenas 274. ✆ **322/222-4995.**

Puerco Azul Set in a space that actually has a former pig-roasting oven, Puerco Azul features a whimsical and eclectic selection of art and home accessories, much of it created by owner and artist Lee Chapman (aka Lencho). Open Monday to Saturday from

10:30am to 6pm, closed on Sunday. Constitución 325, just off Basilio Badillo's "restaurant row." ✆ **322/222-8647.**

Querubines (Finds) Owner Marcella García travels across the country to select the items, which include exceptional artistic silver jewelry, embroidered and hand-woven clothing, bolts of loomed fabrics, tin mirrors and lamps, glassware, pewter frames and trays, high-quality wool rugs, straw bags, and Panama hats. Open Monday through Saturday from 9am to 9pm. Juárez 501A (at Galeana). ✆ **322/223-1727.**

Tequila & Cigars

La Casa del Habano This fine tobacco shop has certified quality cigars from Cuba, along with humidors, cutters, elegant lighters, and other smoking accessories. It's also a local cigar club, with a walk-in humidor for regular clients. In the back, you'll find comfy leather couches, TV sports, and full bar service. Open Monday through Saturday from noon to 9pm. Aldama 170. ✆ **322/223-2758.**

La Casa del Tequila ★ Here you'll find an extensive selection of premium tequilas, plus information and tastings. Also available are books, tequila glassware, and other tequila-drinking accessories. The shop has been downsized to accommodate the **Agave Grill** (see "Where to Dine," earlier) in the back. Open Monday through Saturday from noon to 11pm, and Sunday from 5pm to midnight. Morelos 589. ✆ **322/222-2000.**

PUERTO VALLARTA AFTER DARK

Puerto Vallarta's spirited nightlife reflects the town's dual nature—part resort, part colonial town. In the past, Vallarta was known for its live music scene, but in recent years the nocturnal action has shifted to DJ clubs with an array of eclectic, contemporary music. A concentration of modern bars, lounges, and nightclubs line the *malecón,* with more traditional cantinas, sports bars, and gay clubs and bars found south of the Río Cuale in Viejo Vallarta (old town).

Performing Arts & Cultural Events

Truth be told, cultural nightlife beyond the **Mexican Fiesta** is limited. Culture centers on the visual arts; the opening of an exhibition carries considerable social and artistic significance. Puerto Vallarta's gallery community comes together in the central downtown area to present biweekly **art walks** from late October to April, where new exhibits are presented, featured artists attend, and complimentary cocktails are served. Check listings in the daily English-language newspaper *Vallarta Today,* or the events section of **www.virtualvallarta.com**.

Fiesta Nights

Major hotels in Puerto Vallarta feature frequent fiestas for tourists—extravaganzas with open bars, Mexican buffet dinners, and live entertainment. Some are fairly authentic and make a good introduction for first-time travelers to Mexico.

Rhythms of the Night (Cruise to Caletas) ★★★ (Moments) This is an unforgettable evening under the stars at John Huston's former home at the pristine cove called Las Caletas. The smooth, fast Vallarta Adventures catamaran travels here, entertaining guests along the way. Tiki torches and drummers dressed in native costumes greet you at the dock. There's no electricity—you dine by the light of candles, the stars, and the moon. The evening includes dinner, open bar, and entertainment. The buffet dinner is delicious—steak, seafood, and generous vegetarian options. The entertainment

 showcases indigenous dances in contemporary style. The cruise departs at 6:30pm from the Vallarta Adventure Center in Nuevo Vallarta or at 7pm from the Puerto Vallarta Maritime Terminal and returns by 11pm. ✆ **888/303-2653** in the U.S., or 322/297-1212. www.vallarta-adventures.com. Cost $89 (includes cruise, dinner, open bar, and entertainment).

The Club & Music Scene

Restaurant & Bars

Bar Constantini ★★ The most sophisticated martini bar in Vallarta is set in the elegant eatery Café des Artistes. The plush sofas are enticing, and the list of champagnes by the glass, signature martinis, and specialty drinks is suitably tempting. An ample appetizer and dessert menu make it appropriate for late-night dining and drinks. Open daily from 6pm to 1am. Guadalupe Sánchez 740. ✆ **322/222-3229.**

La Bodeguita del Medio This authentic Cuban restaurant and bar is known for its casual energy, terrific live Cuban music, and mojitos. It is a branch of the original Bodeguita in Havana (reputedly Hemingway's favorite restaurant there), which opened in 1942. If you can't get to that one, the Vallarta version has successfully imported the essence—and has a small souvenir shop that sells Cuban cigars, rum, and other items. The food is not memorable, so I recommend coming just for drinks and dancing. A Cuban band plays salsa, cumbia, and other tropical rhythms nightly (except Mon) after 10pm. Kitchen open daily from 11:30am to 1am; bar open until 3am. Paseo Díaz Ordaz 858 (malecón), at Allende. ✆ **322/223-1585.**

Punto V Having replaced Carlos O'Brien's in 2009, Punto V has quickly become one of Vallarta's top nightspots. The grand open-air bar and restaurant overlooks the *malecón* and sea, transforming as the night wears on into a sizzling dance club popular with a 30s-something crowd. Crystal chandeliers, faux Greek statues, a video screen, and tables and sofas fill the main room; the upstairs sky bar also has daybeds. Open daily from 11am to 3am. Open bar Sunday and Wednesday nights for 450 pesos. Paseo Díaz Ordaz (malecón) 786, at Pípila. ✆ **322/322-1444.** www.puntov.com.mx.

Z'Tai ★ Z'Tai is a stunning array of spaces that span an entire city block. Enter from the *malecón,* and you'll discover ZBar, an upstairs lounge with chill-out music, backlit orange lighting, bay views, and comfortable banquettes to relax on. Venture farther into this club, and you'll find an expansive open-air garden area that serves cocktails, as well as Asian-inspired dining and snacking options, accompanied by electronic music at a level still appropriate for conversation. There's an enormous selection of wines, but the favorite drink here is their signature cucumber martini. Open daily for food service from 6pm to midnight, with bar service until 2am or later. Valet parking available. Morelos 737, Col. Centro. ✆ **322/222-0306.** www.ztai.com.

Rock, Jazz & Blues

El Faro Lighthouse Bar ★ A circular cocktail lounge at the top of the Marina lighthouse, El Faro is one of Vallarta's most romantic nightspots. Live guitar plays in high season, and the music's not so loud as to interrupt conversations. Drop by at twilight for the magnificent panoramic views, but don't expect anything other than a drink and, if you get lucky, some popcorn. Open daily from 5pm to 1am. Royal Pacific Yacht Club, Marina Vallarta. ✆ **322/221-0541,** -0542.

Mariachi Loco This lively mariachi club features singers belting out boleros and ranchero classics. Live music starts at 10pm; the mariachi show begins at 11:30pm—the mariachis stroll and play as guests join in impromptu singing—and by midnight it gets

going. After 2am the mariachis play for pay, which is around 150 pesos for each song played at your table. There's Mexican food from 8 to 10:30pm. Open daily from 8pm to approximately 5am. Cárdenas 254 (at Ignacio Vallarta). ✆ **322/223-2205.** Minimum consumption 80 pesos.

Nightclubs & Dancing

A few of Vallarta's clubs charge admission, but generally you pay just for drinks: about 60 pesos for a margarita, 45 pesos for a beer, and a bit more for mixed drinks. Keep an eye out for discount passes frequently available in hotels, restaurants, and other tourist spots. Along with clubs listed below, Carlos n' Charlie's, Hard Rock Cafe, and Señor Frog's are also here. Most clubs are open from 10pm to 4am.

Christine This dazzling club draws a crowd with an opening laser-light show, pumped-in dry ice, flashing lights, and a dozen large-screen video panels. Once a disco—in the true sense of the word—it is now a more modern dance club, with techno, house, and hip-hop the primary tunes played. The sound system is truly amazing, and the mix of music can get almost anyone dancing. Dress code: No tennis shoes or flip-flops, no shorts for men. Open weekends from 10pm to 4am; the light show begins at 11pm. In the Krystal Vallarta hotel, north of downtown off Av. Francisco Medina Ascencio. ✆ **322/224-0202.** Cover $10 ladies, $20 men.

Collage Club A multilevel monster of nighttime entertainment, Collage includes a pool salon, video arcade, bowling alley, and the Disco Bar, with frequent live entertainment. It's just past the entrance to Marina Vallarta, air-conditioned, and very popular with a young, mainly local crowd. Calle Proa s/n, Marina Vallarta. ✆ **322/221-0505.** Cover $5.50–$40, which varies by theme party being offered that night.

de Santos ★★★ Vallarta's chic de Santos restaurant is even better known for the hip urban crowd its bar draws, and the adjacent club has become known as the place for the super chic to party. The lower level holds an air-conditioned bar and dance floor (after midnight, when dining tables have been cleared away), where a DJ spins house and techno. The relatively young crowd shares a common denominator of cool style. The restaurant bar is open daily from 6pm to 2am; the club is open Wednesday through Saturday from 10pm to 4am. Morelos 771. ✆ **322/223-3052,** -3053.

Hilo You'll recognize Hilo by the giant sculptures that practically reach out the front entrance, including somewhat ironic faux-bronze statues of *campesinos* (Mexican farmers). This high-energy club playing extremely loud music ranging from house and electronic to rock remains a favorite with the 20-something set. The later the hour, the more crowded the club becomes. Open daily from 4pm to 6am. Malecón, btw. Aldama and Abasolo sts. ✆ **322/223-5361.** Cover $10 weekends and holidays. No cover weekdays.

J & B Salsa Club This is a popular place to dance to Latin music—from salsa to samba, the dancing is hot and the atmosphere electric. On Fridays, Saturdays, and holidays, the air-conditioned club hosts live bands. Open daily from 9pm to 6am. Av. Francisco Medina Ascencio Km 2.5 (Hotel Zone). ✆ **322/224-4616.** Cover 90 pesos.

La Vaquita A giant dancing cow dominates the bar of this hot new addition to the Vallarta club scene. In fact, paintings of flying cows and cattle in any number of amusing poses decorate this raging bar, with couches and daybeds upholstered like spotted cows. A sexy crowd moves to the grooves of the DJ into the wee hours. It's located next to Zoo (see below). Calle Morelos 535 (at Paseo Diaz Ordaz). No phone. Cover 50 pesos.

Mandala The sister club to Hilo is geared toward a slightly more sophisticated crowd. There are giant Buddha sculptures situated throughout the Pan Asian–inspired club, and the three-level bar and dance club has ongoing music video screens and oversize windows overlooking the *malecón.* But there's little meditating here amid the din of house and Latin pop. This place attracts a sleek and suntanned crowd. Open daily from 6pm to 6am. Paseo Díaz Ordaz (malecón) 600 at Abasolo. ✆ **322/223 0966.** Cover (nighttime) $10–$20, depending on the promotion of the evening.

Zoo This is your chance to be an animal and get wild in the night. A giant elephant head emerges out of a jungle-themed mural near the entrance, and the Zoo even has cages to dance in if you're feeling unleashed. This packed club boasts a killer sound system and a hot variety of dance music, including techno, reggae, and rap. Every hour's happy hour, with two-for-one drinks. Zoo opens daily at noon and closes in the wee hours. Paseo Díaz Ordaz (malecón) 630. ✆ **322/222-4945.** www.zoobardance.com. Cover $15 weekends only (includes 2 drinks).

A Sports Bar

Andale's Attached to an inexpensive hotel and American restaurant, Andale's is the most happening sports bar in town. The kitschy joint, decorated with an egg carton ceiling, stuffed animals, and comical life-size dolls, attracts a mixed-age English-speaking crowd. Sports play on various screens to the backdrop of classic rock. It advertises that it's open 24 hours. Olas Altas 425 in the Zona Romantica. ✆ **322/223-2622.** www.andales.com.

Gay & Lesbian Clubs

Vallarta has a vibrant gay community with a wide variety of clubs and nightlife options, including special bay cruises and evening excursions to nearby ranches. Most of the gay nightlife happens in so-called *Zona Romantica* (also called *Viejo Vallarta* or old town) on the south side of the Rio Cuale, where the busiest street lined with restaurants, cafes, and bars is Olas Altas. The free ***Gay Guide Vallarta*** (www.gayguidevallarta.com) specializes in gay-friendly listings, including weekly specials and happy hours.

Casanova This small club decorated with leather sofas, red lights, and disco balls usually gets going after midnight. There's a small stage featuring strip shows nightly from 11pm to 3am. The club itself is open daily from 10pm until the last customers leave. Lazaro Cardenas 302 (corner of Constituciones). No phone. Cover 100 pesos.

La Noche La Noche is a casual, intimate "neighborhood bar" catering to a gay clientele, with great prices on drinks and a menu of martinis and tequila cocktails. Beers are always two-for-one. Open daily from 6pm to 2am. Lazaro Cardenas 257 (2 doors from Ignacio Vallarta). ✆ **322/222-3364.**

Mañana ★ Located in the Zona Romantica, the town's most popular gay club offers two dance floors, a pool with a waterfall, and candlelit tables. Weekends bring drag shows and stripteases. It's open daily from 10pm to 6am. Venustiano Carranza 290. ✆ **322/222-7772.** www.manana.com.mx. Cover 200 pesos weekends, 100 pesos weekdays.

SIDE TRIPS FROM PUERTO VALLARTA

Yelapa: Robinson Crusoe Meets Jack Kerouac ★

It's a cove straight out of a tropical fantasy, and only a 45-minute trip by boat from Puerto Vallarta. Yelapa has no cars and one paved (pedestrian-only) road, and it only acquired electricity in the past 10 years. It's accessible only by boat. Its tranquillity, natural beauty, and seclusion make it a popular home for hipsters, artists, writers, and a few

expats (looking to escape the stress of the world, or perhaps the law). Yelapa remains casual and friendly—you're unlikely to ever meet a stranger.

To get there, travel by excursion boat or inexpensive water taxi (see "Getting Around," earlier in this chapter). You can spend an enjoyable day, but I recommend a longer stay—it provides a completely different perspective.

Once you're in Yelapa, you can lie in the sun, swim, snorkel, eat fresh grilled seafood at a beachside restaurant, or sample the local moonshine, *raicilla.* The beach vendors specialize in the most amazing pies you've ever tasted (coconut, lemon, or chocolate). You can tour this tiny town or hike up a river to see one of two waterfalls; the closest to town is about a 5-minute walk straight up from the pier. ***Note:*** If you use a local guide, agree on a price before you start out. Horseback riding, guided birding, fishing trips, and paragliding are also available.

For overnight accommodations, local residents frequently rent rooms, and there's also the rustic **Hotel Lagunita** ★ (✆ **322/209-5056** or 209-5055; www.hotel-lagunita.com). Its 29 cabañas have private bathrooms, and the hotel has electricity, a saltwater pool, a primitive spa with massage, an amiable restaurant and bar, as well as the Barracuda Beach lounge and brick-oven pizza cafe, plus a gourmet coffee shop. Though the prices are high for what you get, it is the most accommodating place for most visitors. Double rates run up to $120 during the season and up to $90 in the off season. Special rooms are available for honeymooners, for $150 in high season (MasterCard and Visa are accepted). Lagunita is a popular spot for yoga retreats.

If you wish to splurge, look into staying at **Verana** ★★★ (✆ **800/530-7176** or 322/222-2360; www.verana.com). See "Where to Stay," earlier, for details.

If you stay over on a Wednesday or Saturday during the winter, don't miss the regular dinner-dance at the **Yelapa Yacht Club** ★ (no phone). Typically tongue-in-cheek for Yelapa, the "yacht club" consists of a cement dance floor and a disco ball, but the DJ spins a great range of tunes, attracting all ages and types. Dinner (70–150 pesos) is a bonus—the food may be the best anywhere in the bay. The menu changes depending on what's fresh. Ask for directions; it's in the main village, on the beach.

Nuevo Vallarta & North of Vallarta: All-Inclusives

Many people assume Nuevo Vallarta is a suburb of Puerto Vallarta, but it's a stand-alone destination over the state border in Nayarit. It was designed as a mega resort development, complete with marina, golf course, and luxury hotels. Although it got off to a slow start, it has finally come together, with a collection of mostly all-inclusive hotels catering particularly to families on one of the widest, most attractive beaches in the bay. The biggest resort, Paradise Village, has a full marina and an 18-hole golf course inland from the beachside strip of hotels, plus a growing selection of condos and homes for sale. The Mayan Palace also has an 18-hole course here. The most expensive all-inclusive resort here is **Grand Velas All Suites & Spa Resort** (✆ **322/226-8000;** www.vallarta.grandvelas.com) at Av. Cocoteros, 98 Sur. The Paradise Plaza shopping center, next to Paradise Village, amplifies the area's shopping, dining, and services. It's open daily from 10am to 10pm. To get to the beach, you travel down a lengthy entrance road from the highway, passing by a few remaining fields (which used to be great for birding) but mostly real estate under construction.

A 16-mile trip into downtown Puerto Vallarta takes about 30 minutes by taxi, costs about 250 pesos, and is available 24 hours a day. The ride is slightly longer by public bus, which costs 15 pesos and operates from 7am to 11pm.

Marival Grand & Club Suites This all-inclusive hotel sits almost by itself at the northernmost end of Nuevo Vallarta. Designed in Mediterranean style, it offers a complete vacation experience, including extensive land sports, watersports, and daytime activities for kids, teenagers, and adults. There are a large variety of room types, ranging from studios to one-, two-, and three-bedroom suites. Rooms and suites have balconies or terraces with garden, pool, or ocean views. The broad white-sand beach is one of the real assets here—it stretches over 274m (900 ft.).

Paseo de los Cocoteros and Bulevar Nuevo Vallarta s/n, 63735 Nuevo Vallarta, Nay. ✆ **877/222-0302** toll-free in the U.S., or 322/297-0100 or 226-8200. Fax 322/297-0262. www.gomarival.com. 495 units. $235 and up double; $300 and up suite. Rates are all-inclusive. Ask for seasonal specials. AE, MC, V. Free parking. From the Puerto Vallarta airport, enter Nuevo Vallarta from the 2nd entrance; Club Marival is the 1st resort to your right on Paseo de los Cocoteros. **Amenities:** 6 restaurants; 7 bars; kids' club; 4 outdoor pools and an adults-only whirlpool; spa; 4 lighted tennis courts; extensive watersports, land sports, and daytime activities. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi (for a fee).

Paradise Village ★ The collection of pyramid-shaped buildings, designed in Maya-influenced style, houses well-designed all-suite accommodations in studio and one-, two-, and three-bedroom configurations. All have sitting areas and kitchenettes, making the resort ideal for families or groups of friends. Truly a village, this self-contained resort set on an exquisite stretch of beach offers a full array of services. The Maya theme extends to both oceanfront pools, with mythical creatures forming water slides and waterfalls. The spa is reason enough to book a vacation here, with treatments, hydrotherapy, massage (including massage on the beach), and fitness and yoga classes. A compelling attraction is the nearby El Tigre golf course (details earlier in this chapter, under "Golf"); their on-site marina continues to draw a growing number of boats and yachts. Paradise Village has begun to feel a bit dated around the edges.

Paseo de los Cocoteros 001, 63731 Nuevo Vallarta, Nay. ✆ **866/334-6080** toll-free in the U.S., or 322/226-6770. Fax 322/226-6713. www.paradisevillage.com. 700 units. $150–$300 junior or 1-bedroom suite; $300–$400 2-bedroom suite; $500–$600 3-bedroom suite. All-inclusive rates available for $96 additional per person. AE, DC, MC, V. Free covered parking. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 beachside snack bars; kids' club; petting zoo; access to championship golf club w/18-hole course; complete fitness center; basketball court; beach volleyball; 2 beachside pools; lap pool; European spa; 2 tennis courts; watersports center; marina; Wi-Fi (in lobby for a fee). *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar.

Bucerías: A Coastal Village ★

Only 18km (11 miles) north of the Puerto Vallarta airport and adjacent to Nuevo Vallarta, Bucerías ("boo-seh-*ree*-ahs," meaning "place of the divers") is a picturesque coastal fishing village on the Nayarit side of Banderas Bay. It has caught on as a quieter alternative to Puerto Vallarta, and now has a thriving expatriate community of Americans and Canadians living alongside the locals. Lovely villas, art galleries, and gourmet restaurants line the main street in Bucerías Sur (the south side of town). Nightlife is slim, but dining is excellent for this low-key town, and it is walking distance from some of the resorts in Nuevo Vallarta.

To reach the town center by car, take the exit road from the highway out of Vallarta and drive down the shaded, divided street that leads to the beach. Turn left when you see a line of minivans and taxis (which serve Bucerías and Vallarta). Go straight ahead 1 block to the main plaza. The beach, with a lineup of restaurants, is a half-block farther. You'll see cobblestone streets leading from the highway to the beach, and hints of villas and town homes behind high walls.

If you take the bus to Bucerías, exit when you see the minivans and taxis to and from Bucerías on the street that leads to the beach. To use public transportation from Puerto Vallarta, take a minivan or bus marked BUCERIAS (they run 6am–9pm). The last minivan stop is Bucerías's town square. There's also 24-hour taxi service.

EXPLORING BUCERÍAS Come here for a day trip from Puerto Vallarta just to enjoy the long, wide, uncrowded beach, along with the fresh seafood served at the beachside restaurants or at one of the cafes listed below. On Sundays, many of the streets surrounding the plaza are closed to traffic for a *mercado* (street market)—where you can buy anything from tortillas to neon-colored cowboy hats. There's also an art walk every second Thursday of the month from 7 to 9pm (www.buceriasartwalk.com). Bucerías doesn't offer much in the way of hotel accommodations—many people who come here rent condominiums or other vacation properties. One reliable option is the **Hotel Palmeras** (✆ **329/298-1288;** www.hotelpalmeras.com), on Lázaro Cárdenas 35, with simple, comfortable rooms generally under $100, just a block off the beach.

The **Coral Reef Surf Shop,** Heroe de Nacozari 114-F (✆ **329/298-0261**), sells a great selection of surfboards and gear, and offers surfboard and boogie board rentals, and a surf package that includes transport to Punta Mita and a lesson there for $85. It's located on the main highway heading south out of town.

WHERE TO DINE Besides those mentioned below, there are many seafood restaurants fronting the beach. The local specialty is *pescado zarandeado,* a whole fish smothered in tasty sauce and slow-grilled, and the ceviche and lobster are excellent here, too. Most fine-dining options here are open only for dinner.

Karen's Place ★ INTERNATIONAL This casual beachfront eatery on the south side of town is one of the few restaurants open in Bucerías during the day. Breakfast burritos, spicy Mexican egg dishes, and fresh fruit start the day here. For lunch, light, healthy choices include chicken almond salads and Mexican wraps with beans, salsa, and avocado. There are also tasty sandwiches and burgers, as well as more traditional Mexican dishes. The open-air *palapa* fronts the beach, and service is friendly and quick; people come here just for happy hour as well. Karen's Place also houses a coffee and pastry shop just off the street.

Calle Lázaro Cárdenas 156 (right on the beach in front of the Costa Dorada hotel). ✆ **329/298-3176.** www.karensplacebucerias.com. Main courses 80–185 pesos. MC, V (no credit cards at breakfast). Mon–Sat 9am–4pm and 6–9pm; Sun 9am–3pm.

Le Fort ★★★ Moments FRENCH The unforgettable evening begins with champagne smiles as the privileged diners watch chef-owner Gilles Le Fort prepare their gourmet meal. The U-shaped bar adjacent to the kitchen accommodates the guests, who sip *kir royales* and nibble on homemade terrine while the master works. Chef Le Fort is the winner of numerous culinary awards, and his warm conviviality is the real secret ingredient of this unusual experience. Once dinner is served in the adjacent open-air dining room, Le Fort and his wife Margarita join the table, which seats up to 16. He owns the most extensive wine cellar in the bay—some 2,000 bottles of French and Mexican varieties. Three delicious courses are served (the menu is chosen by the first group to reserve for that night), followed by a presentation of fine liquors (available for purchase). I cannot imagine a more creative, social dining experience along this beautiful stretch of coast.

Calle Lázaro Cárdenas 71, 1 block from the Hotel Royal Decameron. ✆ **329/298-1532.** www.lefort.com.mx. Reservations required. Cooking class, 3-course dinner, wines, and recipes $55 per person. No credit cards. Daily 8–10:30pm. Closed for a month in summer.

Mark's ★★ (Finds) MEDITERRANEAN It's worth a special trip to Bucerías just to eat at this open-air patio restaurant. The most popular dinner spot in town, Mark's offers a great assortment of thin-crust pizza and flatbread, baked in a brick oven and seasoned with fresh herbs grown in the garden. Everything has exquisite flavorings—favorites include shrimp tempura with fruit salad, macadamia-crusted red snapper filet, fresh poached lobster, and grass-fed filet mignon with blue-cheese ravioli. A four-course wine tasting menu is available for 400 pesos. Multitalented chef Jan Marie (Mark's charming wife and partner) runs an adjacent boutique, featuring elegant home accessories and unique gift items. The bar televises all major sporting events.

Calle Lázaro Cárdenas 56 (a half-block from the beach). ✆ **329/298-0303.** www.marksbucerias.com. Reservations recommended. Pasta 175–315 pesos; main courses 200–365 pesos. MC, V. Daily 5–11pm. From the highway, turn left just after bridge, where there's a small sign for Mark's; double back left at next street (immediately after you turn left) and turn right at next corner; Mark's is on the right.

Mezzogiorno ★★ ITALIAN The owners of this lovely oceanfront trattoria built a reputation with their Mezzaluna restaurant in Vallarta and then moved the business to their former home in Bucerías when the traffic became too much to deal with the commute. It's the most attractive dining option north of Vallarta, in a sleekly restored home overlooking the bay. But as stunning as the setting is, it takes second place to the savory dishes served. Large, flavorful salads overflow with fresh ingredients. My favorite combines grilled chicken with mixed greens, sun-dried tomatoes, goat cheese, and a currant-balsamic vinaigrette. For main dishes, pasta is the specialty, with bestsellers that include fettuccini salmone, lasagna, and penne with grilled vegetables. Also delightful are the shrimp, scallops, and fish served over black fettuccine, with black olives, capers, and a spicy tomato sauce.

Av. del Pacífico 33. ✆ **329/298-0350.** www.mezzogiorno.com.mx. Reservations recommended. Main courses 85–195 pesos. MC, V. Daily 5–11pm.

Punta Mita: Exclusive Seclusion ★★★

At the northern tip of the bay lies an arrowhead-shaped, 600-hectare (1,482-acre) peninsula bordered on three sides by the ocean, called Punta de Mita. Considered a sacred place by the Indians, this is the point where Banderas Bay, the Pacific Ocean, and the Sea of Cortez come together. It's magnificent, with quiet beaches and coral reefs just offshore. Stately rocks jut out along the shoreline, and the water is a dreamy translucent blue. Punta Mita has evolved into Mexico's most exclusive development, an enormous gated resort community next to the original little town that to this day has a few authentic restaurants and shops. The luxury community's master plan includes a couple world-class resorts, multimillion dollar villas and residences, and two championship golf courses. You'll find the elegant Four Seasons Resort, St. Regis, and two Jack Nicklaus Signature golf courses here along with plenty of exclusive real estate for sale to the highest bidders.

Casa de Mita ★★ (Finds) This hotel isn't technically in Punta Mita, but it's near enough to convey a sense of the area's relaxed seclusion. It's located on the back road that runs from Punta Mita to Sayulita, on the small, pristine Careyeros Bay. The six rooms and two suites are set in a villa overlooking the exquisite beach. The villa itself is a work of white stucco walls, tile floors and patios, thatch and tile roofs, and guayaba-wood balcony detailing. Interiors of the guest rooms are simple and elegant, with touches such as carved armoires, headboards, and doors from Michoacán. Private balconies with ocean views surround the pool, which features submerged sunning chairs and a small fountain. A big plus here is the delicious dining.

Playa Careyeros, 63734 Punta de Mita, Nay. ✆ **866/740-7999** in the U.S., or 329/298-4114. Fax 329/298-4112. www.casademita.com. 8 rooms and suites. High season $485–$615 suite; low season $445–$575 suite. Rates include all meals and drinks. Minimum 3-night stay required. AE, DC, MC, V. Limited street parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; entertainment room w/TV and DVD; universal gym station; small outdoor pool; spa; tour services, including horseback riding and surfing lessons; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, minibar, no phone.

Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita ★★★ The Four Seasons Punta Mita is one of the world's most spectacular resorts, offering refinement, seclusion, and impeccable service. Accommodations lie in three-story casitas surrounding the main building, which houses the open-air lobby, cultural center, restaurants, shopping arcade, and oceanfront infinity pool. Every guest room offers views of the ocean from a large terrace or balcony. Most suites have a private plunge pool, sitting room with a sofa bed, separate bedroom, bar, and a powder room. Rooms are plush and spacious, with a king-size or two double beds, a seating area, and an oversize bathroom. The resort also has an adults-only tranquillity pool, with a sushi and tapas bar surrounded by cabañas available for daily rent, as well as an incredible kids' pool in the form of a lazy river with inner tubes. The resort rents out magnificent four- and five-bedroom villas with private butlers, and there are two Jack Nicklaus championship golf courses, a full-service spa, and tennis center. Service is unerringly warm and unobtrusive throughout this little paradise, and each of the resort's gourmet restaurants is fantastic.

63734 Bahía de Banderas, Nay. ✆ **800/332-3442** in the U.S., or 329/291-6000. Fax 329/291-6060. www.fourseasons.com/puntamita. 173 units. High season $545–$1,175 double, $1,685–$16,000 suite; low season $375–$925 double, $1,025–$8,750 suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Free valet parking. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lobby bar; beachfront bar; horseback riding; children's programs; concierge; cultural center w/lectures, cooking classes, Spanish classes, dance classes, and other daily activities; full-service fitness center; yoga; Jacuzzi; oceanfront pool; adults-only pool surrounded by private cabañas; lazy river kids' pool; room service; European-style spa; tennis center w/10 courts of various surfaces; watersports equipment; yacht charter. *In room:* A/C, flatscreen TV/DVD, i-Home, hair dryer, Internet (for a fee), minibar.

St. Regis ★★ Opened in late 2008, this ultra-exclusive St. Regis is the first in Latin America, set on a stunning expanse of beach in Punta Mita. Guest rooms and suites are almost hidden amid the 33 two-story casitas spread throughout the property, where palm-filled gardens and three infinity pools compete with the endless ocean for guests' attention. Beautifully appointed rooms incorporate handmade tiles, custom Mexican furnishings, and large marble bathrooms with indoor and outdoor showers. Other features include flatscreen TVs, Remède bath amenities, and the St. Regis signature butler service. Throughout the resort, touches of Provence combine with chic Mexican designs that draw on river stone, marble, onyx, wood, and clay. The resort's spa merits special mention for its pampering service. Although there's a kids' program, the resort targets adults looking for privacy and usually feels very quiet. The three gourmet restaurants give you variety, so you never need leave the property.

Lote H-4 Carretera Federal 200, Km 19.5, Punta de Mita, 63734, Nayarit. ✆ **800/598-1863** in the U.S., or 329/291-5800. Fax 329/291-5801. www.stregis.com/puntamita. 120 units. $480 and up double; $1,140 and up suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Free valet parking. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 3 bars, babysitting; kids' club; concierge; full-service spa and fitness center; Jacuzzi; Internet room; 3 pools; room service; 8 tennis courts and access to the Jack Nicklaus Signature courses Pacífico and Bahía; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, flatscreen TV, hair dryer, Internet, minibar.

Sayulita: Mexico's Current Hot Spot

Sayulita sits only 40km (25 miles) northwest of Puerto Vallarta, on Hwy. 200 to Tepic, yet it feels like a world apart. It captures the simplicity and tranquillity of beach life that

has long since left Vallarta—but hurry, because it's exploding in popularity. For years, Sayulita has been principally a surfers' destination—the main beach in town is known for its consistent break and long, rideable waves. Visitors and locals who find Vallarta to be too cosmopolitan have started to flock here. Although Sayulita has only 5,800 residents, it swells to nearly 40,000 visitors in high season. You'll now find more real estate offices than surf shops, and more fine-jewelry stores than juice bars, but Sayulita is still holding on to its charms.

An easygoing attitude prevails in this beach town, despite the niceties popping up amid the basic accommodations, inexpensive Mexican food stands, and handmade, hippie-style-bauble vendors. It's quickly becoming gentrified with new cafes, sleek shops, aromatherapy-infused spas, and elegant villas for rent.

Sayulita is most popular for surfing. Any day, you'll witness a swarm of surfers seeking perfect swells offshore from the main beach. You may just as easily encounter a Huichol Indian family that has come down from the Sierra to sell their wares.

To get to Sayulita, you can rent a car or take a taxi from the airport or downtown Vallarta. The rate is about $70 to get to the town plaza. The taxi stand is on the main square, or you can call for pickup at your hotel. The trip to the airport from Sayulita costs about $60. Guides also lead tours to Puerto Vallarta, Punta Mita, and other surrounding areas, including a Huichol Indian community.

SURFING There are two main surf spots in Sayulita—the most popular is the "point" break fronting the main beach in the village, which is a right long board break. A faster, left break is found just north of the river mouth, in front of the campground. There's also a calmer spot toward the beach's south end where lessons are usually given. Surf instruction and board rentals are available at **Lunazul Surf School** (✆ **329/291-2009**), located at Marlin 4, where this street ends at the beachfront. The 90-minute surf lessons cost 550 pesos for individual instruction, or 400 pesos per person for group instruction. This includes a rash guard and hour free board rental after the lesson. Board rentals (including hard and soft short and long boards) through Lunazul are 50 pesos per hour or 200 pesos for the day; you'll need to leave an ID as a deposit. You'll find several other surf schools on the beach during high season.

Where to Stay

Along with the hotels listed below, Sayulita has two hostels, a beachside campground, and a number of private homes to rent.

Hotel La Casona ★ Just half a block from Sayulita's main surfing beach, this cheerful hotel houses eight individually designed rooms decorated in bleached white, terra cotta, and turquoise with colorful Mexican accents. Four rooms—Sky (which has a full ocean view), Amor, Peacock, and Lily—offer their own balconies with hammocks, and all rooms have private bathrooms with showers only. The communal kitchen and "living lounge" tend to bring guests together, and there are a number of daybeds and couches interspersed throughout the corridors perfect for reading. For breakfast, organic coffee, teas, fresh squeezed orange juice and fruit, and a variety of pastries and breads are offered. One drawback: The surrounding streets can be quite noisy, especially in high season.

Calle Delfin 7, 63734 Sayulita, Nay. ✆ **415/683-3244** from the U.S., or 329/291-3629. www.lacasonasayulita.com. 8 units. $75–$140 high season; low season discounts available. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Massage service; help w/tours and activities; communal kitchen and lounge; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C (in some), fan.

Playa Escondida ★★★ Finds Just above an idyllic beach cove, a handful of uniquely designed bungalows dot the lush tropical grounds of Playa Escondida. A waterfall rains warm water into the oceanfront infinity pool, set next to the *palapa* restaurant and open-air spa. The casual, friendly staff gets to know many of the guests at this gorgeous yet unpretentious resort. It's not the Four Seasons—activities are limited, there are no air conditioners, and Mother Nature sometimes visits the open-air bungalows (which have fans and mosquito nets). But for those who want a peaceful vacation off the beaten track and don't mind sacrificing a bit of commercial convenience for enchanted natural beauty, this place is unforgettable. Choose from among individually designed beachfront casitas, bungalows in the jungle, or imported teak houses from Thailand constructed in a spectacular bird canyon. Sayulita is a winding 10-minute drive from this splendid resort.

Playa Escondida, 63732 Sayulita, Nay. ✆ **805/709-1470** from the U.S. www.playa-escondida.com. 26 units. High season $220–$475 double; low season $115–$250 double. $100 mandatory fee per guest for food and beverages. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; horseback riding; Jacuzzi; oceanfront pool; room service; open-air spa; private beach w/watersports equipment; yoga; walking trails; Wi-Fi (in reception and restaurant areas). *In room:* Fan, fridge (full kitchen in houses in bird canyon).

Villa Amor Villa Amor is a collection of charming guest rooms—think of it as your private villa by the sea. Owner Rod Ingram and his design team have carefully crafted each space and individual suite. The exterior walls curve invitingly and open to breathtaking views all around. The one- and two-bedroom "villa" suites have fully equipped kitchenettes, plus open-air seating or dining areas (or both); some have plunge pools. Note there are many stairs and steep walkways throughout the property. Weddings are often hosted here.

Camino Playa Los Muertos s/n, 63732 Sayulita, Nay. ✆ **619/819-5407** from the U.S., or 329/291-3010. Fax 329/291-3018. www.villaamor.com. 33 units. High season $110–$260 1-bedroom villa, $380–$550 2-bedroom villa, $750 3-bedroom villa; low season $55–$130 1-bedroom villa, $190–$275 2-bedroom villa, $375 3-bedroom villa. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; concierge w/tour services; kayaks; room service. *In room:* A/C (in some), fan.

Where to Dine

Fine dining is hard to come by in Sayulita, but you'll find tasty seafood eateries and fish taco stands around town and by the beach. For the best burrito of your life, stop by **Burritos Revolución** just off the main plaza at Revolución 40 (no phone). There's almost always a line here for the cooked-to-order "surf" (marlin, mahimahi, or shrimp) and "turf" (chicken, beef, or carnitas) burritos, and a sign advises you to smile, pay cash, and not ask for any substitutions. This no-nonsense burrito shack is open daily from 10am to 6pm.

Don Pedro's INTERNATIONAL Sayulita's best known and most upscale restaurant features an enticing beachfront location and excellent service. Choose between an open-air dining area or shaded tables on the beach for breakfast, lunch, or dinner. Although the food quality sometimes varies, I always like the grilled artichoke, scallop sushi, and fresh salads to start. For main courses, I recommend the thin-crust pizza, fresh fish artfully prepared, and changing selection of savory pasta and meat dishes, such as the mesquite grilled leg of lamb with couscous. Delicious homemade flatbread accompanies your meal. At night, torches and clay pot fireplaces warm the beachfront tables. In the bar area, TVs broadcast sporting events of any relevance, from college football to Mexican *futból* (soccer).

Marlin 2, on the beachfront. ✆ **329/291-3090.** Main courses 145–295 pesos. MC, V. Daily 8am–10:30pm.

El Consteño SEAFOOD They say you haven't been to Sayulita if you haven't eaten at El Costeño. The sandy, sun-drenched eatery right on the main beach invites you to nibble on tortilla chips and ceviche while watching surfers glide across waves just in front. Grab one of the plastic tables and chairs on the large open-air patio or right on the beach—you can come for lunch or an early dinner and sit for as long as you like. Start with an order of guacamole and an outrageously strong margarita. The fish tacos are simple and delicious, as are the shrimp quesadillas. Whole fish is served with butter, garlic, or spicy sauce, and shrimp are prepared any number of ways. The laid-back waitstaff seem as timeless as the ocean before you, and are never too rushed.

On the main beach. No phone. Dishes 60–110 pesos. No credit cards. Fri–Wed noon–8pm. Closed Thurs.

Restaurant Bar Leyza ★★ Value MEXICAN Sayulita's most authentic Mexican restaurant sits off the main square and incorporates traditional Huichol dishes, such as *sopes* and *huaraches,* into its carefully designed menu. Other delectable dishes include chiles rellenos, *arrachera* beef, chicken *mole,* and enormous combination platters with enchiladas, burritos, and tostadas. There are vegetarian options, too. The perfectly spiced food is cooked in olive oil and served on beautiful ceramic dishes; everything at this family-run restaurant tends to be healthy, cheap, and delicious. Try one of the fresh fruit waters to accompany your meal, and don't miss the hot salsa with fresh tomatoes, chiles, garlic, and shallots. You can sit inside, on the sidewalk patio, or on the rooftop terrace. The restaurant also prides itself on having the cleanest bathrooms in town.

Next to the main square. ✆ **322/100-9373.** Dishes 50–125 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 8am–midnight.

Rollie's ★ INTERNATIONAL This eclectic restaurant emanates a happy aura that puts its patrons in a good mood. Rollie's is best known for its breakfasts; recommended items include Adriana's Rainbow (an omelet with cheese, tomatoes, green peppers, and onions) and my personal favorite, Indian Pipe Pancakes. All breakfast dishes come with Rollie's famous lightly seasoned, pan-fried new potatoes. Rollie's also serves dinner, with live music in high season. Specialties include paella, creative hamburgers (such as those with shrimp or mahimahi), and taco salads. There's also an upstairs espresso bar open in the mornings.

Av. Revolución 58, 2 blocks west of the main square. ✆ **329/291-3567,** -3075. Breakfast 55–75 pesos; dinner 65–135 pesos. No credit cards. Nov–Apr daily 7:30am–noon and 5:30–9pm. Closed for dinner Mon nights; closed May–Oct.

Nightlife

Nightlife in Sayulita is as laid-back by night as by day, and much of the action just happens out on the street and around the main square. Locals seem to gravitate to a different locale each night, so when you arrive, ask around to see where the evening's hot spot will be. One dependable option is the **Buddha Mar** (✆ **329/291-3869**), located at Calle Marlin 8, on the second floor just next to Don Pedros (you can't miss the neon pink sign). This cool ambient bar serves beer and cocktails as well as sushi and sashimi amid Buddha statues, pillowed banquettes, and lounge music. On weekends, there's often live music from 9pm until 1am, which tends to draw a dancing crowd. It's open each evening from 6:30pm until about 2am, or when the crowd abates. Housed upstairs under a big *palapa* next to the main plaza, **Calypso** (✆ **329/291-3704**), at Av. Revolución 44, is a popular bar/restaurant serving simple Mexican dishes and excellent salads alongside a full collection of tequilas and other favorite liquors. Traditional Mexican music plays in the background. It's open daily from 5 to 11pm. **Dragon Rojo** (the **Red Dragon;** ✆ **329/291-3201**), on Calle Manuel Navarrete at the corner of Gaviottas, is basically a

big beach shack playing live music nightly—usually reggae and samba. It's open from midday to midnight.

2 MAZATLAN ★

1,078km (668 miles) NW of Mexico City; 502km (311 miles) NW of Guadalajara; 1,561km (968 miles) SE of Mexicali

Mazatlán flourished as a beach destination in the 1980s, and then lost some of its luster to newer resorts like Cancún and Cabo San Lucas. In the last couple decades, the city has catered more to package tourists and timeshare holders, although more and more visitors have been attracted recently to the renaissance taking place in Mazatlán's old town and the addition of major new resorts in Nuevo Mazatlán. And even if Mazatlán lacks some of the chic appeal of other coastal resorts, it remains comfortable, casual, value-packed Mexico. More than any other beach resort in the country, it represents the expansive golden beaches, inexpensive accommodations, and welcoming bars and restaurants that typified Mexico's early appeal to travelers. The evolving golf scene, luxury-yacht harbor, and growing selection of accommodations have yet to catch the attention of enough tourists to drive prices to the levels of other Mexican resorts, and that's good news for travelers looking for economy in a beach resort.

A city with a population of nearly 500,000, Mazatlán is the largest port between Los Angeles and the Panama Canal. Elegant reminders of its history, 27km (17 miles) of sandy beaches, and a geographically diverse environment are all added attractions in Mazatlán's efforts to become a premier beach resort.

Once known as a spring break haven and party town, Mazatlán now attracts more American and Canadian families, retirees, and other tourists with an eye for value.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There & Departing

BY PLANE A number of airlines operate direct or nonstop flights to Mazatlán, though charters predominate. From the United States, **Aeroméxico** (✆ **800/237-6639** in the U.S., or 01-800/021-4000 in Mexico) flies from Los Angeles, Atlanta, Phoenix, and Tucson, via Mexico City. **Mexicana** (✆ **800/531-7921** in the U.S.) has direct service from Denver, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, and San Antonio, most connecting through Mexico City. **Alaska Airlines** (✆ **800/252-7522** in the U.S., or 669/985-2730) flies nonstop from Los Angeles and Seattle. **Continental Airlines** (✆ **800/523-3273**) flies nonstop from Houston. In Mexico, **Aeroméxico** (✆ **669/914-1111**) has flights from Hermosillo, Durango, Monterrey, Puerto Vallarta, Tijuana, and León, all via Guadalajara or Mexico City. **Mexicana** (✆ **669/982-5666**) offers service from Mexico City and Los Cabos. **Aero Calafia** (✆ **669/985-4300;** www.aereocalafia.com.mx) offers direct service from Puerto Vallarta and Los Cabos. Check with a travel agent for the latest **charter flights.**

BY BUS First-class and deluxe buses connect Mazatlán to Guadalajara (7 hr.; 410 pesos one-way), Mexico City (16 hr.; 920 pesos), Puerto Vallarta (8 hr.; 350 pesos), and other points within Mexico. The main first-class bus company is **TAP** (✆ **01-800/001-1827** toll-free in Mexico; www.tap.com.mx). The bus terminal is located on Hwy. 200 N. Km 1203 (✆ **669/982-1949**).

BY CAR To reach Mazatlán from the United States, take **International Hwy. 15** from Nogales, Arizona, to Culiacán. At Culiacán, change to the four-lane **tollway**—it costs

about 200 pesos from here to Mazatlán and is the only road considered safe and in drivable condition. On the tollway, total trip time from the United States to Mazatlán is about 12 hours. Consider an overnight stop, because driving at night in Mexico can be dangerous. **From Puerto Vallarta,** the 560km (347-mile) drive is not easy—the road winds through the mountains and takes about 8 hours, but is in generally good condition. Take **Hwy. 200** north to Las Varas. There it becomes four-lane **Hwy. 68;** follow that until you see a detour for **Hwy. 15.** Take 15 north to Mazatlán.

Orientation

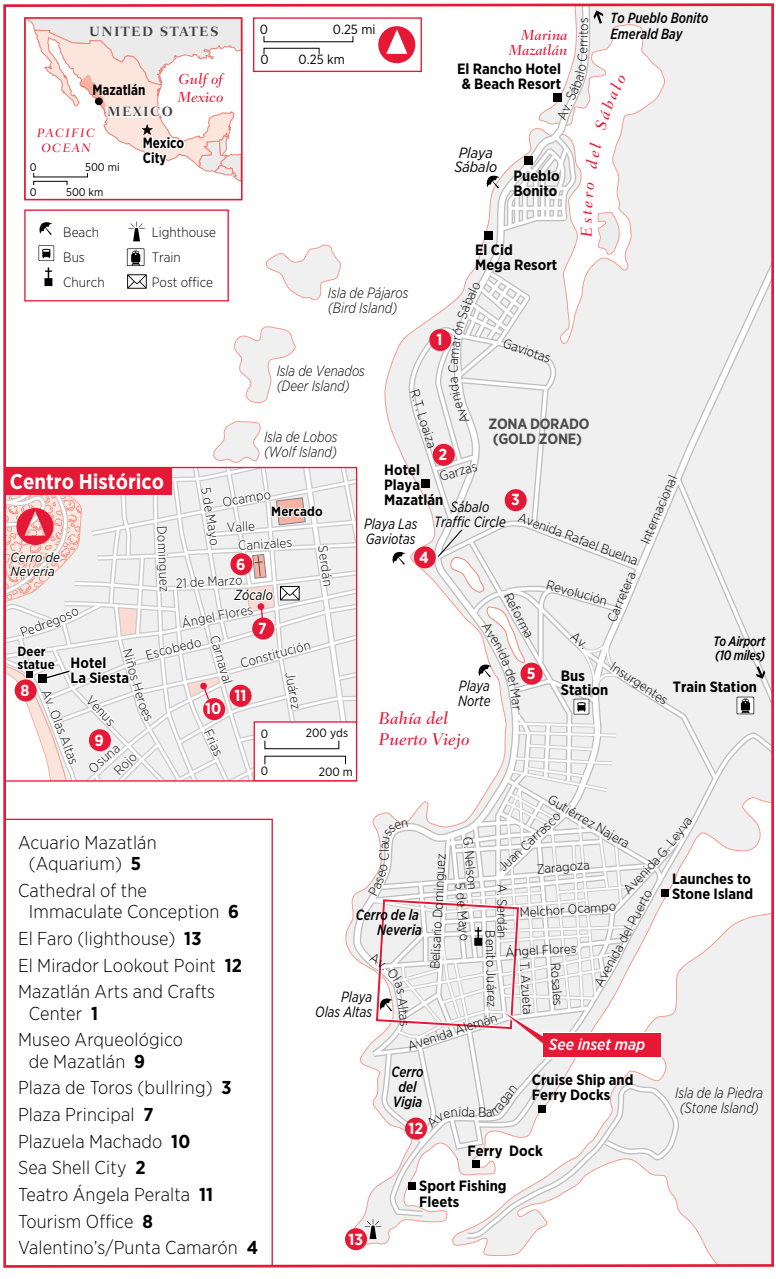
ARRIVING The Rafael Buelna International Airport (airport code: MZT) is 27km (17 miles) southeast of the hotel-and-resort area of town. The following rental-car companies have counters in the airport, open during flight arrivals and departures: **Alamo** (✆ **800/424-3687** in the U.S., or 669/981-2266), **Avis** (✆ **800/331-2112** in the U.S., or 669/954-8148), **Budget** (✆ **800/527-0700** in the U.S., or 669/913-2000), **Hertz** (✆ **800/654-3131** in the U.S., or 669/985-0845), and **National** (✆ **800/227-3876** in the U.S., or 669/982-4000). Daily rates run $35 and up. A car is desirable if you want to explore the coast and nearby villages, but it is not essential in Mazatlán.

Taxis and *colectivo* minivans run from the airport to hotels; the airport-chartered taxis cost about 300 pesos, which is significantly more than the *colectivos,* which cost 120 pesos but take up to 12 passengers and, therefore, make multiple stops. Only taxis make the return trip to the airport, which costs 200 to 300 pesos. The **Central de Autobuses** (main bus terminal) is at Jose Angel Ferrusquilla, between the Zona Dorada and downtown.

VISITOR INFORMATION The extremely helpful and professional **State Tourism Office** (✆ **669/981-8883** or 981-8887; www.vivesinaloa.com), is at Olas Altas Sur 1501, near Hotel La Siesta. The office is open Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm; the staff speaks English. To preview what's going on in Mazatlán before you arrive, check the website of the local English-language newspaper ***Pacific Pearl*** (www.pacificpearl.com), or pick up a copy of the simple publication at various hotels and locations around town. For additional information to help orient you, check the ***Welcome Digest*** (✆ **669/913-3628;** www.welcomedigest.com) or ***Mazatlán Interactivo*** (✆ **669/981-8435;** www.mazatlaninteractivo.com.mx).

CITY LAYOUT Mazatlán extends north from the peninsula port area along Avenida Gabriel Leyva and Avenida Barragan, where the cruise ships, sportfishing boats, and ferries dock. Downtown begins with the historic area of **Viejo Mazatlán (Old Mazatlán)** and **Playa Olas Altas** to the south. A curving seaside boulevard, or ***malecón,*** extends 27km (17 miles) along the waterfront, all the way from Playa Olas Altas to **Playa Norte,** changing names often along the way. Traveling north, it begins as Paseo Olas Altas and becomes Paseo Claussen parallel to the commercial downtown area. The name changes to Avenida del Mar at the beginning of the Playa Norte area.

About 6km (3¾ miles) north of downtown lies the Sábalo traffic circle in the **Zona Dorada (Golden Zone),** near the **Punta Camarón,** a rocky outcropping over the water. The Zona Dorada begins where Avenida del Mar intersects Avenida Rafael Buelna and becomes **Avenida Camarón Sábalo,** which leads north through the abundant hotels and fast-food restaurants of the tourist zone. From here, the resort hotels, including the huge El Cid Resort complex, spread northward along and beyond **Playa Sábalo.** The **Marina Mazatlán** development has changed the landscape north of the Zona Dorada considerably; hotels, condo complexes, and private residences rise around the marina. Although completion of the extensive project—to comprise the marina, condominiums, and commercial



- Acuario Mazatlán (Aquarium) **5**
- Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception **6**
- El Faro (lighthouse) **13**
- El Mirador Lookout Point **12**
- Mazatlán Arts and Crafts Center **1**
- Museo Arqueológico de Mazatlán **9**
- Plaza de Toros (bullring) **3**
- Plaza Principal **7**
- Plazuela Machado **10**
- Sea Shell City **2**
- Teatro Ángela Peralta **11**
- Tourism Office **8**
- Valentino's/Punta Camarón **4**

centers—is still years away, the new marina will be the largest on the western seaboard between Los Angeles and Panama, and one of the largest in all of Latin America. This area north of the Marina El Cid is increasingly known as Nuevo Mazatlán. North of here is **Los Cerritos (Little Hills).**

Getting Around

The downtown transportation center for buses, taxis, and *pulmonías* (see below) is on the central Plaza Principal, facing the cathedral.

BY TAXI **Eco Taxis** are green and red cabs with posted set fares, and generally cost about 50 to 100 pesos per trip. Taxis are easy to flag around town and can also be rented by the hour (200 pesos). Agree on a price in advance. Fares between the Zona Dorada and Old Mazatlán average 100 pesos; within the Zona Dorada, you should pay about 50 pesos. It will cost 200 pesos to travel between Emerald Bay and downtown. To request a taxi, call ✆ **669/986-1111** or 985-2828.

BY PULMONÍA These open-air VW vehicles resembling overgrown golf carts carry up to three passengers. ***Pulmonías*** (literally "pneumonias") have surreylike tops and open sides. They're the same price as regular taxis and a quintessential part of the Mazatlán experience.

BY BUS Buses, some with air-conditioning, cover most of the city and are relatively easy to use, although knowing some Spanish is helpful. The SABALO CENTRO line runs from the Zona Dorada along the waterfront to downtown near the market and the central plaza; at Avenida Miguel Alemán, the buses turn and head south to Olas Altas. The CERRITOS-JUAREZ line starts near the train station, cuts across town to the *malecón* beside the Zona Dorada, and heads north to Los Cerritos and back. The SABALO COCOS line runs through the Zona Dorada, heads inland to the bus station, and goes on to downtown (also stopping at the market) by a back route. The PLAYA SUR line goes to the area where the sportfishing and tour boats depart. Buses run daily from 6am to 10:30pm. Fares are about 9 pesos for air-conditioned green buses or 6 pesos for the white buses.

Fast Facts Mazatlán

Area Code The telephone area code for Mazatlán is **669.**

Banks Most banks are generally open Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm, and some open from 9am to 2pm on Saturday.

Climate As the northernmost major beach resort on the mainland, Mazatlán does not get as hot as beach cities farther south. The wettest month is September, and evenings during the winter months can be cool.

Consular Agencies The **Canadian** (✆ **669/913-7320;** Mon–Fri 9:30am–12:30pm) and **U.S. Consular Agency** (✆ **669/916-5889;** Mon–Fri 10am–2pm) are both at Avenida Playa Gaviotas 202.

Drugstore **Farmacias Hidalgo,** German Evers and Hidalgo s/n (✆ **669/985-4545** or 985-4646), is open from 8am to 10pm.

Emergencies Dial ✆ **066.** For medical emergencies, contact the **Sharp Hospital,** Rafael Buelna and Las Cruces (✆ **669/986-5676** or 986-5678). The **Tourist Police** can be reached at ✆ **669/914-3222.**

Post Office The *correo* is downtown at Benito Juárez and 21 de Marzo, on the east side of the main plaza (✆ **669/981-2121**). Hours are Monday through Friday from 8am to 5:30pm, Saturday from 9am to 1pm.

WHERE TO STAY

The hotels in downtown Mazatlán are generally older and less expensive than those along the beachfront heading north. Room rates rise farther north from downtown. The major areas to stay are the Zona Dorada (Golden Zone), Playa Norte (North Beach), Nuevo Mazatlán (New Mazatlán), and Playa Olas Altas, and the downtown seafront.

The Zona Dorada & North

The Zona Dorada is an elegant arc of gold sand linked by a palm-lined boulevard and bordered by the most deluxe hotels and elaborate beach houses. A bonus is the sunset view. Many hotels along this beach cut their prices from May through September.

El Cid Resort ★ The grand dame of Mazatlán's resorts, El Cid Resort offers extensive services, outdoor activities, and dining and entertainment options. Both a hotel and a timeshare development, El Cid features three beachside buildings within close distance and a separate hotel at the marina. These include the main 17-story beachside tower, Castilla; the 28-story, all-suite El Moro Tower (which is mostly for timeshares); and the oldest, lowest-priced building, Granada, near the golf course. El Cid Marina Beach is the newest, most upscale, and most expensive of El Cid's Mazatlán properties, located north of the main El Cid complex on the marina's waterfront. In general, the rooms are not the resort's primary draw (except for at the more luxurious El Cid Marina Beach), although many guest rooms were renovated throughout the complex in 2009 to 2010. The resort's main draw are the activities: The golf and tennis facilities are outstanding, as is the spa. Guests can choose from extensive watersports, adventure and cultural tours, and nature programs.

Av. Camarón Sábalo s/n (btw. Av. Rodolfo T. Loaiza and Circuito Campeador), 82110 Mazatlán, Sin. ✆ **866/306-6113** in the U.S., or 669/913-3333 in Mexico. Fax 669/914-1311. www.elcid.com. 1,320 units. High season $100–$300 double, $200 and up suite; low season $50–$250 double, $175 and up suite. All-inclusive program $200 double occupancy, children 3–11 $35. AE, MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** 11 restaurants; 8 bars; babysitting; kids' club; concierge; 27-hole golf course; fitness center; marina; marine turtle conservation program; 8 outdoor pools (including 1 saltwater pool); room service; spa; sportfishing; 9 tennis courts; tennis academy; watersports equipment. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi (for a fee).

El Rancho Hotel & Beach Resort ★ (Value) This is one of my favorite hotels in Mazatlán. Each of the charming and relatively inexpensive villas features two levels, with two spacious bedrooms (one with a king-size bed, the other with two queen-size beds), a fully equipped kitchen, two bathrooms, and a living/dining area. They're decorated with handsome wood furnishings, Mexican handicrafts, and simple artwork. The difference in price depends on your view—garden, pool, or ocean. The small hotel lies on a beautiful stretch of soft-sand beach, immediately to the north of the Zona Dorada. The gardens are lovely, and the laid-back, *palapa*-covered restaurant sits above the bar, making it an ideal spot for catching the sunset. Note that this is also a timeshare resort, so be prepared for a sales pitch if you stay here.

Av. Sábalo-Cerritos 3170, 82110 Mazatlán, Sin. ✆ **888/596-5760** toll-free in the U.S. or 01-800/717-1991 in Mexico. www.elrancho.com.mx. 28 units. High season $135–$200 2-bedroom suite (sleeps up to 6); low season $110–$170 2-bedroom suite (sleeps up to 6). Rates include free airport pickup. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; 2 Jacuzzis; outdoor pool; Wi-Fi (in lobby). *In room:* A/C, TV.

Pueblo Bonito ★★ (Kids) The all-suite Pueblo Bonito remains one of my favorite resorts in Mazatlán. The grounds are gorgeous—exotic birds stroll lush lawns, a waterfall cascades into the main pool adjacent to the pool bar, and a row of *palapas* lines the beachfront. The colonial-style suites feature balconies or patios with ocean views; feather-top beds with pillow menus; and architectural touches such as curved ceilings, arched windows, and tiled floors. They come with kitchenettes and ample seating areas, and the extra space makes this a good choice for families or friends traveling together. Much of the action takes place on the beach or around the pool area, and watersports and pool activities enliven the scene throughout the day.

Av. Camarón Sábalo 2121 (Apdo. Postal 6), 82110 Mazatlán, Sin. ✆ **800/990-8250** in the U.S., or 01-800/990-8250 in Mexico, or 669/989-8900. Fax 669/989-8600. www.pueblobonito.com. 247 units. High season $240 junior suite, $280 2-bedroom suite (up to 2 adults and 2 children); low season $160 junior suite, $180 2-bedroom suite. AE, MC, V. Free guarded parking; valet parking. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants, including Angelo's (p. 337); 2 bars; babysitting; concierge; gym; 2 large outdoor pools and pool activities; whirlpool; room service; sauna; watersports. *In room:* A/C, TV.

Playa Norte

The waterfront between downtown and the Zona Dorada is Mazatlán's original tourist hotel zone. Moderately priced hotels and motels line the street across from the beach. From May to September, many hotels cut their prices.

Hotel Playa Mazatlán ★★ (Kids) The most happening place on this stretch of the Zona Dorada, the rustic Hotel Playa Mazatlán (open since 1955) remains enduringly popular with families, tour groups, and regulars who return annually for winter vacations and Semana Santa (Easter Week). The quietest rooms lie in the four-story section surrounding the well-tended interior gardens; those by the terrace restaurant and beach can be noisy. The north tower rooms and suites were remodeled in 2008, and most rooms are decorated in bright colors, with dark-wood furnishings and colonial accents. The beach is one of the liveliest in town. The hotel hosts a popular Mexican fiesta on Saturday at 7pm and a fireworks display on Sunday. Also at the Hotel Playa Mazatlán, Sendero Mexico (www.senderomexico.com) operates EduVentura, an evolving recreation center that includes waterfalls and ponds, climbing walls, two exciting 120m (400-ft.) Zip Lines, and more.

Av. Playa Gaviotas 202 Zona Dorada, 82110 Mazatlán, Sin. ✆ **800/762-5816** in the U.S., or 669/989-0555. Fax 669/914-0366. www.hotelplayamazatlan.com. 403 units. $125 garden-view double; $144 deluxe oceanview double. AE, MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant (p. 338); snack bar; bar; gym; massages; 3 outdoor pools; 2 outdoor whirlpools; advanced recreation center; room service; watersports equipment rental. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Downtown Seafront/Playa Olas Altas

The old section of Mazatlán spreads around a picturesque beach a short walk from downtown. Movie stars of the 1950s and 1960s came here for sun and surf, and the hotels where they stayed are still here. A few seafront restaurants also remain.

Hotel La Siesta (Value) The landmark La Siesta occupies a building surrounded by the old mansions of Mazatlán. Inside, three levels encircle a central courtyard; guest rooms facing the ocean have balconies opening to sea breezes and pounding waves. Those at the

back of the hotel are quieter but less charming; all have two beds, a table and chair, and small functional bathroom. **El Shrimp Bucket,** once the town's most popular restaurant until the Zona Dorada stole this area's thunder, sits just off the courtyard. A small pool has been added, along with Wi-Fi.

Av. Olas Altas 11 Sur, 82000 Mazatlán, Sin. ✆ **669/981-2640,** -2334. Fax 669/982-2633. www.lasiesta.com.mx. 58 units. $47 interior double; $59 oceanview double. AE, MC, V. Street parking. From the deer statue on Olas Altas, go right 1 block. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; small pool; limited room service. *In room:* A/C, TV, Wi-Fi.

Nuevo Mazatlán (New Mazatlán)

New Mazatlán stretches out north of the marina and is the city's newest development area. In addition to Pueblo Bonito Emerald Bay, a Crowne Plaza and an all-inclusive RIU have opened in this area. It's about a half-hour drive to the city center from here.

Pueblo Bonito Emerald Bay ★★★ (Kids) Mazatlán's most upscale resort sits on a stunning stretch of coastline, undisturbed by much around it. The protected beach area, magnificent free-form infinity pools, and gorgeous landscaped grounds with over 70 types of palms are reason enough to stay here. Outdoor activities abound, and the kids' club offers wonderful programs, involving painting, ceramics, and sand castles. The high-tech spa is Mazatlán's best (and most expensive), offering diverse spa rituals, massage therapies, body treatments, and facials. The generously appointed junior, master, and presidential suites are spread out among 15 buildings, introducing Mexican accents to the neoclassical design. All have oceanview balconies or terraces, comfy beds, and lovely bathrooms with amenities by Bath and Body Works. As with other resorts in Mazatlán, some of the rooms here are timeshares. La Cordeliere beachfront restaurant serves seafood, and a new bistro offers quality Mexican fare. A free shuttle runs frequently between this resort and Pueblo Bonito, in the Golden Zone.

Av. Ernesto Coppel Compania s/n, Zona Nuevo Mazatlán, 82110 Mazatlán, Sin. ✆ **800/990-8250** in the U.S., or 669/989-0525 in Mexico. Fax 669/988-0718. www.pueblobonitoemeraldbay.com. 348 units. High season $305 and up suite; low season $205 and up suite. AE, MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 3 bars, including pool bar; babysitting; kids' club; concierge; fitness center; 3 pools including adult pool and multilevel infinity pool w/activities; room service; full-service spa w/sauna, steam room, Jacuzzi, plunge pool, massage treatments, salon, fitness center, yoga and fitness classes (for a fee); 2 tennis courts w/instruction available; theme nights; watersports; Wi-Fi (in deli). *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, kitchen.

WHERE TO DINE

Mazatlán boasts one of the largest shrimp fleets in the world, so it's no surprise that shrimp and seafood are the specialties. Most restaurants are very casual and moderately priced, offering good value. A cheap-eats treat is to stop in one of the many *loncherías* (small establishments that are only for lunch, kind of like a home-cooking place, but not a counter) scattered throughout the downtown area. Here you can get a *torta* (a sandwich on a small French roll) stuffed with a variety of meats, cheeses, tomatoes, and onions, for around $5. Also recommendable is the **Deli 28 Centro,** Belisario Domínguez 1503, Historic Downtown (✆ **669/981-1577**), serving pasta, salads, quality deli meats and cheeses, as well as pizzas. It's open daily from 1:30 to 11pm.

The Zona Dorada

Expensive

Angelo's ★ ITALIAN/SEAFOOD Even locals consider this Italian restaurant one of the best in town, as much for its elegant ambience as for its food. Beveled-glass doors

reveal a dining room gleaming with brass, polished wood, and crystal chandeliers, as well as live piano. For an antipasti, consider the pan-fried marinated eggplant with Parmesan cheese followed by a light pasta. Waiters then present diners with fresh fish, veal, and steak (including chateaubriand for two). The formality of the restaurant seems a little out of place given the beach location, but those willing to dress up will appreciate Angelo's for special occasions.

In the Pueblo Bonito hotel (p. 336), Av. Camarón Sábalo 2121. ✆ **669/989-8900,** ext. 8608. www.pueblobonito-mazatlan.com. Reservations required. Main courses 140–480 pesos. AE, MC, V. Tues–Sun 6–11pm.

Papagayo Restaurant ★ INTERNATIONAL Nestled on the beach at the Inn at Mazatlán, diners at Papagayo enjoy the natural beauty of the sea. Diners can choose beach or open-air patio seating and a view to Las Tres Islas, the three imposing islands just offshore. Chef Vidal offers an extensive international menu, using the freshest fish, fruit, and vegetables. For a treat, order the shrimp CocoLoco, served in a half-pineapple with a coconut and tequila sauce, and wash it down with a rich flavored margarita. A number of exotic desserts and coffees are prepared tableside here.

The Inn at Mazatlán, Av. Camarón Sábalo 6291. ✆ **669/913-4151.** www.innatmazatlan.com.mx. Main courses 100–420 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 7am–11pm.

Pedro y Lola ★★ INTERNATIONAL Named after legendary *ranchero* singers Pedro Infante and Lola Beltran, this wonderful little restaurant/bar sits on the corner of the Plazuela Machado. Weekends bring live music and performances to the square, when cars are not allowed. The restaurant is housed in the beautifully restored 19th-century Juárez building that once served as the social center of this music-loving city. Inside, the colorful restaurant is decorated with local artwork and has a jazzy feel, but it's even more fun to sit outside on the patio. My favorite dish here is the "Pedro and Lola shrimp" prepared with fresh orange and Cointreau. You can also come just for appetizers or a drink, and the bar stays open until 1am.

Calle Constitución 523. ✆ **669/982-2589.** Main courses $10–$20. AE, MC, V. Daily 6–11:30pm.

Moderate

Jungle Juice CAFE This casual eatery has a festive touch, offering smoothies and juices as well as a number of popular entrees. Meat and lobster dishes are grilled over mesquite on the patio, and healthy vegetarian selections are available. Jungle Juice also serves tasty Mexican and American breakfasts and makes for a nice, quick stop after shopping in the Zona Dorada.

Las Garzas 101. ✆ **669/913-3315.** Main courses 100–300 pesos. MC, V. Daily 7am–10pm. Bar daily 6pm–2am. From Pastelería Panamá, take Sábalo and turn right on Las Garzas; it's 1 block down on your right. Heading north on Loaiza, Las Garzas and the Pastelería Panamá are on the right after the Sábalo traffic circle, before the Mazatlán Arts and Crafts Center.

La Terraza ★ Kids MEXICAN/INTERNATIONAL During the day, diners enjoy a view of the beach and Isla de Venados from the open-air terrace looking right over the ocean. After sundown, candlelit tables, the stars overhead, and the sound of the surging waves serve as the backdrop to live music and dancing from 7pm to midnight. The menu at La Terraza incorporates Mexican and international dishes, with a focus on seafood. Order fish, shrimp, or lobster prepared any way you like. The traditional and popular Mexican songs draw a festive crowd of all ages, and it's possible to just come for drinks. The breakfast buffet is also popular.

In the Hotel Playa Mazatlán, Av. Playa Gaviotas 202. ✆ **669/989-0555.** Breakfast 60–120 pesos; Mexican plates 83-138 pesos; seafood and meat 126–247 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 7am–11pm. Bar stays open later.

Inexpensive

Pura Vida I ★ VEGETARIAN/HEALTH FOOD Nearly hidden behind thick plants, Pura Vida has several small seating sections with wood picnic tables and white canvas umbrellas. A perfect morning spot, it specializes in juices and smoothies, from kelp to papaya. The energetic staff serves omelets and whole-wheat pancakes for breakfast, and burgers, purified salads, soups, and Mexican specialties for lunch. There are plenty of vegetarian dishes, such as soy burgers. The veggie and white-chicken sandwiches served on whole-wheat rolls are fabulous.

Bugambilia 100. ✆ **669/916-1010.** Main courses 50–70 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 8am–10:30pm. From Pastelería Panamá on Sábalo, turn right on Las Garzas, then left 1 block down onto Laguna; the cafe is on your right.

Downtown & Playa Norte

Moderate

Copa de Leche ★ Value MEXICAN This nostalgic sidewalk cafe on the waterfront at Playa Olas Altas feels the way Mazatlán must have in the 1950s, and the food is consistently as good as the ocean view. The menu includes *pechugas en nogada* (chicken breast in pecan-and-pomegranate sauce); shrimp *a la plancha* cooked with cheese and white wine, traditional *alambre* (grilled beef cooked with onion, peppers, mushrooms, ham, and bacon); rich seafood soup loaded with squid, shrimp, and chunks of fish; and succulent shrimp with chipotle sauce. Inside, the decor is about as simple as it gets, although the bar is creatively designed using an old wooden boat. Live music plays Thursday through Saturday nights.

Av. Olas Altas 1220 A Sur. ✆ **669/982-5753.** Breakfast 40–80 pesos; main courses 70–170 pesos. MC, V. Daily 7am–11pm. From El Shrimp Bucket (at Mariano Escobedo and Olas Altas), turn south and walk half a block down Olas Altas; the cafe is on your left.

El Shrimp Bucket MEXICAN/SEAFOOD Opened in 1963, El Shrimp Bucket reigned for decades as the most popular restaurant in town. Although its luster has been somewhat eclipsed by newer establishments in the Golden Zone, it retains a loyal following and is especially popular for breakfast—when all types of egg dishes are served—and lunch, when many come for sandwiches and salads. The specialty, of course, is Mazatlán's famous shrimp, which can be ordered throughout the day and prepared any way you choose—breaded, beer battered, barbecued, grilled, coconut crusted, or peel-and-eat. The giant Shrimp Boat includes 30 pieces done in different styles, served with rice and fries. Take a seat in the festive air-conditioned dining room or on the outdoor terrace, and enjoy a relaxed meal in this old-time favorite.

In the Hotel La Siesta, Av. Olas Altas 111 (at Mariano Escobedo). ✆ **669/981-6350** or 982-8019. Breakfast 40–83 pesos. Lunch plates 60–100 pesos; seafood and steak 107–395 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 7am–11pm.

ACTIVITIES ON & OFF THE BEACH

To orient yourself, walk up and enjoy the panoramic view from **El Faro,** the famous lighthouse on the point at the south end of town. It's the second-highest lighthouse in the world (only Gibraltar's is higher), towering 135m (443 ft.) over the harbor. Begin at the end of Paseo Centenario, near the sportfishing docks. There's a refreshment stand at the foot of the hill. Allow about 45 minutes for the climb. The view is nearly as spectacular from the top of **Cerro del Vigía (Lookout Hill),** which is accessible by car from Paseo Olas Altas.

BEACHES At the western edge of downtown is rocky **Playa Olas Altas,** a lovely stretch of pounding surf not suitable for swimming. Around a rocky promontory north of Olas Altas is **Playa Norte,** which offers several kilometers of good sand beach.

At the Sábalo traffic circle, Punta Camarón juts into the water, and on either side of the point is **Playa Las Gaviotas.** Farther north, **Playa Sábalo** is perhaps the best beach in Mazatlán. The next point jutting into the water is Punta Sábalo, beyond which you'll find a bridge over a channel that flows in and out of a lagoon. Beyond the marina, more beaches stretch all the way to Los Cerritos. Remember that all beaches in Mexico are public property, so you have the right to enjoy the beach of your choice.

Mazatlán is one of only a few resorts in Mexico where surfing is common on central town beaches. The waves are best at **Los Pinos,** north of the fort—known in surfing circles as "the Cannon"—and at Playa Los Gaviotas and Playa Sábalo. Swells are most consistent from May to September. Other notable surf breaks are found at Olas Altos, Cerritos, Isla de la Piedra, and El Camarón, at Playa Norte. The **Mazatlán Surf Center** (✆ **669/913-1821;** www.mazatlansurfcenter.com), in the Zona Dorada, at Camarón Sábalo 500-4, sells gear, rents boards, and offers surf lessons and Billabong camps. Lessons cost $65 for 2 hours and include hotel transportation and equipment. Surfboard rentals start at about $25 per day. Boogie boards are widely available for about $15 per day; wet suits rent for $10 per day.

An enticing beach for a day trip lies on **Isla de la Piedra (Stone Island).** From the center of town, board a Circunvalación or Playa Sur bus from the north side of the Plaza Principal for the ride to the boat landing, Embarcadero–Isla de la Piedra. Small motorboats make the 5-minute trip to the island every 15 minutes or so, from 7am to 6pm, for a modest price. When you arrive on the island, walk through the rustic little village to the ocean side, where the pale-sand beaches, bordered by coconut groves, stretch for miles. On Sunday afternoons, the *palapa* restaurants on the shore feature music and dancing, attracting mainly Mexican families.

CRUISES & BOAT RENTALS The **Kolonahe Sailing Adventure** departs for Isla de Venados (Deer Island) Tuesday through Sunday from Marina El Cid. Reserve through any travel agent or through El Cid (see below). This excursion sails aboard a 15m (49-ft.) trimaran to the island, where guests enjoy a picnic lunch and beverages, plus the use of snorkel equipment, boogie boards, kayaks, and canoes, for a cost of $50 per person. The boat departs at 9:15am and returns at 3:30pm. A sunset cruise sets sail on Thursdays at 5pm for a cost of $38 per person.

DEEP-SEA FISHING Mazatlán claims to be the billfish and shrimp capital of the world, and whether or not it's a valid claim, deep-sea fishing in Mazatlán is generally less expensive than in other parts of Mexico. July and August are the best fishing months, when marlin, sailfish, and dorado (mahimahi) pack the warm Pacific waters. If requested, your captain will practice "catch and release." Rates are around $475 per day for a 9m (40-ft.) *lancha* for up to four people and $675 per day for an 11m (36-ft.) cruiser for up to 10 passengers. Rates do not include fishing licenses ($15 per person), drinks, or gratuities. Try the **Aries Fleet** located at the Marina El Cid harbor master's office (✆ **669/916-3468;** www.ariesfleet.elcid.com), or **Fish!** (✆ **669/913-3308;** www.ifishmexico.com), at Av. Camaron Sabalo 1504-1A in the Sabalo Country Club. Locals suggest making fishing reservations for October through January at least a couple weeks in advance; at the very least, do it the minute you arrive in town. You may also choose to rent a *panga* (a small, uncovered fiberglass boat with an outboard motor) at a rate of about $250 per day (6 hr.) for up to four people.

OTHER WATERSPORTS The best place to arrange scuba diving, snorkeling, or surfing expeditions is the **Aqua Sport Center** (✆ **669/913-3333;** www.mazatlan-aquasports.com), located at Av. Camaron Sabalo s/n between the Posada Freeman Hotel and

El Cid Hotel. Another good option, located in front of Pueblo Bonito, is **OceanWorld** (✆ **669/913-2226**), which offers sailing, snorkeling, banana boats, kayaks, and boat tours.

SPECIAL EVENTS IN NEARBY VILLAGES The weekend of the first Sunday in October, **Rosario,** a small town 45 minutes south on Hwy. 15, holds a **festival honoring Our Lady of the Rosary,** with games, music, dances, processions, and festive foods. From May 1 to May 10, Rosario holds its **Spring Festival.**

In mid-October, the village of **Escuinapa,** south of Rosario on Hwy. 15, holds a **Mango Festival;** call the **Escuinapa Tourism Office** (✆ **695/953-0019**) or the **State Tourism Office** (✆ **669/981-8886**) for details.

SPECTATOR SPORTS There's a bullring (Plaza de Toros) on Rafael Buelna about 1.5km (1 mile) from the Zona Dorada. From December to early April, **bullfights** take place certain Sundays and holidays at 4pm; locals recommend arriving by 3pm. Tickets range from 100 pesos for general admission (ask for the shady side—*la sombra*) to 300 pesos for the front of the shaded section; most travel agencies and tour desks sell advance tickets. Note that the bulls are killed in these events.

At Playa Olas Altas, daring **cliff divers** take to the rock ledges of **El Mirador** and plunge into the shallow, pounding surf below, a la Acapulco. The divers perform sporadically during the day as tour buses arrive near their perch, sometimes diving with torches on Sundays at 7pm. Follow the *malecón* to the esplanade and look for the mermaid statue to find El Mirador.

TENNIS, GOLF & OTHER OUTDOOR SPORTS Try the **El Cid Resort,** on Camarón Sábalo (✆ **669/913-3333;** hotel guests have priority), or the **Racquet Club Gaviotas, Ibis,** and **Río Bravo** in the Zona Dorada (✆ **669/913-5939**). Courts run about $20 per hour. Many larger hotels in Mazatlán also have courts.

Mazatlán is probably the best **golf** value in Mexico. Try the 27-hole course at the **El Cid Resort** (✆ **669/913-3333**). Nine holes designed by Lee Trevino complement the 18 holes designed by Robert Trent Jones, Jr. It's open to the public, with preference given to hotel guests. Greens fees for nonguests run $91 for 18 holes, plus $20 for the caddy. El Cid guests pay $76, plus $20 for the caddy. A driving range and golf lessons are available. The club's open daily from 7am to 5pm.

The 9-hole course at the **Club Campestre Mazatlán** (✆ **669/980-1570**) is open to the public. Greens fees are about $25 for 9 holes, $35 for 18 holes; a caddy costs an extra $10 to $15, a cart is $15 to $20, respectively. It's on Hwy. 15 just outside town.

Mazatlán's newest course is at the **Estrella del Mar Golf Club** (✆ **800/629-2852** toll-free in the U.S. or 669/982-3300; www.estrelladelmar.com). The 18-hole, 7,004-yard course, also designed by Robert Trent Jones, Jr., stretches along 3km (1¾ miles) of coastline on Isla de la Piedra, a peninsula just south of downtown Mazatlán. There's a PGA pro on staff, driving range, and lessons available. Greens fees in high season run $110 for 18 holes and $74 for 9 holes, and in low season $75 for 18 holes and $49 for 9 holes; fees include cart, but no caddies are available. It's open daily from 7:30am to sunset. Clubs are available for rent for $35 plus tax.

You can go **horseback riding** on Isla de la Piedra for 80 pesos per ride. Ask your hotel's travel agent to arrange a **kayaking excursion** on El Verde Camacho Ecological Lagoon, or take a trip to Teacapán for **birding** in one of Mexico's largest estuaries.

Bird-watching tours are offered by **Sendero Mexico** (www.senderomexico.com), an outfitter that also runs a popular kayaking tour. The birding tours can be arranged in conjunction with a kayak tour, or as a separate trip to the foothills of the Sierra Madres

or to the Palmito reserve (located just past Copala on the highway), home to the tufted-jay. In early 2009, Sendero Mexico organized the first **Mazatlán Bird Festival** (www.mazatlanbirdfestival.com).

EXPLORING MAZATLAN

Mazatlán may be best known for its wide, sandy beaches and sporting activities, but visitors who neglect to sample the city's cultural events and attractions are missing out on a multidimensional destination.

Museums

Acuario Mazatlán (Kids) Children and adults interested in the sea will love the Mazatlán Aquarium. With over 200 species of fish, including sharks, eels, and sea horses, it is one of the largest and best in Mexico. Next to the aquarium are a playground and botanical garden, with an aviary and a small crocodile exhibit. Staff feed the sea lions, birds, and fish at shows held almost hourly.

Av. de los Deportes 111 (a half-block off Av. del Mar). ✆ **669/981-7815,** or -7817. Admission 75 pesos adults, 50 pesos children 3–11. Daily 9:30am–6pm.

Museo Arqueológico de Mazatlán This small, attractive archaeological museum displays pre-Hispanic artifacts and a permanent contemporary art exhibit. From Olas Altas, walk inland on Sixto Osuna 1½ blocks; the museum sits on the right. Art exhibits sometimes take place in the Casa de la Cultura across from the museum.

Sixto Osuna 76 (1½ blocks from Paseo Olas Altas). ✆ **669/981-1455.** Admission 31 pesos, free Sun. Tues–Sun 9am–6pm.

Architectural Highlights

Two blocks south of the central plaza stands the lovely **Teatro Angela Peralta,** Carnaval 1024, Centro (✆ **669/982-4444**), a national historic monument. Built between 1869 and 1874, the 841-seat Italian-style theater has three levels of balconies, two facades, and, in true tropical style, a lobby with no roof. The theater was named for one of the world's great divas, who, along with the director and 30 members of the opera, died in Mazatlán of cholera in an 1863 epidemic. Some city tours stop here; if you're visiting on your own, the theater is open daily from 9am to 6pm. The fee for touring the building is 12 pesos. It regularly schedules folkloric ballets, along with periodic performances of classical ballet, contemporary dance, symphony concerts, opera, and jazz. This theater is the home of Delfos, one of the most important contemporary dance companies in Mexico.

The 20-block historic area near the theater, including the small square **Plazuela Machado** (bordered by Frías, Constitución, Carnaval, and Sixto Osuna), abounds with beautiful old buildings and colorful town houses trimmed with wrought iron and carved stone. On weekends, the streets surrounding the plaza close to cars, giving artists, musicians, vendors, and street performers a chance to set up shop.

The **Plaza Principal,** also called Plaza Revolución, forms the heart of the city, filled with vendors, shoeshine stands, and people of all ages out for a stroll. At its center lies a Victorian-style wrought-iron bandstand with a diner-type restaurant underneath. Be sure to take in the **Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception,** at Calle 21 de Marzo and Nelson, with its unusual yellow-tiled twin steeples and partially tiled facade.

Organized Tours

In addition to 3-hour **city tours** ($25), tour operators offer excursions to many colorful and interesting villages nearby, such as Concordia and Copala. Some towns date from the

16th-century Spanish Conquest; others are modest farming or fishing villages. Information and reservations are available at any travel agency or major hotel, and all accept American Express, MasterCard, and Visa. The premier provider of these and other tours is **Pronatours** (✆ **669/916-7720,** or -3333, ext. 3490; www.elcid.com), yet another part of the El Cid megacomplex of activities. In addition to the city tour, they offer a 5-hour Tequila Tour that includes a distillery tour and lunch ($45), a 5-hour sailing excursion to Isla de Venados that includes kayaking, snorkeling, buffet lunch, and open bar ($50), and a visit to a historic village by the El Quelite river. Two other recommended tour agencies are **Viajes el Sabalo** (✆ **669/986-4930**) and **Olé Tours** (✆ **669/916-6288;** www.ole-tours.com).

COPALA-CONCORDIA This popular countryside tour stops at several mountain villages where artisans craft furniture and other items. Copala is a historic mining village with a Spanish-colonial church. The tour ($55), also known as the Mountain Tour or Country Tour, includes lunch and soft drinks.

MAZATLÁN JUNGLE TOUR Some might say that David Pérez's (King David's) **Jungle Tour** (✆ **669/914-1444;** www.kingdavid.com.mx) is misnamed, but it's still worthwhile. It consists of a 1½-hour boat ride past a Mexican navy base, Mazatlán's shrimp fleet and packing plants, and into the mangrove swamps to Isla de la Piedra (Stone Island). There's a 3-hour stop at a pristine beach that has what could be the world's largest sand dollars (though fewer and fewer are left). Horseback rides on the beach are available for a modest fee. After the beach stop, feast on *pescado zarandeado* (fish cooked over coconut husks, green mangrove, and charcoal). Tours run from 9am to 3pm Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, and cost $45 per person.

SHOPPING

Mazatlán shopping runs the gamut from precious stones to seashells—with plenty of T-shirts in between. Most stores are open Monday through Saturday from 9 or 10am to 6 or 8pm. Very few close for lunch, and many stores are open on Sunday afternoon. There's also an art walk to a number of galleries from 4 to 8pm on the first Friday of the month between November and May; for details visit www.artwalkmazatlan.com.

La Zona Dorada (the **Golden Zone**) is the best area for shopping. There are a number of quality silver shops along Avenida Playa Gaviotas, including **Pacific Jewelry** (✆ **669/913-3754**), at Av. Gaviotas 413. It's open daily from 9am to 8pm. For more fine jewelry, seek out **Rubio Jewelers,** in the Costa de Oro Hotel, Av. Camarón Sábalo 710 (✆ **669/914-3167;** www.rubiojewellers.com). It's open Monday to Saturday from 9am to 6pm, Sunday from 10am to 1:30pm.

Sea Shell City (✆ **669/913-1301**), at Av. Gaviotas 407, is exactly what the name implies—more shell-covered decorative items than you ever dreamed could exist, from the tacky to the sublime. It's open daily 10am to 7pm and purports to be a museum as well. **Michael Gallery** (✆ **669/916-7816;** www.michaelgallerymexico.com), at Av. Las Garzas 18 off Avenida Camarón Sábalo, has an excellent selection of Tlaquepaque crafts and fine silver jewelry. It's open Tuesday to Saturday from 10am to 5:30pm. **Señor Frog's,** which has its main store located next to El Cid resort at Camaron Sabalo s/n (✆ **669/985-1110;** www.senorfrogs.com), is the most popular souvenir store in town, selling a wide variety of Señor Frog's signature shirts, hats, handbags, and beachwear. There are about a dozen branches of Señor Frog's around town.

The **Centro Mercado** in Old Mazatlán is another kind of shopping experience. Here you'll find women selling fresh shrimp under colorful umbrellas; open-air food stalls; and

indoor shops stacked with pottery, clothing, and crafts (mostly of lesser quality). The market opens around 6am and stays open until sundown.

Small galleries and shops are beginning to appear in Old Mazatlán; one of the nicest is **NidArt Galería,** Av. Libertad 45 and Carnaval (✆ **669/981-0002,** or 985-5991 for after-hours appointments; www.nidart.com), next to the Angela Peralta Theater. It features changing exhibits of contemporary art. Open Monday to Friday from 10am to 5pm or after hours by appointment.

MAZATLAN AFTER DARK

Mazatlán is known for its vibrant Mexican fiestas and equally colorful local bar scene, where dancing on bars, atop tables, and inside cages can be a nightly event. Traditional mariachi groups, *tambora* bands, and live romantic music create a festive mood in many restaurants and hotel bars.

A free **fireworks** show takes place every Sunday at 8pm on the beach fronting the Hotel Playa Mazatlán (p. 336), Av. Playa Gaviotas 202, in the Zona Dorada (✆ **669/913-5320** or 989-0555). The display is visible from the beach and from the hotel's La Terraza restaurant (see "Where to Dine," earlier).

The same hotel presents Mazatlán's most popular **Fiesta Mexicana** (www.laoriginalfiestamexicana.com), complete with buffet, open bar, folkloric dancing, and live music. Fiestas begin at 7pm on Saturdays; try to arrive by 6pm to get a good table. Tickets are 360 pesos. Pueblo Bonito Emerald Bay (✆ **669/989-0555**) offers a Fiesta Mexicana on Wednesday nights at 6pm in La Cordeliere Restaurant.

Clubs & Bars

Café Pacifico Owned by the popular Mazatlán-based Pacifico brewery, this rustic cafe/bar in the historic center offers a taste of an authentic Mexican cantina. In addition to serving the popular Mexican beer, it serves simple local fare, including steaks. Live music plays on weekend nights. Open Wednesday to Sunday 6pm to 3am. Constitución and Horiberto Frias. ✆ **669/136-0916.**

Joe's Oyster Bar Beer, cocktails, and tequila, along with high-volume dance music, are the house specialties at this casual open-air bar. Popular with locals, it's open daily from 11am to 2:30am. On the beachfront at Los Sábalos Hotel, Av. Rodolfo T. Loaiza 100. ✆ **669/983-5333.** Cover 60 pesos, which includes 2 drinks.

Latitud 23 The city's most popular new addition, Latitud 23 is a friendly upstairs bar that plays Mexican hits to a mostly local crowd. Dress is casual, and a simple fusion menu offers pastas, fish and seafood, and simple Mexican dishes. Located a block from the Hotel Playa Mazatlán, Latitud 23 regularly hosts theme nights, occasionally with live music. It's open weekdays from 5pm to midnight, and weekends until 4am. Av. Playa Gaviotas 401 (upstairs), Zona Dorada. ✆ **669/913-1413.**

Señor Frog's With an expanded location next to El Cid resort, Señor Frog's remains one of Mazatlán's hottest bar/restaurants, including among locals. Live music rocks the house Thursday through Saturday nights, when the energetic staff leads the festive local and international crowd in song and dance. Other nights a DJ spins beats from inside a transformed VW bus, while hilarious quotes across the walls make for fun table conversation. It's open daily from noon to 1am, and into the wee hours on weekends. There's also a gift shop next door. Camaron Sabalo s/n, Zona Dorada. ✆ **669/985-1110.** www.senorfrogs.com. Sat cover 70 pesos.

Valentino's & the Fiestaland Complex The popularity of **Valentino's** dance club has resulted in its expansion into an entire array of nocturnal options. The centerpiece remains Valentino's, dramatically perched on a rocky outcropping overlooking the sea, in an all-white, Moorish-looking complex that you can't miss. Many of the bars here attract a very young crowd, although **Bora Bora** is a hip urban beach bar frequented by slightly older young professionals. Open daily from 9pm to 4am. Punta Camarón, near the Camarón Sábalo traffic circle. ✆ **669/989-1600.** Cover varies.

3 COSTA ALEGRE: PUERTO VALLARTA TO BARRA DE NAVIDAD ★★★

In my view, Costa Alegre is Mexico's most spectacular coastal area, a 232km (144-mile) stretch that connects tropical forests with a series of dramatic cliff-lined coves and a few of the most exclusive accommodations in the world. Tiny outpost towns line the coast, while dirt roads trail down to a succession of magical coves with pristine beaches, most of them steeped in privileged exclusivity. The sunset vistas and nighttime stargazing here are incredible—without any light pollution, it feels like you can reach up and grab the stars. Considered one of Mexico's greatest undiscovered treasures, this coast is becoming a favored hideaway for publicity-fatigued celebrities and those in search of natural seclusion.

The area is referred to as **Costa Alegre (Happy Coast)**—the marketer's term—and **Costa Careyes (Turtle Coast),** after the many sea turtles that nest here. It is home to an eclectic array of the most captivating and exclusive places to stay in Mexico, with a selective roster of activities that includes championship golf and polo. Along the line, however, you will encounter the funky beach towns that were the original lure for travelers who discovered the area.

Stops along Hwy. 200, as it meanders between Puerto Vallarta to the north and Manzanillo to the south, can be an enjoyable day trip, but travelers usually make the drive en route to a destination along the coast.

EXPLORING COSTA ALEGRE Costa Alegre is more an ultimate destination than a place to rent a car and take a drive. Most of the beaches are tucked into coves accessible by dirt roads that can extend for kilometers inland. If you do drive along this coast, Hwy. 200 is safe, but it's not lit and it curves through the mountains, so travel only during the day. A few buses travel this route, but they stop only at the towns that line the highway; many of them are several kilometers inland from the resorts along the coast. For more information about traveling to this area, visit **www.costalegre.ca**.

ALONG COSTA ALEGRE (NORTH TO SOUTH)

Cruz de Loreto's Luxury Eco-Retreat

Hotelito Desconocido ★★★ Moments After having been closed and completely renovated, the unforgettable Hotelito reopened in May 2010 as a luxury eco-resort under new management. The enchanted bungalows offer handcrafted furnishings, richly colored Mexican art, canopy beds, and luxuriously appointed bathrooms with solar-heated showers; three family-friendly villas are built on stilts with large terraces overlooking the canals, lagoon, and beach. Located 96km (60 miles) south of Puerto Vallarta, Hotelito sits on 40 hectares (100 acres) of private reserve, which include trails leading past organic gardens and gorgeous Pacific coastline. Among the myriad activities are a holistic spa

with a wellness center, yoga program, and aqua gym; a bio-center with programs on marine turtles, indigenous plants, and birds; beachfront horseback riding; an observatory; and a private beach with watersports. The tropical grounds are as serene as they are spectacular, lit up at night by torches, candles, and lanterns. The resort uses 100% renewable energy, including eco-friendly air conditioners in the bungalows, as well as 100% organic food in the gourmet restaurants. Communication between the gracious staff members is done by push-to-talk radio, since there is no cellphone coverage here.

Playón de Mismaloya s/n, Cruz de Loreto, 48360 Tomatlán, Jal. ✆ **800/851-1143** in the U.S. and Canada (reservations ✆ 01-800/013-1313 in Mexico). www.hotelito.com. 30 units. Inquire about rates and meal plan. All activities are subject to an extra charge. AE, MC, V. Free parking. Take Hwy. 200 south for 1 hr., turn off at exit for Cruz de Loreto, and continue on clearly marked route on unpaved road for about 25 min. Children allowed in villas but not bungalows. **Amenities:** 2 restaurant/bars; beach club w/catamarans, kayaks, and windsurfing; biocenter w/education programs about surrounding plants, birds, and marine turtles; hiking trails; horseback riding; Internet; Jacuzzi; music and reading library; observatory; outdoor pool; extensive spa w/yoga and other fitness programs. *In room:* Eco air-conditioning, no phone.

Las Alamandas: An Exclusive Luxury Resort

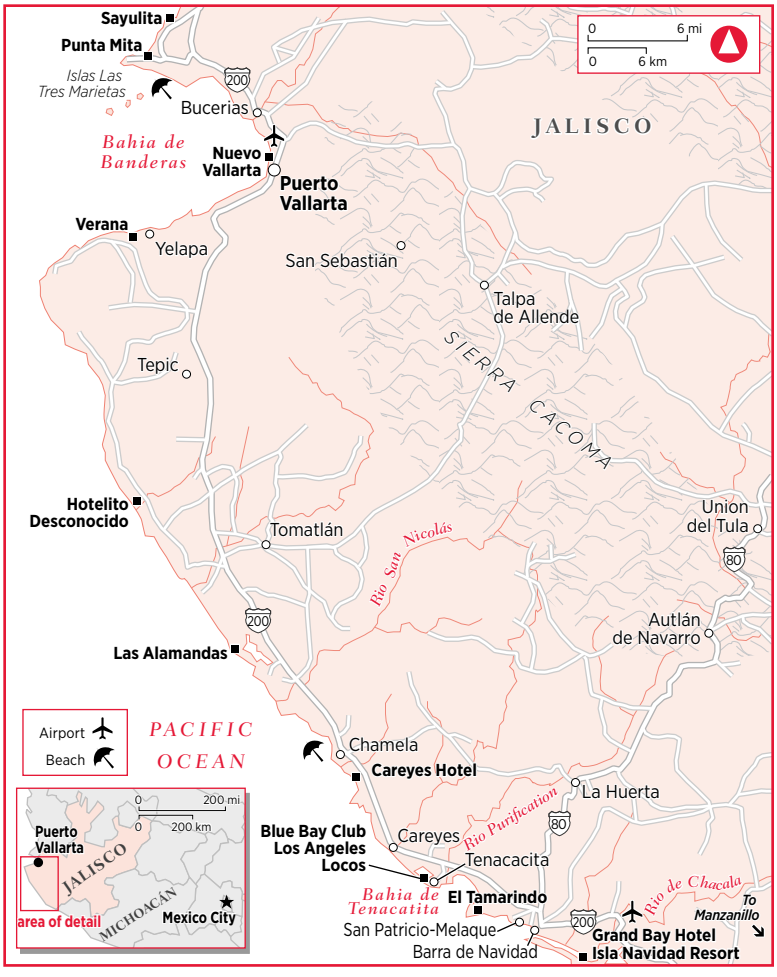
Las Alamandas ★★★ Almost equidistant between Manzanillo (2 hr.) and Puerto Vallarta (2 hr.) lies Mexico's original ultra-exclusive resort, which consists of colorful villas and *palapas* spread among four stunning private beaches, gardens, lakes, lagoons, and a bird sanctuary. Las Alamandas accommodates a maximum of 32 guests, with over 100 staff members serving them. The six spacious villas house a total of 14 suites splashed in pinks, yellows, and blues. These suites can easily be joined to form larger accommodations, and all have tiled verandas with magnificent ocean or garden views. Some villas are on the beach, others across a cobblestone plaza. The food here is excellent, with most of the organic products grown right on the property.

Hwy. 200, Km 83 48850 Manzanillo–Puerto Vallarta, Jal. Mailing address: Domicilio Conocido Costa Alegre QUEMARO Jalisco, Apdo. Postal 201, 48980 San Patricio Melaque, Jal. ✆ **888/882-9616** in the U.S. and Canada, or 322/285-5500. Fax 322/285-5027. www.alamandas.com. 14 units. High season $488–$2,070; low season $371–$1,499. Meal plans $135. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; mountain bikes; horseback riding; concierge; weight room; art gallery; video library; 18m (59-ft.) outdoor pool; room service; lighted tennis court; birding boat tours; boogie boards; hiking trails; landing strip (make advance arrangements). *In room:* A/C, TV w/DVD/VCR available upon request, minibar.

Careyes

The Careyes Hotel ★★ The Careyes is a gem of a resort on a small, pristine cove between dramatic cliffs adorned by exclusive villas. Stylishly simple, if dated, accommodations surrounded by subtropical rainforest all face the ocean. Guests come primarily for seclusion, although the resort is as popular with families as with couples. It's rustic and sophisticated; room facades are awash in scrubbed pastels and form a U around the center lawn and free-form pool. Twenty rooms have private pools, and villas are available for rent. Roughly 150km (93 miles) south of Puerto Vallarta, the Careyes is about a 2-hour drive north of Manzanillo on Hwy. 200, and about a 1-hour drive from the Manzanillo airport. Taxis from the Manzanillo airport charge around $110 one-way. A car would be useful only for exploring the coast—Barra de Navidad and other resorts, for example—and the hotel can make touring arrangements.

Hwy. 200 Km 53.5, 48970 Careyes, Jal. CP. Mailing address: Apdo. Postal 24, 48970 Cihuatlán, Jal. ✆ **888/433-3989** in the U.S. and Canada, or 315/351-0000. Fax 315/351-0100. www.elcareyesresort.com. 51 units. High season $277 double, $351–$911 suite; low season $268 double, $339–$891 suite. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; deli; bikes; horseback riding; children's programs (during Christmas and Easter vacations only); beach volleyball; weight equipment; privileges at exclusive El



Tamarindo resort (40km/25 miles south), w/18-hole mountaintop golf course; book and DVD library; large beachside pool; hot and cold plunge pools; room service; state-of-the-art spa; steam room; sauna; 2 tennis courts; kayaks. *In room:* A/C, TV/DVD, CD player, minifridge, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi (for a fee).

Tenacatita Bay

Located an hour (53km/33 miles) north of the Manzanillo airport, this jewel of a bay is accessible by an 8km (5-mile) dirt road that passes through a small village set among banana plants and coconut palms. Sandy, serene beaches dot coves around the bay (frolicking dolphins are a common sight), and exotic birds fill a coastal lagoon. Swimming and snorkeling are good, and the bay is a popular stop for luxury yachts. Just south of the entrance to Tenacatita is a sign for the all-inclusive **Blue Bay Los Angeles Locos,** as

well as the exclusive **El Tamarindo** resort and golf club. There is no commercial or shopping area, and dining options outside hotels are limited to a restaurant or two that may emerge during the winter months (high season).

El Tamarindo Beach & Golf Resort ★★★ Finds The most beautiful resort I know in Mexico, El Tamarindo is a romantic haven amid lush jungle surroundings, with exquisite facilities, gracious service, and absolute tranquillity. Each thatched-roof casita features a wraparound splash pool, hammock, and open-air sitting and dining area that overlooks a private lawn. The bedrooms—with dark hardwood floors and intricately designed furnishings—can be closed off for air-conditioned comfort, but the remaining areas are open to the sea breezes and tropical air. There are also three luxurious four-bedroom beachfront residences that can accommodate up to eight adults. El Tamarindo boasts a championship 18-hole golf course designed by David Fleming, with 7 oceanside holes and dramatic views. The spa services are exceptional, and El Tamarindo's restaurant is the only dining option. At night, subtle lighting through the jungle and around the casitas transforms El Tamarindo into a truly enchanted retreat. On over 809 hectares (2,000 acres) of nature preserve extending along 2 miles of oceanfront, you'll feel as if you've found your own personal bit of heaven here.

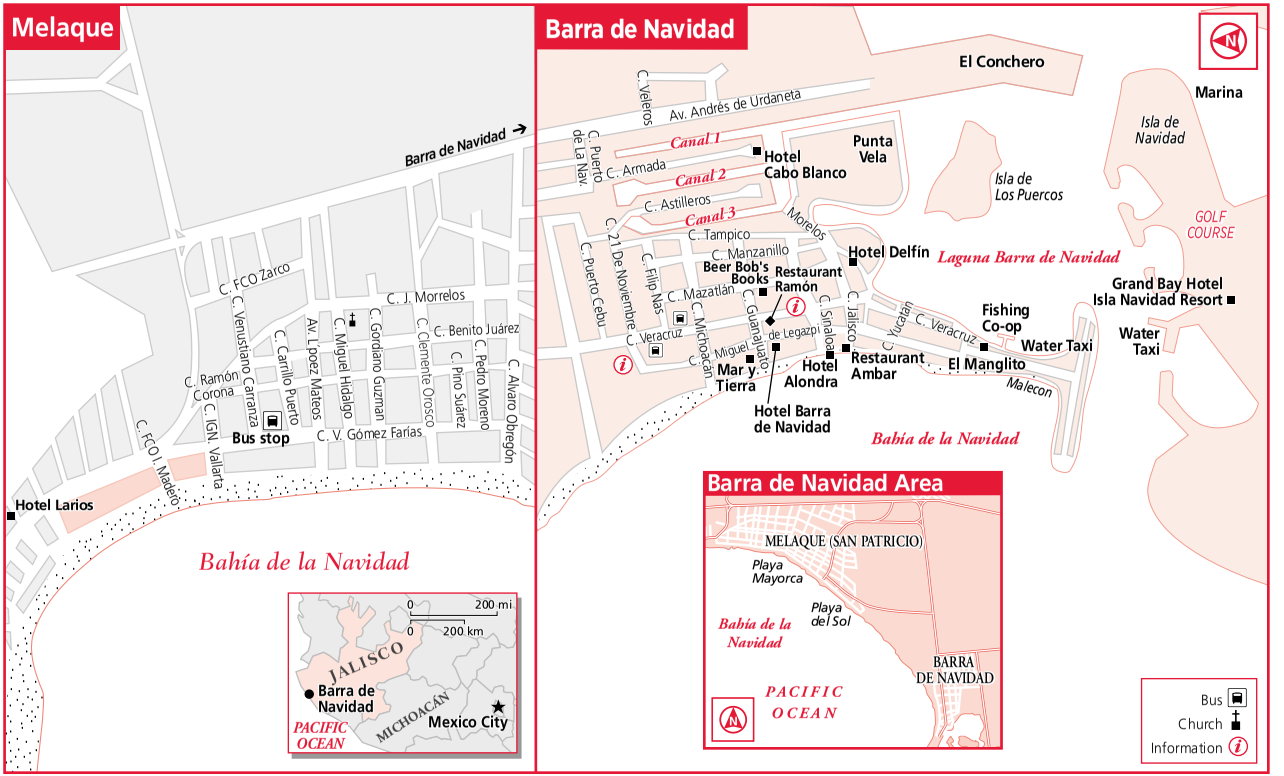
Carretera Barra de Navidad–Puerto Vallarta Km 7.5, 48970 Cihuatlán, Jal. ✆ **866/717-4316** in the U.S., or 315/351-5031. Fax 315/351-5070. www.eltamarindoresort.com. 29 casitas. High season $625–$1,950 villas; low season $500–$1,750 villas. Beachfront residences $2,600–$5,500. AE, MC, V. Free valet parking. From Puerto Vallarta (3 hr.) or the Manzanillo airport (45 min.), take Hwy. 200, and then turn west at the clearly marked exit for El Tamarindo; follow signs for about 25 min. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; mountain bikes; kids' club (in high season); high-tech fitness center; beachside pool w/whirlpool; room service; *temazcal* (pre-Hispanic sweat lodge); spa services; 2 clay tennis courts and 1 grass court; kayaks; sailboards; Aquafin sailboats; water-skiing; estuary bird-watching tours; hiking trails; Wi-Fi (in lobby). *In room:* A/C, TV, CD player, hair dryer.

BARRA DE NAVIDAD & MELAQUE

This pair of rustic beach villages (only 5km/3 miles apart) has been attracting travelers for decades. Only 30 minutes north of Manzanillo's airport and about 100km (62 miles) north of downtown Manzanillo, Barra has a few brick or cobblestone streets, good budget hotels and restaurants, and funky beach charm. All of this lies incongruously next to the super-luxurious Grand Bay Hotel, which sits on a bluff across the inlet from Barra.

In the 17th century, Barra de Navidad was a harbor for the Spanish fleet; from here, galleons first set off in 1564 to find China. Located on a crescent-shaped bay with curious rock outcroppings, Barra de Navidad and neighboring Melaque are connected by a continuous beach on the same wide bay. It's safe to say that the only time Barra and Melaque hotels are full is during Easter and Christmas weeks. **Barra de Navidad** has more charm, more tree-shaded streets, better restaurants, more stores, and more conviviality between locals and tourists. Barra is very laid-back; faithful returnees adore its lack of flash. Other than the Grand Bay Hotel, on the cliff across the waterway in what is called Isla Navidad (although it's not on an island), nothing is new or modern. But there's a bright edge to Barra, with more good restaurants and limited—but existent—nightlife.

Melaque, on the other hand, is larger, sun baked, treeless, and lacking in attractions. It does, however, have plenty of cheap hotels available for longer stays, and a few restaurants. Although the beach between the two is continuous, Melaque's beach, with deep sand, is more beautiful than Barra's. Both villages appeal to those looking for a quaint, quiet, inexpensive retreat rather than a modern, sophisticated destination.


Melaque
Barra de Navidad
Barra de Navidad
C. FCO Zarco
C. C. Venustiano Carranza
C. Carrillo Puerto
Av. Lopez Mateos
C. Miguel Hidalgo
C. Gordiano Guzman
C. J. Morrelos
C. Clemente Orosco
C. Benito Juárez
C. Piño Suárez
C. Pedro Moreno
C. Alvaro Obregón
C. Ramón Corona
C. IGN. Vallarta
C. FCO I. Madero
Bus stop
C. V. Gómez Farías
Hotel Larios
Bahía de la Navidad
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JALISCO
Barra de Navidad
Mexico City
MICHOACÁN
PACIFIC OCEAN
El Conchero
Marina
Isla de Navidad
Av. Andrés de Urdaneta
C. Veleros
C. Puerto de La Nav.
C. Armada
Canal 1
Canal 2
Canal 3
C. Astilleros
C. Tampico
C. Manzanillo
Hotel Cabo Blanco
Punta Vela
Isla de Los Puercos
GOLF COURSE
Morelos
Hotel Delfín
Laguna Barra de Navidad
C. 21 De Noviembre
C. Puerto Cebu
C. Filip Nas
C. Mazatlán
Beer Bob's Books
Restaurant Ramón
C. Michoacán
C. Guanajuato
de Legazpi
C. Sinaloa
C. Jalisco
C. Yucatan
C. Veracruz
Fishing Co-op
Water Taxi
Grand Bay Hotel Isla Navidad Resort
Water Taxi
C. Miguel Hidalgo
Mar y Tierra
Hotel Alondra
Restaurant Ambar
El Manglito
Malecon
Hotel Barra de Navidad
Bahía de la Navidad
Barra de Navidad Area
MELAQUE (SAN PATRICIO)
Playa Mayorca
Playa del Sol
Bahía de la Navidad
BARRA DE NAVIDAD
PACIFIC OCEAN
Bus
Church
Information

Isla Navidad Resort has a manicured 27-hole golf course and the super luxurious Grand Bay Hotel, but the area's pace hasn't quickened as fast as expected. The golf is challenging and delightfully uncrowded, with another exceptional course at nearby El Tamarindo. It's a serious golfer's dream.

Essentials

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING **Regional buses** from Manzanillo frequently run up the coast along Hwy. 200 on their way to Puerto Vallarta and Guadalajara. Most stop in the central villages of Barra de Navidad and Melaque. First-class **ETN** buses (www.etn.com.mx) make the 4-hour ride to and from Guadalajara for about 350 pesos each way. From the Manzanillo airport, it's only 30 minutes to Barra, and **taxis** are available. The taxi fare from Manzanillo to Barra is around 450 pesos; from Barra to Manzanillo, 350 pesos. From Manzanillo, the highway twists through some of the Pacific Coast's most beautiful mountains. Puerto Vallarta is 3 hours by **car** and 4 to 5 hours by bus, north on Hwy. 200 from Barra. A taxi from Barra to Puerto Vallarta costs 1,700 pesos.

VISITOR INFORMATION The **tourism office** for both villages is at Jalisco 67 (btw. Veracruz and Mazatlán), Barra (✆/fax **315/355-5100;** www.costalegre.com); it's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm and will help with hotel reservations as well as with a general orientation to the towns.

ORIENTATION In Barra, hotels and restaurants line the main beachside street, **Legazpi.** From the bus station, beachside hotels are 2 blocks straight ahead, across the central plaza. Two blocks behind the bus station and to the right is the lagoon side. More hotels and restaurants are on its main street, **Morelos/Veracruz.** Few streets are marked, but 10 minutes of wandering will acquaint you with the village's entire layout. There's a taxi stand at the intersection of Legazpi and Sinaloa streets. Legazpi, Jalisco, Sinaloa, and Veracruz streets border Barra's **central plaza.**

Activities on & off the Beach

Swimming and enjoying the attractive beach and views of the bay take up most tourists' time. You can hire a small boat for a coastal ride or fishing in two ways. Go toward the *malecón* on Calle Veracruz until you reach the tiny boatmen's cooperative, with fixed prices posted on the wall, or walk two buildings farther to the water taxi ramp. The water taxi is the best option for going to Colimilla (5 min.; $2.50) or across the inlet (3 min.; $1) to the Grand Bay Hotel. Water taxis make the rounds regularly, so if you're at Colimilla, wait, and one will be along shortly. At the cooperative, a 30-minute **lagoon tour** costs $20, and a **sea tour** costs $25. **Sportfishing** is $80 for up to four people for a half-day in a small *panga* (open fiberglass boat).

Isla Navidad Country Club (✆ **314/337-9024;** www.islanavidad.com) has a 27-hole, 7,053-yard, par-72 **golf course** that is open to the public. Greens fees are $140 for 18 holes plus tax, $160 for 27 holes plus tax (discounts are available for hotel guests). Prices include a motorized cart. Caddies are available for $30 and rental clubs for $46.

Where to Stay

Low season in Barra is any time except Christmas and Easter weeks. Except for those 2 weeks, it doesn't hurt to ask for a discount at the inexpensive hotels.

Very Expensive

Grand Bay Hotel Isla Navidad Resort ★★★ Kids Across the yacht channel from Barra de Navidad, this hotel sits on its own island and is spread out over 480 hectares

(1,186 acres) next to a 27-hole golf course. Operated by Wyndham Resorts, the Grand Bay overlooks the village, bay, and Navidad lagoon. The hotel's swimming pools are spectacular, and there's a narrow beach facing the lagoon. Spacious guest rooms are sumptuously outfitted with marble floors and columns, beautiful bathrooms, hand-carved wood furnishings, and soft colors. Each comes with a king-size or two double beds, ceiling fans plus air-conditioning, and a balcony. Outdoor activities abound, and the luxurious spa offers extensive facial and body treatments. The hotel is a short water-taxi ride across the inlet from Barra de Navidad; it's also on a paved road from Hwy. 200. It's worth a visit even if you're not staying here, although the hotel is closed to nonguests at night unless they're coming for dinner.

Circuito de los Marinos s/n, 28830 Isla Navidad, Col. ✆ **877/999-3223** in the U.S., 01-800/849-2373 in Mexico, or 314/331-0500. Fax 314/331-0570. www.wyndham.com. 199 units. $200 and up double; $300 and up suite. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 2 bars; golf club w/food and bar service; babysitting; kids' club; concierge; 27-hole, par-72 golf course; golf club w/pro shop and driving range; small workout room; 2 Jacuzzis; marina w/private yacht club; 3 outdoor pools, including 1 w/waterslides and swim-up bar; room service; full spa; 3 lighted grass tennis courts; fishing, horseback riding, boat tours, and other excursions can be arranged. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi (for a fee).

Moderate

Hotel Alondra Located next to the church on the main strip of restaurants, shops, and bars, and with a little beach just in front, this place sits in the heart of the action. Guest rooms are spread out in two buildings, one oceanfront called "Casa Club" and the other just across the street. Splashed in hues of blue, yellow, and white, the light-filled rooms feature marble floors and small bathrooms; junior suites have kitchenettes. This hotel, which is especially popular with Canadians, has a small infinity pool in front of the beach, as well as an open-air bar on the fifth floor with a lovely view.

Sinaloa 16, 48987 Barra de Navidad, Jal. ✆ **315/355-8373.** www.alondrahotel.com. 73 units. 1,060–1,170 pesos double; 1,820–2,640 pesos oceanview double. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; Wi-Fi (for a fee). *In room:* A/C, TV, kitchenette (in some rooms).

Inexpensive

Hotel Barra de Navidad At the northern end of Legazpi, this comfortable beachside hotel remains a favorite among value-seeking visitors. It has friendly management and basic rooms, some with balconies overlooking the beach and bay. Other, less-expensive rooms afford only a street view. Four bungalows offer king-size beds, kitchenettes, and separate sitting areas. A nice swimming pool lies on the street level to the right of the lobby, and there's a popular restaurant here called the Banana Cafe.

Legazpi 250, 48987 Barra de Navidad, Jal. ✆ **315/355-5122.** Fax 315/355-5303. www.hotelbarradenavidad.com. 60 units. 860–1,000 pesos double; 1,300 pesos bungalow. MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Outdoor pool. *In room:* TV and A/C in some rooms.

Hotel Cabo Blanco ★ Kids Located on the point where you cross over to Isla Navidad, the Cabo Blanco is a sensible option for family vacations or longer-term stays. Comfortable though fairly basic rooms have tile floors, large tile tubs with showers, and stucco walls. The Cabo Blanco overlooks the canal, and it's a 10-minute walk to the hotel's **Mar y Tierra** beach club (see below), which is open on weekends. The beamed-ceiling lobby is in its own building; rooms are in hacienda-style buildings surrounded by gardens. The atmosphere is generally tranquil, except during weekends and Mexican holidays, when this hotel tends to fill up.

Armada y Bahía de la Navidad s/n, 48987 Barra de Navidad, Jal. ✆ **01-800/710-5690** in Mexico, or 315/355-6495, -6496. Fax 315/355-6494. www.hotelcaboblanco.com. 101 units. 890 pesos double; 1,830

pesos suite with kitchenette. All-inclusive plans also available. AE, MC, V. Limited street parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 outdoor pools (1 adults only); 2 tennis courts. *In room:* A/C, TV.

Where to Dine

Internet is difficult to find in Barra, but one reliable option is **Deli & Espresso** (✆ **315/107-3995**), at the entrance to the *malécon* next to Hotel Alondra; it offers free Wi-Fi to its patrons, as well as tasty coffees and desserts.

Ambar d'Mare ★★ CREPES/ITALIAN/FRENCH This cozy beachside restaurant is open to the breezes, and the food is as wonderful as the ambience. The crepes are named after towns in France; the delicious *crêpe Paris,* for example, is filled with chicken, potatoes, spinach, and green sauce. A rich selection of salads and carpaccios are available as starters. Main dishes include grilled fish prepared any way you like, jumbo prawns, rack of lamb in mint jelly, and lobster tail kabob in a white-wine sauce. Pastas and pizzas are also served. Owner Veronique Bourdet expanded her restaurant in 2009 to include a wine cellar and bar, with live music in high season. She also rents out a couple studio lofts—inquire directly with her for rates.

López de Legazpi 150 (corner of Jalisco), across from the church. ✆ **315/355-8169.** Crepes 125–240 pesos; main courses 100–350 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 5pm–midnight.

Mar y Tierra INTERNATIONAL Hotel Cabo Blanco's beach club is also a popular restaurant and bar, and a great place to spend a day at the beach. There are shade *palapas* and beach chairs, and a game of volleyball seems constantly in progress. Open during the daytime only, the colorful restaurant is decorated with murals of mermaids. Perfectly seasoned shrimp fajitas come in plentiful portions.

In Hotel Cabo Blanco (see above), Legazpi s/n (at Jalisco). ✆ **315/355-5028.** Main courses 120–200 pesos. MC, V. Fri–Sun 8am–6pm.

Restaurant Ramón Value SEAFOOD/MEXICAN It seems that all the English speakers in town eat regularly at Ramón's, where the chips and fresh salsa arrive unbidden, and service is prompt and friendly. The food is especially tasty, although many options are fried. Try fresh shrimp with french fries, fish and chips, fish tacos, or any daily special that features vegetable soup or chicken-fried steak.

Legazpi 260. ✆ **315/355-6435.** Main courses 65–130 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 7am–11pm.

Sea Master ★ SEAFOOD Sea Master's creative allure stems from its own private gallery, located at the entrance to the restaurant. Original paintings, artistic lighting, and brilliant colors spill out from the gallery to the cafe and waterfront dining room, and all the tables here afford beautiful sea views. Big, succulent shrimps dominate the menu, with selections such as the "Sea Master pineapple" stuffed with shrimp, cheese, brandy, and Kahlúa, and the "Sea Master roll" with fresh fish filled with shrimp, bacon, nuts, and garlic cream. Steak and chicken options are also available. Potent cocktails are poured with double shots, and lounge music plays in the background, except for Saturday nights when the music is live.

Legazpi 146, near the boatmen's cooperative. ✆ **315/107-0889.** www.seamasterbarra.com. Main courses 110–360 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 11am–midnight.

Barra de Navidad After Dark

When dusk arrives, visitors and locals alike find a cool spot to sit outside, sip cocktails, and chat. Many outdoor restaurants and stores in Barra accommodate this relaxing way to end the day, adding extra tables and chairs for drop-ins. Most of the nighttime action

is centered around the walking area near the church. Closing times vary depending on the season and mood of the managers.

The colorful **Capri Sunset Bar,** facing the bay at the corner of Legazpi and Jalisco, is a favorite for sunset watching and a game of oceanside pool or possible dancing. **Via Berlin Simona & Niños,** at the beachfront adjacent to Hotel Casa Chips at the corner of Yucatán and Legazpi, offers an excellent sunset vista and often has chess players out in front. **Piper Lover Bar & Grill,** Legazpi 154 A (✆ **315/100-9194;** www.piperlover.com), is done in the style of the Carlos Anderson's chain—but it's not one of them. Still, it's lively, with pool tables and occasional live music.

A Visit to Melaque (San Patricio)

For a change of scenery, you may wander over to Melaque (aka San Patricio), 5km (3 miles) from Barra. Its pace is even more laid-back, as though it's stuck in time. A few yachts bob in the harbor, and the palm-lined beach is gorgeous. Restaurants and basic bungalows line the beach. You can walk on the beach from Barra or take one of the frequent local buses from the bus station near the main square in Barra for 5 pesos. The bus is marked MELAQUE. To return to Barra, take the bus marked CIHUATLAN. A taxi between the towns costs 50 pesos each way.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE The best hotel in town is **Larios** (✆ **315/355-8058**), at Calle Av. Primavera 60, just a block from the beach. It has 10 rooms that cost between 500 and 600 pesos per night, depending on if there's a kitchen; cash only. Other motels in town are half that price but far less nice. There are a number of rustic ***palapa*** **restaurants** on the beach and farther along the bay at the end of the beach.

4 MANZANILLO ★

256km (159 miles) SE of Puerto Vallarta; 267km (166 miles) SW of Guadalajara; 64km (40 miles) SE of Barra de Navidad

Manzanillo has long been known as a resort town with wide, curving beaches; legendary sportfishing; and a highly praised diversity of dive sites. Golf is also an attraction here, with two popular courses in the area.

One reason for its popularity could be Manzanillo's enticing tropical geography—vast groves of tall palms, abundant mango trees, and successive coves graced with smooth sand beaches. To the north, mountains blanketed with palms rise alongside the shoreline. And over it all lies the veneer of perfect weather, with balmy temperatures and year-round sea breezes.

Manzanillo is a dichotomous place—it is both Mexico's busiest commercial seaport and a tranquil town of multicolor houses cascading down the hillsides to meet the central commercial area of simple seafood restaurants, shell shops, and salsa clubs. The activity in Manzanillo divides neatly into two zones: the downtown commercial port and the luxury Santiago Peninsula resort zone to the north. A visit to the town's waterfront *zócalo* provides a glimpse into local life. The exclusive Santiago Peninsula, home to the resorts and golf course, separates Manzanillo's two golden-sand bays.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING **By Plane** **Alaska Airlines** (✆ **800/252-7522** in the U.S., or 314/334-2211) offers service from Los Angeles; **Mexicana** (✆ **800/531-7921**

in the U.S.) connects to U.S. destinations via Mexico City; **Continental** (✆ **800/523-3273** in the U.S.) flies from Houston. Ask a travel agent about the numerous **charters** from the States in the winter.

The **Playa de Oro International Airport** is 40km (25 miles) northwest of town. *Colectivo* (minivan) airport service is available from the airport; hotels arrange returns. Make reservations for return trips 1 day in advance. The *colectivo* fare is based on zones and runs $15 to $20 for most hotels. Private taxi service between the airport and downtown area is around $35. **Alamo** (✆ **314/334-0124**), **Budget** (✆ **314/333-1445**), and **Thrifty** (✆ **314/334-3282**) have counters in the airport open during flight arrivals; they will also deliver a car to your hotel. Daily rates run $50 to $80. You need a car especially if you plan to explore surrounding cities and the Costa Alegre beaches.

By Car **Coastal Hwy. 200** leads from Acapulco (south) and Puerto Vallarta (north). From Guadalajara, take **Hwy. 54** through Colima into Manzanillo. Outside Colima you can switch to a toll road, which is faster but less scenic.

By Bus Buses run to Barra de Navidad (1½ hr. north), Puerto Vallarta (5 hr. north), Colima (1½ hr. east), and Guadalajara (4½ hr. north), with deluxe service and numerous daily departures. **ETN** (www.etn.com.mx) is the main bus company. Manzanillo's **Central Camionera** (bus station; ✆ **314/336-4785**) sits about 12 long blocks east of town.

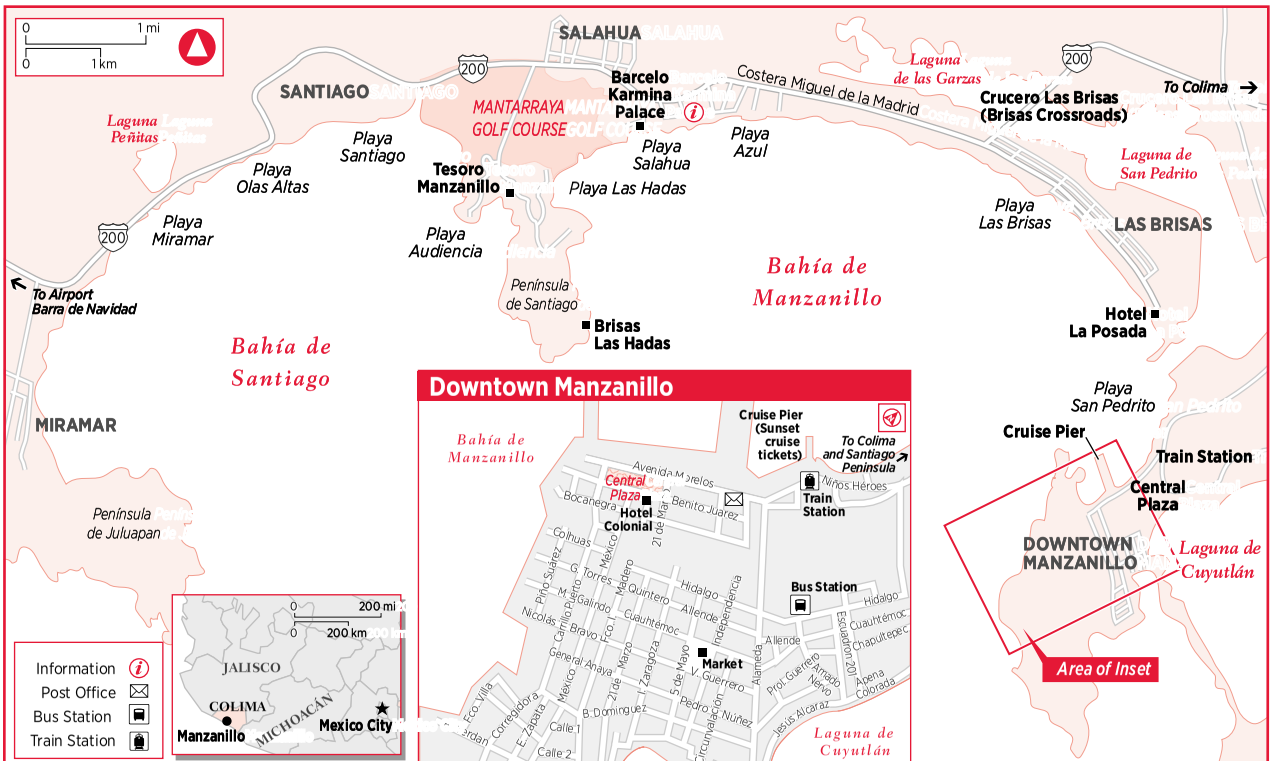
VISITOR INFORMATION The **tourism office** (✆ **314/333-2277;** www.visitacolima.com.mx or www.vivemanzanillo.com) is on the Costera Miguel de la Madrid 875-A, Km 8.5. It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 7pm, and Saturday from 9am to 2pm.

CITY LAYOUT The town lies at one end of an 11km-long (6¾-mile) beach facing Manzanillo Bay and its commercial harbor. The beach has four sections—**Playa Las Brisas, Playa Azul, Playa Salahua,** and **Playa Las Hadas.** At the other end of the beaches is the high, rocky **Santiago Peninsula.** Santiago lies 11km (6¾ miles) from downtown; it's the site of many beautiful homes and the best hotel in the area, Las Hadas, as well as the hotel's Mantarraya Golf Course. The peninsula juts into the bay, separating Manzanillo Bay from Santiago Bay. Playa Las Hadas sits on the south side, facing Manzanillo Bay, and **Playa Audiencia** is on the north side, facing Santiago Bay. The inland town of **Santiago** extends opposite the turnoff to Las Hadas.

Activity in downtown Manzanillo centers on the ***zócalo,*** officially known as the Jardín Álvaro Obregón. The plaza has flowering trees, a fountain, twin kiosks, and a view of the bay. **Avenida México,** the street leading out from the plaza's central gazebo, is the town's principal commercial thoroughfare. The interesting **Museo de la Perversidad** (✆ **314/332-5599;** www.manzanillomuseo.com) opened in mid-2009 with vivid displays of torture throughout the ages, much of it religiously motivated. The museum is located at Av. Juárez 160, just off the square, and open Monday through Friday from 11am to 8pm, and Saturday and Sunday from 11am to 9pm.

Once you leave downtown, the **Costera Miguel de la Madrid** highway (or just Costera Madrid) runs through the neighborhoods of Las Brisas, Salahua, and Santiago to the **hotel zones** on the Santiago Peninsula and at Miramar.

There are two main lagoons. **Laguna de Cuyutlán** stretches south for miles, paralleling the coast. **Laguna de San Pedrito,** north of the city, parallels the Costera Miguel de la Madrid. Both are good birding sites. There are also two bays. **Manzanillo Bay** encompasses the harbor, town, and beaches. The Santiago Peninsula separates it from the second bay, **Santiago.** Between downtown and the Santiago Peninsula lies **Las Brisas,** a flat



0 1 mi
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SALAHUA
SANTIAGO
200
Barcelo Karmina Palace
Costera Miguel de la Madrid
Laguna de las Garzas
Crucero Las Brisas (Brisas Crossroads)
To Colima
Laguna Peñitas
MANTARRAYA GOLF COURSE
Playa Santiago
Playa Olas Altas
Tesoro Manzanillo
Playa Salahua
Playa Azul
Playa Las Hadas
Laguna de San Pedrito
Playa Las Brisas
LAS BRISAS
Playa Miramar
Playa Audiencia
Bahía de Manzanillo
To Airport Barra de Navidad
Península de Santiago
Brisas Las Hadas
Hotel La Posada
Bahía de Santiago
Playa San Pedrito
MIRAMAR
Cruise Pier
Train Station
Central Plaza
Península de Juluapan
DOWNTOWN MANZANILLO
Laguna de Cuyutlán
Area of Inset
Downtown Manzanillo
Bahía de Manzanillo
Cruise Pier (Sunset cruise tickets)
To Colima and Santiago Peninsula
Central Plaza
Hotel Colonial
Train Station
Bus Station
Market
Laguna de Cuyutlán
Information
Post Office
Bus Station
Train Station
0 200 mi
0 200 km
JALISCO
COLIMA
MICHOACÁN
Manzanillo
Mexico City

peninsula with a long stretch of sandy golden beach, a lineup of inexpensive but run-down hotels, and a few good restaurants.

GETTING AROUND **By Taxi** Taxis in Manzanillo are plentiful. Fares are fixed by zones; rates for trips in town and to more distant points should be posted at your hotel. For example, a taxi ride from Las Hadas to the airport will cost 250 pesos. Daily rates can be negotiated for longer drives outside the Manzanillo area.

By Bus The *camionetas* (local buses) make a circuit from downtown in front of the train station, along the Bay of Manzanillo, to the Santiago Peninsula and the Bay of Santiago to the north; the fare is 6 pesos. The ones marked LAS BRISAS go to the Las Brisas crossroads, to the Las Brisas Peninsula, and back to town; MIRAMAR, SANTIAGO, and SALAHUA buses go to outlying settlements along the bays and to most restaurants mentioned below. Buses marked LAS HADAS go to the Santiago Peninsula and pass the Las Hadas resort and the Tesoro Manzanillo and Plaza Las Glorias hotels. This is an inexpensive way to see the coast as far as Santiago and to tour the Santiago Peninsula.

Fast Facts Manzanillo

Area Code The telephone area code is **314.**

Bank **Banamex,** just off the plaza on Avenida Juárez, downtown (✆ **314/332-0115**), is open Monday through Saturday from 9am to 4pm.

Hospital Contact the **Cruz Roja** (**Red Cross;** ✆ **314/336-5770**) or the **General Hospital** (✆ **314/334-7491**).

Internet Access You can access Wi-Fi or rent a computer at **WWW.CAFE** (✆ **314/334-8004**), located next to Hotel Pacifico Azul at Blvd. Miguel de la Madrid 1161. Hours vary; it charges 25 pesos per hour.

Police Both the general police and Tourism Police are available by calling ✆ **314/332-1004,** -1002.

Post Office The *correo,* Dr. Miguel Galindo 30, opposite Farmacia de Guadalajara, downtown (✆ **314/332-0022**), is open Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 4pm, Saturday from 9am to 1pm.

WHERE TO STAY

Manzanillo's strip of coastline consists of three areas: **downtown,** with its shops, markets, and commercial activity; **Las Brisas,** the hotel-lined beach area immediately north of the city; and **Santiago,** the town and peninsula, now virtually a suburb, to the north at the end of Playa Azul. Reservations are recommended during the Easter, Christmas, and New Year's holidays.

Downtown

Hotel Colonial ★ An old favorite, this three-story colonial-style hotel sits in the central downtown district. Popular for its consistent quality, ambience, and service, it features beautiful blue-and-yellow tile and colonial-style carved doors and windows in the lobby and a festive Mexican restaurant. Rooms provide basic comforts with one, two,

or three beds, simple colonial-style furniture, and small bathrooms with showers only. The hotel lies 1 block inland from the main plaza.

Av. México 100 and González Bocanegra 28, 28200 Manzanillo, Col. ✆ **314/332-1080,** -0668, -1230. 42 units. www.hotelcolonialmanzanillo.com. 620 pesos double. MC, V. Underground parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar. *In room:* A/C, cable TV, Wi-Fi.

Las Brisas

Hotel La Posada ★ This charming inn has a bright-pink stucco facade with a large arch that leads to a broad tiled patio and swimming pool right next to the beach. Guest rooms incorporate exposed brick walls, tile floors, and simple furnishings with Mexican decorative accents. It remains popular with longtime travelers to Manzanillo. The atmosphere is casual and informal—help yourself to beer and soft drinks; at the end of your stay, owners Juan and Lisa Martinez will count the bottle caps you deposited in a bowl labeled with your room number. The restaurant, which also welcomes non–hotel guests, is open daily from 8 to 10:30am and 12:30 to 2:30pm. A meal costs around 65 pesos. Stop by for a drink at sunset; the bar's open until 10pm all year. The hotel lies at the end of Las Brisas Peninsula, closest to downtown.

Av. Lázaro Cárdenas 201, Las Brisas (Apdo. Postal 135), 28200 Manzanillo, Col. ✆/fax **314/333-1899.** www.hotel-la-posada.info. 23 units. High season 900 pesos double; low season 600 pesos double. Rates include full breakfast. MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; Internet kiosk; outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C (in some), ceiling fan.

Santiago

Barceló Karmina Palace ★★ Kids This is my favorite resort in Manzanillo, an all-inclusive getaway with nonstop activities, a beautiful beach and pools, quality restaurants, and excellent spa and gym. The buildings here are designed to resemble Maya pyramids. Guests check into spacious suites featuring rich wood furnishings, recessed seating areas with pullout couches, two 27-inch TVs, and luxurious bathrooms. Most suites offer terraces or balconies with views of the ocean, overlooking the tropical gardens and swimming pools. Master suites offer spacious sun terraces with private splash pools, plus a full wet bar, refrigerator, and a large living room area. The kids' club provides a host of activities, and come night there are live dance shows and an open-air dance club adjacent to the sea. Service is not totally personalized, but overall this is an excellent destination for families looking for an all-inclusive resort.

Av. Vista Hermosa 13, Fracc. Península de Santiago, 28200 Manzanillo, Col. **888/234-6222** in the U.S. and Canada, or 314/334-1300, 331-1313, or 01-800/507-4930 in Mexico. Fax 314/334-1108. www.barcelokarminapalace.com. 324 units. $240 and up double; $450 and up 2-bedroom suites for 4. Rates are all-inclusive. Special packages and Web specials available; ask about seasonal specials. 2 children 7 and younger stay free in parent's room. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; snack bar; 5 bars; nightclub; beach volleyball; kids' program; concierge; health club w/treadmills and Cybex equipment; kayaks; 9 connected pools; room service; spa w/men's and women's sauna and steam rooms; tennis courts; Wi-Fi (in lobby). *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar.

Brisas Las Hadas Golf Resort & Marina ★★ This iconic beachside resort designed in an all-white Moorish style lights up a side of the rocky Santiago peninsula. Rooms are spread over landscaped grounds and overlook the bay; cobbled lanes lined with colorful flowers and palms connect them. The resort is large but maintains an air of seclusion. Views, room size and quality, and amenities differentiate the 10 categories of accommodations. The better rooms feature white-marble floors, sitting areas, and large, comfortably furnished balconies. Nine suites have private pools. The lobby is a popular

place for enjoying a drink and live music in high season. A stunning free-form pool stretches out beside the small beach in front. Pete and Roy Dye designed La Mantarraya, the hotel's 18-hole, par-71 golf course. This is the most famous resort in Manzanillo, and one of the best known in Mexico.

Av. de los Riscos s/n, Santiago Peninsula, 28200 Manzanillo, Col. ✆ **888/559-4329** in the U.S. and Canada, or 314/331-0101. Fax 314/331-0122. www.brisas.com.mx. 234 units. High season $206–$327 double, $386–$626 Fantasy Suite; low season $182–$234 double, $386–$626 Fantasy Suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants, including the elegant Legazpi (see "Where to Dine," below); 3 lounges and bars; babysitting; concierge; small exercise room; 18-hole golf course; marina; 2 outdoor pools (one adults only); room service; sailing cruises; scuba diving; snorkeling; 10 lighted tennis courts. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi (for a fee).

WHERE TO DINE

Downtown

Roca del Mar SEAFOOD Roca del Mar's menu focuses on seafood and, above all else, shrimp. Start with the tasty shrimp cocktail, shrimp prepared in lemon, or even shrimp dressed up in a coconut. The best main courses include snapper grilled with a hot spice, shrimp fettuccini, and a seafood chile relleno. There's even a shrimp hamburger, unusual as this may be. This open-air restaurant is open for breakfast, too.

Bulevar Miguel de la Madrid 2333. ✆ **314/336-9097.** Main courses 79–150 pesos. MC, V. Mon 9am–6:30pm; Tues–Sun 9am–8pm.

Playa Azul

La Toscana ★★★ Finds SEAFOOD/INTERNATIONAL You're in for a treat at La Toscana, one of Manzanillo's most popular and consistently reliable restaurants, located on the beach of Playa Azul. You'll pass a decorative pool and waterfall at the entrance to the open-air dining room, where live music plays nightly. Menu items are written on boards scattered throughout the restaurant; to start I recommend the smoked salmon terrine, fresh artichoke, or escargots. Among the grilled specialties are seafood skewers, shrimp imperial wrapped in bacon, red snapper served whole with garlic and butter, sea bass with mango and ginger, and tender fresh lobster. Service is excellent.

Bulevar Miguel de la Madrid 3177. ✆ **314/333-2515.** Reservations highly recommended. Main courses 120–350 pesos. MC, V. Daily 6:30–11pm. 100m (328 ft.) from Hotel Fiesta Mexicana.

Santiago Road

Benedetti's Pizza There are several branches in town, so you'll probably find a Benedetti's not far from where you are staying. The variety is extensive; add some *chimichurri* sauce to your sesame-crust pizza to enhance the flavor. Benedetti's specializes in seafood pizza, such as smoked oyster and anchovy. You can also select from pasta, sandwiches, burgers, fajitas, salads, Mexican soups, cheesecake, and pie.

Bulevar Miguel de la Madrid, in Plaza Manzanillo. ✆ **314/333-1592** or 334-0141. Pizza 90–120 pesos; main courses 35–80 pesos. MC, V. Daily 10am–10pm.

Bigotes II SEAFOOD Locals flock to this large, breezy restaurant (the name translates as "Mustaches") by the water for the good food and festive atmosphere. Strolling singers serenade diners as they eat fresh fish, shrimp cocktail, seafood soup, or shrimp prepared any number of ways—grilled with butter, garlic, spicy sauces, or simply natural. The signature "Mustache Shrimp" is a hearty portion of coconut shrimp. A lovely beach lies in front of the casual restaurant.

Puesta del Sol 3 (2nd location at Blvd. Costa M. de la Madrid 3157). ✆ **314/333-1236.** Main courses 132–242 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily noon–10pm. From downtown, follow the Costera Madrid past the Las Brisas turnoff; the restaurant is behind the Penas Coloradas Social Club, across from the beach.

El Fogón Finds MEXICAN Locals consider this to be the best Mexican restaurant in town, almost hidden in a small garden setting. The menu features a selection of unique and traditional Mexican dishes. *Molcajetes* (meat, seafood, and vegetables grilled in a stone dish) are the house specialty; options include shrimp, beef, and quail. A variety of delicious tacos and fajitas are also served. For those with a large appetite, the *plato mexicano* combines enchiladas, beef fajitas, a chile relleno, and guacamole.

Bulevar Miguel de la Madrid across from Pacifico Azul. ✆ **314/333-3094.** Main courses 91–143 pesos. MC, V. Daily 1pm–midnight. From downtown, follow the Costera Madrid; the restaurant is located just before the Soriana grocery store.

Juanito's MEXICAN/BREAKFAST Manzanillo has few good options for breakfast, but this is one. The cheerful American-run eatery attracts Mexicans and tourists in equal numbers. Pancakes, waffles, and French toast are morning favorites, and customers love the fresh-fruit *licuados,* Mexico's version of smoothies. For lunch and dinner, simple American fare includes burgers, hot dogs, club sandwiches, fried chicken, and barbecue ribs. Diners are served at casual wood tables with green tablecloths. Be prepared for a short wait on weekend mornings.

Bulevar Miguel de la Madrid Km 14. ✆ **314/333-7405.** www.juanitos.com. Breakfast $3–$6; main courses $3–$10. AE, MC, V. Daily 8am–11pm.

Santiago Peninsula

Legazpi ★★ ITALIAN/INTERNATIONAL This is a top choice in Manzanillo for elegance, service, and outstanding food. The candlelit tables are set with silver and flowers, and enormous bell-shaped windows show off the sparkling bay below. To start, consider the beef filet carpaccio or lobster bisque with a touch of caviar. Homemade pastas include ravioli stuffed with shrimp and crab, and linguine with grilled shrimp and fresh Parmesan. For main courses, the crunchy shrimp with polenta and mango chutney is delicious, as is the "veal mignon" prepared with a shitake mushroom sauce. Top off your meal with one of the decadent flambéed desserts or the Legazpi coffee with brandy, Damiana liqueur, sugar, and cream. The restaurant is open only on weekends in high season, and live music accompanies dinner.

In the Brisas Las Hadas hotel, Santiago Peninsula. ✆ **314/331-0101.** Main courses 220–480 pesos. AE, MC, V. High season Thurs–Sat 6:30–11:30pm; closed low season.

ACTIVITIES ON & OFF THE BEACH

Activities in Manzanillo revolve around its golden-sand beaches, which sometimes accumulate a film of black mineral residue from nearby rivers. Manzanillo's public beaches provide an opportunity to see local color and scenery. They are the daytime playground for those staying at places off the beach or without pools.

BEACHES **Playa Audiencia,** on the Santiago Peninsula, offers the best swimming as well as snorkeling, but **Playa San Pedrito,** shallow for a long way out, is the most popular beach for its proximity to downtown. **Playa Las Brisas,** located south of Santiago Peninsula as you're heading to downtown Manzanillo, offers an optimal combination of location and good swimming. **Playa Miramar,** on the Bahía de Santiago past the Santiago Peninsula, is popular with bodysurfers, windsurfers, and boogie boarders. It's accessible by local bus from

town. The major part of **Playa Azul,** also south of the Santiago Peninsula, drops off sharply but is noted for its wide beach.

BIRDING Birding is good in several lagoons along the coast. As you go from Manzanillo past Las Brisas to Santiago, you'll pass **Laguna de Las Garzas (Lagoon of the Herons),** also known as Laguna de San Pedrito, where many white pelicans and huge herons fish in the water. They nest here in December and January. Directly behind downtown is the **Laguna de Cuyutlán** (follow the signs to Cuyutlán), where you'll usually find birds in abundance; species vary between summer and winter.

DIVING **Underworld Scuba–Scuba Shack** ★★ (✆ **314/333-3678;** www.divemanzanillo.com), located at Blvd. M. de la Madrid Km 15, conducts professional diving expeditions and classes. Many locations are so close to shore that there's no need for a boat. Close-in dives include the jetty, and a nearby sunken frigate downed in 1959 at 8m (26 ft.). Divers can see abundant sea life, including coral reefs, sea horses, giant puffer fish, and moray eels. A two-tank boat dive costs $85 per person ($10 discount if you have your own equipment). You can also rent weights and a tank for beach dives for $10. A three-stop snorkel trip costs $45. All guides are certified dive masters, and the shop offers PADI certification classes in intensive courses of various durations. The owner offers a 10% discount on your certification when you mention Frommer's. MasterCard and Visa are accepted.

ESCORTED TOURS Because Manzanillo is so spread out, you might consider a city tour. Reputable local tour companies include **HECTOURS** (✆ **314/333-1707;** www.hectours.com) and **Bahías Gemelas Travel Agency** (✆ **314/333-1000**). Schedules are flexible; a half-day city tour costs around $25. Other tours include the daylong Colima Colonial Tour ($69), which stops at Colima's Archaeological Museum and principal colonial buildings, and passes the active volcano.

FISHING Manzanillo is famous for its fishing, particularly sailfish. Marlin and sailfish are abundant year-round. Winter is best for dolphin fish and dorado (mahimahi); in summer, wahoo and rooster fish are in greater supply. The international sailfish competition is held around the November 20 Revolution Day holiday, and the national sailfish competition is in February. You can arrange fishing through travel agencies or directly at the fishermen's cooperative (✆ **314/332-1031**), located downtown where the fishing boats moor. A fishing boat is approximately $50 for eight people to $60 for 12 people per hour, with most trips lasting about 5 hours.

GOLF The 18-hole **La Mantarraya Golf Course** (✆ **314/331-0101**) is open to nonguests as well as guests of Las Hadas. The compact, challenging 18-hole course designed by Roy and Pete Dye is a beauty, with banana trees, blooming bougainvillea, and coconut palms at every turn. A lush and verdant place (12 of the 18 holes are played over water), it remains a favorite. When the course was under construction, workers dug up pre-Hispanic ceramic figurines where the 14th hole now lies. It is believed to have been an important ancient burial site. The course culminates with its signature 18th hole, with a drive to the island green off El Tesoro (the treasure) beach, in front of the Karmina Palace Resort. Greens fees are 1,650 pesos for 18 holes, 990 pesos for 9 holes; cart rental costs 550 pesos for 18 holes and 385 pesos for 9 holes.

The fabulous Isla Navidad Country Club 27-hole golf course associated with the **Grand Bay Hotel** (✆ **314/337-9024**) in Barra de Navidad is also open to the public. The Robert von Hagge design is long and lovely, with each hole amid rolling, tropical landscapes. It is wide open, with big fairways and big greens, and features plenty of water

(2 lagoon holes, 13 lakeside holes, and 8 holes along the Pacific). The greens fees, including a motorized cart, are $140 for 18 holes and $160 for 27 holes, plus tax. Barra is about a 1- to 1½-hour drive north of Manzanillo on Hwy. 200.

SHOPPING Manzanillo has numerous shops that carry Mexican crafts and clothing, mainly from Guadalajara. Almost all fall on downtown streets near the central plaza. Shopping downtown is an experience—for example, you'll find a shop bordering the plaza that sells a combination of shells, religious items (including shell-framed Virgin of Guadalupe night lights), and orthopedic supplies. The Plaza Manzanillo is an American-style mall on the road to Santiago, and a traditional *tianguis* (outdoor flea market) in front of the entrance to Club Maeva sells clothes, sweets, and souvenirs from around Mexico. Most resort hotels also have boutiques or shopping arcades.

SUNSET CRUISES To participate in this popular activity, buy tickets from a travel agent or your hotel tour desk. Most cost around 360 pesos and depart at different times depending on the season. The trips vary in their combinations of drinks, music, and entertainment, and last 1½ to 2 hours. **El Explorer** departs from Las Hadas and **Antares** from Playa Audiencia.

MANZANILLO AFTER DARK

Nightlife in Manzanillo is much more exuberant than you might expect. Clubs and bars change from year to year, so check with your concierge for current hot spots. Some area clubs have a dress code prohibiting shorts or sandals, principally applying to men.

El Bar de Félix, between Salahua and Las Brisas by the Avis rental-car office (✆ **314/333-1875**), is open Tuesday through Sunday from 9pm to 3am and has a 100 peso minimum consumption charge. Music ranges from salsa and ranchero to rock and house—it's usually the most lively place in town. Next to it, **Nautilus** is a trendy dance club open after 10pm on weekends. Also very popular is the nightclub at the **Club Maeva Hotel & Resort** (✆ **01-800/849-1987** in Mexico), on the inland side of the main highway, north of the Santiago Peninsula. It's open Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday from 11pm to 2am. Couples are given preferential entrance.

11

Acapulco & the Southern Pacific Coast

by Joy Hepp

It was this region's exotic tropical beaches and rich jungle scenery that first lured modern travelers to Mexico. Although the southern Pacific geography may be uniform, the resorts along this coast couldn't be more varied, ranging from high-energy seaside cities to pristine, primitive coves.

Spanish conquistadors came to this coast for its numerous sheltered coves and protected bays, from which they set sail to the Far East. Centuries later, Mexico's first tourists came for the same natural features, but with a different type of escape in mind.

Over the years, the area developed a diverse selection of resorts. Each is distinct, and there's one for almost any type of traveler. The region encompasses the country's oldest resort, **Acapulco;** its newest, the **Bahías de Huatulco;** and a side-by-side pair of opposites—modern **Ixtapa** and the charming fishing village of **Zihuatanejo.** Between Acapulco and Huatulco lies **Puerto Escondido,** a laid-back beach town on a picturesque bay with world-class waves.

This chapter covers coastal towns in two Mexican states, Guerrero and Oaxaca. Stunning coastline and tropical mountains grace the entire region, but outside the urban centers, few roads are paved, and these two states remain among Mexico's poorest, despite decades of incoming tourist dollars (and many other currencies). As with some other parts of Mexico, tourism in Guerrero has suffered somewhat from reports of drug-related crime, although this problem has generally not affected the key tourist areas.

EXPLORING THE SOUTHERN PACIFIC COAST

Beach bumming with a frosty piña colada or cold Corona and a big, shady sombrero used to be the stereotype for most travelers to this part of Mexico. Today ecotourism, adventure tourism, and more culturally oriented travel are stealing people from the beach for at least part of their visits. Each of the beach towns in this chapter can serve as a complete vacation. You could also combine several coastal resorts into a single trip or mix the coastal with the colonial—say, Puerto Escondido and Oaxaca (see chapter 12), or Acapulco and Taxco (see chapter 6).

These coastal communities have distinct personalities, but you get the beach wherever you go, whether you choose a city that offers virtually every luxury imaginable or a rustic town providing little more than seaside relaxation.

The largest and most decadent of Mexican resort destinations, **Acapulco** leapt into the international spotlight in the late 1930s when movie stars made it their playground. Today, though increasingly challenged by other seaside destinations, Acapulco still lures visitors with its glitzy nightlife and sultry beaches (even if the Hollywood celebrities who made it a household name have long since moved on). Of all the resorts in this chapter, Acapulco has the best airline connections, the broadest range of late-night entertainment, the most savory dining, and the widest range of accommodations. The beaches are generally wide and clean, and although the bay itself remains suspect, it's cleaner than in past years.

The resort of **Ixtapa** and its neighboring seaside village, **Zihuatanejo,** offer beach-bound tourist attractions on a smaller, less hectic scale than Acapulco. They attract travelers with their complementary contrasts—sophisticated high-rise hotels in one, local color and leisurely pace in the other. Their excellent beaches front clean ocean waters. To get there, many people fly into Acapulco, then make the 4- to 5-hour trip north by rental car or bus.

Puerto Escondido, noted for its celebrated surf break, laid-back village ambience, attractive and inexpensive inns, and nearby nature excursions, is a worthy destination and an exceptional value. It's 6 hours south of Acapulco on coastal Hwy. 200. Most people fly from Mexico City or drive up from Huatulco.

The **Bahías de Huatulco** encompass a total of nine bays—each lovelier than the last—on a pristine portion of Oaxaca's coast. Development of the area has been gradual and well planned, with great ecological sensitivity. The town of **Huatulco,** 130km (80 miles) south of Puerto Escondido, is emerging as Mexico's most authentic adventure-tourism haven. In addition to an 18-hole golf course, cruise-ship pier, and a handful of resort hotels, it offers a growing array of soft adventures that range from bay tours to diving, river rafting, and rappelling. Dining and nightlife remain limited, but the setting is beautiful and relaxing.

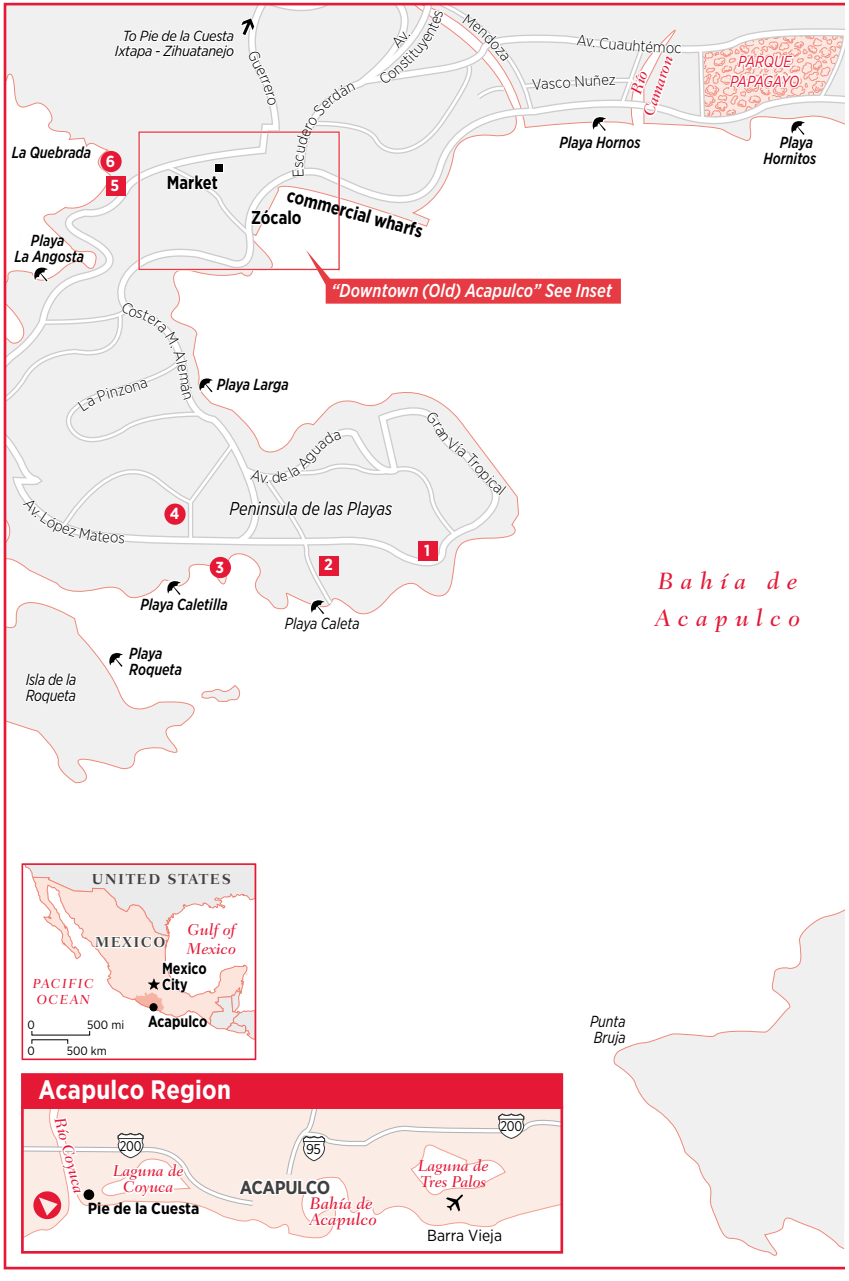
1 ACAPULCO ★★

366km (227 miles) S of Mexico City; 272km (169 miles) SW of Taxco; 979km (607 miles) SE of Guadalajara; 253km (157 miles) SE of Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo; 752km (466 miles) NW of Huatulco

I like to think of Acapulco as a diva—a little past her prime, perhaps overly made up, but still capable of captivating an audience. It's tempting to dismiss Acapulco as a passé resort: Drug-related violence, underinvestment, and poverty in some parts of this huge city have led many tourists to head for glitzier Mexican resorts such as Cancún and Cabo San Lucas. But Acapulco surprisingly retains its appeal, and its temptations are hard to resist. This is a place where beautiful bodies pack the sun-soaked beaches, daring men dive from cliffs into the sea, romantic couples dine alongside unforgettable views of the bay, and uninhibited revelers dance the rest of the night away. Acapulco has world-class resorts, yet they're often much less expensive than comparable hotels elsewhere. Though most beach resorts are made for relaxing, Acapulco offers nonstop, 24-hours-a-day energy. Its perfectly sculpted bay is an adult playground filled with water-skiers in sexy *tanga* swimsuits and darkly tanned, mirror-shaded guys on jet skis. Visitors play golf and tennis with intensity, but the real sport is the nightlife, which has made this city famous for decades. Back in the days when there was a jet set, they came to Acapulco—filmed it, sang about it, wrote about it, and lived it.

It's not hard to understand why: The view of Acapulco Bay, framed by mountains and beaches, is breathtaking day or night. Playa Diamante (Diamond Beach), just south of the bay, is by far the best beach within driving distance of Mexico City. At night, a trendy set of upper-class Mexicans and international visitors fills the top restaurants, bars, and nightclubs, which are some of the hottest in the country.

Acapulco tries hard to hold on to its image as the ultimate party town, and remains a top weekend and vacation destination for affluent residents of Mexico City, who can reach the city in a few hours via a major highway. Don't expect small-town charm or undiscovered beaches, but do expect breathtaking bay views, wide-ranging tourist services, and good


To Pie de la Cuesta
Ixtapa - Zihuatanejo
Guerrero
Escudero Serdán
Av. Constituyentes
Mendoza
Av. Cuauhtémoc
Vasco Nuñez
Río Camarón
PARQUE PAPAGAYO
Playa Hornos
Playa Hornitos
La Quebrada
6
5
Market
Zócalo
commercial wharfs
Playa La Angosta
"Downtown (Old) Acapulco" See Inset
Costera M. Alemán
La Pinzona
Playa Larga
Av. de la Aguada
Gran Vía Tropical
Av. López Mateos
Península de las Playas
4
3
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1
Playa Caletilla
Playa Caleta
Playa Roqueta
Isla de la Roqueta
Bahía de Acapulco
UNITED STATES
MEXICO
Gulf of Mexico
Mexico City
PACIFIC OCEAN
Acapulco
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Punta Bruja
Acapulco Region
Río Coyuca
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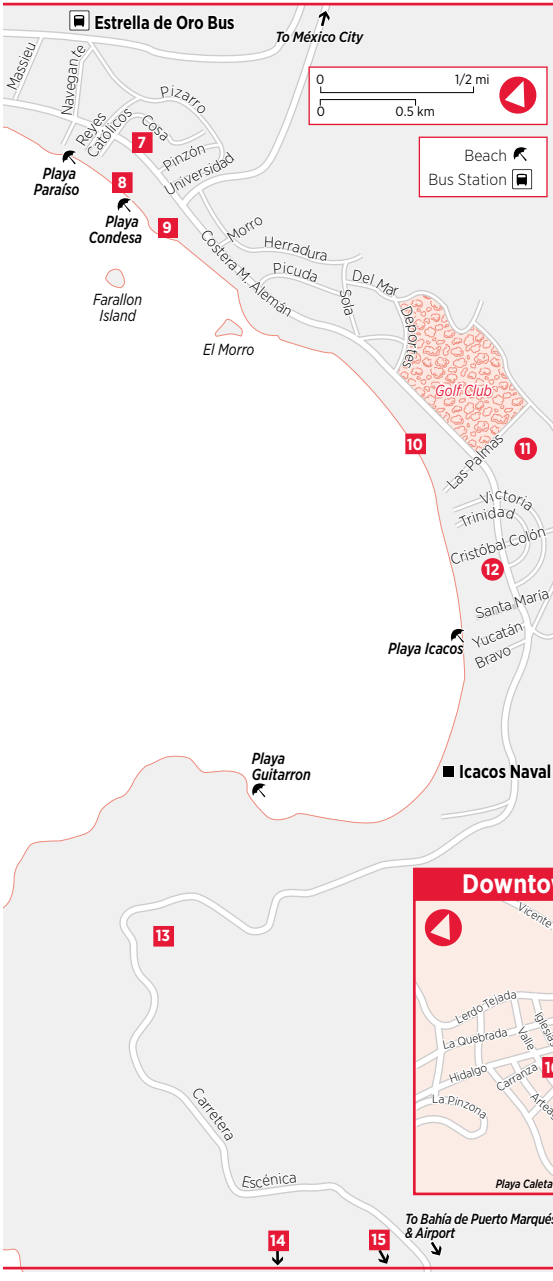
Laguna de Coyuca
Pie de la Cuesta
ACAPULCO
Bahía de Acapulco
Laguna de Tres Palos
Barra Vieja



ACCOMMODATIONS

Calinda Beach Acapulco **9**
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Casa Yal' ma Ka'an **15**
Fairmont Acapulco Princess **15**
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Hotel Elcano **10**
Hotel Los Flamingos **1**
Hotel Mirador Acapulco **5**
Hotel Misión **16**
Hotel Sands Acapulco **7**
Las Brisas **13**
Quinta Real **15**

ATTRACTIONS

Cathedral **18**
Centro Acapulco (Convention Center) **11**
Fuerte de San Diego/ Museo Histórico de Acapulco **19**
La Quebrada/Cliff Divers **6**
Mágico Mundo Marino **3**
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Plaza de Toros **4**
Zócalo/ Plaza Álvarez **17**

values. Acapulco's still the top choice for those who want to have dinner at midnight, dance until dawn, and sleep all day on a sun-soaked beach.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There & Departing

BY PLANE See chapter 3 for information on flying from the United States or Canada to Acapulco. Local numbers for major airlines with nonstop or direct service to Acapulco are **Aeroméxico** (✆ **744/485-1600** inside Mexico), **American** (✆ **744/481-0161,** or 01-800/904-6000 inside Mexico for reservations), **Continental** (✆ **744/466-9063**), **Delta** (✆ **01-800/123-4710**), **Mexicana** (✆ **744/466-9138** or 486-7585), and **US Airways** (✆ **744/466-9257**).

Aeroméxico flies from Guadalajara, Mexico City, Tijuana, and Monterrey; **Aviacsa** (✆ **01-800/711-6733**) flies from Mexico City; **InterJet** (✆ **01-800/01-12345**) is a low-cost carrier that flies from Toluca, about an hour from Mexico City; **Mexicana** flies from Mexico City. Check with a travel agent about **charter** flights.

The airport (airport code: ACA) is 22km (14 miles) southeast of town, over the hills east of the bay. Private **taxis** are the fastest way to get downtown; they cost 300 to 550 pesos. The major **rental-car** agencies all have booths at the airport. **Millinium** and **Movilaca** have desks at the airport where you can buy tickets for minivan *colectivo* transportation into town (about 100 pesos). You can reserve return service to the airport through your hotel.

BY CAR From Mexico City, take either the curvy toll-free **Hwy. 95D** south (6 hr.) or scenic **Hwy. 95,** the four- to six-lane toll highway (3½ hr.), which costs around 550 pesos one-way. The free *(libre)* road from Taxco is in good condition; you'll save around 400 pesos in tolls from there through Chilpancingo to Acapulco. From points north or south along the coast, the only choice is **Hwy. 200,** where you should always try (as on all Mexican highways) to travel by day.

BY BUS The **Estrella de Oro** terminal is at Av. Cuauhtémoc 1490, and the **Estrella Blanca** terminal (also called Central de Autobuses) is at Av. Cuauhtémoc 1605. **Turistar, Estrella de Oro,** and **Estrella Blanca** have almost hourly service for the 5- to 7-hour trip to Mexico City (380–600 pesos), and daily service to Zihuatanejo (220 pesos). Buses also serve other points in Mexico, including Chilpancingo, Cuernavaca, Iguala, Manzanillo, Puerto Vallarta, and Taxco.

Tips Car & Bus Travel Warning Eases

Car robberies and bus hijackings on Hwy. 200, south of Acapulco on the way to Puerto Escondido and Huatulco, used to be common, and you may have heard warnings about the road. The trouble has all but disappeared, thanks to military patrols and greater police protection. However, as in most of Mexico, it's advisable to travel the highways during daylight hours only. In addition to the still-present risk of unsavory activities, the highways are unlit and animals can wander onto them. Before heading in that direction, ask locals and the tourism office about the status of the route.

Orientation

VISITOR INFORMATION The **State of Guerrero Tourism Office** operates the **Procuraduría del Turista** (✆/fax **744/484-4416;** www.guerrero.gob.mx), on the street level of the **Convention Center,** set back from the main Costera Alemán, down a lengthy walkway with fountains. The office offers maps and information about the area, as well as police assistance for tourists; it's open daily from 8am to 11pm.

CITY LAYOUT Acapulco stretches more than 6km (3¾ miles) around the huge bay, so trying to take it all in by foot is impractical. The tourist areas are roughly divided into three sections. On the western end of the bay is **Acapulco Viejo (Old Acapulco),** the original town that attracted the jet-setters of the 1950s and 1960s—and today it looks as if it's still locked in that era, though a renaissance is under way.

The second section, in the center of the bay, is the **Zona Hotelera (Hotel Zone);** it follows the main boulevard, **Costera Miguel Alemán** (or just "the Costera"), as it runs east along the bay from downtown. Towering hotels, restaurants, shopping centers, and strips of open-air beach bars line the street. At the far eastern end of the Costera lie the golf course and the International Center (a convention center). **Avenida Cuauhtémoc** is the major artery inland, running roughly parallel to the Costera.

The third major area begins just beyond the Gran Hotel Acapulco, where the name of the Costera changes to **Carretera Escénica (Scenic Hwy.),** which continues all the way to the airport. The hotels along this section of the road are lavish, and extravagant private villas, gourmet restaurants, and flashy nightclubs built into the hillside offer dazzling views. The area fronting the beach here is **Acapulco Diamante,** Acapulco's most desirable address.

Street names and numbers in Acapulco can be confusing and hard to find. Many streets are not well marked or change names unexpectedly. Street numbers on the Costera are illogical, so don't assume that similar numbers will be close together.

GETTING AROUND **By Taxi** Taxis are more plentiful than tacos in Acapulco—and practically as inexpensive, if you're traveling in the downtown area only. Just remember that you should always establish the price with the driver before starting out. Hotel taxis may charge three times the rate of a taxi hailed on the street, and nighttime taxi rides cost extra, too. Taxis are also more expensive if you're staying in the Diamante section or south. The minimum fare is 25 pesos per ride for a roving VW Bug–style taxi in town; the fare from Puerto Marqués to the hotel zone is 100 pesos, or 150 pesos into downtown. *Sitio* taxis are nicer cars, but more expensive, with a minimum fare of 450 pesos. Acapulco taxis are easily recognizable by their flashy, blue neon lights.

By Bus Even though the city has a confusing street layout, using city buses is amazingly easy and inexpensive. Two kinds of buses run along the Costera: pastel color-coded buses and regular "school buses." The difference is the price: New air-conditioned tourist buses (Aca Tur Bus) are 10 pesos; old buses are 5 pesos. Covered bus stops line the Costera, with handy maps on the walls showing routes to major sights and hotels.

The best place near the *zócalo* to catch a bus is next to Sanborn's, 2 blocks east. CALETA DIRECTO or BASE-CALETA buses will take you to the Hornos, Caleta, and Caletilla beaches along the Costera. Some buses return along the same route; others go around the peninsula and return to the Costera.

For expeditions to more distant destinations, there are buses to **Puerto Marqués** to the east (marked PUERTO MARQUES–BASE) and **Pie de la Cuesta** to the west (marked ZOCALO–PIE DE LA CUESTA). Be sure to verify the time and place of the last bus back if you hop on one of these.

By Car Rental cars are available at the airport and at hotel desks along the Costera. Unless you plan on exploring outlying areas, trust me, you're better off taking taxis or using the easy and inexpensive public buses.

Fast Facts Acapulco

Area Code The telephone area code is **744.**

Climate Acapulco boasts sunshine 360 days a year, with average daytime temperatures of 27°C (80°F). Humidity varies, with approximately 1.5m (59 in.) of rain per year. June through October is the rainy season, though July and August are relatively dry. Tropical showers are brief and usually occur at night.

Consular Agents The **United States** has an agent at the Hotel Continental Emporio, Costera Alemán 121, Loc. 14 (✆ **744/469-0556**); the office is open Monday through Friday from 10am to 2pm. The **Canadian** office is at the Centro Comercial Marbella, Loc. 23 (✆ **744/484-1305**). The office is open Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm.

Currency Exchange Numerous banks along the Costera are open Monday through Friday from 9am to 6pm, Saturday from 10am to 2pm. Banks and their ATMs generally have the best rates. *Casas de cambio* (currency-exchange booths) along the street may have better rates than hotels.

Drugstores One of the largest drugstores in town is **Farmacía Daisy,** Francia 49, across the traffic circle from the convention center (✆ **744/481-2635**). It's open daily from 9am to 11pm. Sam's Club and Wal-Mart, both on the Costera, have pharmacy services and lower prices on medicine.

Hospital **Hospital Magallanes,** Av. Wilfrido Massieu 2, Fracc. Magallanes (✆ **744/469-0270**), has an English-speaking staff and doctors. For local emergencies, call the **Cruz Roja (Red Cross),** Av. Ruiz Cortines s/n (✆ **065**).

Internet Access **@canet,** Costera Alemán 1632 Int., La Gran Plaza, Loc. D-1, lower floor (✆/fax **744/486-9186,** -8182), is open weekdays from 10am to 9pm and weekends from 11:30am to 9pm. Internet access costs about 30 pesos per hour. This is a computer shop that also offers Internet access and has a very helpful staff.

Parking It is illegal to park on the Costera at any time. Try parking along side streets or in one of the few covered parking lots, such as in Plaza Bahía and in Plaza Mirabella.

Post Office The *correo* is next door to Sears, close to the Fideicomiso office. It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm, Saturday from 9am to 2pm. Other branches are in the Estrella de Oro bus station on Cuauhtémoc, inland from the Acapulco Qualton Hotel, and on the Costera near Caleta Beach.

Safety Riptides claim a few lives every year, so pay close attention to warning flags posted on Acapulco beaches. Red or black flags warn swimmers to stay out of the water, yellow flags signify caution, and white or green flags mean it's safe to swim. As is the case anywhere, tourists are vulnerable to thieves. This is especially true when shopping in a market, lying on the beach, wearing jewelry, or visibly carrying a camera, purse, or bulging wallet. Don't walk on Acapulco's beaches at night.

Telephone Acapulco phone numbers seem to change frequently. The most reliable source for telephone numbers is the **Procuraduría del Turista,** on the Costera in front of the convention center (✆ **744/484-4416**), which has an exceptionally friendly staff. It's open daily from 8am to 11pm.

Tourist Police Policemen in white and light-blue uniforms belong to the Tourist Police (✆ **066** for emergencies, or 744/485-0490), a special corps of English-speaking police established to assist tourists.

WHERE TO STAY

The listings below begin with the most expensive resorts south of town in Diamante and continue along Costera Alemán to the less expensive, more traditional hotels north of town, in the downtown or "Old Acapulco" part of the city. Hotel prices have tended to fall or stay the same in Acapulco in recent years. Inquire about promotional rates or check with the airlines for air-hotel packages. During Christmas and Easter weeks, considered the highest season here, some hotels double their normal rates. Low season lasts September through November and April through June; the rest of the year is midseason. The rates below do not include the 17% tax. Private **villas** are available for rent all over the hills south of town; staying in one of these palatial homes is an unforgettable experience. **Acapulco Luxury Villas** (✆ **01-800/030-4444;** www.acapulcoluxuryvillas.com) handles some of the most exclusive villas.

South of Town

Acapulco's most exclusive and renowned hotels, restaurants, and villas nestle in the steep forested hillsides here, between the naval base and Puerto Marqués. This area is several kilometers from the heart of Acapulco; you'll pay about 200 pesos round-trip taxi fare every time you venture off the property into town.

Very Expensive

Quinta Real ★★★ This exquisite hotel offers the most exclusive accommodations in Acapulco, with just 74 suites perched on a small cliff with uninterrupted views of the Pacific Ocean and Diamante Beach. Part of Mexico's top hotel line, the Quinta Real is designed for relaxing and getting away from it all. (This is not the place for those looking for entertainment or family-friendly services; for that, I suggest the Fairmont Acapulco Princess.) The suites come in different sizes, with California-style furnishings, still-life paintings, extensive use of marble, and light neutral colors. The larger Governor suites have high ceilings, separate living and dining rooms, and terraces with private plunge pools. All rooms were remodeled in 2009. The inviting hotel pool lies just steps from the beach, where there's also a casual seafood restaurant and beach club. Service throughout the Quinta Real is impeccable.

Paseo de la Quinta 6, Desarrollo Inmobiliario Real Diamante, 39907 Acapulco, Gro. ✆ **744/469-1500.** Fax 744/469-1516. www.quintareal.com. 74 units. 3,700–12,500 pesos suite. AE, MC, V. Free valet parking. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; lobby bar; airport shuttle; babysitting; beach club; kids' club; concierge; fitness center; 2 outdoor pools (1 for children); room service; spa treatments; tobacco shop; Wi-Fi (in lobby). *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar.

Expensive

Camino Real Acapulco Diamante ★★ Kids Tucked in an almost hidden location on 32 hectares (79 acres) above Playa Puerto Marqués, this relaxing, self-contained resort

Fun Facts **Acapulco, Queen of the Silver Screen**

Besides hosting legendary stars of the silver screen, Acapulco has played a few starring roles. More than 250 films were shot here, including *Rambo II* (1985), which used the Pie de la Cuesta lagoon as its backdrop.

is an ideal choice for families or for those who want seclusion. It's one of Acapulco's most enticing hotels because of its family-friendly atmosphere, extensive amenities, and beautiful protected cove ideal for swimming. From Carretera Escénica, a handsome brick road winds down to the resort. The hotel lobby features an inviting terrace facing the bay, and the sparkling waterfront pools are the focus of daytime activity. Spacious guest rooms offer balconies or terraces, small sitting areas, marble floors, ceiling fans (in addition to air-conditioning), and bright, colorful decor.

Carretera Escénica Km 14, Baja Catita s/n, Pichilingue, 39867 Acapulco, Gro. ✆ **744/435-1010.** Fax 744/435-1020. www.caminoreal.com/acapulco. 157 units. High season $245 and up double; low season $132 and up double. AE, MC, V. Parking 70 pesos daily. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; lobby bar; babysitting; kids' club; health club w/aerobics, massage, spa treatments, and complete workout equipment (extra charge); 3 outdoor pools (1 for children); room service; tennis court; watersports equipment rentals; Wi-Fi (in lobby). *In room:* A/C, flatscreen TV, hair dryer, Internet, minibar.

Casa Yal'ma Ka'an ★★ **Finds** A romantic hideaway 20 minutes south of Diamante, Casa Yal'ma Ka'an is a small ecological retreat with its own ocean beach. Stone paths with little bridges meander past several lookout towers and over lily ponds with palms and flowers, and the beautiful pool lies just steps from the Pacific. In addition to featuring its own beach club, Casa Yal'ma Ka'an offers a *temazcal,* a Maya rustic steam bath that will be prepared for you with candles and aromatherapy amenities. Seven individual thatched-roof cottages have king-size beds, rustic wood furnishings, stone bathrooms, and private sitting decks. Gourmet breakfasts are served under a giant *palapa* overlooking the pool and beach, and private romantic dinners can be arranged on the beach. Service throughout this exclusive hotel is outstanding; children 16 and younger are not allowed.

Carretera hacia Barra Vieja Km 29 L189, 39867 Acapulco, Gro. ✆ **744/444-6389,** -6390. www.casayalmakaan.com. 7 units. Weekends 3,100 pesos double; weekdays 2,750 pesos double. Rates include American breakfast. No children 16 and under allowed. MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; pool bar; beach club; outdoor pool; sauna; *temazcal* (steam bath). *In room:* A/C, TV.

Fairmont Acapulco Princess ★★★ The Princess hotel still reigns as Acapulco's leading resort, with 192 beachfront hectares (480 acres) of tropical gardens, pools, and golf courses. Guest rooms are housed in three 15-story buildings shaped like Aztec pyramids, with modern Mexican decor and terraces with views of the ocean, gardens, or golf course. Five beautiful free-form pools, including a saltwater lagoon dotted with waterfalls, are surrounded by gardens with 750 plant species and swans, flamingos, and other tropical birds. The wide beach offers many watersports activities, and there's an excellent kids' club. The resort also offers tennis, golf, and spa facilities, and enough dining and entertainment options to obviate your need to leave the facility. In late 2008, the Fairmont "Pearl" opened as a luxury annex to the Princess, targeting hip, urban couples looking for a place to "see and be seen." Chic guest rooms colored in brilliant blues, magentas, and light greens feature plasma TVs, 350-count Egyptian cotton sheets, and

beautiful bathrooms with rain showers and Miller Harris amenities. The Pearl Tower features its own lobby, concierge services, and swimming pool, and its guests have access to all the facilities at the Princess and the Pierre Marqués.

Playa Revolcadero s/n, Colonia Granjas del Marques, 39907 Acapulco, Gro. ✆ **800/441-1414** in the U.S., or 744/469-1000. Fax 744/469-1016. www.fairmont.com/acapulco. 710 units. $259 and up double; $314 and up double in the Pearl Tower. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants; 5 bars; babysitting; kids' club; concierge; 2 championship golf courses; fitness center; 5 outdoor pools; room service; Willow Stream spa; 8 outdoor lighted tennis courts and 2 indoor tennis courts; watersports activities; Wi-Fi (in common areas). *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, Internet.

Fairmont Pierre Marqués ★★★ The refined Fairmont Pierre Marqués is both more exclusive and more relaxed than the famous Fairmont Princess next door, to which guests also have access. It once served as a private home for J. Paul Getty and is today one of Acapulco's most prestigious hotels. Together the Pierre Marqués and the Princess offer more activities than you are likely to have time for, with three pools alone at the Pierre Marqués, a beautiful beach with watersports activities, championship golf, tennis, and a state-of-the-art spa and fitness center. Luxurious guest rooms include villas, bungalows, and low-rise pavilions overlooking the pools, tropical gardens, or beach. Fine dining is available here or at the Princess, with a shuttle regularly connecting the two hotels. Service throughout the hotel is outstanding. The Fairmont lies in Diamante, about a 20-minute drive from the center of Acapulco.

Playa Revolcadero s/n, Colonia Granjas del Marques, 39907 Acapulco, Gro. ✆ **800/441-1414** in the U.S., or 744/435-2600. Fax 744/466-1046. www.fairmont.com/pierremarques. 335 units. $269 and up double. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; cafe; deli; 2 bars; concierge; championship golf course; health club and spa; 3 outdoor pools; room service; 5 outdoor lighted tennis courts (10 additional courts at Fairmont Princess, including 2 indoor courts). *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Las Brisas ★★ Moments This is a local landmark dating from 1957, often considered Acapulco's signature hotel. On a hillside with the best bay views of any hotel in Acapulco, Las Brisas is known for its tiered pink stucco facade, private pools, and 50 pink jeeps rented exclusively to guests. The retro guest rooms are like separate villas sculpted from a terraced hillside, with panoramic views of Acapulco Bay from a balcony or terrace, as well as a private or semiprivate pool. They have been upgraded and retain the beloved "Las Brisas" style with pink and stone walls, whitewashed wood furnishings, flatscreen TVs and DVD players, and marble bathrooms. Early each morning, your continental breakfast arrives in a cubbyhole. In case you tire of your own pool, Las Brisas runs a beach club less than a kilometer (a half-mile) away, on Acapulco Bay; continuous shuttle service departs from the lobby. Mandatory service charges cover the shuttle service and all tips.

Apdo. Carretera Escénica 5255, Las Brisas, 39868 Acapulco, Gro. ✆ **866/427-2779** in the U.S., or 744/469-6900. Fax 744/446-5328. www.brisas.com.mx. 251 units. High season $350 shared pool, $445 private pool, $550 Royal Beach Club; low season $250 shared pool, $334 private pool, $410 Royal Beach Club. $20 per day service charge. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; deli; concierge; gym; room service; small spa; 4 lighted tennis courts; private beach club w/fresh- and saltwater pools; Wi-Fi (in lobby). *In room:* A/C, TV, DVD, hair dryer, minibar.

Costera Hotel Zone

Moderate

Calinda Beach You'll see this tall cylindrical tower rising at the eastern edge of Condesa Beach. Each room has a view, usually of the bay. Guest rooms have a simple beach feel, with white tile floors, blue and yellow fish-themed bedspreads, and small bathrooms. It affords the most reasonably priced lodgings along the strip of hotels facing

popular Condesa Beach. Package prices are available, and the hotel frequently offers promotions, such as rates that include breakfast. The hotel features a narrow pool next to the beach and is popular with Mexican families.

Costera Alemán 1260, 39300 Acapulco, Gro. ✆ **744/435-0600.** Fax 744/484-4676. www.hotelcalinda beach.com. 357 units. 2,990 pesos and up double. Ask about promotional specials. AE, DC, MC, V. Parking $5. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; poolside snacks; lobby bar w/live music; babysitting; small gym; Internet; 2 outdoor pools; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar.

Fiesta Americana Villas Acapulco ★ The Fiesta Americana is a long-standing favorite deluxe hotel in the heart of the beach-bar action. The 19-story structure towers above Condesa Beach, just east and up the hill from the Glorieta Diana traffic circle. The studios, suites, and villas have marble floors and can be loud if you're overlooking the pool area. Each has a private terrace or balcony with ocean view. The more expensive rooms feature the best bay views, and all have purified tap water. The hilltop swimming pool affords one of the city's finest views. The location is great for accessing Acapulco's numerous beach activities, shopping, and more casual nightlife.

Costera Alemán 97, 39690 Acapulco, Gro. ✆ **800/343-7821** in the U.S., or 744/435-1600. Fax 744/435-1645. www.fiestamericana.com. 324 units. High season $210 double, $280 suite; low season $80–$130 double, $200 suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lobby bar; deli; kids' club; gym; 2 outdoor pools; room service; spa w/massage service; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer.

Hotel Elcano ★★ Finds An Acapulco classic, the Elcano is another personal favorite. It offers exceptional service and a prime location—on a broad stretch of beach (on the bay) in the heart of the hotel zone. The retro-style, turquoise-and-white lobby and beachside pool area are the closest you can get to a South Beach, Miami, atmosphere in Acapulco, and its popular open-air restaurant adds to the lively waterfront scene. Rooms are bright, and generally feature classic navy-and-white tile accents with white wicker furniture. The large junior suites, all on corners, have two queen-size beds and huge closets. Studios are small but adequate, with king-size beds and small sinks outside the bathroom area; there are no balconies in the studios. All rooms have purified tap water. Avoid the noisy rooms near the ice machines.

Costera Alemán 75, 39690 Acapulco, Gro. ✆ **744/435-1500.** Fax 744/484-2230. www.elcano-hotel.com. 180 units. High season $145 studio, $185 standard double, $195 junior suite, $250 penthouse suite; low season $90 studio, $100 standard double, $145 junior suite, $180 penthouse suite. Rates higher during holiday periods. Ask about promotional discounts. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; babysitting; small workout room; beachside pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar.

Inexpensive

Hotel Sands Acapulco Value Kids A good option for budget-minded families, this unpretentious 1960s-style motel nestles on the inland side, opposite the giant resort hotels and away from the Costera traffic. Guest rooms have basic furnishings with colorful linens, wall-to-wall carpeting, and tile bathrooms with showers only. The bungalows are smaller and less expensive, but more enticing than the motel rooms because they are surrounded by a small garden. Some units have kitchenettes, and all have a terrace or balcony. The family-friendly motel has a kids' pool and a special play area for youngsters, including *golfito* (minigolf). The rates are reasonable, the accommodations satisfactory, and the location excellent.

Costera Alemán 178, 39670 Acapulco, Gro. ✆ **744/484-2260.** Fax 744/484-1053. www.sands.com.mx. 94 units. High season 1,000 pesos double, 600 pesos bungalow; low season 750 pesos double, 5,550 pesos bungalow. AE, MC, V. Limited free parking. **Amenities:** Babysitting; children's playground w/minigolf; concierge; outdoor pool; children's pool; squash court; volleyball. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge, Wi-Fi.

Downtown (on La Quebrada) & Old Acapulco Beaches

Numerous budget hotels dot the streets fanning out from the *zócalo.* They're among the best values in town, but be sure to check your room first to see that it meets your needs. Several hotels in this area are close to Caleta and Caletilla beaches, or on the back of the hilly peninsula, at Playa la Angosta.

Moderate

Hotel Mirador Acapulco ★ An Old Acapulco landmark dating from 1934, the Mirador enjoys an unforgettable view of the famous cove where the cliff divers perform. The hotel's guest rooms are staggered along the edge of a cliff, with double or queen-size beds and traditional furnishings, small kitchenette areas with minifridge and coffeemaker, and large bathrooms with marble counters. Most have a separate living room, and all are accented with colorful Saltillo tile and other Mexican decorative touches. Ask for a room with a balcony or ocean view. Many guests gravitate to the large, breezy lobby bar as day fades into night on the beautiful cove. An a la carte menu ($25 minimum consumption) at La Perla restaurant affords stunning views of the cliff-diving show. Nearby is a protected cove with good snorkeling.

Plazoleta Quebrada 74, 39300 Acapulco, Gro. ✆ **744/483-1221** for reservations. Fax 744/482-4564. www.miradoracapulco.com. 133 units, including 9 junior suites with whirlpools. High season $155–$185 double, $207 junior suite; low season $85 double, $150 junior suite. Add $10 for kitchenette. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; lobby bar; 3 outdoor pools, including 1 rather run-down saltwater pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV.

Inexpensive

Hotel Costa Linda Value Budget-minded Mexican and American families and couples are drawn to the sunny, well-kept rooms of the Costa Linda, one of the best values in the area. All rooms have individually controlled air-conditioning and a minifridge, and some have a small kitchenette (there's a $10 charge for using the kitchenette). Closets and bathrooms are ample in size, and mattresses are firm. Cozy as the Costa Linda is, it is adjacent to one of the busier streets in Old Acapulco, so traffic noise can be bothersome. It's just a 1-block walk down to lively Caleta beach, and guests also have free beach access at the nearby Acamar hotel.

Costera Alemán 1008, 39390 Acapulco, Gro. ✆ **744/482-5277** or 482-2549. www.hotelcostalindaacapulco.com 44 units. High season $120 double; low season $60 double. Children 7 and younger stay free in parent's room. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Small outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, TV, Wi-Fi.

Hotel Los Flamingos ★ Finds Perched on a cliff 150m (492 ft.) above Acapulco Bay, this Acapulco landmark once entertained John Wayne, Cary Grant, Errol Flynn, Roy Rogers, and others. The place is a real find in a kitschy, campy sort of way—although the aged rooms are simple and lack modern luxuries, much of the hotel retains the charm of a grand era. Most rooms feature dramatic sea views and a large balcony or terrace, although few have air-conditioning and bathrooms are bare-bones. Thursdays at Los Flamingos are especially popular, with a *pozole* party and live music by a Mexican band. Even if you don't stay here, at least come for a margarita or "coco loco" cocktail (invented here) at sunset, and walk along the dramatic lookout point.

López Mateos s/n, Fracc. Las Playas, 39300 Acapulco, Gro. ✆ **744/482-0690.** Fax 744/483-9806. www.hotellosflamingos.com. 36 units. High season $65 double, $85 superior double with A/C, $100 junior suite; low season $60 double, $70 superior double, $80 junior suite. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; room service; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C (in some), TV.

Hotel Misión Enter this hotel's plant-filled brick courtyard, shaded by two enormous mango trees, and you'll retreat into an earlier, more peaceful Acapulco. This tranquil 19th-century hotel lies 2 blocks inland from the Costera and the *zócalo.* The original L-shaped building is at least a century old. The rooms have simple colonial touches, such as colorful tile and wrought iron, and come simply furnished. Four rooms have air-conditioning. Breakfast is served on the patio. This is a good value hotel, but it doesn't offer much in the way of service and it's also located in an area you'd probably not want to walk around at night.

Felipe Valle 12, 39300 Acapulco, Gro. ✆ **744/482-3643.** Fax 744/482-2076. 27 units. High season $50 double; low season $40 double. No credit cards. Parking $5.

WHERE TO DINE

Diners in Acapulco enjoy stunning views and fresh seafood. The quintessential setting is a candlelit table with the glittering bay spread out before you. If you're looking for a romantic spot, Acapulco brims with such inviting places; most sit along the southern coast, with views of the bay. If you're looking for simple food or an authentic local dining experience, you're best off in Old Acapulco. Cheap, fresh seafood can also be found at any of the simple restaurants in the local "Barra Vieja" neighborhood near Diamante. Many of Acapulco's fine-dining establishments automatically add a small "cover" charge to your bill (which is ostensibly for the bread served when you sit down), which usually amounts to between $2 and $3 per person.

South of Town: Las Brisas Area

Very Expensive

Baikal Overrated FUSION/FRENCH/ASIAN Baikal remains the best-known place in Acapulco for an over-the-top dining experience, although you will be paying top dollar for it. The restaurant itself is constructed into the cliff, providing sweeping views of Acapulco Bay's glittering lights. The large dining room, with a two-story ceiling, has comfortable seating. The creative menu combines fusion fare with a dash of Mexican flare. Start with the thinly sliced scallops in chipotle vinaigrette or a terrine of foie gras in a port sauce. Notable entrees include the filet of sole and lobster, pork tenderloin in red wine, or medallions of New Zealand lamb in a sweet garlic sauce. There's also an extensive selection of wines. Baikal has a private VIP dining room, wine cellar, and elegant bar, ideal for enjoying a sunset cocktail or after-dinner drink. It's east of town on the scenic highway just before the entrance to the Las Brisas hotel.

Carretera Escénica 16 and 22. ✆ **744/446-6845** or 446--6867. www.baikal.com.mx. Reservations required (reservaciones@baikal.com.mx). Main courses $21–$90. AE, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 7pm–1am; Fri–Sat 7pm–2am. Closed Mon during summer.

Becco ★★ ITALIAN/SEAFOOD Among the city's most exclusive tables, Becco features floor-to-ceiling windows that stretch three floors overlooking the bay. A spiral staircase leads down from the entrance past the cocktail lounge and into the minimalist dining room, which has contemporary cement floors, large white pillars, and refined wood tables and chairs. The multilevel room buzzes with the chatter of Mexico's elite, many on vacation from the capital. The menu involves a rich selection of *antipasti,* including carpaccios, brochettes, and prosciutto with mozzarella; a crowd-favorite starter is seared tuna over a bed of spinach served with fries. The top pastas are homemade taglioli with lobster; spaghetti *allo scoglio* loaded with shrimp, calamari, clams, and crayfish; and seafood risotto. The chefs will prepare the fresh catches any way you like. Becco

Moments Dining with a View

Restaurants with unparalleled views of Acapulco include **Baikal, Becco, Zibu,** and **Zuntra** in the Las Brisas area; **El Olvido** along the Costera; **Su Casa** on a hill above the convention center; and the appropriately named **Bella Vista Restaurant** at the Las Brisas hotel, which many consider to have the best view of them all.

has an extensive Italian wine and champagne selection—all visible through the glass-enclosed cellar.

Carretera Escénica 14. ✆ **744/446-7402.** www.beccoalmare.com. Reservations required. Main courses $22–$40. AE, MC, V. Sun–Thurs 7pm–midnight; Fri–Sat 7pm–1am.

Zibu ★★★ SEAFOOD/THAI With a gorgeous view over the sea, Zibu blends Mexican and Thai architectural and culinary styles to create a breathtaking dining experience. The open-air venue is furnished with rattan tables and chairs surrounded by warm lighting of candles, tiki torches, and lamps; an infinity pool separates the restaurant patio from the *palapa*-topped lounge. Consider starting with the sea scallop carpaccio or sea bass tartare, and continue with the shrimp medallions with ginger and mango or grilled fish filet with almonds and soy (there are also meat dishes). Although it's not on the menu (just ask for it), the Thai salad with shrimp tempura, mint, cilantro, lettuce, mango, red and green peppers, and soy is out of this world. Finish with a tropical fruit plate and variety of sorbets. The glass-enclosed wine cellar houses a well-balanced though expensive collection. Service is gracious and attentive.

Av. Escénica s/n, Fracc. Glomar. ✆ **744/433-3058** or 433-3069. www.zibu.com.mx. Reservations recommended. Main courses $18–$46. AE, MC, V. Daily 7pm–midnight.

Zuntra ★★ ASIAN/SEAFOOD One of the hottest tables in Acapulco, Zuntra sits across from Las Brisas hotel and overlooks the spectacular bay. Floor-to-ceiling windows frame the vista, as the fashionably dressed clientele trade knowing glances and spirited conversation. The kitchen focuses on seafood dishes with a pan-Asian flare. You can't go wrong with the halibut teriyaki over sushi crab with a chipotle mousse, or seared tuna marinated in a port wine and soy sauce. The cuisine is exquisitely presented and service is top-notch. There seem to be as many servers as diners, and when compared to some of Acapulco's trendiest restaurants, Zuntra is also reasonably priced. A sleek bar/lounge sits on the restaurant's upper level (p. 385).

Carretera Escénica s/n, Marina Brisas (across from Las Brisas hotel). ✆ **744/444-5601.** www.zuntra.com.mx. Reservations required. Main courses $23–$38. AE, MC, V. Tues–Sun 7:30pm–2am.

Costera Hotel Zone

Very Expensive

El Olvido ★★ FRENCH/MEXICAN El Olvido gives you all the glittering bayview ambience of the posh Las Brisas restaurants, without the taxi ride. The menu is one of the most sophisticated in the city, but it's expensive. Start with one of the 12 house specialty drinks, such as Olvido, made with tequila, rum, Cointreau, tomato juice, and lime juice. Soups include delicious cold avocado cream, and thick black bean and chorizo. Among the innovative entrees are grilled quails with honey and *pasilla* chiles, thick sea bass with a mild sauce of cilantro and avocado, and lamb chops with chipotle. For dessert, try the chocolate

fondue or *guanábana* (a tropical fruit) mousse in a rich *zapote negro* (black tropical fruit) sauce. El Olvido sits at the back of the Plaza Marbella shopping center fronting Diana Circle. Although the bay view is lovely, a drawback is that the nearby dance clubs can often be heard after 10pm.

Glorieta Diana traffic circle, Plaza Marbella. ✆ **744/481-0203,** -0256, -0214. www.elolvido.com.mx. Reservations recommended. Main courses $15–$40. AE, MC, V. Daily 6pm–midnight.

Su Casa/Angel and Shelly's ★★ INTERNATIONAL Relaxed elegance and terrific food at reasonable prices are what you get at Su Casa. Owners Shelly and Angel Herrera created this pleasant, breezy, open-air restaurant on the patio of their hillside home overlooking the city (Angel and Shelly's—previously called La Margarita—is the indoor restaurant below Su Casa that's open during the rainy season). Both Shelly and Angel are experts in the kitchen and are on hand nightly to greet guests on the patio. The menu changes often. Some items are standard, such as shrimp *a la patrona* in herbs and spices, grilled fish, steak, and chicken. The *pasta el padrino,* with fresh shrimp and crème *chipotle,* is a delicious new addition to the menu. Many entrees come with garnishes of cooked banana or pineapple. The margaritas are big and delicious. The banana split or any of the flambées make dessert hard to resist.

V. Anahuac 110. ✆ **744/484-4350** or 484-1261. Fax 744/484-0803. www.sucasa-acapulco.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses $17–$35. MC, V. Daily 5pm–midnight.

Moderate

El Cabrito ★★ NORTHERN MEXICAN With its hacienda-inspired entrance, waitresses in white dresses and *charro*-style neckties, and location in the heart of the Costera, this typical Mexican restaurant targets tourists. But its authentic and delicious food makes it a favorite among Mexicans, too—a comforting stamp of approval. Among the specialties are *cabrito al pastor* (roasted goat), *charro* beans, Oaxaca-style *mole,* and *burritos de machaca* (made with shredded beef). A whole *cabrito* is usually being slowly roasted inside the glass-enclosed *parilla.* Bottles of beer are brought to your table in buckets of ice and then poured in frosty cold mugs. El Cabrito lies on the ocean side of the Costera, south of the convention center.

Costera Alemán 1480. ✆ **744/484-7711.** www.elcabrito-acapulco.com. Main courses $8–$20. AE, MC, V. Daily 2pm–midnight.

Inexpensive

El Zorrito ★★ MEXICAN/TACOS If you're looking for quality, no-nonsense Mexican food, El Zorrito is your place. Plastic tables and chairs, a dozen spinning ceiling fans, and photos of famous diners fill the open-air dining space. Waiters with their names printed on the back of their shirts traverse the restaurant with a smile, making sure customers are well fed and attended to. You can watch as homemade tortillas are prepared hot off the *comal* (the cast-iron plate used to make tortillas), and an expert team of cooks works harmoniously in the open kitchen. The food here is spicy and delicious, and the tacos are among the best you'll find.

Costera Miguel Alemán 212, across from the Costa Club Hotel. ✆ **744/485-7914.** Breakfasts 35–55 pesos; tacos 70–90 pesos; other dishes 70–200 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 24 hr.

Ika Tako ★★ Finds SEAFOOD/TACOS These fresh seafood tacos (many served in combinations that include grilled pineapple, fresh spinach, grated cheese, garlic, and bacon) are so tasty that they're addicting. An unusual selection of nine sweet and spicy salsas accompanies them, and there are also excellent burritos, meat and chicken dishes,

Moments If There's Pozole, It Must Be Thursday

If you're visiting Acapulco on a Thursday, indulge in the local custom of eating *pozole,* a bowl of white hominy and meat in broth, garnished with sliced radishes, shredded lettuce, onions, oregano, and lime, served with crispy tostadas. The traditional version includes pork, but a newer chicken version has also become a standard. You can also find green *pozole,* which is made by adding a paste of roasted pumpkinseeds to the traditional *pozole* base. Green *pozole* is also traditionally served with a side of sardines. For a singular Acapulco experience, enjoy your Thursday *pozole* at the cliff-side restaurant of the Hotel Los Flamingos (see above). (If you ask nicely many restaurants will serve the dish the other 6 days of the week.)

and vegetarian selections. Unlike most inexpensive places to eat, the setting is also lovely, with a handful of tables overlooking tropical trees and the bay below. The lighting may be bright, the atmosphere occasionally hectic, and the service dependably slow, but the tacos are delectable. Consider the *takabrían,* which comes with shrimp, octopus, calamari, pepper, onion, and cheese. You can also order beer, wine, and dessert here. This restaurant is along the Costera, next to Beto's lobster restaurant. There's another branch across from the Gran Hotel Acapulco.

Costera Alemán 99. ✆ **744/484-9521.** www.ikatako.com. Main courses 55–175 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 5pm–3am.

100% Natural ★ Kids BREAKFAST/HEALTH FOOD Healthy, delicious, and inexpensive Mexican food fills the plates at this tropical plant–filled restaurant, on the second level of the shopping center across from the Acapulco Plaza Hotel. (This chain has five other branches in Acapulco, including another one farther east on the Costera.) If you've overindulged the night before, get yourself back on track here with one of the outstanding breakfast selections, served any time of day, such as whole-wheat pancakes with apple and cinnamon, a vegetarian omelet, or any one of nine fresh-fruit plates. Yogurt shakes, steamed vegetables, and cheese enchiladas are alternatives to the yummy sandwiches served on whole-grain breads. Don't miss one of the fruit *licuados,* blended fresh fruit with your choice of yogurt or milk.

Costera Miguel Alemán 200, across from the Costa Club Hotel. ✆ **744/485-3982.** www.100natural.com. Breakfasts 55–90 pesos; sandwiches 70–100 pesos. AE, MC, V. Open 24 hr.

Downtown: The Zócalo Area

The old downtown abounds with simple, inexpensive restaurants serving tasty eats. It's easy to pay more elsewhere for food that's not as consistently good as in this part of town. To explore, start at the *zócalo* and stroll west along Juárez. After about 3 blocks, you'll come to Azueta, lined with small seafood cafes and street-side stands.

Inexpensive

El Amigo Miguel ★ Finds MEXICAN/SEAFOOD Locals know that El Amigo Miguel is a standout among downtown seafood restaurants—you can easily pay more elsewhere but not eat better. Impeccably fresh seafood reigns; the large open-air dining room, 3 blocks west of the *zócalo,* is usually brimming with seafood lovers. When it

overflows, head to a branch across the street, with the same menu. Try delicious *camarones borrachos* (drunken shrimp), in a sauce made with beer, ketchup, and bits of fresh bacon—it tastes nothing like the individual ingredients. *Filete Miguel* is a fresh fish filet (often red snapper or sea bass) stuffed with seafood and covered in a wonderful chipotle chile sauce. Grilled shrimp with garlic and *mojo de ajo* (whole red snapper) are served at their classic best. Meat dishes are available as well.

Juárez 31, at Azueta (2nd location across the street, at Juárez 16). ✆ **744/483-6981.** www.elamigomiguel.com. Main courses $6–$15. AE, MC, V. Daily 9:30am–9:30pm.

Mariscos Pipo SEAFOOD Check out the photographs of Old Acapulco on the walls while relaxing in this airy dining room decorated with hanging nets, fish, glass buoys, and shell lanterns. The English-language menu lists a wide array of seafood, including ceviche, lobster, octopus, crayfish, clams, baby-shark quesadillas, and fish prepared any way you want. This local favorite is 2 blocks west of the *zócalo* on Breton, just off the Costera.

Almirante Breton 3. ✆ **744/482-2237.** Main courses $5–$25. AE, MC, V. Daily 1–9:30pm.

ACTIVITIES ON & OFF THE BEACH

Acapulco is known for its great beaches and watersports, and few visitors bother to explore its traditional downtown area. But the shaded ***zócalo*** (also called Plaza Alvarez) is worth a trip, to experience a glimpse of local life and color. Inexpensive cafes and shops border the plaza. At its far north end is the **cathedral Nuestra Señora de la Soledad,** with blue, onion-shaped domes and Byzantine towers. Though reminiscent of a Russian Orthodox church, it was originally (and perhaps appropriately) built as a movie set, then later adapted into a house of worship. From the church, turn east along the side street going off at a right angle (Calle Carranza, which doesn't have a marker) to find an arcade with newsstands and more shops. The hill behind the cathedral provides an unparalleled view of Acapulco. Take a taxi to the top of the hill from the main plaza, and follow signs to **El Mirador (lookout point).**

Local travel agencies book city tours, day trips to Taxco, cruises, and other excursions and activities. Taxco is about a 3-hour drive inland from Acapulco (see chapter 6 for more information).

THE BEACHES Here's a rundown on the beaches, going from west to east around the bay. **Playa la Angosta** is a small, sheltered, often-deserted cove just around the bend from **La Quebrada** (where the cliff divers perform).

South of downtown on the Peninsula de las Playas lie the beaches **Caleta** and **Caletilla.** Separating them is a small outcropping of land that contains the aquarium and

Tips To Swim or Not to Swim in the Bay?

In the past decade, the city has gone to great lengths (and great expense) to clean up the waters off Acapulco. Nevertheless, this is an industrial port that was once heavily polluted, so many choose to stick to their hotel pool. The bay beaches that remain most popular are **Caleta** and **Caletilla beaches,** as well as **Playa Puerto Marqués.**

Warning! Riptides

Each year, at least one or two unwary swimmers drown in Acapulco because of deadly riptides and undertow (see "Safety" in "Fast Facts: Acapulco," earlier). Check for warning flags posted by the lifeguards and be careful of the undertow no matter where you go. If you find yourself caught in the undertow, head back to shore at an angle instead of trying to swim straight back.

water park **Mágico Mundo Marino,** which is open daily from 9am to 6pm (✆ **744/483-1215**) and costs 60 pesos to enter. You'll find thatched-roofed restaurants, watersports equipment for rent, and brightly painted boats that ferry passengers to **Roqueta Island.** You can rent beach chairs and umbrellas for the day. Mexican families favor these beaches because they're close to several good-value hotels. In the late afternoon, fishermen pull their colorful boats up on the sand; you can buy the fresh catch of the day and, occasionally, oysters on the half shell.

Pleasure boats dock at **Playa Manzanillo,** south of the *zócalo.* Charter fishing trips sail from here. In the old days, the downtown beaches—Manzanillo, Honda, Caleta, and Caletilla—were the focal point of Acapulco. Today beaches and resort developments stretch along the 6.5km (4-mile) length of the shore.

East of the *zócalo,* the major beaches are **Hornos** (near Papagayo Park), **Hornitos, Paraíso, Condesa,** and **Icacos,** followed by the naval base (La Base) and **Punta del Guitarrón.** After Punta del Guitarrón, the road climbs to the legendary Las Brisas hotel. Past Las Brisas, the road continues to the small, clean bay of **Puerto Marqués,** followed by **Punta Diamante,** about 20km (12 miles) from the *zócalo.* The fabulous Acapulco Princess, the Quinta Real, and the Pierre Marqués hotels dominate the landscape, which fronts the open Pacific.

Playa Puerto Marqués, in the bay of Puerto Marqués, is an attractive area for swimming. The Camino Real and a large residential development are located here. The water is calm and the bay sheltered. Water-skiing and WaveRunner rentals can also be arranged. Past the bay lies **Revolcadero Beach,** a magnificent wide stretch of beach on the open ocean, where many of Acapulco's grandest resorts are found.

Other beaches lie farther north and are best reached by car, though buses also make the trip. **Pie de la Cuesta** is 13km (8 miles) west of town. Buses along the Costera leave every 5 or 10 minutes; a taxi costs about 200 pesos. The water is too rough for swimming, but it's a great spot for checking out big waves and the spectacular sunset, especially over *coco locos* (drinks served in fresh coconuts with the tops whacked off) at a rustic beachside restaurant. The area is known for excellent birding and surrounding coconut plantations.

If you're driving, continue west along the peninsula, passing **Coyuca Lagoon** on your right, until almost to the small air base at the tip. Along the way, various private entrepreneurs, mostly young boys, will invite you to park near different sections of beach. You'll also find *colectivo* boat tours of the lagoon offered for about 100 pesos.

BAY CRUISES & ROQUETA ISLAND The waters of Acapulco are dotted with virtually every kind of boat—yachts, catamarans, and trimarans (single- and double-deckers). Cruises run morning, afternoon, and evening. Some offer buffets, open bars, and live

music; others just snacks, drinks, and taped music. Prices range from $26 to $50. Cruise operators come and go, and their phone numbers change so frequently from year to year that it's pointless to list them here; to find out what cruises are currently operating, contact any Acapulco travel agency or your hotel's tour desk, and ask for brochures or recommendations.

Boats from Caletilla Beach to **Roqueta Island**—a good place to snorkel, sunbathe, hike to a lighthouse, visit a small zoo, or have lunch—leave every 15 minutes from 9am until the last one returns at 5:30pm for under $10 round-trip. There are also primitive-style glass-bottom boats that circle the bay as you look down at a few fish and watch a diver swim down to the underwater sanctuary of the Virgin of Guadalupe, patron saint of Mexico. The statue of the Virgin—created by sculptor Armando Quesado—was placed there in 1958, in memory of a group of divers who lost their lives at the spot. You can purchase tickets ($5) directly from any boat that's loading.

WATERSPORTS & BOAT RENTALS An hour of **water-skiing** at Coyuca Lagoon can cost as little as $35 or as much as $70.

Scuba diving costs about $80 for 4 hours of instruction, when you book through a hotel or travel agency. Dive trips start at around $90 per person for one- or two-tank dives. One reputable shop, near Club de Esquís, is **Divers de México** (✆ **744/482-1398;** www.funfishingfactory.com). We also recommend **Fish-R-Us** (✆ **744/482-8282;** www.fish-r-us.com), which offers shore and boat dives, usually to Roqueta Island. Sunken ships, sea mountains, and cave rock formations are all on display around the area. **Boat rentals** are cheapest on Caletilla Beach, where you can usually find inner tubes, small boats, canoes, paddleboats, and chairs for rent.

For **deep-sea fishing** excursions, go to the boat cooperative's pink building opposite the *zócalo,* or book a day in advance (✆ **744/482-1099**). Charter trips run $250 to $450 for 6 to 7 hours, tackle and bait included, with an extra charge for ice, drinks, and lunch. Credit cards are accepted, but you're likely to get a better deal by paying cash. Boats leave at 7am and return at 2pm. **Fish-R-Us** (✆ **744/482-8282**) also books quality excursions. If you book through a travel agent or hotel, prices start at around $250 for four people. Prices vary, so call for details.

Parasailing, though not free from risk (the occasional thrill-seeker has collided with a palm tree or even a building), can be brilliant. Floating high over the bay hanging from a parachute towed by a motorboat costs about $35. Most of these rides operate on Condesa Beach, but they also can be found independently operating on the beach in front of most hotels along the Costera.

GOLF & TENNIS Both the **Acapulco Princess** (✆ **744/469-1000**) and **Pierre Marqués** (✆ **744/466-1000**) hotels share top-notch golf courses. The Princess's course is a rather narrow, level, Ted Robinson design. The Marques course, redesigned by Robert Trent Jones, Jr., in 1980 for the World Cup Golf Tournament, is longer and more challenging. A morning round of 18 holes at the Princess course costs $135 for guests and $150 for nonguests (discounted rates for afternoon rounds); prices are $10 more at the Marques course. American Express, Visa, and MasterCard are accepted, and the cart is included in the fee. Tee times begin at 7:30am, and reservations should be made at least a day in advance. Club rental is available for an extra $40. The **Mayan Palace Golf Club,** Geranios 22 (✆ **744/469-6043** or 466-2260), designed by Latin American golf great Pedro Guericia, lies farther east. Greens fees are $110 for visitors, and caddies are available for an additional $20. At the **Club de Golf Acapulco,** off the Costera next to the

convention center (✆ **744/484-0781**), you can play 9 holes for $50 and 18 holes for $65, with equipment renting for $10.

The Robert von Hagge–designed course at the exclusive **Tres Vidas Golf Club,** Carretera a Barra Vieja Km 7 (✆ **744/444-5126**), is spectacular. The par-72, 18-hole course, right on the edge of the ocean, has nine lakes, is dotted with palms, and home to a flock of ducks and other birds. The club is open only to members, guests of members, and guests at Tres Vidas or a few other participating hotels. Greens fees are $200, including cart; a caddy is $20. Also here is a clubhouse with a restaurant (daily 7am–10pm), as well as a pool. American Express, Visa, and MasterCard are accepted.

The **Club de Tenis Gran Hotel Acapulco,** Costera Alemán 1 (✆ **744/484-1225**), is open daily from 7am to 11pm. Outdoor courts cost $10 per hour during the day, $15 per hour at night; rackets rent for $3 and a set of balls costs $2. Many of the hotels along the Costera have tennis facilities for guests; the best are at the Fairmont Princess, Mayan Palace, and Las Brisas hotels. The **Fairmont Princess** (✆ **744/469-1000**) also allows nonguests to play for $20 per hour.

RIDING & BULLFIGHTS You can go **horseback riding** along the beach. Independent operators stroll the Hotel Zone beachfront offering rides for about $25 to $45 for 1 to 2 hours. Horses are also commonly found on the beach in front of the Acapulco Princess Hotel. There is no phone; you go directly to the beach to make arrangements.

Traditionally called Fiesta Brava, **bullfights** are held during Acapulco's winter season at a ring (called Plaza de Toros) up the hill from Caletilla Beach. Tickets purchased through travel agencies cost around $17 to $40 and usually include transportation to and from your hotel. You can also buy a general admission ticket at the stadium for $4.50. Be forewarned that this is a true bullfight—meaning things generally do not fare well for the bull. The festivities begin at 5:30pm each Sunday from late November to late February.

A MUSEUM & A WATER PARK The original **Fuerte de San Diego,** Costera Alemán, east of the *zócalo* (✆ **744/482-3828**), was built in 1616 to protect the town from pirate attacks. At that time, the port reaped considerable income from trade with the Philippine

Moments Death-Defying Divers

High divers perform at La Quebrada each day at 12:45, 7:30, 8:30, 9:30, and 10:30pm. Admission is 35 pesos for adults, 10 pesos for kids 10 and under. From a spot-lit ledge on the cliffs, divers (holding torches for the final performance) plunge into the roaring surf of an inlet that's just 7m (23 ft.) wide, 4m (13 ft.) deep, and 40m (131 ft.) below—after wisely praying at a small shrine nearby. To the applause of the crowd, divers climb up the rocks and accept congratulations and gifts of money from onlookers. This is the quintessential Acapulco experience. No visit is complete (even for jaded travelers) without watching the cliff divers. To get there from downtown, take the street called La Quebrada from behind the cathedral for 4 blocks. Parking costs 20 pesos.

The public areas have great views, but arrive early, because performances quickly fill up. Another option is to watch from the lobby bar of the **Hotel El Mirador.** The bar imposes a $15 cover charge, which includes two drinks. You can get around the cover by having dinner at the hotel's **La Perla restaurant.** Reservations (✆ **744/483-1221,** ext. 802) are recommended during high season.

A House of Art, Seen from Outside

Of all the exclusive villas and homes in Acapulco, one stands far apart from the others. Though not as elegantly impressive as the villas of Las Brisas, the **home of Dolores Olmedo** in Acapulco's traditional downtown area is a work of art. In 1956, the renowned Mexican artist Diego Rivera covered its outside wall with a mural of colorful mosaic tiles, shells, and stones. The work is unique and one of the last he created. The Olmedo mural, which took him 18 months to complete, features Aztec deities such as Quetzalcóatl and Tepezcuincle, the Aztec dog. Rivera and Olmedo were lifelong friends, and Rivera lived in this house for the last 2 years of his life, during which time he also covered the interior with murals. The home isn't a museum, so you have to settle for a look at the exterior masterpiece. The house is a few blocks behind the Casablanca Hotel, a short cab ride from the central plaza, at Calle Cerro de la Pinzona 6. At press time, the house was on the market for $6 million.

Islands (which, like Mexico, were part of the Spanish Empire). The fort you see today was rebuilt after considerable earthquake damage in 1776 and has undergone a series of renovations since. The structure houses the **Museo Histórico de Acapulco (Acapulco Historical Museum)** ★★, with exhibits that reveal the port's role in the conquest of the Americas, Catholic conversion campaigns in the region, and exotic trade with the Orient. Temporary exhibits are also on display. Admission to the museum costs 41 pesos, free on Sunday. It's open Tuesday through Sunday from 9:30am to 6:30pm. To reach the fort, follow Costera Alemán past Old Acapulco and the *zócalo;* the fort is on a hill on the right.

The **Parque Acuático el CICI** ★, Costera Alemán at Colón (✆ **744/484-8033;** www.cici.com.mx), is a sea-life and water park east of the convention center. It offers guests swimming pools with waves, water slides, and water toboggans, and has a cafeteria and restrooms. The park is open daily from 10am to 6pm. General admission is $10 and free for children 1 and younger. There are **dolphin shows** (in Spanish) weekdays at 2pm and weekends at 2 and 4pm. There's also a dolphin swim program, which includes 30 minutes of introduction and 30 minutes to 1 hour of swim time. The cost for this option is $90 for the half-hour swim, $130 for the hour; both options include total access to the water park and are available by reservation only. Shows are at 10:30am, 12:30, and 4:30pm. Reservations are required; there is a 10-person maximum per show for the dolphin swim option. The minimum age is 4 years.

SHOPPING

Acapulco is not among the best places to buy Mexican crafts, but it does have a few interesting shops, and the Costera is lined with places to buy tourist souvenirs, including silver jewelry, Mexico knickknacks, and the ubiquitous T-shirt.

The shopkeepers aren't pushy, but they'll test your bargaining mettle. The starting price will be steep, and dragging it down may take some time. Before buying silver, examine it carefully and look for ".925" stamped on the back. This supposedly signifies that the silver is 92.5% pure, but the less expensive silver metal called "alpaca" may also bear this stamp. (Alpaca is generally stamped MEXICO or MEX, often in letters so tiny that they are hard to read and look similar to the three-digit ".925.")

Linda de Taxco, located at the Quebrada where the cliff divers perform (✆ **744/483-3340;** www.lindadetaxco.net), is a large store selling silver and gold pieces, including quality silver from Taxco. It's open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 10pm. It has two other locations in Acapulco (see website for details).

Sanborn's, a good department store and drugstore chain, offers an array of staples, including cosmetics, music, clothing, books, and magazines. It has a number of locations in Acapulco, including downtown at Costera Miguel Alemán 209, across from the boat docks (✆ **744/482-6167**); and Costera Miguel Alemán 1226, at the Condo Estrella Tower, close to the convention center (✆ **744/484-2035;** www.sanborns.com.mx). It's open daily from 7:30am to midnight.

Boutiques selling resort wear crowd the Costera Alemán. These stores carry attractive summer clothing at prices lower than you generally pay in the United States. If there's a sale, you can find incredible bargains. One of the nicest air-conditioned shopping centers on the Costera is **Plaza Bahía,** Costera Alemán 125 (✆ **744/485-6939** or 485-6992; www.plazabahia.com.mx), which has four stories of shops, movie theaters, a bowling alley, and small fast-food restaurants. The center is just west of the Costa Club Hotel. The bowling alley, **Aca Bol in Plaza Bahía** (✆ **744/485-0970** or 485-7464), is open daily from noon to midnight (1am on weekends). Another popular shopping strip is the **Plaza Condesa,** adjacent to the Fiesta Americana Condesa; shops include Guess, Izod, and Bronce Swimwear. **Olvido Plaza,** near the restaurant of the same name, has Tommy Hilfiger and Aca Joe.

The top shopping center in Acapulco is **La Isla,** located away from the coast on the road toward the airport. Opened in late 2008, it houses the Mexican department stores Liverpool and Casa Palacio, as well as name-brand stores like Coach, Calvin Klein, DKNY, and Hugo Boss. There's also a cinema and Carlos 'n' Charlie's located here, along with other restaurants and entertainment options.

ACAPULCO AFTER DARK

SPECIAL ATTRACTIONS Some major hotels schedule Mexican fiestas and other theme nights that include dinner and entertainment, including the **Mayan Palace** (✆ **744/469-6000**) on Monday nights at 7pm. Local travel agencies will have information.

NIGHTCLUBS & DANCE CLUBS Acapulco is even more famous for its nightclubs than for its beaches. Because clubs frequently change ownership—and often names—it's difficult to give specific and accurate recommendations. But some general tips will help. Cover charges vary but are almost always higher for men. Drinks can cost anywhere from $5 to $15. Don't even think about going out to one of the hillside dance clubs before 11pm, and don't expect much action until after midnight. But it will keep going until 4 or 5am, and possibly later.

Many dance clubs periodically waive their cover charge or offer some other promotion to attract customers. Look for promotional materials in hotel reception areas, at travel desks or concierge booths, in local publications, and on the beach.

The high-rise hotels have their own bars and sometimes dance clubs. Informal lobby or poolside cocktail bars often offer free live entertainment.

THE BEACH BAR ZONE Prefer a little fresh air with your nightlife? The young, hip crowd favors the growing number of open-air oceanfront dance clubs along Costera Alemán, most of which feature techno or alternative rock. There's a concentration of them between the Fiesta Americana and Continental Plaza hotels. An earlier and more

casual option to the glitzy dance clubs, these places include **El Sombrero** (you'll know it when you see it), **Tabú,** and the pirate-themed **Barbaroja.** These mainly charge a cover (around $10) and offer an open bar. Women frequently drink free or with a lesser charge (men may pay more, but then, this is where the beach babes are). Disco Beach is the most popular of the bunch and occasionally—such as during spring break—has live bands on the beachfront stage. Their Friday night foam parties are especially popular. Most of the smaller establishments do not accept credit cards; when they do, MasterCard and Visa are more widely accepted than American Express.

If you are brave enough—or inebriated enough—there's a **bungee jump** in the midst of the beach bar zone at Costera Alemán 101 (✆ **744/484-7529**). For $60, you get one jump, plus a T-shirt, diploma, and membership. Additional jumps are $20, and your fourth jump is free. For $90, you can jump eight times.

Baby-O ★★★ This longtime Acapulco hot spot is a throwback to the town's heady disco days, although the music is exceptionally contemporary. The mid- to late-20s crowd dances to everything from house to hip-hop and techno to dance. Across from the Days Inn and Hooters, Baby-O has a dance floor surrounded by several tiers of tables and sculpted, cavelike walls, serviced by three bars. Drinks cost 60 to 90 pesos. Three-dimensional laser shows and vapor effects keep the dancing going strong. Service is excellent. This is a high-class dance club attracting a beautiful clientele. It opens at 10:30pm, and you'd be wise to make a reservation. Costera Alemán 22. ✆ **744/484-7474** or 481-1035. www.babyo.com.mx. Cover $20 for women, $60 for men.

Carlos 'n' Charlie's For fun, danceable music and good food, you can't go wrong with this branch of the Carlos Anderson chain. It's always packed. Come early and get a seat on the terrace overlooking the Costera. This is a great place to go for late dinner and a few drinks before moving on to a club. It's east of the Glorieta Diana traffic circle, across the street from the Fiesta Americana Condesa. It's open daily from 1pm to 1am. Blvd. de Las Naciones No. 1813, in the La Isla Shopping Center. ✆ **744/462-2104** 462-0039. www.carlosandcharlies.com/acapulco/index.htm.

Classico ★★ One of the newest and hottest clubs in town, Classico is a raging party into the wee hours. A winding mirrored glass entrance leads into this small but trendy *antro* (dance club). Digital screens and candlelit tables surround the illuminated dance floor, where music includes house, hip-hop, and reggaeton mixed by top DJs and blasted over a high-tech sound system. The glittery dance club and outdoor deck sits just in front of Palladium and attracts a young, trendy crowd. The club is open from 10:30pm until whenever the last person leaves—usually around 6:30am—and is closed Mondays and Wednesdays. Carretera Escénica 2, in front of Palladium. ✆ **744/446-6455.** www.classicodelmar.com.mx. The cover ranges from $30–$55.

Mandara ★★ Moments Venture into this chrome-and-neon extravaganza perched on the side of the mountain for a true Acapulco nightlife experience. The plush, dim club has a sunken dance floor and panoramic view of the lights of Acapulco Bay. The after-hours lounge Privado, also in the same building, opens its doors at 4:30am and is most crowded at 6am. Tight and slinky is the norm for women; no shorts for men. The club opens nightly at 10:30pm; fireworks rock the usually full house at 3am, which is when a stylized dance performance takes place on weekends, in the style of Euro clubs. Call to find out if you need reservations; this club tends to be busiest on Friday nights. Carretera Escénica, btw. Los Rancheros Restaurant and La Vista Shopping Center. ✆ **744/446-5711** or 446-5712. www.acapulcomandara.com. Covers start at $30 for women, $40 for men; includes open bar.

Palladium ★★ This cliff-side club reigns as the top spot in town and is found just down the road from Mandara. Generally, it welcomes a younger, rowdier crowd that enjoys the fabulous views and the dancing platforms set in the 50m-wide (164-ft.) glass windows overlooking the bay. Around 3:30am, Silver Man—complete with an Aztec headdress—performs, followed by fireworks outside. Palladium consistently books some of the world's finest DJs, and the music seems to rock the earth below. Carretera Escénica. ✆ **744/481-0330** or 446-5483. www.palladium.com.mx. Cover averages $30 for women, $40 for men; includes open bar.

Zuntra ★★★ This chic open-air bar above Zuntra restaurant (p. 375) overlooks Acapulco Bay and is furnished with lounge seating amid tiki torches and candles. The DJ spins lounge beats from the rooftop, and the fashionable crowd tends to arrive late and stay late. Women may wear black cocktail dresses, while men often sport designer button-down shirts. This is one of the best places for an evening cocktail or after-dinner drink in Acapulco. Open daily from 9pm to 4am. Carretera Escénica s/n, across from Las Brisas hotel. ✆ **744/444-5601.** www.zuntra.com.mx. No cover.

2 NORTHWARD TO ZIHUATANEJO & IXTAPA ★

576km (357 miles) SW of Mexico City; 565km (350 miles) SE of Manzanillo; 253km (157 miles) NW of Acapulco

Side-by-side beach resorts, Ixtapa and Zihuatanejo share geography, but they couldn't be more different in character. Ixtapa is a preplanned resort development with modern infrastructure, high-rise hotels, and tourist services, while Zihuatanejo—"Zihua" to the locals—is a charming Mexican beach village that has changed slowly with time. For travelers, this offers the intriguing possibility of visiting two distinct destinations in one vacation. Those looking for a package vacation or all-inclusive resort should opt for Ixtapa (eex-*tah*-pah). You can easily make the quick 6.5km (4-mile) trip into Zihuatanejo for a sampling of the simple life in a *pueblo* by the sea. Those who prefer a more low-key retreat with Mexican personality should settle in Zihuatanejo (see-wah-tah-*neh*-hoh). It's home to some simple beach-close inns as well as ultraluxury boutique hotels.

The area, with the backdrop of the Sierra Madre and foreground of the Pacific Ocean, provides a broad range of outdoor activities and sun-drenched diversions. Scuba diving, deep-sea fishing, bay cruises to remote beaches, and golf are among the favorites. Nightlife in both towns borders on the subdued, although Ixtapa is livelier during holiday periods.

This dual destination is the choice for the traveler looking for a little of everything, from resort-style indulgence to unpretentious simplicity. These two resorts are more welcoming to couples and adults than families, with a number of places that are off-limits to children 15 and younger—something of a rarity in Mexico.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There & Departing

BY PLANE These destinations tend to be even more seasonal than most resorts in Mexico. Flights are available year-round from U.S. gateways, but they operate less frequently in the summer. **Aeroméxico** and **Mexicana** fly daily from Mexico City; **InterJet** flies daily from neighboring Toluca (about an hour from Mexico City). Here are the local

numbers of some carriers: **Aeroméxico** (✆ 755/554-2018, -2019), **Alaska Airlines** (✆ 755/554-8457), **Continental** (✆ 755/554-4219), **InterJet** (✆ 01-800/011-2345 toll-free in Mexico), and **US Airways** (✆ 755/554-8634). Ask your travel agent about **charter flights** and packages.

The **Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo airport** (✆ **755/554-2070**) is about 11km (6¾ miles) and 15 minutes south of Zihuatanejo. Taxi fares to the Ixtapa hotel zone are 400 pesos and to Zihuatanejo 350 pesos. **Transportes Terrestres** (✆ **755/554-3298**) *colectivos* (minivans) transport travelers to hotels in Ixtapa and Zihuatanejo for about 150 pesos and can be purchased just outside the baggage-claim area. Car-rental agencies with booths in the airport include **Hertz** (✆ **800/654-3131** in the U.S., or 755/554-2952) and **Budget** (✆ **800/527-0700** in the U.S., or 755/553-0397).

BY CAR From Mexico City (about 8–9 hr.), you can take **Hwy. 15** to Toluca, then **Hwy. 130/134** the rest of the way. On the latter road, highway gas stations are few. Another route is the four-lane **Hwy. 95D** to Iguala, then **Hwy. 51** west to **Hwy. 134.** A new toll road, **Hwy. 37** from Morelia to Ixtapa, cuts an hour off the total trip time.

From Acapulco (3–4 hr.) or Manzanillo (9 hr.), the only choice is the coastal **Hwy. 200.** The ocean views along the winding, mountain-edged drive from Manzanillo can be spectacular, although there are many speed bumps along the way that make for slow going. ***Warning:*** You should not drive this route at night, both because it is dark and curvy and because there are ongoing problems with drug-related crime through the state of Michoacán, where you will encounter numerous military checkpoints.

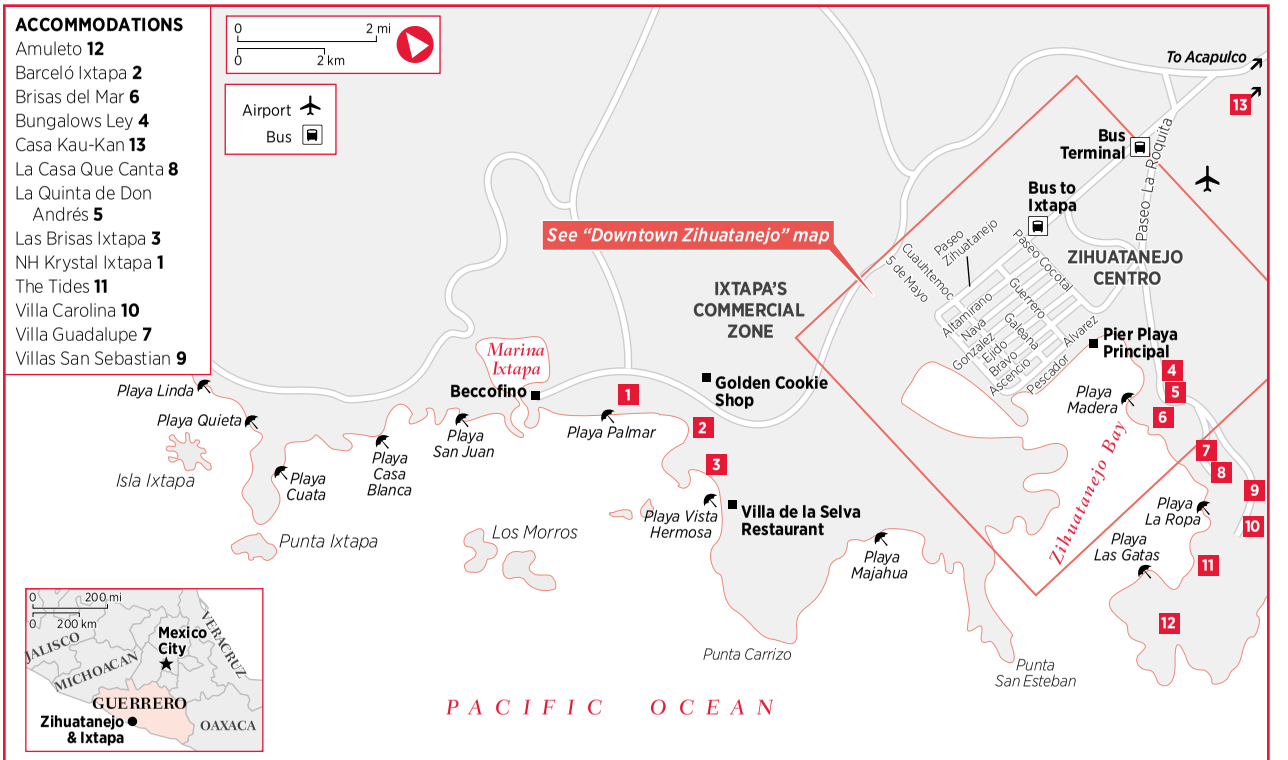
BY BUS Zihuatanejo has two bus terminals: the **Central de Autobuses Estrella Blanca** (✆ **755/554-3477**), Paseo Zihuatanejo at Paseo la Boquita, opposite the Pemex station and IMSS Hospital, from which most lines operate; and the **Estrella de Oro** station (✆ **755/554-2175**), a block away. At the Central de Autobuses, several companies offer daily service to and from Acapulco, Puerto Escondido, Huatulco, Manzanillo, Puerto Vallarta, and other cities. At the other station, first-class Estrella de Oro buses run daily to Acapulco.

The trip from Mexico City to Zihuatanejo (bypassing Acapulco) takes 9 hours; from Acapulco, it's 4 to 5 hours. From Zihuatanejo, it's 9 or 10 hours to Manzanillo, and it's an additional 6 hours to Puerto Vallarta.

Orientation

VISITOR INFORMATION The **Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo Tourism Office** (✆ **755/554-2001**) sits on the main square at Av. Zihuatanejo Poniente 21; it's open Monday through Friday from 8am to 6pm and provides basic tourist information. The **Convention and Visitor's Bureau,** www.visit-ixtapa-zihuatanejo.org, is another source of information; it's in Ixtapa at Paseo de Las Gaviotas 12 (✆ **755/553-1270**) and open Monday through Friday from 9am to 2pm and 4 to 7pm. There's also a tourist kiosk in front of the Plaza las Fuentes in Ixtapa, which is open daily from 10am to 6pm.

CITY LAYOUT The fishing village and resort of **Zihuatanejo** spreads out around the beautiful Bay of Zihuatanejo, framed by downtown to the north and a beautiful long beach and the Sierra foothills to the east. The heart of Zihuatanejo is the waterfront walkway **Paseo del Pescador** (also called the *malecón*), bordering the Municipal Beach. Rather than a plaza, as in most Mexican villages, the town centerpiece is a **basketball court,** which fronts the beach. It's a point of reference for directions. The main thoroughfare for cars is **Juan Alvarez,** a block behind the *malecón.* Sections of several of the main streets are designated *zona peatonal* (pedestrian zone).


ACCOMMODATIONS
Amuleto 12
Barceló Ixtapa 2
Brisas del Mar 6
Bungalows Ley 4
Casa Kau-Kan 13
La Casa Que Canta 8
La Quinta de Don Andrés 5
Las Brisas Ixtapa 3
NH Krystal Ixtapa 1
The Tides 11
Villa Carolina 10
Villa Guadalupe 7
Villas San Sebastian 9
0 2 mi
0 2 km
Airport
Bus
To Acapulco
Bus Terminal
Bus to Ixtapa
Paseo La Roquita
See "Downtown Zihuatanejo" map
IXTAPA'S COMMERCIAL ZONE
ZIHUATANEJO CENTRO
Paseo Zihuatanejo
Paseo Cocotal
Cuauhtemoc
5 de Mayo
Altamirano
Nava
Gonzalez
Guerrero
Galeana
Alvarez
Ejido
Bravo
Ascencio
Pescador
Pier Playa Principal
Marina Ixtapa
Beccofino
Golden Cookie Shop
Playa Linda
Playa Quieta
Isla Ixtapa
Playa Cuata
Playa Casa Blanca
Playa San Juan
Playa Palmar
Playa Madera
Zihuatanejo Bay
Playa La Ropa
Playa Las Gatas
Playa Vista Hermosa
Villa de la Selva Restaurant
Playa Majahua
Punta Ixtapa
Los Morros
Punta Carrizo
Punta San Esteban
PACIFIC OCEAN
0 200 mi
0 200 km
JALISCO
MICHOACAN
Mexico City
VERACRUZ
GUERRERO
Zihuatanejo & Ixtapa
OAXACA

A cement-and-sand walkway runs from the *malecón* in downtown Zihuatanejo along the water to **Playa Madera.** The walkway is lit at night. Access to Playa La Ropa (Clothing Beach) is by the main road, **Camino a Playa La Ropa.** Playa La Ropa and Playa Las Gatas (Cats Beach) are connected only by boat.

A good highway connects Zihua to **Ixtapa,** 6km (4 miles) northwest. The 18-hole **Ixtapa Golf Club** marks the beginning of the inland side of Ixtapa. Tall hotels line Ixtapa's wide beach, **Playa Palmar,** against a backdrop of lush palm groves and mountains. Access is by the main street, **Bulevar Ixtapa.** On the opposite side of the main boulevard lies a large expanse of small shopping plazas (many with air-conditioned shops) and restaurants. At the far end of Bulevar Ixtapa, **Marina Ixtapa** has excellent restaurants, private yacht slips, and an 18-hole golf course. Condominiums and private homes surround the marina and golf course, and additional exclusive residential areas are rising in the hillsides past the marina on the road to Playa Quieta and Playa Linda. Ixtapa also has a paved bicycle track that begins at the marina and continues around the golf course and on toward Playa Linda.

GETTING AROUND **Taxi** fares are reasonable, but from midnight to 5am, rates increase by 50%. The average fare between Ixtapa and Zihuatanejo is 80 pesos. Within Zihua, the fare runs about 40 pesos; within Ixtapa, it averages 40 to 60 pesos. Radio cabs are available by calling ✆ **755/554-3680** or 554-3311; however, taxis are available from most hotels. A **shuttle bus** (7 pesos) runs between Zihuatanejo and Ixtapa every 15 or 20 minutes from 5am to 11pm daily but is almost always very crowded with commuting workers. In Zihuatanejo, it stops near the corner of Morelos/Paseo Zihuatanejo and Juárez, about 3 blocks north of the market. In Ixtapa, it makes numerous stops along Bulevar Ixtapa.

Note: The road from Zihuatanejo to Ixtapa is a broad, four-lane highway, which makes driving between the towns easier and faster than ever. Street signs are becoming more common in Zihuatanejo, and good signs lead in and out of both towns. However, both locations have an area called the Zona Hotelera (Hotel Zone), so if you're trying to reach Ixtapa's Hotel Zone, signs in Zihuatanejo pointing to that village's Hotel Zone may be confusing.

Fast Facts Zihuatanejo & Ixtapa

Area Code The telephone area code is **755.**

Banks Ixtapa's banks include **Bancomer,** in the La Puerta Centro shopping center. The most centrally located of Zihuatanejo's banks is **Banamex,** Calle Ejido at Vicente Guerreo. Banks change money during business hours, which are generally Monday through Friday from 9am to 4pm, Saturday from 10am to 1pm. ATMs and currency exchange are available during these and other hours.

Climate Summer is hot and humid, though tempered by sea breezes and brief showers; September is the peak of the tropical rainy season, with showers concentrated in the late afternoons.

Consular Agents The **U.S.** has an office in Ixtapa at the Hotel Fontan, Boulevard Ixtapa s/n (✆ **755/553-2100;** Mon–Fri 1–5pm).

Drugstore There's a branch of **Farmacías Coyuca** (✆ **755/554-5390**) at Nicolas Bravo 33 in Zihuatanejo, open from 8am to midnight.

Hospital **Hospital de la Marina Ixtapa** is at Bulevar Ixtapa s/n, in back of the artisans' market (✆ **755/553-0499**). In Zihuatanejo, there's the **Clinica Maciel,** Las Palmas 12 (✆ **755/554-2380**) or **Hospital Hernández Montejano,** Juan Alvarez s/n (✆ **755/554-5404**). Dial ✆ **065** (Red Cross) from any phone for emergencies.

Internet Access Ixtapa hotels generally have Internet access. Access is cheaper in Zihuatanejo; the most popular is **Zihuatanejo Bar Net,** Agustín Ramírez 2, on the ground floor of the Hotel Zihuatanejo Centro (✆ **755/554-3661**). High-speed access is 20 pesos per hour; it's open 9am to 11pm daily.

Post Office The *correo* is in the SCT building, Edificio SCT, behind El Cacahuate in Zihuatanejo (✆ **755/554-2192**). It's open Monday through Friday from 8am to 6pm, Saturday from 8am to noon.

WHERE TO STAY: ZIHUATANEJO

Some of the hotels in Zihuatanejo and its nearby beach communities are more economical than those in Ixtapa, while others are far more expensive and exclusive. The term *bungalow* is used loosely—it may mean an individual unit with a kitchen and bedroom, or just a bedroom. It may also be like a hotel, in a two-story building with multiple units, some of which have kitchens. It may be cozy or rustic, with or without a patio or balcony. Accommodations in town are generally very basic, though clean and comfortable.

Playa Madera and Playa La Ropa, separated by a craggy shoreline, are both accessible by road. Prices tend to be higher here than in town, but the value is much better, and people tend to find that the beautiful, tranquil setting is worth the extra cost. The town is 5 minutes away by taxi and just 10 to 15 minutes by foot.

In Town

Posada Citlali In this cheerful three-story hotel, small rooms with fans surround a shaded, plant-filled courtyard that holds comfortable rockers and chairs. It's centrally located and a good value for the price, but very basic. Bottled water is in help-yourself containers on the patio. The stairway to the top two floors is narrow and steep.

Vicente Guerrero 3 (near Alvarez), 40880 Zihuatanejo, Gro. ✆ **755/554-2043.** 18 units. 500 pesos double. No credit cards. *In room:* Fan, TV, no phone.

Playa Madera

Madera Beach is a 15-minute walk along the street, a 10-minute walk along the beach pathway, or a cheap taxi ride from Zihuatanejo. Most of the accommodations are on Calle Eva S. de López Mateos, the road overlooking the beach. Many hotels are set against the hill and have steep stairways.

Moderate

Brisas del Mar This simple but enchanted beach hotel has just 30 cheerful suites, all with private terraces overlooking Zihuatanejo Bay. The larger and more expensive units offer separate sitting areas, Jacuzzi tubs, and kitchenettes. Located above Playa Madera, the family-run establishment is known for its friendly service, and maid service includes

Tips Choosing a Hotel in Zihuatanejo or Ixtapa (or Both)

Larger high-rise hotels and all-inclusive resorts dominate accommodations in Ixtapa and on Playa Madera. Package deals for these are readily available online. There are only a few choices in the budget range. If you're looking for lower-priced rooms, Zihuatanejo offers more selection and better values, although it also has some very expensive (and wonderful) boutique hotels. Lodgings in both towns offer free parking. High season here generally runs from November 15 to April 30, and low season from May 1 to November 14. The rates quoted below do not include the 17% tax.

an artistic presentation of flower petals on the bed. There's direct beach access, a pool, and spa services, including in-room massages upon request. The restaurant and lounge terrace boast a wonderful view of the sea.

Calle Eva S. de López Mateos s/n, Playa Madera, 40880 Zihuatanejo, Gro. ✆ **755/554-2142.** www.hotelbrisasdelmar.com. 30 units. High season $140 and up double; low season $107 and up double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; Internet; outdoor pool; small spa. *In room:* A/C (in some rooms), TV, hair dryer, minibar.

Inexpensive

Bungalows Ley No two suites are the same at this small complex, one of the nicest on Playa Madera. If you're traveling with a group, you may want to book the most expensive suite (Club Madera); it has a rooftop terrace, outdoor bar and grill, and spectacular view. All the units are immaculate; the simplest are studios with one king-size bed and a kitchen in the same room. Rooms have terraces or balconies just above the beach, and all are decorated in pastel colors. Bathrooms, however, tend to be small and dark, with showers only. The hotel has no pool but leads right to the beach.

Calle Eva S. de López Mateos s/n, Playa Madera (Apdo. Postal 466), 40880 Zihuatanejo, Gro. ✆ **755/554-4087.** Fax 755/554-1365. www.bungalowsley.com. 8 units. 750 pesos double with A/C; 1,750 pesos 2-bedroom suite with kitchen (up to 4 persons). Low-season discounts available after 6-night stay. MC, V. Follow Mateos to the right, up a slight hill; it's on your left. *In room:* A/C, TV, kitchenette.

La Quinta de Don Andrés This inexpensive, family-friendly hotel sits just above Playa Madera and is less than a 10-minute walk from the town center. Seven of the 10 simply decorated rooms are suites, with separate living areas, bedrooms, kitchens, and air-conditioning. Although they're lacking in decor, the regular rooms are perfectly comfortable and some have panoramic views of the bay. There's a small courtyard pool, and the beach is just down the stairs.

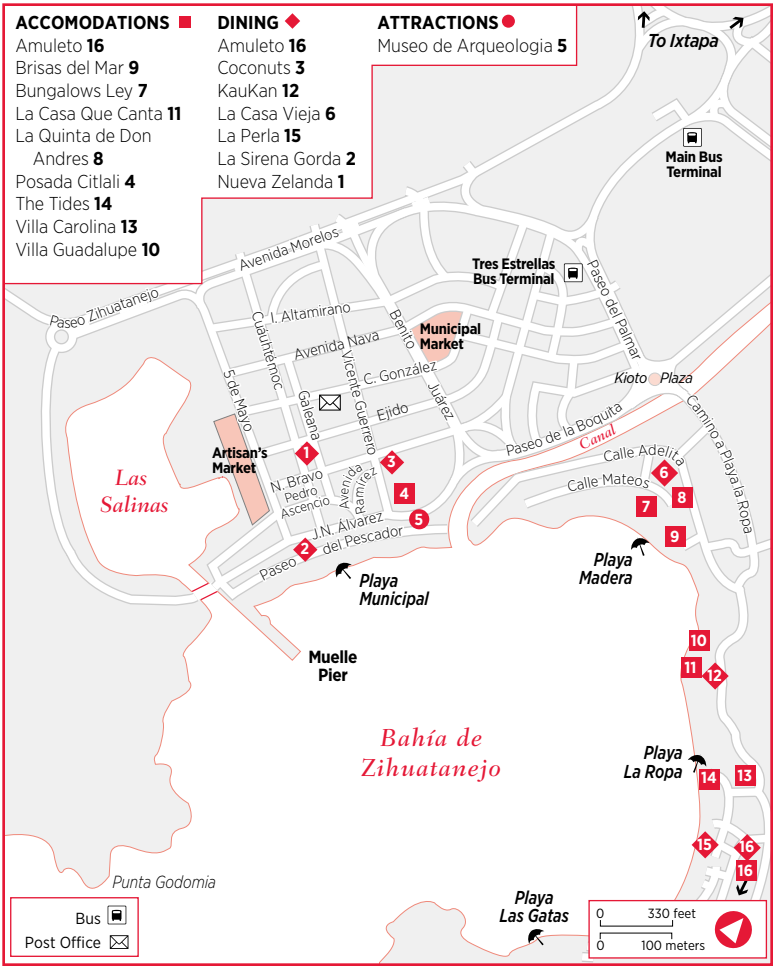
Adelita 11, Playa Madera (Apdo. Postal 466), 40880 Zihuatanejo, Gro. ✆ **755/553-8213.** www.laquintadedonandres.com. 10 units. $120 double; $200 suite with kitchen (up to 4 persons). No credit cards. **Amenities:** Beach access; outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C (in suites only), TV, fridge, Wi-Fi.

Playa La Ropa

Playa La Ropa is a 20- to 25-minute walk south of town on the east side of the bay, or it's a 50 peso taxi ride.

Expensive

Amuleto ★★ Perched on a hill high above the bay, this intimate boutique hotel was designed for people who want to relax in luxury and exclusivity. Amuleto, which has only



six units, has stunning panoramic views of Zihuatanejo Bay that make it seem like you're on top of the world. The *palapa*-covered restaurant serves innovative international food and overlooks a small infinity pool framed by the bay. Each of the bungalow-like units is individually decorated with Mexican and Asian designs using organic textures and earth colors. The *palapa* suite, for example, features meticulous stone, tile, and woodwork; a bed with 1,000-thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets; a separate sitting area with onyx lamps and bamboo chairs; a rooftop terrace with its own hammock surrounded by bougainvillea; and a private plunge pool. Amuleto's open-air restaurant serves wonderful breakfasts and is open to the public for dinner (p. 395).

Calle Escénica 9, Playa La Ropa, 40880 Zihuatanejo, Gro. ✆ **213/280-1037** in the U.S., or 755/544-6222. Fax 310/496-0286 in the U.S. www.amuleto.net. 6 units. High season $400–$700 double; low season $325–$550 double. $100 extra person. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; gym; outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, minibar, Wi-Fi.

La Casa Que Canta ★★★ Moments "The House that Sings" is a romantic hotel that is regularly rated among the top boutique hotels in the world. The striking molded-adobe architecture typifies the rustic-chic style known as Mexican Pacific. Individually decorated rooms named after Mexican songs have handsome natural-tile floors, unusual painted Michoacán furniture, antiques, and stretched-leather *equipale*-style chairs and tables with hand-loomed fabrics throughout. All of the exquisite rooms offer large, beautifully furnished terraces with bay views, and the service includes beautiful flower-petal designs prepared each day atop the beds. Most of the spacious units are suites, and 11 of them have private pools. Rooms meander up and down the hillside, and while no staircase is terribly long, there is only one elevator. A "well-being" center offers massage, spa services, and yoga. The hotel's service is remarkably gracious, and you'll find La Casa Que Canta pretty close to heaven.

Camino Escénico a Playa La Ropa, 40880 Zihuatanejo, Gro. ✆ **888/523-5050** in the U.S., or 755/555-7000, -7026, -7030. Fax 755/554-7900. www.lacasaquecanta.com. 25 units. $490–$885 double; 5-night minimum stay required Jan–Apr. AE, MC, V. Children 15 and younger not accepted. **Amenities:** Restaurant (open to outside guests for dinner w/reservation only); bar; cooking classes; fitness center; freshwater outdoor pool; saltwater pool; room service; spa; yoga and stretching. *In room:* A/C, hair dryer, minibar.

The Tides ★★ The Tides sits on one of Mexico's most beautiful beaches. Suites feature one or two bedrooms, living areas, large terraces, and private plunge pools. Rooms are decorated with modern Mexican touches and include comfy lounges, CD players, and hammocks that beckon at siesta time. There are 11 beachside suites and one presidential suite. Those units that don't overlook the beach surround a fountain-filled lagoon and tropical gardens with enchanted lighting at night. Service remains first-rate. The Tides allows children only in two-bedroom suites and generally has a quiet feel. The meal plan (breakfast and dinner) is mandatory in high season and includes an excellent variety of cuisine. In addition to the exquisite beach area, pools, restaurants, and bars, the Tides offers a full-service spa, tennis courts, and beach club. You can even request a massage on the sand.

Playa la Ropa (Apdo. Postal 84), 40880 Zihuatanejo, Gro. ✆ **866/905-9560** in the U.S., or 755/555-5500. Fax 755/554-2758. www.tideszihuatanejo.com. 70 units. High season $500–$550 double, $875–$1,700 suite; low season $355–$470 double, $570–$1,600 suite. Meal plan $90 per person Dec 17–Mar 31 (mandatory). AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 open-air beachside restaurants; 3 bars; 4 outdoor pools (including 18m/59-ft. lap pool); room service; full-service spa; 2 lighted tennis courts. *In room:* A/C, TV, DVD, hair dryer, iHome, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Moderate

Villa Carolina ★★ Finds Located next to the Tides, Villa Carolina is a hidden gem within walking distance of Playa La Ropa. Each of the beautifully designed suites offers privacy, luxury, and enchantment—at far less price than comparable boutique hotels in Zihuatanajo. Garden suites sit on the pool level and have individual patios; the larger master suites are upstairs and have balconies with hammocks and Jacuzzis. With two levels, the "grand house" is the largest suite, with two bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a private pool. All of the suites feature open-air sitting areas under palm-thatched roofs with built-in couches, fully stocked kitchens, and satellite TVs with DVD/CD players.

The bedrooms and bathrooms use marble, tile, and stonework extensively, and have muted colors and soft Mexican designs. Service is gracious and unobtrusive, and hosts Tim and Carolina Conti will help with reservations for restaurants and activities.

Camino Escénico Playa La Ropa s/n, 40880 Zihuatanejo, Gro. ✆ **755/554-5612.** Fax 755/554-5615. www.villacarolina.com.mx. 7 units. High season $219 garden suite, $299 master suite, $350–$550 grand house; low season $169 garden suite, $219 master suite, $290–$450 grand house. MC, V. **Amenities:** Breakfast terrace; bar; DVD library; outdoor pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV w/DVD/CD player, hair dryer.

Villa Guadalupe ★★ A long wood staircase descends through junglelike surroundings alongside the tiered villas of Villas Guadalupe, toward the sea. With adobe walls and *palapa* roofs, the villas seem to blend into the landscape, and pieces of Mexican art add to the magical ambience. Each of the individually decorated rooms at this boutique hotel has beach-white furnishings and a private terrace with a spectacular view of Zihuatanejo Bay; the largest suite has its own plunge pool. Service is personalized and friendly, and the hotel has a very relaxed, intimate feel. Continental breakfast is served by the small infinity pool, and while there's no restaurant here, a beautiful restaurant looks over the water at the sister Tentaciones Hotel just up the hill.

Camino Escénico a Playa La Ropa, 40880 Zihuatanejo, Gro. ✆ **755/554-3005.** Fax 755/554-6185. www.hotelvillaguadalupe.com. 8 units. High season $220–$350 double; low season $165–$250 double. AE, MC, V. Follow the road leading south out of town toward Playa La Ropa, take the 1st right after the traffic circle, and go left on Adelita. **Amenities:** Breakfast terrace; outdoor pool. *In room:* TV, minibar.

Villas San Sebastián On the mountainside above Playa La Ropa, this nine-villa complex offers great views of Zihuatanejo's bay. The one- and two-bedroom villas surround tropical vegetation and a central swimming pool. Each has a kitchenette and a spacious private terrace. The personalized service is one reason these villas come so highly recommended; owner Luis Valle, whose family has lived in this community for decades, is usually available to help guests with any questions or needs.

Bulevar Escénico Playa La Ropa (across from the Dolphins Fountain). ✆ **755/554-4154.** www.valleproperties.com/sansebastian. 11 units. High season $145 1-bedroom villa, $255 2-bedroom villa; low season $98 1-bedroom villa, $165 2-bedroom villa. No credit cards. **Amenities:** Outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, TV, kitchenette, Wi-Fi.

Playa Zihuatanejo

Moderate

Casa Kau-Kan ★★ Casa Kau-Kan is an upscale bohemian oasis on the long, secluded beach of Playa Larga. It's located about 20 minutes south of Zihuatanejo on the open Pacific Ocean. The spacious bungalow-like accommodations surrounded by palm trees feature private sitting areas, canopied beds with mosquito nets, and bamboo furnishings; four have private terrace pools. Owned by Ricardo Rodriguez, who also runs Kau-Kan restaurant (p. 396), the hotel serves delicious fresh seafood. There's not much to do in the immediate surroundings except tan, swim, eat, read, and enjoy the quiet lazy days, although horseback riding and kite-surfing are also offered on the beach immediately in front. You should be an experienced swimmer to go in the ocean here, which typically has waves perfect for bodysurfing. Hotel service is friendly and extremely attentive—whether it's a coconut or a cocktail you desire, it'll be right up.

Playa Larga s/n, 40880 Zihuatanejo, Gro. ✆ **755/554-8446.** Fax 755/554-5731. www.casakaukan.com. 9 units. High season $120–$235 double; low season $90–$200 double. AE, MC, V. Children 14 and younger not accepted. **Amenities:** Restaurant; outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, fridge.

Expensive

Barceló Ixtapa ★ (Value) (Kids) An excellent value and a great choice for families, this grand 12-story all-inclusive resort hotel has large, handsomely furnished public areas facing the beach. It's an inviting place to sip a drink and people-watch. Most rooms have balconies with ocean or mountain views. Gardens surround the large pool, with a swim-up bar; daytime activities, including a dive center; and a separate section for children. There's a Mexican fiesta night here on Wednesdays.

Bulevar Ixtapa, 40880 Ixtapa, Gro. ✆ **755/555-2000.** Fax 755/553-2438. www.barceloixtapa.com. 340 units. High season $380 double all-inclusive; low season $250 double all-inclusive. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; lobby bar; concierge; fitness room; beachside pool w/activities; room service; spa w/massage treatments; dive center; rooms for those w/limited mobility. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi (for a fee).

Las Brisas Ixtapa ★★ Set above the high-rise hotels of Ixtapa on a rocky promontory, Las Brisas is the best of Ixtapa's resorts. Notable for its gorgeous private beach cove and striking stepped architecture, designed by renowned architect Ricardo Legorreta, Las Brisas features large stone and stucco public areas, recently renovated guest rooms with upscale beach decor and oceanview terraces with hammocks, and multitier swimming pools with waterfalls. All rooms face the hotel's gorgeous private beach, which can be accessed by an elevator; although enticing, the water is sometimes rough and can be dangerous for swimming. The six master suites come with private pools. Beach Club rooms offer upgraded amenities, complimentary cocktails, and continental breakfast. The hotel sits in beautiful junglelike surroundings and has tennis courts on the property. Internet specials are usually available, and guests receive discounts at a nearby golf course.

Bulevar Ixtapa s/n at Playa Vista Hermosa, 40880 Ixtapa, Gro. ✆ **888/559-4329** in the U.S., or 755/553-2121. Fax 755/553-1091. www.brisas.com.mx. 417 units. High season $285 deluxe double, $490 Royal Beach Club; low season $196 deluxe double, $230 Royal Beach Club. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants; 3 bars; babysitting; elevator to secluded beach; executive rooms; fitness center; 4 outdoor pools (1 just for adults and another just for children); room service; rooms for those w/limited mobility; 4 lighted tennis courts w/pro on request. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar.

NH Krystal Ixtapa (Kids) Krystal hotels are known in Mexico for quality rooms and service. This was the original in the chain and one of the first hotels in Ixtapa, and it upholds its reputation for family-friendly service. Many staff members have been with the NH Krystal for its more than 20 years of operation and are on hand to greet return guests. This large V-shaped hotel has ample grounds and a terrific pool area. Most of the spacious guest rooms feature oceanview balconies and tile bathrooms, while master suites have larger balconies that double as living areas. Club rooms are just $30 more than regular rooms, and some rates include breakfast buffet. The center of Ixtapa nightlife is here, at the hotel's **Christine** dance club.

Bulevar Ixtapa s/n, 40880 Ixtapa, Gro. ✆ **888/726-0528** in the U.S., or 755/555-0510. Fax 755/553-0226. www.nh-hotels.com. 255 units. High season $250 and up double, $350 suite; low season $100 and up double, $350 suite. 2 children 11 and younger stay free in parent's room. Ask about special packages. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; lobby bar; nightclub; kids' club; gym; outdoor pool and kids' pool; room service; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar.

WHERE TO DINE

Zihuatanejo

Zihuatanejo's **central market,** on Avenida Benito Juárez, about 5 blocks inland from the waterfront, will whet your appetite for cheap and tasty food. It's best at breakfast and

lunch, before the market activity winds down in the afternoon. Look for what's hot and fresh. The market area is one of the coast's best places to shop and people-watch.

Expensive

Coconuts ★★ INTERNATIONAL/SEAFOOD Located in Zihuatanejo's oldest building, Coconuts has long been a Zihua institution serving fresh, innovative cuisine under the direction of chef David Dawson. The historic building, which now has a garden patio, was originally the weigh-in station for Zihua's coconut industry in the late 1800s. For an appetizer, I recommend the roasted pumpkin and ricotta crepes. Among the excellent seafood dishes are grilled red snapper and other locally caught fish prepared any way you like, such as with fresh fruit salsa. The bananas flambé (for two) has earned a loyal following, with good reason. Expect friendly, efficient service here and a large expat clientele.

Augustín Ramírez 1 (at Vicente Guerrero). ✆ **755/554-2518** or 554-7980. www.restaurantcoconuts.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses 190–225 pesos. AE, MC, V. High season daily noon–4pm and 6pm–midnight. Closed late May to Sept (rainy season).

Inexpensive

La Sirena Gorda MEXICAN For one of the most popular breakfasts in town, head to the fun and unusual Sirena Gorda. "The Fat Mermaid," as it translates into English, serves a variety of eggs and omelets, hot cakes or French toast, and fruit with granola and yogurt. For lunch, the house specialty is seafood tacos—fish, shrimp, or even lobster in a variety of sauces. Also take a look at the short list of daily specials, such as blackened red snapper, tuna, or steak. The food is excellent, and patrons enjoy the casual sidewalk-cafe atmosphere. Passionate illustrations and paintings of colorful fat mermaids decorate the walls, and miniature wood boats hang from the ceiling.

Paseo del Pescador. ✆ **755/554-2687.** Breakfast 55–75 pesos; main courses 80–275 pesos. MC, V. Thurs–Tues 8:30am–10:30pm. Closed Wed. From the basketball court, face the water and walk to the right; La Sirena Gorda is on your right just before the town pier.

Nueva Zelanda MEXICAN This open-air snack shop serves rich cappuccino sprinkled with cinnamon, fresh-fruit *licuados* (smoothies mixed with water or milk), and pancakes with real maple syrup. The mainstays are *tortas* and enchiladas, and service is friendly and efficient. There's a second location in Ixtapa, in the back section of the Los Patios shopping center (✆ **755/553-0838**), next to Señor Frog's.

Cuauhtémoc 23 (at Ejido). ✆ **755/554-2340.** *Tortas* 35 pesos; enchiladas 65 pesos; *licuados* 30 pesos; cappuccino 30 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 8am–10pm. From the waterfront, walk 3 blocks inland on Cuauhtémoc; the restaurant is on your right.

Playa Madera & Playa La Ropa

Expensive

Amuleto ★★★ SEAFOOD This intimate restaurant located in the Amuleto boutique hotel (p. 390) feels like it's on top of the world, offering a breathtaking view of the sea and town behind it. Just a handful of candlelit tables sit under the open-air *palapa* next to an infinity pool and tropical vegetation. To start, try the tuna tartare with lime or salmon carpaccio, with fresh citrus fruit. Excellent main dishes include grilled mahimahi with caviar and grapefruit; filet mignon prepared with a rich blue cheese sauce; and lobster and shrimp risotto served with a half-lobster on top. For dessert, the chocolate brownie with vanilla ice cream and Kahlúa should top off what promises to be a very special meal. Overseen by Brazilian owners Ricardo Teitelroat and Ticci Tonetto, Amuleto offers outstanding service.

Calle Escénica 9, Playa La Ropa, 40880 Zihuatanejo, Gro. ✆ **755/544-6222.** www.amuleto.net. Main courses $20–$35. AE, MC, V. Daily 6–9pm.

Kau-Kan ★★ MEDITERRANEAN/SEAFOOD Candlelit tables and lamps dot this romantic open-air restaurant with just a handful of tables and an unforgettable view of Zihuatanejo Bay. Head chef Ricardo Rodriguez, who also runs the Casa Kau-Kan (p. 393), ensures that the fresh dishes are prepared with care and meticulously presented. Among the many delicious appetizers are the eggplant salad with ginger adobo shrimp and the mahimahi carpaccio. For a main dish, consider the baked potato stuffed with lobster, or the shrimp prepared in a basil and garlic sauce. To top off your meal, go for a stuffed pear with ice cream and strawberry sauce, accompanied by one of the aromatic Central American coffees. If you're looking for an enchanted dinner outside your hotel, reserve a candlelit table at Kau-Kan and try to arrive in time for the sunset.

Camino a Playa La Ropa. ✆ **755/554-8446.** www.casakaukan.com/kaukan. Reservations recommended. Main courses $17–$37. AE, MC, V. Daily 5–10:30pm. From downtown on the road to La Ropa, Kau-Kan is on the right side of the road past the 1st curve.

Moderate

La Casa Vieja ★ MEXICAN A casual yet intimate Mexican restaurant at the entrance to Playa Madera, "The Old House" serves delicious fish and traditional dishes, such as *filet a la tampiqueña* (tenderloin steak) and *cochinita pibil* (slow-roasted pork). Among the fresh fish selections prepared any way you like are tuna, red snapper, and mahimahi. Tiny white lights, twig lamps, and plants decorate the open-air dining room. Service is friendly and relaxed, and soft music plays in the background. The number of Mexicans dining here testifies to the restaurant's quality. Delicious *pozole* is served on Thursday.

Josefa Ortíz de Domínguez 7. ✆ **755/554-9770.** Main courses $11–$17. MC, V. Mon–Sat noon–10:30pm; Sun 9am–11pm. Restaurant is at the entrance of the road leading into Playa Madera.

Inexpensive

La Perla SEAFOOD Among the many *palapa*-style restaurants on Playa La Ropa, La Perla is the most popular. The combination of plastic tables plopped on the sand and simple food served unhurriedly makes La Perla a local tradition. The menu is a mix of Mexican and seafood selections, including delectable seafood ceviches, grilled fish filets, and a 1-kilo (2.2-lb.) grilled or broiled lobster for 450 pesos. Cold beer and cocktails are available whether or not you eat, as are whole coconuts served with a straw and with or without an added kick of gin. Sports are played throughout the day via satellite TV.

Playa La Ropa. ✆ **755/554-2700.** www.laperlarestaurant.net. Breakfast 35–80 pesos; main courses 100–450 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–10pm; breakfast 10am–noon. Near the southern end of La Ropa Beach, take the right fork in the road; there's a sign in the parking lot.

Ixtapa

Expensive

Beccofino ★ NORTHERN ITALIAN This restaurant is a standout in Mexico. Owner Angelo Rolly Pavia serves the flavorful northern Italian specialties he grew up knowing and loving. I strongly recommend one of the homemade seafood pastas, which may include calamari, shrimp, clams, mussels, and crayfish. Ravioli, a house specialty, comes stuffed with beef or seafood. The garlic bread is terrific, and there's an extensive wine list. A popular place in a breezy marina location, the restaurant tends to be loud when it's crowded. It's also a popular breakfast spot.

Marina Ixtapa. ✆ **755/553-1770.** www.zihuatanejo.net/beccofino. Breakfast $7–$18; main courses $18–$28. AE, MC, V. Daily 9am–11:30pm.

Villa de la Selva ★★★ MEXICAN/MEDITERRANEAN Clinging to the edge of a cliff, this elegant restaurant enjoys the most spectacular sea and sunset view in Ixtapa. Beautiful wood terraces surrounded by a palm and mango tree–filled jungle look directly over the bay, just steps below. Try to come early to get one of the best vistas, especially on the lower terrace. Hidden speakers create music that seems to come from the sea. The cuisine is artfully presented and classically rich. To start, I recommend the coconut-pecan encrusted shrimp in a mango-and-chile sauce or the tuna carpaccio. For a main course, a wonderful dish is *Filet Villa de la Selva,* red snapper topped with shrimp and hollandaise sauce. Finish with the coffee-flavored flan topped with blackberries. It's possible to make reservations online.

Paseo de la Roca. ✆ **755/553-0362.** www.villadelaselva.com.mx. Reservations recommended during high season. Main courses $18–$37. AE, MC, V. Daily 6–11:30pm. Closed Sept.

Moderate

Casa Morelos MEXICAN This is a casual place for tasty Mexican seafood. You can order fresh fish any way you like, such as with lemon and olive oil, mustard, orange, mango, garlic, or chile. You might have the delicious seafood fajitas, tequila and coconut shrimp, or perhaps shrimp enchiladas. The fish tacos *al pastor* are the best in the area. The *mar y tierra* is a succulent shrimp and steak dish, while *mar y mar* is shrimp and lobster. Service is friendly at this casual eatery, which offers indoor and outdoor seating.

Centro Comercial La Puerta. ✆ **755/553-0578.** www.casamorelosixtapa.com. Main dishes $20–$37. MC, V. Daily 8am–midnight. Located next to Señor Frog's.

Inexpensive

Golden Cookie Shop ★ PASTRIES/DELI This German bakery and deli's freshly baked goods beg for a detour, and the organic coffee menu is the most extensive in town. Come for one of the creative breakfast pancake plates, or for a hot or cold triple-decker sandwich. Nutritional cookies, breads, pastries, and cakes are available, as are vegetarian and low-carb selections. Large sandwiches on fresh soft bread come with a choice of sliced meats. Bratwurst and Wiener schnitzel are also served.

Los Patios Center. ✆ **755/553-0310** www.goldencookieshop.com.mx. Breakfast 60–120 pesos; sandwiches 65–110 pesos; main courses 110–150 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 8am–2pm. Go to the 2nd floor of Los Patios commercial center.

ACTIVITIES ON & OFF THE BEACH

The **Museo de Arqueología de la Costa Grande** (✆ **755/554-7552**) traces the history of the area from Acapulco to Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo (the Costa Grande) from pre-Hispanic times, when it was known as Cihuatlán ("the Land of Women" in the Náhuatl language), through the Colonial Era. Most of the museum's pottery and stone artifacts give evidence of extensive trade with far-off cultures and regions, including the Toltec and Teotihuacán near Mexico City, the Olmec on the Pacific and Gulf coasts, and areas known today as the states of Nayarit, Michoacán, and San Luis Potosí. Local indigenous groups gave the Aztec tribute items, including cotton *tilmas* (capes) and *cacao* (chocolate), representations of which can be seen here. This museum, in Zihuatanejo near Vicente Guerrero at the east end of Paseo del Pescador, easily merits the half-hour or less it takes to stroll through; signs are in Spanish and English, and an accompanying brochure is available in English. Admission is 12 pesos (children 11 and under are free), and it's open Tuesday through Sunday from 10am to 6pm.

THE BEACHES **In Zihuatanejo** At Zihuatanejo's town beach, **Playa Municipal,** the local fishermen pull their colorful boats up onto the sand, making for a fine photo op.

The small shops and restaurants lining the waterfront are great for people-watching and absorbing the flavor of daily village life. **Playa Madera (Wood Beach),** just east of Playa Municipal, is open to the surf but generally peaceful. A number of attractive budget lodgings overlook this area.

All beaches in Zihuatanejo are safe for swimming. Undertow is rarely a problem, and the municipal beach is protected from the main surge of the Pacific. Beaches in Ixtapa are more dangerous for swimming, with frequent undertow problems.

South of Playa Madera is Zihuatanejo's largest and most beautiful beach, **Playa La Ropa** ★★, a long sweep of sand with a great view of the sunset. Some lovely small hotels and restaurants nestle in the hills; palm groves edge the shoreline. Although it's also open to the Pacific, waves are usually gentle. There are a number of beachside restaurants, as well as beach operators renting kayaks, Hobie Cat sailboats, and snorkeling equipment. A taxi from town costs 35 pesos. The name Playa La Ropa (Clothing Beach) comes from an old tale of the sinking of a *galeón* during a storm. The silk clothing that it was carrying back from the Philippines washed ashore on this beach—hence the name.

The nicest beach for swimming, and the best for children, is the secluded **Playa Las Gatas (Cats Beach),** across the bay from Playa La Ropa and Zihuatanejo. The small coral reef just offshore is a nice spot for snorkeling and diving, and a little dive shop on the beach rents gear. The waters at Las Gatas are exceptionally clear, without undertow or big waves. Open-air seafood restaurants on the beach make it an appealing lunch spot. The PADI-certified **Carlo Scuba** (✆ **755/554-6003;** www.carloscuba.com) arranges **scuba-diving** and snorkeling trips from here. Kayaks are also available for rent. Small *pangas* or *lanchas* (boats) with shade run to Las Gatas from the Zihuatanejo town pier, a 10-minute trip; the captains will take you across whenever you wish between 9am and 5pm for 45 pesos round-trip. Usually the last boat back leaves Las Gatas at 6:30pm (5:30pm in low season), but check to be sure.

Playa Larga is a beautiful, uncrowded beach between Zihuatanejo and the airport, with several small *palapa* restaurants, hammocks, and wading pools.

In Ixtapa Ixtapa's main beach, **Playa Palmar,** is a lovely white-sand arc on the edge of the Hotel Zone, with dramatic rock formations silhouetted in the sea. The surf can be rough; use caution, and don't swim when a red flag is posted. Several of the nicest beaches in the area are essentially closed to the public. Although by law all Mexican beaches are open to the public, it is common practice for hotels to create artificial barriers (such as rocks or dunes).

Club Med and Qualton Club have largely claimed **Playa Quieta,** on the mainland across from Isla Ixtapa. The remaining piece of beach was once the launching point for boats to Isla Ixtapa, but it is gradually being taken over by a private development. Isla Ixtapa–bound boats now leave from the jetty on **Playa Linda,** about 13km (8 miles) north of Ixtapa. Inexpensive water taxis ferry passengers to Isla Ixtapa. Playa Linda is the primary out-of-town beach, with watersports equipment and horse rentals available. **Playa las Cuatas,** a pretty beach and cove a few miles north of Ixtapa, and **Playa Majahua,** an isolated beach just west of Zihuatanejo, are both being transformed into resort complexes. Lovely **Playa Vista Hermosa** is framed by striking rock formations and bordered by the Las Brisas hotel high on the hill. All of these are very attractive beaches for sunbathing or a stroll but have heavy surf and strong undertow. Use caution if you swim here.

WATERSPORTS & BOAT TRIPS Probably the most popular boat trip is to **Isla Ixtapa** for snorkeling and lunch at the El Marlin restaurant, one of several on the island. You can book this outing as a tour through local travel agencies, or go on your own from

Zihuatanejo by following the directions to Playa Linda above and taking a boat from there. Boats leave for Isla Ixtapa every 10 minutes between 9am and 5pm, so you can depart and return as you like. The round-trip boat ride is 55 pesos. Along the way, you'll pass dramatic rock formations and see in the distance **Los Morros de Los Pericos islands,** where a great variety of birds nest on the rocky points jutting out into the blue Pacific. On Isla Ixtapa, you'll find good snorkeling, diving, and other watersports. Gear is available for rent on the island. Be sure to catch the last water taxi back at 5pm, and double-check that time upon arrival on the island.

Local travel agencies can usually arrange day trips to Los Morros de Los Pericos islands for **birding,** though it's less expensive to rent a boat with a guide at Playa Linda. The islands are offshore from Ixtapa's main beach.

Sunset cruises on the sailboat *Picante,* arranged through **Yates del Sol** (✆ **755/554-2694** or 554-8270; www.picantecruises.com), depart from the Zihuatanejo town marina at Puerto Mío. The evening cruises last 2½ hours, cost $52 per person, and include an open bar and hors d'oeuvres. There's also a "Sail and Snorkel Adventure" day trip to **Playa Manzanillo** on the very comfortable, rarely crowded sailboat. The 4½-hour trip begins at 10am, costs $74 per person, and includes an open bar and lunch (snorkeling gear $7 extra).

You can arrange **fishing trips** with the **boat cooperative** (✆ **755/554-2056**) at the Zihuatanejo town pier. They cost $210 to $450, depending on boat size, number of people, trip length, and so on. Most trips last about 7 hours. The cooperative accepts only cash; no credit cards. The price includes soft drinks, beer, bait, and fishing gear, but not lunch. You'll pay more for a trip arranged through a local travel agency. The least expensive trips are on small launches called *pangas;* most have shade. Both small-game and deep-sea fishing are offered. The fishing is adequate, though not on par with that of Mazatlán or Baja. Other trips combine fishing with a visit to the near-deserted ocean beaches that extend for miles along the coast. Sam Lushinsky at **Ixtapa Sport-fishing Charters,** 19 Depue Lane, Stroudsburg, PA 18360 (✆ **570/688-9466;** fax 570/688-9554; www.ixtapasportfishing.com), is a noted outfitter. Prices range from $210 to $445 per day, for 8 to 13m (26–43 ft.) custom cruisers, fully equipped. They accept MasterCard and Visa.

Boating and fishing expeditions from the new **Marina Ixtapa,** a bit north of the Ixtapa Hotel Zone, can also be arranged. As a rule, everything available in or through the marina is more expensive and more Americanized.

Sailboats, sailboards, and other **watersports equipment** rentals are usually available at stands on Playa La Ropa, Playa las Gatas, Isla Ixtapa, and the main beach, Playa Palmar, in Ixtapa. There's **parasailing** at La Ropa and Palmar. **Kayaks** are available for rent at hotels in Ixtapa and some watersports operations on Playa La Ropa. The **Tides** has a beach club in front of the hotel on La Ropa with sailboat, sailboard, and kayak rentals open to the public.

The PADI-certified **Carlo Scuba,** on Playa Las Gatas (✆ **755/554-6003;** www.carloscuba.com), arranges **scuba-diving trips.** Fees start at $65 for a one-tank dive, or $85 for two dives, including all equipment and a drink. This shop has been around since 1962 and is very knowledgeable about the area, which has nearly 30 different dive sites, including walls and caves. Diving takes place year-round, though the water is clearest July to August and November to February, when visibility is 30m (98 ft.) or better. The nearest decompression chamber is in Ixtapa Marina. Advance reservations for dives are advised during Christmas and Easter.

Surfing is particularly good at **Petacalco Beach,** north of Ixtapa. **Swimming with dolphins** is possible at **Delfiniti Ixtapa** (www.delfiniti.com), arranged through any of the hotels or travel agents in town.

GOLF, TENNIS & HORSEBACK RIDING In **Ixtapa,** the **Club de Golf Ixtapa Palma Real** (✆ **755/553-1062** or 553-1163), in front of the Barceló Hotel, has an 18-hole course designed by Robert Trent Jones, Jr. The greens fee is $85 for 18 holes, $65 for 9 holes; caddies cost $25 for 18 holes, $20 for 9 holes; electric carts are $35; and clubs are $30. Tee times begin at 7am. The **Marina Ixtapa Golf Course** (✆ **755/553-1410;** fax 755/553-0825), designed by Robert von Hagge, has 18 challenging holes. The greens fee is $90, carts cost $35, caddies cost $20, and club rental is $35. Discounted rates are available after 1:30pm. The first tee time is 7am. Call for reservations 24 hours in advance. Both courses accept American Express, MasterCard, and Visa. Most hotels offer discounts to the golf courses.

In Ixtapa, the **Club de Golf Ixtapa Palma Real** (✆ **755/553-1062** or 553-1163) has lighted **public tennis courts.** Fees are $8.50 an hour during the day, $14 at night. Call for reservations. In Zihuatanejo, the **Tides** (✆ **755/555-5500**) has lit tennis courts open to $30 an hour; private lessons cost $70 an hour.

For **horseback riding,** the largest local stable is on **Playa Linda** (no phone), offering guided trail rides from the Playa Linda beach (about 13km/8 miles north of Ixtapa). It's just next to the pier where the water taxis debark to Isla Ixtapa. Groups of three or more riders can arrange their own tour, which is especially nice around sunset (though you'll need mosquito repellent). Riders can choose to trace the beach to the mouth of the river and back through coconut plantations, or hug the beach for the entire ride (which usually lasts 1–1½ hr.). The fee is around $40, cash only. Travel agencies in either town can arrange your trip but will charge a bit more for transportation. Reservations are suggested in high season. Another good place to ride is in Playa Larga. There is a ranch on the first exit coming from Zihuatanejo (no phone, but you can't miss it—it is the first corral to the right as you drive toward the beach). The horses are in excellent shape. The fee is about $45 for 1½ hours, and includes transportation to and from your hotel as well as a drink.

SHOPPING

Zihuatanejo

Zihuatanejo has its quota of T-shirt and souvenir shops, but it has also become a better place to buy crafts, folk art, and jewelry. Shops are generally open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 2pm and 4 to 8pm. Many better shops close Sunday, but some smaller souvenir stands stay open, and hours vary.

The **artisans' market** on Calle Cinco de Mayo is a good place to start shopping before moving on to specialty shops. It's open daily from 8am to 9pm. The **municipal market** on Avenida Benito Juárez sprawls over several blocks (about 5 blocks inland from the waterfront), but most vendors hawk the same things—*huaraches,* hammocks, and baskets. On the sand next to the pier is a daily fish market, and just behind it on Paseo del Pescador there's a small seashell market. Spreading inland from the waterfront some 3 or 4 blocks are numerous small shops well worth exploring.

Besides the places listed below, check out **Alberto's,** Cuauhtémoc 12 and 15 (no phone), for jewelry. Also on Cuauhtémoc, 2 blocks down from the Nueva Zelanda Coffee Shop, is a small shop that looks like a market stand and sells beautiful tablecloths, napkins, and other linens; all are handmade in Aguascalientes.

Casa Marina This small complex extends from the waterfront to Alvarez near Cinco de Mayo and houses five intriguing shops, each specializing in handcrafted wares from all over Mexico. Items include handsome rugs, textiles, masks, colorful woodcarvings, and silver jewelry. Café Marina, the small coffee shop in the complex, sells shelves and shelves of used paperback books in several languages. Open daily from 9am to 9pm during the high season, Monday through Saturday 10am to 2pm and 5 to 9pm the rest of the year. Paseo del Pescador 9. ✆ **755/554-2373.**

El Jumil With small fishing boats pulled up on the sand just in front, this store sells coconut shell masks, exotic figurines, indigenous masks (including those used for ceremonial dances from Guerrero), Oaxacan pottery, and other regional art and crafts. There's a 10% discount on all items paid in cash. Open Monday to Saturday from 10am to 9pm. Casa Marina, Paseo del Pescador 9. ✆ **755/554-6191.**

Fruity Keiko Next to Coconuts restaurant (p. 395), this impressive little shop sells gorgeous gifts from across Mexico. Fruity Keiko carries carefully selected crafts and folk art, including some made by Mexico's best present-day artists. There's also a small selection of regional jewelry, handmade dresses, and Talavera pottery. Prices are higher here than if you were in the towns where these goods are actually made. Open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 9pm and Sunday from noon to 8pm. Vicente Guerrero 5 at Alvarez, opposite the Hotel Citali. ✆ **755/554-6578;** www.zihuatanejo.net/fruitykeiko.

Ixtapa

Shopping in Ixtapa is not especially memorable, with T-shirts and Mexican crafts the usual wares. Several shops in the same area on Bulevar Ixtapa, across from the beachside hotels, sell designer sportswear and most are open daily from 9am to 2pm and 4 to 9pm.

Decoré Ixtapa This small boutique shop at the entrance to the Ixtapa Marina sells fine Mexican furniture and decorations. Among the selections are wood and glass furnishings, onyx lamps, beautiful vases, handbags, and other luxury items. Bulevar Ixtapa. ✆ **755/553-3550.** www.decoreixtapa.com.

La Fuente This terrific shop carries gorgeous Talavera pottery, jaguar-shaped wicker tables, hand-blown glassware, masks, tin mirrors and frames, hand-embroidered clothing from Chiapas, and wood furniture. Open daily from 9am to 10pm during high season, daily from 10am to 9pm in low season. Los Patios Center, Bulevar Ixtapa. ✆ **755/553-0812.**

ZIHUATANEJO & IXTAPA AFTER DARK

With an exception or two, Zihuatanejo nightlife dies down around 11pm or midnight. For a selection of clubs, dance spots, hotel fiestas, special events, and fun watering holes with live music and dancing, head for Ixtapa. Just keep in mind that the shuttle bus stops at 11pm, and a taxi to Zihuatanejo after midnight costs 50% more than the regular price. During the off season (after Easter and before Christmas), hours vary: Some places open only on weekends, while others close completely. In Zihuatanejo, a lively bar showing satellite TV sports is **Bandido's,** at the corner of Cinco de Mayo and Pedro Ascencio in Zihuatanejo Centro, across from the Artisans' Market (✆ **755/553-8072**). It features live salsa music nightly and is open until 2am. There's no cover, and people often come to dance salsa.

The Club & Music Scene

Many dance clubs stay open until the last customers leave, so closing hours depend upon revelers. Most dance clubs have a ladies' night at least once a week—admission and drinks are free for women.

Christine This long-standing dance club is best known for its midnight light show, which features classical music played on a mega sound system. A semicircle of tables in tiers overlooks the dance floor. The crowd tends to be in their 20s and 30s. No sneakers, flip-flops, or shorts are allowed, and reservations are recommended during high season. Open Thursday to Saturday at 10:30pm. Off-season hours vary. In the NH Krystal, Bulevar Ixtapa, Ixtapa. ✆ **755/555-0510.** Cover free–$20, depending on the season and night.

Señor Frog's A companion restaurant to Carlos 'n' Charlie's, Señor Frog's has several dining sections and a warehouselike bar with raised dance floors. Large speakers play electronic, rock, and Latin music, sometimes even prompting dinner patrons to shimmy by their tables between courses. The restaurant is open daily from noon to midnight; the bar stays open until 3am. In the La Puerta Center, Bulevar Ixtapa, Ixtapa. ✆ **755/553-2282.** www.senorfrogs.com/ixtapa. Cover charges are around 100 pesos but vary depending on the night.

Zihuablue One of Zihuatanejo's few nightlife options, Zihuablue opened in late 2007 across from Kau-Kan restaurant. The chic Mediterranean lounge is an open-air oasis with a candlelit bar, small dance floor, canopy beds and sofas, and sand floor. Ambient music fills the air of this small, exclusive retreat, open from 8pm to 2am November through May. Above the lounge is a fine seafood restaurant. Carretera Escénica La Ropa s/n, next to Kau-Kan restaurant. ✆ **755/554-4844**. www.zihuablue.com. No cover.

Hotel Fiestas & Theme Nights

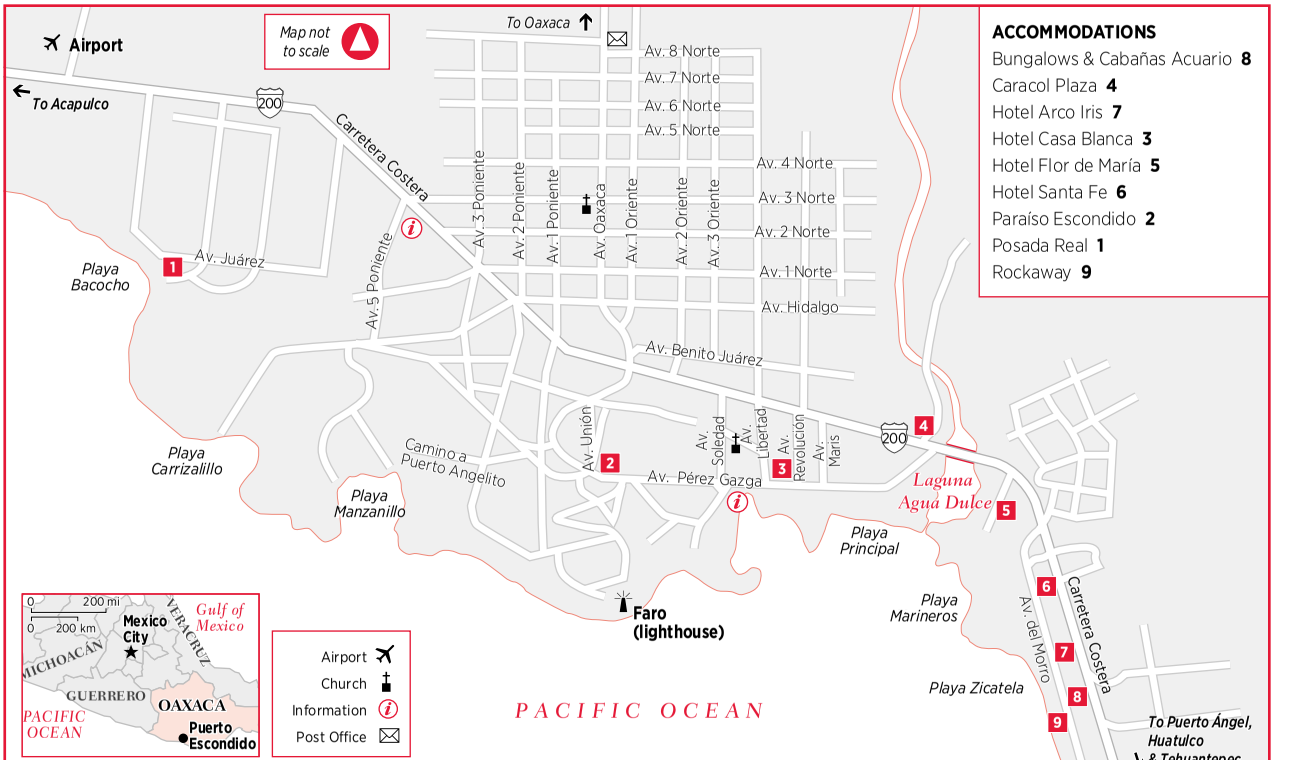
A number of hotels hold Mexican fiestas and other special events that include dinner, drinks, live music, and entertainment for a fixed price (generally $44 from 7–10pm). The **Barceló Ixtapa** (✆ **755/555-2000**) stages a popular Wednesday night fiesta; the **Dorado Pacífico** (✆ **755/553-2025**), in Ixtapa, hosts a Tuesday night fiesta. Only the Barceló Ixtapa offers them in the off season. Call for reservations, and be sure you understand what the price covers, as drinks, tax, and tip are not always included.

3 PUERTO ESCONDIDO ★★★

368km (228 miles) SE of Acapulco; 240km (149 miles) NW of Salina Cruz; 80km (50 miles) NW of Puerto Angel

Puerto Escondido seems disconnected from the rest of the world, an idyllic beach town stuck in time. It's easily the best overall beach value in Mexico, and it retains the same casual beach feel that has drawn people here for decades. Although it has long been known as one of the world's top surf sites, today its appeal is broadening. Think alternative therapies, great vegetarian restaurants, hip nightlife, inexpensive hotel and dining options, and some of Mexico's best coffee shops. It's for those whose priorities include the dimensions of the surf break (big), the temperature of the beer (cold), the strength of the coffee (espresso), and the optimal tanning angle. The young and very aware crowd that comes here measures time by the tides, and the pace is relaxed.

The location of "Puerto," as the locals call it, makes it an ideal jumping-off point for ecological explorations of neighboring jungle and estuary sanctuaries, as well as indigenous mountain settlements. Increasingly, it attracts those seeking both spiritual and physical renewal, with abundant massage and bodywork services, yoga classes, and exceptional and varied healthful dining options.


Airport
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Carretera Costera
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Av. Oaxaca
Av. 1 Oriente
Av. 2 Oriente
Av. 3 Oriente
Av. 5 Poniente
Av. Juárez
Av. Benito Juárez
Av. Unión
Av. Soledad
Av. Libertad
Av. Revolución
Av. Maris
Av. Pérez Gazga
Camino a Puerto Angelito
Playa Bacocho
Playa Carrizalillo
Playa Manzanillo
Laguna Agua Dulce
Playa Principal
Playa Marineros
Playa Zicatela
Av. del Morro
Faro (lighthouse)
PACIFIC OCEAN
To Puerto Ángel, Huatulco & Tehuantepec
ACCOMMODATIONS
Bungalows & Cabañas Acuario 8
Caracol Plaza 4
Hotel Arco Iris 7
Hotel Casa Blanca 3
Hotel Flor de María 5
Hotel Santa Fe 6
Paraíso Escondido 2
Posada Real 1
Rockaway 9
0 200 mi
0 200 km
Mexico City
Gulf of Mexico
VERACRUZ
MICHOACÁN
GUERRERO
OAXACA
PACIFIC OCEAN
Puerto Escondido
Airport
Church
Information
Post Office

People come from the United States, Canada, and Europe to stay for weeks and even months—easily and inexpensively. Expats have migrated here from Los Cabos, Acapulco, and Puerto Vallarta seeking what originally attracted them to their former homes—stellar beaches, friendly locals, and low prices. Added pleasures include an absence of beach vendors and timeshare sales, an abundance of English speakers, and terrific, inexpensive dining and nightlife.

This is a real place, not a produced resort. A significant number of visitors are European travelers, and it's common to hear a variety of languages on the beach and in the bars. Puerto Escondido is also a favorite among Mexican college students. Solo travelers will probably make new friends within an hour of arriving. There are still surfers here, lured by the best break in Mexico, but espresso cafes and live music are becoming just as ubiquitous.

The city has been dismissed as a colony of former hippies and settled backpackers, but it's so much more. It's entirely possible that those who favor Puerto are just trying to keep the place true to its name (*escondido* means "hidden") and undiscovered by tourists. Don't let them trick you—visit, and soon, before it, too, changes.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There & Departing

BY PLANE **Aerovega** (✆ **954/582-0151**) operates daily morning flights to and from Puerto Escondido on small planes; the fare is 1,100 pesos each way to Oaxaca. **Mexicana** (✆ **52/5998-5998**) flies jets to and from Mexico City daily. The price is about $150 each way.

If flights to Puerto Escondido are booked, you have the (possibly less expensive) option of flying into **Huatulco** on a scheduled or charter flight. This is especially viable if your destination is Puerto Angel, which lies between Puerto Escondido and Huatulco. An airport taxi costs about 900 pesos to Puerto Angel, and approximately 1,500 pesos to Puerto Escondido. If you can find a local taxi rather than a government-chartered cab, you can reduce these fares by about 50%, including the payment of a 60 pesos mandatory airport exit tax. There is frequent bus service between the three destinations.

Arriving: The Puerto Escondido **airport** (airport code: PXM) is about 4km (2½ miles) north of the center of town, near Playa Bacocho. The ***colectivo*** **(minibus)** to hotels costs 40 pesos per person. **Aerotransportes de Pasajeros Turistas de Oaxaca** sells *colectivo* tickets to the airport via **Turismo Dimar Travel Agency** (✆/fax **954/582-0737** or 582-2305), on Avenida Pérez Gasga (the pedestrian-only zone), next to Hotel Casa Blanca. A minibus picks you up at your hotel and costs 50 pesos per person.

BY CAR From Oaxaca, **Hwy. 175** via Pochutla is the least bumpy road. The 240km (149-mile) trip takes 5 to 6 hours. **Hwy. 200** from Acapulco is a good road, although stretches of it are dirt only, and numerous speed bumps and army checkpoints may impede progress. It should take about 8 hours to travel. This stretch of road has been the site of numerous car and bus hijackings and robberies at night in recent years—travel only during the day.

From Salina Cruz to Puerto Escondido is a 5-hour drive, past the Bahías de Huatulco and the turnoff for Puerto Angel. The road is paved but can be rutty during the rainy season. The trip from Huatulco to Puerto Escondido takes just over 2 hours; you can easily hire a taxi for a fixed rate of about 550 pesos an hour.

BY BUS Buses run frequently to and from Acapulco and Oaxaca, and south along the coast to and from Huatulco and Pochutla, the transit hub for Puerto Angel. The main

bus station for **Estrella Blanca, Oaxaca Pacífico,** and **Estrella del Valle** is the **Central Camionera,** just north of the city center. First-class buses run to Huatulco, Oaxaca, and Mexico City. Several buses also leave daily for Pochutla, Salina Cruz (5 hr.), and Oaxaca (7 hr. via second-class bus). **Cristóbal Colón** buses (✆ **954/582-1073**) serve Salina Cruz, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, San Cristóbal de las Casas, and Oaxaca.

Arriving: Minibuses from Pochutla or Huatulco will let you off anywhere, including the spot where Pérez Gasga leads down to the pedestrian-only zone.

If you're arriving from Oaxaca City, the speediest buses to Puerto Escondido—6 hours away over a tortuous road—leave from the *terminal de segunda clase* (second-class terminal) Armenta y López 721, across from the Red Cross. Two lines serve the route: Pacífico Oaxaca and Estrella del Valle. Many people who go to Puerto Escondido on these buses say that if they had it to do over, they'd fly. Motion sickness is the main reason; there are hundreds of curves through the mountains.

The **Viajes Atlántida** agency, at Armenta y López 621, intersection with La Noria (✆ **951/514-7077**), offers daily service from Oaxaca City to Pochutla in Suburbans. The Suburbans are faster than the bus. There are 10 runs daily (5–6 hr.; 140 pesos). From Pochutla, you can catch a ***colectivo*** (Volkswagen van) to Puerto Escondido, Huatulco, or Puerto Angel (which run 1–1½ hr.). You should buy your tickets in advance. The agency is open daily from 5:30am to 11:30pm.

Orientation

VISITOR INFORMATION The **State Tourist Office, SEDETUR** (✆ **954/582-0175;** www.aoaxaca.travel), which has a helpful staff, is less than 1km (a half-mile) from the airport, at the corner of Carretera Costera and Bulevar Benito Juárez. It's open Monday through Friday from 8am to 5pm. A tourist kiosk at the west end of the Adoquín (in the town center) is open Monday through Saturday from 9am to 2pm and 4 to 6pm.

CITY LAYOUT Looking out on the Bahía Principal and its beach, to your left you'll see the eastern end of the bay, consisting of a small beach, **Playa Marineros,** followed by rocks jutting into the sea. Beyond this is **Playa Zicatela,** unmistakably the main surfing beach. Zicatela Beach has come into its own as the most popular area for visitors, with restaurants, bungalows, surf shops, and hotels, well back from the shoreline. The west side of the bay, to your right, is about 1.5km long (1 mile), with a lighthouse and a long stretch of fine sand. Beaches on this end are not quite as accessible by land, but hotels are overcoming this difficulty by constructing beach clubs reached by steep private roads and jeep shuttles.

The town of Puerto Escondido has roughly an east-west orientation, with the long Zicatela Beach turning sharply southeast. Residential areas behind Zicatela Beach tend to have unpaved streets; the older town, with paved streets, is north of the Carretera Costera (Hwy. 200). The streets are numbered; Avenida Oaxaca divides east *(oriente)* from west *(poniente),* and Avenida Hidalgo divides north *(norte)* from south *(sur).*

South of this is the original **tourist zone,** through which Avenida Pérez Gasga makes a loop. Part of this loop is a paved pedestrian-only zone, known locally as the Adoquín, after the hexagonal bricks used in its paving. Hotels, shops, restaurants, bars, travel agencies, and other services are all here. In the morning, taxis, delivery trucks, and private vehicles may drive here, but at noon it closes to all but foot traffic.

Avenida Pérez Gasga angles down from the highway at the east end; on the west, where the Adoquín terminates, it climbs in a wide northward curve to cross the highway, after which it becomes Avenida Oaxaca.

The beaches—Playa Principal in the center of town and Marineros and Zicatela, southeast of the town center—are connected. It's easy to walk from one to the other, crossing behind the separating rocks. Puerto Angelito, Carrizalillo, and Bacocho beaches are west of town and accessible by road or water. Playa Bacocho is where you'll find the few more expensive hotels.

GETTING AROUND Almost everything is within walking distance of the Adoquín. **Taxis** around town are inexpensive; call ✆ **954/582-0990** for service. It's also easy to hire a boat and possible to walk beside the sea from the Playa Principal to the tiny beach of Puerto Angelito, though it's a bit of a hike.

Fast Facts Puerto Escondido

Area Code The telephone area code is **954.**

Currency Exchange Banamex, Bancomer, Banorte, and HSBC all have branches in town, and all will change money during business hours; hours vary, but you can generally find one of the above open Monday through Saturday from 9am to 3pm. ATMs are also available, as are currency-exchange offices.

Drugstore **Farmacía de Más Ahorro,** Avenida 1 Norte at Avenida 2 Poniente (✆ **954/582-1911**), is open from 7am to 3am.

Hospital **Unidad Médico–Quirúrgica del Sur,** Av. Oaxaca 706 (✆ **954/582-1288**), offers 24-hour emergency services and has an English-speaking staff and doctor.

Internet Access On Zicatela Beach, **Internet Acuario** is a small, extremely busy Internet service at the entrance to the Bungalows & Cabañas Acuario, Calle de Morro s/n (✆ **954/582-0788**). It's open daily from 8am to 10pm and charges just 15 pesos per hour.

Post Office The *correo,* on Avenida Oaxaca at the corner of Avenida 7 Norte (✆ **954/582-0959**), is open Monday through Friday from 8am to 4:30pm.

Safety Depending on whom you talk to, you need to be wary of potential beach muggings, primarily at night. Lighting at Playa Principal and Playa Zicatela has caused the crime rate to drop considerably. Local residents say most incidents happen after tourists overindulge and then go for a midnight stroll along the beach. Puerto is so casual that it's an easy place to let your guard down. Don't carry valuables, and use common sense and normal precautions. Also, respect the power of the magnificent waves here. Drownings occur all too often.

Seasons Season designations are somewhat arbitrary, but most consider high season to be from mid-December to January, around and during Easter week, July and August, and other school and business vacations.

Telephones Numerous businesses offer long-distance telephone service. Many are along the Adoquín; several accept credit cards.

WHERE TO STAY

The rates posted below do not include the 18% tax.

Expensive

Posada Real (Kids) On a cliff top overlooking the beach, the expanse of manicured lawn that backs this all-inclusive hotel is one of the most popular places in town for a sunset cocktail. The smallish standard rooms are less enticing than the hotel grounds (six "extra large" rooms are available, and preferable for families). A big plus here is Coco's Beach Club, with a 1km (half-mile) stretch of soft-sand beach, large swimming pool, playground, and bar with occasional live music. This is a great place for families, and it's open to the public (nonguests pay $2.50 to enter). The hotel lies 5 minutes from the airport and about the same from Puerto Escondido's tourist zone, but you'll need a taxi to get to town. Rates include breakfast, lunch, dinner, and unlimited domestic drinks, as well as tips and taxes. In high season, it may have availability when Puerto Escondido is otherwise fully booked.

Av. Benito Juárez s/n, Fracc. Bacocho, 71980 Puerto Escondido, Oax. ✆ **800/528-1234** in the U.S., or 954/582-0237. Fax 954/582-0192. www.posadareal.com.mx. 100 units. High season $310 double; low season $123 double. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; beach club w/food service; children's playground; 2 outdoor pools; putting green; room service; tennis court. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Moderate

Caracol Plaza This hotel sits on a small hill overlooking the bay. Guest rooms feature high ceilings, arched French windows, lovely wood furnishings, and small bathrooms. Ask for a room with a bay view. The large white hotel has an adult and children's pool, Mexican restaurant, and *palapa* bar with what may be the best sunset-watching spot in all of Puerto Escondido. The friendly staff will help you with your travel plans. The hotel's one drawback is that it's across the main highway from the beach and is probably a 10-minute walk to the Adoquín. At press time, an additional 50 rooms were being constructed.

7a. Oriente s/n y 1a. Sur, Col. Marinero, 71980 Puerto Escondido, Oax. ✆ **954/582-3814.** 80 units. High season $165 double; low season $149 double. MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; kids' pool. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Hotel Santa Fe ★★★ (Finds) If Puerto Escondido is the best beach value in Mexico, then the Santa Fe is, without a doubt, one of the best hotel values in Mexico. It's about 1km (a half-mile) southeast of the town center, off Hwy. 200, at the curve in the road where Marineros and Zicatela beaches join—a prime sunset-watching spot. The three-story hacienda-style buildings have clay-tiled stairs, archways, and blooming bougainvillea. They surround two courtyard swimming pools. The rooms feature large tile bathrooms, colonial furnishings, hand-woven fabrics, and both air-conditioning and ceiling fans. Most have a balcony or terrace, and the master and presidential suites enjoy ocean views. Bungalows are next to the hotel; each has a living room, kitchen, and bedroom with two double beds. The restaurant (see "Where to Dine," below), one of the best on the southern Pacific coast, is supplied by its own farm.

Calle del Morro (Apdo. Postal 96), 71980 Puerto Escondido, Oax. ✆ **954/582-0170** or 582-0266. Fax 954/582-0260. www.hotelsantafe.com.mx. 61 units, 8 bungalows. High season $173 double, $189 junior suite, $273 suite, $183 bungalow; low season $126 double, $162 junior suite, $263 suite, $136 bungalow. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; Internet kiosk; 3 outdoor pools. *In room:* A/C, TV.

Paraíso Escondido ★★ (Finds) This eclectic inn is hidden away on a shady street a couple of short blocks from the Adoquín and Playa Principal. It's very popular with families and has a small, intimate feel. A curious collection of Mexican folk art, masks,

religious art, and paintings makes this an exercise in Mexican magic realism. An inviting pool—surrounded by gardens, Adirondack chairs, and a fountain—affords a commanding view of the bay. The colonial-style rooms each have one double and two twin beds, tile floors, a small bathroom, and a cozy balcony or terrace with French doors. The suites have much plusher decor than the rooms, with recessed lighting, desks set into bay windows, living areas, and large private balconies overlooking the bay. The penthouse suite has a kitchenette, a tile chessboard inlaid in the floor, and murals adorning the walls—it is the owners' former apartment.

Calle Unión 10, 71980 Puerto Escondido, Oax. ✆ **954/582-0444.** Fax 954/582-2767. www.hotelparaisoescondido.net. 25 units. High season $93 double, $125 suite, $175 penthouse suite; low season $63 double, $73 suite, $93 penthouse suite. MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; wading pool. *In room:* A/C, TV.

Inexpensive

Bungalows & Cabañas Acuario Facing Zicatela Beach, this surfer's sanctuary offers cheap accommodations plus an on-site gym, surf shop, and Internet cafe. The two-story hotel and bungalows surround a pool shaded by great palms. Rooms are small and basic; bungalows offer basic kitchen facilities but don't have air-conditioning. The cabañas lack mosquito nets, so you'll need to cover yourself with bug spray from head to toe. There are several rooms with air-conditioning, which offer a far more comfortable night's sleep. The adjoining retail area has public telephones, money exchange, a pharmacy, an Internet cafe, and a vegetarian restaurant. If you're traveling during low season, you can probably negotiate a better deal than the rates listed below once you're there.

Calle del Morro s/n, 71980 Puerto Escondido, Oax. ✆ **954/582-0357.** Fax 954/582-1027. www.oaxacamio.com/banacuario. 40 units. High season 600 pesos double, 700 pesos double with A/C, 1,100 pesos bungalow; low season 250 pesos double, 300 pesos double with A/C, 450 pesos bungalow. MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; well-equipped gym; Internet cafe; Jacuzzi; outdoor pool. *In room:* No phone except in suite and 2 bungalows.

Hotel Arco Iris ★ (Value) Rooms at the Arco Iris occupy a three-story colonial-style house that faces Zicatela Beach. Each is simple yet comfortable, with a spacious terrace or balcony with hangers for hammocks to rent—all have great views, but the upstairs ones are better (12 units include kitchenettes). Beds come with mosquito nets, and bedspreads were made using beautifully worked Oaxacan textiles. The restaurant/bar runs one of the most popular happy hours in town, daily from 5:30 to 7:30pm, with live music during high season.

Calle del Morro s/n, Playa Zicatela, 71980 Puerto Escondido, Oax. ✆/fax **954/582-2344.** www.hotelarcoiris.com.mx. 35 units. High season $75–$90 double, $100 double with kitchen; low season $50–$70 double, $75 double with kitchen. Extra person $4. Rates 10%–20% higher at Easter and Christmas. MC, V. Ample free parking for cars and campers. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; gym; outdoor pool; wading pool; TV/game room w/foreign channels. *In room:* No phone.

Hotel Casa Blanca ★ (Value) If you want to be in the heart of the Adoquín, this is your best bet for excellent value and ample accommodations. The courtyard pool and adjacent *palapa* make great places to hide away and enjoy a margarita or a book from the hotel's exchange rack. The bright, simply furnished rooms offer a choice of bed combinations, but all have at least two beds and a fan. Some rooms have both air-conditioning and a minifridge. The best rooms have a balcony overlooking the action in the street below, but light sleepers should consider a room in the back. Some rooms accommodate up to five. This is an excellent and economical choice for families.

Av. Pérez Gasga 905, 71980 Puerto Escondido, Oax. ✆ **954/582-0168.** www.hotelcasablanca-oaxaca.com. 25 units. 320–600 pesos double; 600–900 pesos suite (up to 5 people). MC, V. Limited street parking. **Amenities:** Outdoor pool; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C (in some), fan, TV, minifridge (in some), no phone, Wi-Fi.

Hotel Flor de María Though not right on the beach, the Flor de María offers a welcoming place to stay. This cheery three-story hotel faces the ocean, which you can see from the rooftop. Built around a garden courtyard, each room is colorfully decorated with beautiful *trompe l'oeil* still-lifes and landscapes. Rooms have double beds with orthopedic mattresses, and views that vary between the ocean, courtyard, and exterior. On the roof are a small pool, a shaded hammock terrace, and an open-air bar (noon–8pm during high season) with cable TV. It's a great sunset spot. The hotel lies about .5km (¼ mile) from the Adoquín, 60m (197 ft.) up a cobblestone road from Marineros Beach on Calle Marinero at the eastern end of the beach.

Playa Marineros, 71980 Puerto Escondido, Oax. ✆ **954/582-0536.** Fax 954/582-2617. www.mexonline.com/flordemaria.htm. 24 units. High season $50–$65 double; low season $35–$55 double. Ask about off-season long-term discounts. MC, V. Limited parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant (p. 410); bar; small gym; small outdoor pool; Wi-Fi.

Rockaway Facing Playa Zicatela, this surfer's sanctuary offers very clean, cheap accommodations geared for surfers, including newer hotel-style rooms and older cabañas. Every unit is equipped with a private bathroom, as well as ceiling fan and mosquito net. The good-size swimming pool and *palapa* bar form a popular gathering spot. The cabañas in the older section do not have hot water; those in the newer section feature air-conditioning, hot water, and cable TV. The courtyard has a festive and inviting vibe, with music and laughter lasting well into the night. ***Note:*** There's one large cabaña that accommodates up to eight people.

Calle del Morro s/n, 71980 Puerto Escondido, Oax. ✆ **954/582-0668.** www.hotelrockaway.com. 14 units. High season 600 pesos double room, 200–1,200 pesos cabaña; low season 400 pesos double room, 200–500 pesos cabaña. No credit cards. Free parking. **Amenities:** Bar; outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C (in some), fans, TV (in some), no phone.

WHERE TO DINE

In addition to the places listed below, a Puerto Escondido tradition is the *palapa* restaurants on Zicatela Beach, for early morning surfer breakfasts or casual dining and drinking at night. One of the most popular is **Los Tíos,** offering very reasonable prices and surfer-size portions.

Expensive

Pascal ★★ (Finds) FRENCH With an enchanted location on the edge of the bay, Pascal features a beautiful beachside terrace with views of the bobbing boats in front. Opened in 2006, it has quickly become one of the city's top restaurants. All of the French-inspired dishes are prepared by chef-owner Pascal on the outdoor grill using only fresh ingredients. Specials may include breaded goat cheese with tomatoes and pesto on a baguette, chateaubriand, fish and seafood brochettes, and grilled lobster served in the shape of a tower. The bouillabaisse tastes heavenly. Open only for dinner, Pascal offers candlelit tables amid towering palm trees, a centerpiece fountain, and live music weekends. Service is refined though sometimes slow, and the cuisine matches the quality you would expect from a fine French restaurant. There's an enticing selection of French and international wines as well.

Playa Principal s/n (off the Adoquín). ✆ **954/103-0668.** Reservations recommended. Main courses $6–$25. No credit cards. Daily 6pm–midnight.

Moderate

Restaurant Santa Fe ★★★ Finds INTERNATIONAL The Hotel Santa Fe's beachside restaurant sits under a welcoming *palapa,* with the gentle waves crashing just in front. The excellent fish and seafood selections include crayfish, red snapper, tuna, octopus, and giant shrimp prepared any way you like. More traditional dishes, such as Oaxacan-style enchiladas with homemade tortillas and *mole,* are also available. The restaurant offers numerous vegetarian and vegan selections, including chiles rellenos with cheese, rice, and beans; and breaded tofu with salad and rice. The food is served on beautiful hand-painted ceramic place settings, and the organic coffee is grown at the hotel's own farm. There's an elaborate breakfast buffet on the weekends for around $13, featuring fresh local specialties. Even if you don't plan to dine, this is an ideal spot to come for a sunset cocktail and perhaps an hors d'oeuvre.

In the Hotel Santa Fe (p. 407), Calle del Morro s/n. ✆ **954/582-0170.** www.hotelsantafe.com.mx. Breakfast $4–$8; main courses $6–$27. AE, MC, V. Daily 7am–10pm.

Inexpensive

Cafecito ★ Value FRENCH PASTRY/MEXICAN Carmen started with a small bakery in Puerto, and when she opened this cafe years ago on Zicatela Beach, with the motto "Big waves, strong coffee!," it quickly eclipsed the bake shop and now is her main business. But not to worry—it still features all the attractions of her early *patisserie,* with the added attraction of serving full meals all day long. This cafe/restaurant sits under a big *palapa* facing the beach. Giant shrimp dinners cost less than 120 pesos, and creative daily specials are always a sure bet. An oversize mug of cappuccino is 220 pesos and a mango éclair—worth any price—is a steal, at 125 pesos. Smoothies, natural juices, and a variety of coffee selections are available.

Calle del Morro s/n, Playa Zicatela. ✆ **954/582-0516.** Pastries 15–25 pesos; breakfast 45–55 pesos; main courses 35–95 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 6am–10:30pm.

El Jardín ★★ Value ITALIAN This charming restaurant facing Zicatela Beach is generally packed. It's known for its generous use of fresh, healthy ingredients, including lots of olive oil, tomatoes, and Italian vinaigrette. The service is relaxed, if sometimes extremely slow. The choices are delicious: New York–style pizza, vegetarian sandwiches, crepes, pastas, and large creative salads, such as the *Rey de Reyes,* with spinach, tomato, avocado, pickled eggplant, brown rice, and tofu. Try the Ensalada Caprichosa, with fresh-cut tomatoes, savory pesto, and salty anchovies atop crisp grilled eggplant slices. There's also a selection of fresh fish and seafood. El Jardín's extensive menu includes fruit smoothies, Italian and Mexican coffees, herbal teas, and a complete juice bar. The restaurant makes its own tempeh, tofu, pastas, and whole-grain breads. The rich tiramisu is to die for.

Calle del Morro s/n, Playa Zicatela. ✆ **954/110-5408.** Main courses 60–150 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 8am–11pm.

Flor de María INTERNATIONAL This open-air dining room near the beach is particularly popular with locals. The menu changes daily but always includes fresh fish, grilled meats, and pastas. The restaurant sits in the Hotel Flor de María, just steps from the center of town and up a cobblestone road from Playa Marinero at the eastern end of the beach.

In Hotel Flor de María (p. 409), Playa Marinero. ✆ **954/582-0536.** Breakfast 35–50 pesos; main courses 65–200 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 8–11am and 6–9pm. Closed May–June and Sept–Oct.

La Galería ★ ITALIAN At the east end of the Adoquín, La Galería offers a satisfying range of eats in a cool, creative setting, with dark-wood beams, and contemporary works by local artists on the walls. Specialties include homemade pasta and brick-oven pizza (the five-cheese pizza is especially delicious), but burgers and steaks are also available. Or try something light and refreshing, like the crisp grapefruit and shrimp salad, which visitors and locals alike rave about. Cappuccino and espresso, plus desserts such as apple empanadas with vanilla ice cream, finish the meal. Continental and American breakfasts are available in the morning.

Av. Pérez Gasga s/n. ✆ **954/582-2039.** Breakfast 35–55 pesos; main courses 55–120 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 8am–11pm.

Las Margaritas ★ Value MEXICAN One of the tastiest Mexican restaurants in town, Las Margaritas lies off a busy street, a short drive from the Adoquín. The casual, open-air terrace offers wood tables and chairs, as well as an open kitchen, bar, and tortilla stand, where you can watch authentic dishes being made. This is Mexican food prepared as though you were in a family's home, featuring such dishes as empanadas, quesadillas, fish and seafood brochettes, steaks, and *mole* that explodes with flavor.

8 norte s/n (1 block from the market). ✆ **954/582-0212.** www.oaxaca-mio.com/lasmargaritas.htm. Breakfasts 33–50 pesos; main courses 45–150 pesos. MC, V. Daily 8am–6pm.

WHAT TO SEE & DO IN PUERTO ESCONDIDO

BEACHES **Playa Principal,** where small boats are available for fishing and tour services, and **Playa Marineros,** adjacent to the town center on a deep bay, are the best swimming beaches. Beach chairs and sun shades rent for about 55 pesos, which may be waived if you order food or drinks from the restaurants that offer them. **Playa Zicatela,** which has lifeguards and is known as the "Mexican Pipeline," adjoins Playa Marineros and extends southeast for several kilometers. The surfing part of Zicatela, with large curling waves, is about 4km (2½ miles) from the town center. Due to the size and strength of the waves (particularly in summer), it's not a swimming beach, and only experienced surfers should attempt to ride Zicatela's powerful waves. Stadium-style lighting has been installed in both of these areas, in an attempt to crack down on nighttime beach muggings. It has diminished the appeal of the Playa Principal restaurants—patrons now look into the bright lights rather than at the sea. Lifeguard service has recently been added to Playa Zicatela, although the lifeguards are known to go on strike. The best beach for learning how to surf is called **La Punta.**

Barter with one of the fishermen on the main beach for a ride to **Playa Manzanillo** and **Puerto Angelito,** two beaches separated by a rocky outcropping. Here, and at other small coves just west of town, swimming is safe and the overall pace is calmer than in town. You'll also find *palapas,* hammock rentals, and snorkeling equipment. The clear blue water is perfect for snorkeling. Local entrepreneurs cook fresh fish, tamales, and other Mexican dishes right at the beach. Puerto Angelito is also accessible by a road that's a short distance from town, so it tends to be busier. You can also take a cab to the cliff above **Playa Carrizalillo** and descend a hundred stone stairs to a calm and secluded swimming beach. **Playa Bacocho** is on a shallow cove (dangerous for swimming) farther northwest and is best reached by taxi or boat than on foot. It's also the location of the Villa Sol Beach Club. A charge of 50 pesos gives you access to pools, food and beverage service, and facilities.

SURFING **Zicatela Beach,** 2.5km (1½ miles) southeast of Puerto Escondido's town center, is a world-class surf spot. A surfing competition in August and Fiesta Puerto

Escondido, held for at least 3 days each November, celebrate Puerto Escondido's renowned waves. There is also a surfing exhibition and competition in February, for Carnaval. The tourism office can supply dates and details. Beginning surfers often start at Playa Marineros before graduating to Zicatela's awesome waves, although you will see intermediate surfers out at **La Punta,** at the southernmost end of Playa Zicatela. The waves and strong currents make Zicatela dangerous for swimming.

NESTING RIDLEY TURTLES The beaches around Puerto Escondido and Puerto Angel are nesting grounds for the endangered Ridley turtle. During the summer, lucky tourists may see the turtles laying eggs or observe the hatchlings trekking to the sea.

Escobilla Beach, near Puerto Escondido, seems to be the favored nesting grounds of the Ridley turtle. In 1991, the Mexican government established the Centro Mexicano la Tortuga, known locally as the **Turtle Museum.** On view are examples of all species of marine turtles living in Mexico, plus six species of freshwater turtles and two species of land turtles. The center (✆ **958/584-3376;** www.centromexicanodelatortuga.org) lies on **Mazunte Beach** ★, near the town of the same name about an hour and a half from Puerto Escondido. Hours are Tuesday through Saturday 10am to 6:30pm, and Sunday 10am to 4:30pm; suggested donation is 25 pesos. If you come between July and September, ask to join an overnight expedition to Escobilla Beach to see mother turtles scuttle to the beach to lay their eggs. The museum is near a unique shop that sells excellent naturally produced soaps, shampoos, bath oils, and other personal-care products. All are packaged by the local community as part of a project to replace lost income from turtle poaching. Buses go to Mazunte from Puerto Angel about every half-hour, and a taxi ride is 60 pesos. You can fit this in with a trip to Zipolite Beach (see "A Trip to Puerto Angel: Backpacking Beach Haven," below). Buses from Puerto Escondido don't stop in Mazunte; you can cover the 65km (40 miles) in a taxi or rental car.

The tourism cooperative at **Ventanilla** provides another chance to get up close to the turtles. The villagers here have created their own ecological reserve that encompasses a nearby lagoon, inhabited by crocodiles and dozens of species of birds, and a beach where sea turtles lay their eggs. There's also a great organic restaurant called Maiz Azul. A boat ride to see the crocs costs 50 pesos. Turtles lay their eggs here year-round, although summer is the prime season, so there's always a possibility that a nest is about to hatch. Helping the locals release the eggs is free. Ventanilla is a 30-peso taxi ride from Mazunte or the nearby beaches, but if you're planning to stay past sunset, ask your driver to wait; it's a long walk in the dark to the main highway.

GUIDED WALKING TOURS For local information and guided walking tours, visit the **Oaxaca Tourist Bureau** booth (✆ **954/582-1186;** ginainpuerto@yahoo.com). It's just west of the pedestrian street. Ask for Gina, who speaks excellent English and is incredibly helpful. She provides information with a smile, and many say she knows more about Puerto Escondido than any other person. On her days off, Gina offers walking tours to the market and to little-known nearby ruins. Filled with history and information on native vegetation, a day with Gina promises fun, adventure, and insight into local culture.

A Mixtec ceremonial center was discovered in early 2000, just east of Puerto Escondido, and is considered a major discovery. The site covers many acres with about 10 pyramids and a ball court, with the pyramids appearing as hills covered in vegetation. A number of large carved stones have been found. Situated on a hilltop, it commands a spectacular view of Puerto Escondido and the Pacific coast. The large archaeological site spans several privately owned plots of land and is not open to the public, although Gina has been known to offer a guided walking tour to it.

Ecotours & Other Adventurous Explorations

An excellent provider of ecologically oriented tour services is **Rutas de Aventura** ★, Hotel Santa Fe (✆ **954/582-0170;** www.hotelsantafe.com). Gustavo Boltjes speaks fluent English and offers kayak adventures, hiking excursions, and mountain-bike tours. He also leads waterfall hikes, camping trips, and overnight agritourism adventures to learn about local farming and organic coffee production, including trips to a local coffee plantation that has been built upon principles of environmental sustainability. For more, see www.fincalasnieves.com.mx.

Turismo Dimar Travel Agency, on the landward side just inside the Adoquín (✆ **954/582-0737** or 582-2305; fax 954/582-1551; daily 8am–9pm), is another excellent source of information and can arrange all types of tours and travel. Manager Gaudencio Díaz Martinez speaks English and can arrange individualized tours or more organized ones, such as **Michael Malone's Hidden Voyages Ecotours.** Malone, a Canadian ornithologist, leads dawn and sunset trips in high season (winter) to **Manialtepec Lagoon,** a bird-filled mangrove lagoon about 20km (12 miles) northwest of Puerto Escondido. The kayak tour (750 pesos) includes a stop on a secluded beach for a swim. For more, see www.peleewings.ca/ecco.php

One of the most popular all-day tours offered by both companies is to **Chacahua Lagoon National Park,** about 65km (40 miles) west. It costs $45 with Dimar, $52 with Michael Malone. These are true ecotours—small groups treading lightly. You visit a beautiful sandy spit of beach and the lagoon, which has incredible bird life and flowers, including black orchids. Crocodiles are sometimes spotted here, too. Locals provide fresh barbecued fish on the beach. If you know Spanish and get information from the tourism office, it's possible to stay overnight under a small *palapa,* but bring insect repellent.

An interesting and slightly out-of-the-ordinary excursion is **Aventura Submarina,** Av. Pérez Gasga 601A, in front of the tourism office (✆ **954/582-2353**). Jorge, who speaks fluent English and is a certified scuba instructor, guides individuals and small groups of qualified divers along the Coco trench just offshore. The price is $60 for a two-tank dive. This outfit offers a refresher scuba course at no extra charge. Jorge also arranges deep-sea fishing, surfing, and trips to lesser-known nearby swimming beaches. **Omar** (✆ **954/559-4406**) runs dolphin-watching tours in high season (winter).

Fishermen keep their colorful *pangas* (small boats) on the beach beside the Adoquín. A **fisherman's tour** around the coastline in a *panga* costs about 400 pesos, but a ride to Puerto Angelito beaches is only 55 pesos. Most hotels offer or will gladly arrange tours to meet your needs. The waters here are filled with marlin, tuna, and swordfish.

SHOPPING

During high season, businesses and shops are generally open all day. During low season, many close between 2 and 4pm.

The Adoquín holds a row of tourist shops selling straw hats, postcards, and T-shirts, plus a few excellent shops featuring Guatemalan, Oaxacan, and Balinese clothing and art. You can also get a tattoo or rent surfboards and boogie boards. Interspersed among the shops, hotels, restaurants, and bars are pharmacies and minimarkets. The largest of these is **Oh! Mar,** Av. Pérez Gasga 502. It sells anything you'd need for a day at the beach, plus phone (Ladatel) cards and Cuban cigars.

The first surf shop in Puerto Escondido, **Central Surf** (✆ **954/582-2285;** www.centralsurfshop.com), on Zicatela Beach, Calle del Morro s/n, rents and sells surfboards, offers surf lessons, and sells related gear, including custom-made surf trunks. Board rentals usually go for about $10 to $20 per day, with lessons available for $60 for 2 hours. In front of the Rockaway Resort on Zicatela Beach, there's a 24-hour **minisuper** (no phone) that sells the necessities: beer, suntan lotion, and basic food.

Also of interest is **Bazar Santa Fe** ★★, Hotel Santa Fe lobby, Calle del Morro s/n, Zicatela Beach (✆ **954/582-0170**), a small shop that sells antiques, vintage Oaxacan embroidered clothing, jewelry, religious artifacts, and gourmet organic coffee grown on the hotel's own farm. Right next to Central Surf, **Bikini Brazil,** Playa Zicatela, Calle del Morro s/n (✆ **954/582-2555**), you'll find the hottest bikinis under the sun imported from Brazil, land of the *tanga* (string bikini). Another cool beach shop on Playa Zicatela, Calle del Moro s/n, is **Trapos y Harapos** (✆ **954/582-0759**), which sells bathing suits, sandals, and surfboards.

PUERTO ESCONDIDO AFTER DARK

Sunset-watching is a ritual to plan your days around, and good lookout points abound. At Zicatela, you can watch the sun descend behind the surfers, and at **La Galería,** located on the third floor of the Arco Iris hotel, you can catch up on local gossip while enjoying a sundowner. It has a nightly happy hour (with live music during high season) from 5:30 to 7:30pm. Other great sunset spots are the **Hotel Santa Fe,** at the junction of Zicatela and Marineros beaches, and the rooftop bar of **Hotel Flor de María.** For a more tranquil, romantic setting, take a cab or walk a half-hour or so west to the cliff-top lawn of the **Hotel Posada Real.**

Puerto's nightlife will satisfy anyone dedicated to late nights and good music. Most nightspots are open until 3am or until customers leave. The Adoquín offers an ample selection of clubs. Favorites include **Wipeout** (✆ **954/582-2302**), a multilevel club that packs in the crowds until 4am, and **Blue Station,** open from 9pm to 1am.

On Zicatela Beach, **Bar Fly** (www.barfly.com.mx) sits upstairs overlooking the beach and features a DJ spinning Latin, retro, and electronic hits. It's open nightly from 9pm to 3am on Calle de Moro s/n. **Casa Babylon,** a few doors down, is a bohemian beach bar with a book exchange and table games. It's open nightly from 7pm until late and has a hip surfer vibe. There's a movie theater on Playa Zicatela called **Cinemar** (✆ **954/582-2288**). It's a pretty simple setup consisting of a small bookstore, a large screen, and some beach chairs. It serves up popcorn and movies nightly, and also rents surfboards during the day.

A TRIP TO PUERTO ANGEL: BACKPACKING BEACH HAVEN

Seventy-four kilometers (46 miles) southeast of Puerto Escondido and 50km (31 miles) northwest of the Bays of Huatulco lies the tiny fishing port of **Puerto Angel** (*pwer*-toh *ahn*-hehl). With its beautiful beaches, unpaved streets, and budget hotels, Puerto Angel is popular with the international backpacking set and those seeking an inexpensive and restful vacation. Repeated hurricane damage and the 1999 earthquake took its toll on the

Warning! Important Travel Note

Although car and bus hijackings along Hwy. 200 north to Acapulco have greatly decreased (thanks to improved security measures and police patrols), you're still wise to travel this road only during the day. There are numerous military checkpoints, and the road at points is dirt-only and pothole ridden.

village, driving the best accommodations out of business, but Puerto Angel continues to attract visitors. Its small bay and several inlets offer peaceful swimming and good snorkeling. The village's way of life is slow and simple: Fishermen leave very early in the morning and return with their catch before noon. Taxis make up most of the traffic, and the bus from Pochutla passes every half-hour or so.

Essentials

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING **By Car** North or south from **Hwy. 200,** take coastal **Hwy. 175** inland to Puerto Angel. The road is well marked with signs to Puerto Angel. From Huatulco or Puerto Escondido, the trip should take about an hour.

By Taxi Taxis are readily available to take you to Puerto Angel or Zipolite Beach for a reasonable price (about 40 pesos to or from either destination), or to the Huatulco airport or Puerto Escondido (about 550 pesos).

By Bus There are no direct buses from Puerto Escondido or Huatulco to Puerto Angel; however, numerous buses leave Puerto Escondido and Huatulco for Pochutla, 11km (6¾ miles) north of Puerto Angel. Take the bus to Pochutla, and then switch to a bus going to Puerto Angel. If you arrive in Pochutla from Huatulco or Puerto Escondido, you may be dropped at one of several bus stations that line the main street; walk 1 or 2 blocks toward the large sign reading POSADA DON JOSE. The buses to Puerto Angel are in the lot just before the sign.

ORIENTATION The town center is only about 4 blocks long, oriented more or less east-west. There are few signs in the village, and off the main street, much of Puerto Angel is a narrow sand-and-dirt path. The navy base is toward the west end of town, just before the creek crossing toward Playa Panteón (Cemetery Beach).

Puerto Angel has several public (Ladatel) telephones that use widely available prepaid phone cards. The closest bank is **Bancomer** in Pochutla, which changes money Monday through Friday from 9am to 6pm, Saturday from 9am to 1pm.

Beaches, Watersports & Boat Trips

The golden sands and peaceful village life of Puerto Angel and the nearby towns are all the reasons you'll need to visit. Playa Principal, the main beach, lies between the Mexican navy base and the pier that's home to the local fishing fleet. Near the pier, fishermen pull their colorful boats onto the beach and unload their catch in the late morning while trucks wait to haul it off to processing plants in Veracruz. The rest of the beach seems light-years from the world of work and commitments. Except on Mexican holidays, it's relatively deserted. It's important to note that Pacific coast currents deposit trash on Puerto Angel beaches. The locals do a fairly good job of keeping it picked up, but the currents are constant.

Playa Panteón is the main swimming and snorkeling beach. Cemetery Beach, ominous as that sounds, is about a 15-minute walk from the center, straight through town on the main street that skirts the beach. The *panteón* (cemetery), on the right, is worth a visit, with its brightly colored tombstones and bougainvillea.

In Playa Panteón, some of the *palapa* restaurants and a few of the hotels rent snorkeling and scuba gear and can arrange boat trips, but they tend to be expensive. Check the quality and condition of gear—particularly scuba gear—that you're renting.

Playa Zipolite (see-poh-*lee*-teh) and its village are 6km (3¾ miles) down a paved road from Puerto Angel and about an hour and a half from Puerto Escondido. Taxis charge about 45 pesos from Puerto Angel. You can catch a *colectivo* on the main street in the town center and share the cost.

Zipolite is well known as a good surf break and as a nude beach, although there's more nudity these days at nearby Chambala beach. Although public nudity (including topless sunbathing) is technically illegal, it's allowed here—this is one of only a handful of beaches in Mexico that permits it. This sort of open-mindedness has attracted an increasing number of young European travelers. Most sunbathers concentrate beyond a large rock outcropping at the far end of the beach. Police will occasionally patrol the area, but they are much more intent on drug users than on sunbathers. The ocean and currents are strong (that's why the surf is so good), and a number of drownings have occurred over the years—so know your limits. There are places to tie up a hammock and a few *palapa* restaurants for a lunch and a cold beer.

Hotels in Playa Zipolite are basic and rustic; most have rugged walls and *palapa* roofs. Prices range from $10 to $50 a night.

Traveling north on Hwy. 175, you'll come to another hot surf break and a beach of spectacular beauty: **Playa San Agustinillo.** If you want to stay in San Agustinillo, there are no formal accommodations, but you'll see numerous signs for local guesthouses, which rent rooms for an average of $15 to $25 a night, often with a home-cooked meal included. One of the pleasures of a stay in Puerto Angel is discovering the many hidden beaches nearby and spending the day. Local boatmen and hotels can give details and quote rates for this service.

You can stay in Puerto Angel near Playa Principal in the tiny town, or at Playa Panteón. Most accommodations are basic, older, cement-block style hotels, not meriting a full-blown description. Between Playa Panteón and town are several bungalow and guesthouse setups with budget accommodations.

4 BAHIAS DE HUATULCO

64km (40 miles) SE of Puerto Angel; 680km (422 miles) SE of Acapulco

Huatulco has the same unspoiled nature and laid-back attitude as its neighbors to the north, Puerto Angel and Puerto Escondido, but with a difference. Amid the natural splendor, you'll also encounter indulgent hotels and modern roads and facilities.

Pristine beaches and jungle landscapes can make for an idyllic retreat from the stress of daily life—and when viewed from a luxury hotel balcony, even better. Huatulco is for those who want to enjoy the beauty of nature during the day and then retreat to well-appointed comfort by night.

Undeveloped stretches of pure white sand and isolated coves await the promised growth of Huatulco, which lags far behind Cancún, the previous resort planned by FONATUR,

Mexico's Tourism Development arm. FONATUR development of the Bahías de Huatulco is an ambitious project that aims to cover 21,000 hectares (51,870 acres) of land, with over 16,000 hectares (39,520 acres) to remain ecological preserves. The small local communities have been transplanted from the coast into Crucecita. The area consists of three sections: **Santa Cruz, Crucecita,** and **Tangolunda Bay** (see "City Layout," below).

Though Huatulco has increasingly become known for its ecotourism attractions—including river rafting, rappelling, and hiking jungle trails—it has yet to develop a true personality. There's little shopping, nightlife, or even dining outside of the hotels, and what is available is expensive for the quality. However, the service in the area is generally very good.

A cruise-ship dock in Santa Cruz Bay has given the sleepy resort an important business boost. The dock handles up to two 3,000-passenger cruise ships at a time (passengers are currently ferried to shore aboard tenders). Still being refined is the relatively new 20,000-hectare (49,400-acre) "eco-archaeological" park, **El Botazoo,** at Punta Celeste, where there is a recently discovered archaeological site. Hiking, rappelling, and bird-watching are popular activities there. This new development is all being handled with ecological sensitivity in mind.

If you're drawn to snorkeling, diving, boat cruises, and simple relaxation, Huatulco nicely fits the bill. Nine bays encompass 36 beaches and countless inlets and coves. Huatulco's main problem has been securing enough incoming flights. It relies heavily on charter service from the United States and Canada.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There & Departing

BY PLANE **Mexicana** flights (✆ **01-800/801-2030** toll-free in Mexico) connect Huatulco with Mexico City. Prices start at about $150 each way. **Continental** (✆ **800/523-3273**) also offers direct flights from the U.S. for about $280 each way.

From Huatulco's international airport (airport code: HUX; ✆ **958/581-9007** or 581-9008), about 20km (12 miles) northwest of the Bahías de Huatulco, private **taxis** charge 450 pesos to Crucecita, $46 to Santa Cruz, and 550 pesos to Tangolunda. **Transportes Terrestres** (✆ **958/581-9014** or 581-9024) *colectivos* fares are about 100 pesos per person. When returning, make sure to ask for a taxi, unless you have a lot of luggage. Taxis to the airport run 460 pesos, but unless specifically requested, you'll get a Suburban, which costs 600 pesos.

Hertz (✆ **958/581-9092**), **Europcar** (✆ **958/581-9094**), and **Thrifty** (✆ **958/581-9000**) all offer car rentals at the airport, and Hertz also has an in-town location (✆ **958/581-0588**), as does Europcar (✆ **958/583-4067**). Because Huatulco is spread out and has excellent roads, you may want to consider a rental car, at least for 1 or 2 days, to explore the area.

BY CAR Coastal **Hwy. 200** leads to Huatulco (via Pochutla) from the north and is generally in good condition. The drive from Puerto Escondido takes just over 2½ hours. The road is well maintained, but it's filled with curves and potholes and doesn't have lights, so avoid travel after sunset. Allow at least 6 hours for the trip from Oaxaca City on mountainous **Hwy. 175.**

BY BUS Crucecita has three bus stations, all within a few blocks, but none in Santa Cruz or Tangolunda. The **Gacela** and **Estrella Blanca** station, at the corner of Gardenia and Palma Real, handles service to Acapulco, Mexico City, Puerto Escondido, and Pochutla. The **Cristóbal Colón** station (✆ **958/587-0261**) is at Avenida Riscalillo, Sector T. It serves

 destinations throughout Mexico, including Oaxaca, Puerto Escondido, and Pochutla. The **Estrella del Valle** station, on Jasmin between Sabali and Carrizal, serves Oaxaca.

Orientation

VISITOR INFORMATION The **State Tourism Office,** or Oficina del Turismo (✆ **958/581-0176;** www.baysofhuatulco.com.mx), has an information booth in Tangolunda Bay, near the Grand Pacific hotel. It's open Monday to Friday from 8am to 5pm.

CITY LAYOUT The overall resort area is called **Bahías de Huatulco** and includes nine bays. The town of Santa María de Huatulco, the original settlement in this area, is 27km (17 miles) inland. **Santa Cruz Huatulco,** usually called Santa Cruz, was the first developed area on the coast. It has a central plaza with a bandstand kiosk, which has been converted into a cafe that serves regionally grown coffee. It also has an artisans' market on the edge of the plaza that borders the main road, a few hotels and restaurants, and a marina where bay tours and fishing trips set sail. **Juárez** is Santa Cruz's 4-block-long main street, anchored at one end by the Hotel Castillo Huatulco and at the other by the Meigas Binniguenda hotel. Opposite the Hotel Castillo is the marina, and beyond it are restaurants in new colonial-style buildings facing the beach. The area's banks are on Juárez. It's impossible to get lost, and you can take in almost everything at a glance. This bay is the site of Huatulco's cruise-ship dock.

About 3km (1¾ miles) inland from Santa Cruz is **Crucecita,** a planned city that sprang up in 1985. It centers on a lovely grassy plaza. This is the residential area for the resorts, with neighborhoods of new stucco homes mixed with small apartment complexes. Crucecita has evolved into a lovely, traditional town where you'll find the area's best and most reasonably priced restaurants, plus some shopping and several less expensive hotels.

Until other bays are developed, **Tangolunda Bay,** 5km (3 miles) east, is the focal point of development. Over time, half the bays will have resorts. For now, Tangolunda has an 18-hole golf course, as well as the Las Brisas, Quinta Real, Barceló Huatulco, Royal, Casa del Mar, and Camino Real Zaashila hotels, among others. Small strip centers with a few restaurants occupy each end of Tangolunda Bay. **Chahué Bay,** between Tangolunda and Santa Cruz, is a small bay with a beach club and other facilities under construction along with houses and a few small hotels.

GETTING AROUND Crucecita, Santa Cruz, and Tangolunda are too far apart to walk, but **taxis** are inexpensive and readily available. Crucecita has taxi stands opposite the Hotel Grifer and on the Plaza Principal. Taxis are readily available through hotels in Santa Cruz and Tangolunda. The fare between Santa Cruz and Tangolunda is roughly 40 pesos; between Santa Cruz and Crucecita, 30 pesos; between Crucecita and Tangolunda, 30 pesos. To explore the area, you can hire a taxi by the hour (about 200 pesos) or for the day.

There is **minibus service** between towns; the fare is 5 pesos. In Santa Cruz, catch the bus across the street from Castillo Huatulco; in Tangolunda, in front of the Grand Pacific; and in Crucecita, cater-cornered from the Hotel Grifer.

Fast Facts Bahías de Huatulco

Area Code The area code is **958.**

Banks All three areas have banks with ATMs, including the main Mexican banks, Banamex and Bancomer, and HSBC. They change money during business hours,

Monday through Friday from 9am to 4pm. Banks line Calle Juárez in Santa Cruz and surround the central plaza in Crucecita.

Drugstores **Farmacía El Centro,** just off the central plaza in Crucecita (✆ **958/587-0232**), is one of the largest drugstores in town. It's open Monday through Saturday from 8am to 10pm and Sunday from 8am to noon. **Farmacía La Clínica** (✆ **958/587-0591**), Sabalí 1602, Crucecita, offers 24-hour service and delivery.

Emergencies **Police emergency** (✆ **060**); **federal police** (✆ **958/587-0815**); **transit police** (✆ **958/587-0186**); and **Cruz Roja (Red Cross),** Bulevar Chahué 110 (✆ **958/587-1188**).

Hospital **Clínica Médico Quirúrgica,** Jabali 403 (✆ **958/587-0687** or 587-0600), is a medical clinic with emergency care run by Dr. Ricardo Carrillo, who speaks English.

Information **Oficina del Turismo,** the State Tourism Office (✆ **958/581-0176** or 581-0177; sedetur6@oaxaca.gob.mx), has an information module in Tangolunda Bay, near the Campo de Golf. It's open weekdays 8am to 5pm.

Internet Access Several Internet cafes are in Crucecita. One is at the Terra-Cotta cafe in the Misión de los Arcos, Av. Gardenia 902 (✆ **958/587-0165**), which, in addition to paid service, is a free Wi-Fi hot spot. Another lies on the ground-floor level of the **Hotel Plaza Conejo,** Av. Guamúchil 208, across from the main plaza (✆ **958/587-0054**). It's about 15 pesos per hour.

Post Office The *correo,* at Bulevar Chahué 100, Sector R, Crucecita (✆ **958/587-0551**), is open Monday through Saturday from 8am to 4:30pm.

WHERE TO STAY

Moderate- and budget-priced hotels in Santa Cruz and Crucecita are generally more expensive than similar hotels in other Mexican beach resorts. The luxury hotels have comparable rates, especially when they're part of a package that includes airfare. The trend here is toward all-inclusive resorts, which in Huatulco are an especially good option, given the lack of memorable dining and nightlife options. Hotels that are not oceanfront generally have an arrangement with a beach club at Santa Cruz or Chahué Bay, and offer shuttle service. Low-season rates apply August through November only. Parking is free at these hotels; the 18% tax is not included in the rack rates listed below.

Expensive

Camino Real Zaashila ★★ Kids One of the original hotels in Tangolunda Bay, the Camino Real Zaashila sits on a wide stretch of sandy beach secluded from other beaches by small rock outcroppings. It has been renovated with a newly designed *palapa* bar with sit-down check-in. The calm water, perfect for swimming and snorkeling, makes it ideal for families. The white stucco building is Mediterranean in style and washed in colors on the ocean side. The boldly decorated rooms are large and have an oceanview balcony or terrace and a large bathroom with an Italian marble tub/shower. Each of the 41 club rooms on the lower levels has its own private plunge pool and includes buffet breakfast and evening cocktails. The main pool is a free-form design that spans 150m (500 ft.) of beach, with chaises built into the shallow edges. Well-manicured tropical gardens surround it and the guest rooms.

Bulevar Benito Juárez 5, Bahía de Tangolunda, 70989 Huatulco, Oax. ✆ **800/722-6466** in the U.S., or 958/581-0460. Fax 958/581-0468. www.camino-zaashila.com. 120 units. High season $345 and up double; low season $240 and up double, AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; lobby bar w/live music; babysitting; kids' club; concierge; Internet; 2 large outdoor pools; outdoor whirlpool; room service; lighted tennis court; watersports. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar.

Quinta Real ★★★ Double Moorish domes mark this romantic, relaxed hotel, known for its richly appointed cream-and-white decor and complete attention to detail. From the welcoming reception area to the luxurious beach club below, the staff emphasizes excellence in service. The small groupings of suites are built into the sloping hill to Tangolunda Bay and offer spectacular views of the ocean and golf course. Suites on the eastern edge of the resort sit above the highway, which generates some traffic noise. Interiors are elegant and comfortable, with stylish Mexican furniture, original art, wood-beamed ceilings, and marble tub/showers with whirlpool tubs. Balconies have overstuffed seating areas and stone-inlay floors. Eight Grand Class Suites and the Presidential Suite have private pools. This is one of the most luxurious hotels in Huatulco and the top Mexican hotel chain.

Bulevar Benito Juárez Lt. 2, Bahía de Tangolunda, 70989 Huatulco, Oax. ✆ **888/561-2817** in the U.S., or 958/581-0428, -0430. Fax 958/581-0429. www.quintareal.com. 28 units. $190 and up suites. AE, MC, V. Parking. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar w/stunning view; beach club; concierge; 2 outdoor pools (1 for children); room service; tennis court. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar.

Moderate

Hotel Meicer Palmier Huatulco ★ Huatulco's first hotel retains the charm and comfort that originally made it memorable. Rooms have Mexican-tile floors and colonial-style furniture; French doors open onto tiny wrought-iron balconies overlooking Juárez or the pool and gardens. There's a section with newer rooms that have modern teak furnishings. A nice shady area surrounds the small pool in back of the lobby. The hotel is away from the marina at the far end of Juárez, only a few blocks from the water. It offers free transportation every hour to the beach club at Chahué.

Bulevar Santa Cruz 201, 70989 Santa Cruz de Huatulco, Oax. ✆ **958/587-0129.** www.meicerhotels.com. 165 units. 600–1,200 pesos double. Children 6 and younger stay free in parent's room. MC, V. **Amenities:** Large *palapa*-topped restaurant and bar; shuttle to beach; small outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer.

Inexpensive

Hotel Las Palmas The central location and accommodating staff add to the appeal of the bright, cheerful rooms at Las Palmas. Located a half-block from the main plaza, it's connected to the popular El Sabor de Oaxaca restaurant (see "Where to Dine," below), which offers room service to guests. The accommodations have tile floors, cotton textured bedspreads, tile showers, and cable TV; most also have balconies. This hotel is partnered with another inexpensive and reliable choice in case this one sells out, featuring similarly comfortable rooms with a bright, open courtyard overlooking El Sabor restaurant.

Av. Guamúchil 206, 70989 Bahías de Huatulco, Oax. ✆ **958/587-0060.** Fax 958/587-0057. 10 units. High season 950 pesos double; low season 500 pesos double. AE, MC, V. *In room:* A/C, TV.

Misión de los Arcos ★★ Finds This exceptional hotel, just a block from the central plaza, is similar in style to the elegant Quinta Real—but at a fraction of the cost. The hotel is mostly white, accented with abundant greenery, giving it a fresh, inviting feel. The simple rooms continue the theme, washed in white, with cream and beige bed coverings and upholstery. Each room contains understated accents such as lush potted plants and terra-cotta tile embellishments. At the entrance level, an excellent cafe offers Internet access, Huatulco's regionally grown coffee, tea, pastries, and ice cream. It's open from

7:30am to 11:30pm. The adjacent **Terra-Cotta** restaurant (see below) serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and is equally stylish and budget friendly. Although there's no pool, for 20 pesos, guests can use the Castillo Beach Club (✆ **958/587-0144**), at Chahué bay, open daily from 9am to 7pm.

Gardenia 902, La Crucecita, 70989 Huatulco, Oax. ✆ **958/587-0165.** Fax 958/587-1903. www.mision delosarcos.com. 16 units. High season 800 pesos double, 850–1,050 pesos suite; low season 450–500 pesos double, 500–750 pesos suite. Rates increase over Christmas and Easter holiday periods. AE, MC, V. Street parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; nearby beach club. *In room:* A/C, TV, Wi-Fi.

WHERE TO DINE

El Sabor de Oaxaca ★★★ OAXACAN This is the best place in the area to enjoy authentic, richly flavorful Oaxacan food, among the best of traditional Mexican cuisine. This colorful restaurant is a local favorite that also meets the quality standards of tourists. A popular item is the mixed grill for two, with an Oaxacan beef filet, tender pork tenderloin, and chorizo (zesty Mexican sausage). If you're feeling adventurous, try the salty grilled *chapulines* (grasshoppers, an Oaxacan specialty). Generous breakfasts include hearty Oaxacan favorites such as *emoladas,* tortillas generously stuffed with meat fillings and soaked in the zesty traditional *mole* sauce.

Av. Guamúchil 206, Crucecita. ✆ **958/587-0060.** Fax 958/587-0057. Breakfast 55–80 pesos; main courses 80–175 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 7am–11pm.

Noches Oaxaqueñas/Don Porfirio ★ SEAFOOD/OAXACAN This dinner show presents the colorful, traditional folkloric dances of Oaxaca in an open-air courtyard reminiscent of an old hacienda (but in a modern strip mall). The dancers perform traditional ballet under the direction of owner Celicia Flores Ramírez, wife of Don Willo Porfirio. House specialties include grilled lobster, shrimp with *mescal* flambéed at the table, and spaghetti marinara with seafood, along with a fountain of seafood that includes shrimp, octopus, and snails, all cooked on hot grills right in front of your table. Meat lovers will enjoy American-style cuts or a juicy *arrachera* (skirt steak). The *Guelaguetza Show* showcases an important annual cultural celebration in Oaxaca. There are two-for-one specials for children, and the show normally takes place nightly at 8pm during high season, and Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday nights at 8pm in low season.

Bulevar Benito Juárez s/n (across from Royal Maeva), Tangolunda Bay. ✆ **958/581-0001.** Main courses 120–250 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily noon–11pm. Show 130 extra.

Terra-Cotta ★ Finds INTERNATIONAL/MEXICAN Located inside the Hotel Misión de los Arcos, this stylish yet casual restaurant is best known for breakfast, and it's just as tasty at lunch and dinner. Start the day in this whitewashed, Mediterranean setting with gourmet coffee, fruit salad, and an array of morning favorites, including specials such as French toast stuffed with cream cheese and orange marmalade. Lunch and dinner share the same menu, which offers fajitas, baby back ribs, gourmet tacos, and six different sandwich options. Scrumptious desserts such as caramelized pineapple with coconut ice cream offer a sweet finish.

Gardenia 902, at the Misión de los Arcos (p. 420), in front of La Crucecita's central plaza. ✆ **958/587-0165.** www.misiondelosarcos.com. Breakfast 38–78 pesos; lunch and dinner main courses 49–195 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 7:30am–11:30pm.

BEACHES, WATERSPORTS & OTHER ACTIVITIES

Attractions around Huatulco concentrate on the nine bays and their watersports. The number of ecotours and interesting side trips into the surrounding mountains is growing.

Though it isn't a traditional Mexican town, the community of Crucecita is worth visiting. Just off the central plaza is the **Iglesia de Guadalupe,** with a large mural of Mexico's patron saint gracing the entire ceiling of the chapel. The image of the Virgin is set against a deep blue night sky and includes 52 stars—a modern interpretation of Juan Diego's cloak.

You can dine in Crucecita for a fraction of the price in Tangolunda Bay, with the added benefit of some local color. Considering that shopping in Huatulco is generally poor, you'll find the best choices here, in the shops around the central plaza. They tend to stay open late, and offer a good selection of regional goods and typical tourist take-homes, including *artesanía,* silver jewelry, Cuban cigars, and tequila. A small free trolley train takes visitors on a short tour of the town.

BEACHES A section of the beach at Santa Cruz (away from the small boats) is an inviting sunning spot. Beach clubs for guests at non-oceanfront hotels are here. In addition, several restaurants are on the beach, and *palapa* umbrellas run down to the water's edge. For about 160 pesos one-way, *pangas* from the marina in Santa Cruz will ferry you to **La Entrega Beach,** also in Santa Cruz Bay. There you'll find a row of *palapa* restaurants, all with beach chairs out front. Find an empty one, and use that restaurant for your refreshment needs. A snorkeling equipment rental booth is about midway down the beach, and there's some fairly good snorkeling on the end away from where the boats arrive.

Between Santa Cruz and Tangolunda bays is **Chahué Bay.** The beach club has *palapas,* beach volleyball, and refreshments for an entrance fee of about 35 pesos. However, a strong undertow makes this a dangerous place for swimming.

Tangolunda Bay beach, fronting the best hotels, is wide and beautiful. Theoretically, all beaches in Mexico are public; however, nonguests at Tangolunda hotels may have difficulty entering the hotels to get to the beach.

BAY CRUISES & TOURS Huatulco's major attraction is its coastline—a magnificent stretch of pristine bays bordered by an odd blend of cactus and jungle vegetation right at the water's edge. The only way to really grasp its beauty is to take a cruise of the bays, stopping at **Organo** or **Maguey Bay** for a dip in the crystal-clear water and a fish lunch at a *palapa* restaurant on the beach.

One way to arrange a bay tour is to go to the **boat-owners' cooperative** (Cooperativo Tangolunda; ✆ **958/587-0081**), located in a white ticket booth with a blue roof near the entrance to the marina. Prices are posted, and you can buy tickets for sightseeing, snorkeling, or fishing. Beaches other than La Entrega, including Maguey and San Agustín, are noted for offshore snorkeling. They also have *palapa* restaurants and other facilities. Several of these beaches, however, are completely undeveloped, so you will need to bring your own provisions. Boatmen at the cooperative will arrange return pickup at an appointed time. Prices run about $25 for 1 to 10 persons to La Entrega, and $50 for a trip to Maguey and Organo bays. The farthest bay is San Agustín; that all-day trip will run $100 in a private *panga.*

Another option is to join an organized daylong bay cruise. Any travel agency can easily make arrangements. Cruises are about $40 per person, plus $5 for snorkeling equipment rental and lunch. One excursion is on the *Tequila,* complete with guide, drinks, and onboard entertainment. Another, more romantic option is the *Luna Azul,* a 13m (43-ft.) sailboat that runs bay tours and sunset sails.

Ecotours are growing in popularity and number throughout the Bays of Huatulco. The mountain areas surrounding the Copalita River are also home to other natural treasures worth exploring, including the **Copalitilla Cascades.** Thirty kilometers (19 miles) north of Tangolunda, at 395m (1,296 ft.) above sea level, this group of waterfalls—averaging 20

to 25m (66–82 ft.) in height—form natural whirlpools and clear pools for swimming. The area is also popular for horseback riding and rappelling.

An all-day **shopping tour** takes you around the area, including La Crucecita, to peruse quality handmade arts and crafts, and experience authentic Oaxacan cuisine. Contact **Paraíso Tours** (http://paraisohuatulco.com) for reservations.

Guided **horseback riding** through the jungles and to Conejos and Magueyito beach makes for a wonderful way to see the natural beauty of the area. The ride lasts 3 hours, with departures at 9:45am and 1:45pm, and costs $35 to $45. Contact **Caballo del Mar Ranch** (✆ **958/589-9387**).

Another recommended guide for both **hiking** and **bird-watching** is Laura Gonzalez, of **Nature Tours Huatulco** (✆ **958/583-4047;** lauriycky@hotmail.com). Choices include a hike around Punta Celeste with views of the river, open sea, and forest, for sightings of terrestrial and aquatic birds. The 3½-hour tour can be made in the early morning or late afternoon and costs $45. An 8-hour excursion to the Ventanilla Lagoons takes you by boat through a mangrove to view birds, iguanas, and crocodiles. The cost is $80, including lunch. Tours include transportation, binoculars, specialized bird guide, and beverages.

GOLF & TENNIS The 18-hole, par-72 **Tangolunda Golf Course** (✆ **958/581-0037**) is adjacent to Tangolunda Bay. It has tennis courts as well, for $11 per hour. The greens fee is $80 for 18 holes and $6 for 9 holes; carts cost $34. Tennis courts are also available at the **Barceló** hotel (✆ **958/581-0055**) for 125 pesos per person per hour and 10 pesos extra for lights.

SHOPPING Shopping in the area is limited and unmemorable. It concentrates in the **Santa Cruz Market,** by the marina in Santa Cruz, and in the **Crucecita Market,** on Guamúchil, a half-block from the plaza. Both are open daily from 10am to 8pm (no phones). Among the prototypical souvenirs, you may want to search out regional specialties, which include Oaxacan embroidered blouses and dresses, and *barro negro,* pottery made from dark clay exclusively found in the Oaxaca region. Also in Crucecita is the Plaza Oaxaca, adjacent to the central plaza. Its clothing shops include **Poco Loco Club/ Coconut's Boutique** (✆ **958/587-0279**), for casual sportswear; and **Mic Mac** (✆ **958/587-0565**), for beachwear and souvenirs. **Coconuts** (✆ **958/587-0279**) has English-language magazines, books, and music.

HUATULCO AFTER DARK

Huatulco has a very limited selection of dance clubs. What clubs there are, seem to change ownership—and names—almost annually. Check with your hotel to see if any new places have opened. A hot spot is **Bar La Crema** (www.lacremahuatulco.com), in Crucecita (about 4 blocks south of the *zócalo,* at the corner of Bugambilia and La Ceiba), with a lounge atmosphere and a mix of tunes. Nearby is **Café Dublin** (www.gpshow.com/dublin), Carrizal 504 (1 block east and a half-block south from the *zócalo*), an Irish pub with a book exchange. Both bars open in the evening during high season and stay open as long as the management sees fit; hours are sporadic in low season. The **Tipsy Blowfish** (✆ **958/587-2844;** www.thetipsyblowfish.com) plays rock music and features televised sports. The bar is open daily from noon to 4am during high season, with limited hours in low season. It's located on Boulevard Tangolunda across from the golf course.

La Papaya (✆ **958/583-4911**), on Bulevar Chahué, is a popular dance club, open Thursday through Saturday into the wee hours. Each Tuesday, the **Barceló Resort** (✆ **958/583-1440**) hosts its **Fiesta Mexicana** from 7 to 11pm, featuring folkloric dances, mariachi music, and a buffet of Mexican food and drinks.

12

Oaxaca

by David Baird

The main draw of the large, southern state of Oaxaca is its high population of Indians and their vibrant culture and distinct way of viewing things. The Indians belong to several different ethnic groups, each with its own language, and they don't just keep to the villages—you see them everywhere. Over the centuries, their practices, beliefs, and customs have percolated into the local culture at large to such a degree that Indian and non-Indian share a certain worldview that is a bit removed from that held by most Westerners. This is a magical region of Mexico.

In the **central highlands,** is a large population of Zapotec and Mixtec Indians surrounding Oaxaca City. It's a land of mountains and valleys checkered with cornfields, at its prettiest during the rainy season (June–Oct), when the corn is green. The villages here are famous for their crafts, and many families now support themselves more by making handicrafts than by growing corn. But growing corn carries much more weight in their ordering of things and is part of who they are.

Their ancestors established agriculture and civilization in these valleys centuries ago. They were the ones who built and rebuilt the magnificent ceremonial center of **Monte Albán** high upon a mountaintop above Oaxaca City. Up there, you'll find an intriguing collection of buildings, ball courts, and plazas with designs distinctive from those of the Maya to the east and the many cultures of central Mexico to the northwest.

But my favorite part of a trip here is visiting the **city of Oaxaca,** a colonial city of stone buildings, plazas, and courtyards. With the pleasures of elegant surroundings, good food, and warm, welcoming people, I find myself very much at home here.

If you're looking for information on Oaxaca's beach resorts—Puerto Escondido and Puerto Angel among them—see chapter 11.

1 OAXACA CITY ★★★

520km (322 miles) SE of Mexico City; 230km (143 miles) SE of Tehuacán; 269km (167 miles) NE of Puerto Escondido

What you see today when you walk through the historic district of Oaxaca (wah-*hah*-kah) is largely the product of 3 centuries of colonial society. The city is famous for its green building stone and for its own particular style of colonial architecture—an adaptation to the frequent earthquakes that plagued the city in colonial times and still occasionally shake things up. Walls and facades are thick and broad, with heavy buttressing; colonnades are low and spaced closely; and bell towers are squat with wide bases. The overall impression is one of great mass and solidity.

Peace & Politics in Oaxaca

After the political upheaval of 2006 and early 2007, Oaxacan society has gradually returned to what it was, only poorer. The local economy is so dependent on tourism and the sale of artisan goods that the absence of visitors resulted in the almost universal impoverishment of the city and the surrounding valleys. The mood is darker, too. Everyone feels that the national government abandoned Oaxaca. And there is widespread disgust with the present governor, Ulises Ruíz, for his role in the unrest.

For the last couple of years the situation has been peaceful, and with visitors returning the economy has recovered a bit. The political scarring, however, has not healed much and probably cannot heal until the current governor is gone. I have found a diversity of opinion among locals about who is to blame for the crisis, but almost everyone, regardless of their political leanings, holds the current governor, Ulises Ruíz, in bitter contempt and would like to see him resign. Instead, they must content themselves with waiting for his term to expire. That date is fast approaching; by the time you read this, the state will have elected a new governor in July, 2010.

The PRI, the party that has controlled state politics for nearly a century and is the party of the current governor, chose a candidate who is relatively unknown in Oaxaca City, Eviel Pérez Magaña. The good news is that the party insiders didn't choose Jorge Franco Vargas, known to the public and the press as "El Chucky" for his supposed resemblance to the title character in a series of American slasher films. As you might guess from this unflattering political nickname, "El Chucky" is not popular. His nomination would have been a slap in the face to the people of Oaxaca City as it would have shown complete disregard for popular sentiment and proof that the party feels secure that its political machine can turnout the votes no matter who they put forth as candidate.

The other piece of good news is that all the opposition parties made a temporary alliance behind the candidature of Gabino Cué, a former mayor of Oaxaca City. Despite being all over the political spectrum, these political parties—the right-wing PAN, the left-wing PRD and PPS, the workers' party, PT, and the populist Convergencia—held the alliance together through their mutual disgust for the current governor and his party. Cué was uniquely fitted to be an alliance candidate for he lacked any strong party identification and was more of a pragmatist than an ideologue. And in an ironic twist, the PRI had the most difficulty maintaining unity; the candidate-selection process generated a lot of ill will among the losers.

As we go to press, the prospect of the annual teacher's strike and occupation of the capital city is looming. This is what sparked the political unrest in 2006, but so far there has been no serious movement by the union because it, too, wants to see the governor gone.

Before the arrival of the Spanish, the central valley of Oaxaca was an important cultural center. Civilization began to take shape 3 millennia before their arrival, when Olmec influence extended into this region from the east sometime around 1500 B.C. This influence shaped the nascent civilization of the Zapotec (the original builders of Monte Albán) who established several cities in the central valleys. The Zapotec civilization flourished with the growth of trade throughout Mesoamerica. The rise of Teotihuacán in central Mexico in the early part of the Classic Period (A.D. 300–900), and the Maya in the highlands of what is now Chiapas and Guatemala created two important sources for commerce in goods and new ideas. This became the golden age of the Zapotec, which lasted until the rise of the neighboring Mixtec in the 9th century. The Mixtec had expansionist policies and through war and diplomacy gained ascendancy over much of the Zapotec homeland before both peoples were humbled by the Aztec and later the Spaniards. To this day, the two principal ethnic groups in Oaxaca remain the Zapotec and Mixtec, whose tonal languages are closely related to each other but far different from the Aztec language Náhuatl.

The city of Oaxaca, originally called Antequera, was founded just a few years after the Spanish vanquished the Aztec. Most of Oaxaca's central valley was granted to Hernán Cortez for his service to the crown. Three centuries of colonial rule followed, during which the region remained calm.

In the years following independence, there was more or less continuous upheaval. From the 1830s to the 1860s, the Liberals and Conservatives fought for control of Mexico's destiny, with the French eventually intervening on the side of the Conservatives. One man, a Zapotec Indian from Oaxaca, led the resistance against the French and played the key role in shaping Mexico's future. He was Benito Juárez, and his handiwork is known to history as *La Reforma.*

Born in the village of Guelatao, north of Oaxaca City, Juárez was adopted by a wealthy Oaxacan family who clothed and educated him in return for his services as a houseboy. He fell in love with the daughter of his benefactor and promised he would become rich and famous and return to marry her. He did all three and became president of the republic in 1861. Juárez is revered throughout Mexico.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There & Departing

BY PLANE The airport (airport code: OAX) gets limited international service. **Continental ExpressJet** (✆ **800/231-0856** in the U.S., or 01-800/900-5000 in Mexico) has nonstop service to and from Houston. **Mexicana** (✆ **800/531-7921** in the U.S., or 951/516-8414) has nonstop service to and from Los Angeles. **Volaris** (✆ **01-800/786-5274** in Mexico) flies to and from Tijuana. **Aeroméxico** (✆ **800/237-6639** in the U.S., or 951/516-1066) offers flights daily to and from Mexico City through its regional carrier, **Aerolitoral** (✆ **01-800/800-2674** in Mexico). **Click,** a Mexicana affiliate (✆ **01-800/122-5425** in Mexico), has nonstop service to and from Mexico City and Tuxtla Gutiérrez. **Aerovega** (✆ **951/516-4982** in Mexico) flies a seven-passenger twin-engine Aero-Commander to and from Puerto Escondido and Bahías de Huatulco once daily (twice if there are enough passengers). Make arrangements for Aerovega at the Monte Albán Hotel facing the Alameda (next to the *zócalo,* or town square). The cost is 1,100 pesos.

BY CAR It's a 5½-hour drive from Mexico City via the toll roads. Take **Hwy. 150D** east toward Veracruz to Cuacnoapalan, 80km (50 miles) beyond Puebla (250 pesos in tolls), and then south on **Hwy. 150D** to Oaxaca (270 pesos in tolls).

GENERAL MARKETS:
Tlacolula (Sunday Market)
Zaachila (Thursday Market)
Oaxaca (Saturday Market)

BASKET MAKING VILLAGE:
Miahuatlán

CHEESE MAKING VILLAGE:
Etla (Wednesday Market)

POTTERY MAKING VILLAGES:
Atzompa
Ocotlán (Friday Market)

WEAVERS VILLAGES:
Santo Tomás Jalietza
Santa Ana del Valle
Teotitlán del Valle

WOOD CARVER VILLAGES:
Arrazola
San Martin Tilcajete

BY BUS First-class and deluxe buses to and from Mexico City use the toll road, or *autopista,* and take 6 to 7 hours. A few make a short stop in Nochistlán, which isn't much of a delay. Most buses leave from Mexico City's **TAPO (east) bus station.** There is infrequent service to and from Mexico City's Central del Norte (north), and the Central del Sur (south, also called Taxqueña). No service runs from the Mexico City airport. The **main bus station** in Oaxaca is on Calzada Niños Héroes.

ADO (Autobuses del Oriente) and its affiliates handle the first-class and deluxe bus service. Your options are *primera clase* (ADO), with almost hourly departures and a one-way fare of 388 pesos; *de lujo* (ADO GL), with between three and seven departures per day for 464 pesos one-way; and *servicio ejecutivo* (UNO, which will be rebranded sometime in the next year to ADO Platino), with one to five departures per day for 658 pesos one-way. *De lujo* has the same seats as first class, but more legroom, free soda and bottled water, and separate bathrooms for men and women. *Servicio ejecutivo* has all this plus super-wide seats that recline far back. During holidays, you need to reserve a seat. Native Oaxaqueños living outside the state fill the buses for the Days of the Dead, Holy Week, and Christmas. It's possible to reserve seats over the Internet for the higher levels of service, and to check departure times and prices at **www.adogl.com.mx** and **www.uno.com.mx**.

Buses serve Tuxtla Gutiérrez and San Cristóbal de las Casas (four overnight buses); Puebla (10 a day); Veracruz (three a day); Villahermosa (two a day); and Huatulco and Puerto Escondido, on the coast (two a day). It takes 10 hours to reach Puerto Escondido by bus because they go by way of Huatulco.

You can buy your tickets ahead of time at one of the downtown offices of **Ticket Bus.** One is across from the northeast corner of the *zócalo,* at the intersection of Hidalgo and Valdivieso (✆ **915/516-3820**). There's also one at Porfirio Díaz 102-A, just north of calle Independencia (no phone). Office hours are 9am to 9pm, except Sundays, when they open from 11am to 7pm.

If you're coming overland to the city directly from Puerto Escondido or the Oaxacan coast, see p. 60 for information on traveling inland by bus and minivan.

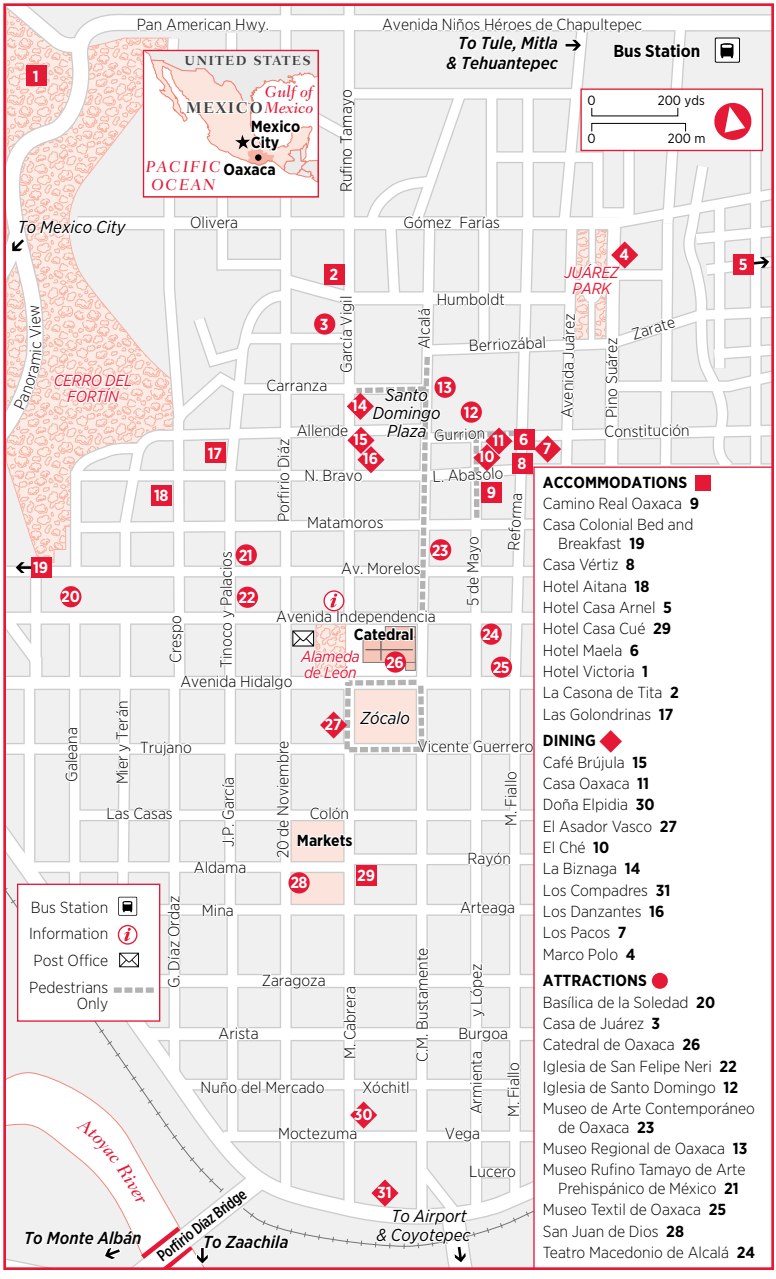
Orientation

ARRIVING BY PLANE The airport is a 20-minute cab ride south of town. Buy a ticket at the window on your left as you exit the airport. A private cab is 140 pesos; an airport van is 44 pesos per person for downtown locations, more for other areas.

The same company provides service from the town to the airport. **Transportes Terrestres Aeropuerto Oaxaca** (✆ **951/514-4350**), is on the Alameda, in the building facing the cathedral. It doesn't accept phone reservations, so drop by Monday through Saturday from 9am to 2pm or 5 to 8pm to buy your ticket and arrange hotel pickup. The cost is 44 pesos from downtown hotels, 83 pesos and up from outlying hotels, and more if you have extra luggage.

ARRIVING BY BUS The ADO first-class bus station is a mile north of the center of town. The taxi ride to the city center is 30 pesos. If you're coming from the Pacific coast, you may arrive at the Central Camionera de Segunda Clase (second-class bus terminal), next to the Abastos Market. It's 10 long blocks southwest of the *zócalo.*

VISITOR INFORMATION A tourist information office is at Calle Independencia 607, corner of García Vigil, in front of the Alameda. It shares the building with the Museo de los Pintores, and shares the same hours: Tuesday to Sunday from 10am to 8pm.



ACCOMMODATIONS
Camino Real Oaxaca **9**
Casa Colonial Bed and Breakfast **19**
Casa Vértiz **8**
Hotel Aitana **18**
Hotel Casa Arnel **5**
Hotel Casa Cué **29**
Hotel Maela **6**
Hotel Victoria **1**
La Casona de Tita **2**
Las Golondrinas **17**

DINING
Café Brújula **15**
Casa Oaxaca **11**
Doña Elpidia **30**
El Asador Vasco **27**
El Ché **10**
La Biznaga **14**
Los Compadres **31**
Los Danzantes **16**
Los Pacos **7**
Marco Polo **4**

ATTRACTIONS
Basílica de la Soledad **20**
Casa de Juárez **3**
Catedral de Oaxaca **26**
Iglesia de San Felipe Neri **22**
Iglesia de Santo Domingo **12**
Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Oaxaca **23**
Museo Regional de Oaxaca **13**
Museo Rufino Tamayo de Arte Prehispánico de México **21**
Museo Textil de Oaxaca **25**
San Juan de Dios **28**
Teatro Macedonio de Alcalá **24**

CITY LAYOUT Oaxaca's east-west axis is **Independencia.** When streets cross Independencia or the north-south axis, **Alcalá/Bustamante,** their names change. The city's center is the ***zócalo,*** a large square surrounded by stone archways, and the **Alameda,** a smaller plaza attached to the northwest part of the *zócalo.* Oaxaca's cathedral faces the Alameda; its Palacio del Gobierno faces the *zócalo.* A few blocks to the north is the **Plaza de Santo Domingo.** The area between these two open spaces holds most of the historic district's shops, hotels, and restaurants. Two of the streets that run from Santo Domingo toward the *zócalo*—**Alcalá** and **Cinco de Mayo**—are partly closed to traffic.

GETTING AROUND **By Car** **Alamo** offices are at 5 de Mayo 203-A (✆ **951/514-8534**), and 5 de Mayo 315-A (✆ **951/514-5653**), and at the airport (✆ **951/511-6220;** alamo.oaxaca@hotmail.com). Rental cars in Oaxaca are expensive, and the process is not exactly streamlined.

By Taxi If you want to reach some of the outlying villages, I recommend hiring a taxi or signing up for a tour. Most taxi drivers have set hourly rates for touring the Oaxacan valleys. A trustworthy and careful taxi driver who speaks English is **Tomás Ramírez.** You can reach him at home (✆ **951/511-5061;** tomasramirez@prodigy.net.mx).

By Bus Buses to the outlying villages of Guelatao, Teotitlán del Valle, Tlacolula, and Mitla leave from the second-class station just north of the Abastos Market. *Colectivos* leave for nearby villages from Calle Mercaderes, on the south side of the Abastos Market.

Fast Facts Oaxaca

Area Code The telephone area code is **951.**

Consulates The **Canadian Consulate,** Pino Suárez 700-11B (✆ **951/513-3777**), is open daily from 11am to 2pm. The **U.S. Consular Agency** is at Alcalá 407, Int. 20 (✆/fax **951/514-3054**). Hours are Monday through Friday from 10am to 3pm.

Currency Exchange *Casas de cambio* cluster on the streets at the northeast corner of the *zócalo,* at Alcalá and Valdivieso. These places have short lines and better hours than banks. Several exchange Canadian dollars.

Doctor Dr. Carlos Arnaud Carreño is a reputable internist at Calle Reforma 905 (✆ **951/515-4053**). Hours are Monday through Friday noon to 2pm and 4 to 8pm.

Internet Access More than 20 Internet access services and cybercafes are in the downtown area. Most are along Alcalá and around the *zócalo* and the Plaza Santo Domingo.

Post Office The *correo* is at the corner of Independencia and Alameda Park. It is open Monday through Friday from 8am to 5pm, Saturday from 9am to 1pm.

Seasons April and May are the hottest, driest months. (Also in May, rural teachers invade the *zócalo* and create havoc in the downtown area while they demonstrate for higher wages.) The rains come in June and improve things considerably. June through March, the city is most enjoyable. High seasons for tourists, when you can expect higher hotel rates, are late July and August (especially around the Guelaguetza), early November (around the Days of the Dead), the entire month of December, and during Easter.

SPECIAL EVENTS & FESTIVALS

Oaxaca is famous for its exuberant traditional festivals. The most important ones are **Holy Week,** the **Guelaguetza** in July, **Días de los Muertos** in November, and the **Night of the Radishes** and **Christmas** in December. Make hotel reservations at least 2 months in advance if you plan to visit during these times.

At festival time in Oaxaca, sidewalk stands near the cathedral sell *buñuelos,* a thin, crisp, sweet snack food. It is customary to serve *buñuelos* in cracked or otherwise flawed dishes; after you've finished eating, you smash the crockery on the sidewalk for good luck. Don't be timid! You can wash down the *buñuelos* with hot *ponche* (a steaming fruit punch) or *atole.*

HOLY WEEK During Holy Week, figurines made of palm leaves are sold on the streets. On Palm Sunday, the Sunday before Easter, there are colorful parades. On the following Thursday, Oaxaca residents follow the Procession of the Seven Churches. Hundreds of the pious walk from church to church, praying at each one. The next day, Good Friday, many of the *barrios* (neighborhoods) have *encuentros:* Groups depart separately from the church, carrying religious figures through the neighborhoods, then "encounter" each other back at the church. Throughout the week, each church sponsors concerts, fireworks, fairs, and other entertainment.

FIESTA GUELAGUETZA On the last two Mondays in July, Oaxaca holds the Fiesta Guelaguetza. In the villages of central Oaxaca, a *guelaguetza* (literally, "a gift") is a celebration by a family in need of assistance to hold a wedding or some other community celebration. Guests bring gifts, which the family repays when they attend other *guelaguetzas.* The Fiesta Guelaguetza, begun in 1974, brings dancers from all the state's various ethnic groups to Oaxaca. For many communities, participation has become a matter of intense civic pride, and an opportunity to show people in the state capital and those from other ethnic groups the beauty of their traditional clothing and dance. Some 350 different *huipiles* (women's overblouses) and dresses can be seen during the performances. In the afternoon, there is an interpretive dance of the legend of Princess Donají.

The performances take place in the stadium that crowns the Cerro del Fortín each Monday from 10am to 1pm. Admission ranges from free (Section C) to 600 to 800 pesos (Section A). Reserve tickets in advance—no later than May—through the State Tourism Office (✆/fax **951/516-0123**). A travel agency may be able to help you. I recommend Sections 5 and 6 in Palco (gallery) A for the best seating. The ticket color matches the color of your seat. You will be sitting in strong sunlight, so wear a hat and long sleeves.

Even if you don't attend the dances, you can enjoy the festival atmosphere that engulfs the city. There are fairs, exhibits, and a lot of gaiety. On the Sunday nights before the Guelaguetza, university students present an excellent program in the Plaza de la Danza at the Soledad church. The production, the *Bani Stui Gulal,* is an abbreviated history of the Oaxaca valley. The program begins at 9pm; arrive early, because the event is free and seating is limited.

DÍAS DE LOS MUERTOS The Mexican Days of the Dead festival (Nov 1–2) has garnered worldwide attention. It's celebrated across Oaxaca with more passion than in the rest of Mexico, which says quite a lot. Markets brim with marigolds—the flower of the underworld—and every household fills an altar with them and the favorite dishes, drinks, and cigarettes of the deceased. People visit relatives and friends, and anyone who visits is offered food. This is also the time to pay one's respects at the graveyard. Try to take one of the nocturnal cemetery tours offered around this time; **Hotel Casa Arnel**

 (✆ **951/515-2856**) offers one. Another common form of celebrating is for young men to dress up in macabre outfits and frolic in the streets in Carnaval-like fashion.

DECEMBER FESTIVALS The December Festivals begin on the 12th with the **Fiesta de la Virgen de Guadalupe (Festival of the Virgin of Guadalupe)** and continue on the 16th with a *calenda,* or procession, to many of the older churches in the *barrios,* all accompanied by dancing and costumes. Festivities continue on the 18th with the **Fiesta de la Soledad,** in honor of the Virgen de la Soledad, patroness of Oaxaca State. A large fireworks construction known as a *castillo* is erected in Plaza de la Soledad. When it is ignited, look out. December 23 is **La Noche de Rábanos** (the Night of the Radishes), when Oaxaqueños build sculptures out of enormous radishes, flowers, and corn husks. Displays on three sides of the *zócalo* are set up from 3pm on. By 6pm, when the show officially opens, lines to see the figures are 4 blocks long. It's well organized and overseen by a heavy police presence. On December 24, around 8:30pm, each Oaxacan church organizes a procession with music, floats, enormous papier-mâché dancing figures, and crowds bearing candles, all converging on the *zócalo.*

WHERE TO STAY

High season includes Easter, July, August, early November, and most of December. You should have no difficulty finding a room the rest of the time, and promotional rates are usually available. The prices listed below include the 19% tax. Most evenings are cool enough that you don't need air-conditioning, but for about 60 days a year, mostly from April to June, it comes in handy, and not every hotel has it.

Very Expensive

Camino Real Oaxaca ★★★ A magnificent hotel in a 16th-century landmark convent, this is the place to cloister yourself when in Oaxaca. Several beautiful courtyards with age-old walls bring to mind the original purpose of the building. The rooms, however, do not. All are comfortable and have the conveniences you would expect in a hotel of this caliber (no small feat, given the constraints imposed by the infrastructure). Exterior rooms are equipped with noise-reducing windows. Interior rooms with views of the courtyards are more expensive. The main difference between "deluxe" and "club" is the size of the room. Service is good. The location—between the *zócalo* and Santo Domingo on a pedestrian-only street—is ideal.

5 de Mayo 300, 68000 Oaxaca, Oax. ✆ **800/722-6466** in the U.S. and Canada, or 951/501-6100. Fax 951/516-0732. www.caminoreal.com/oaxaca. 91 units. $357–$417 deluxe; $387–$428 club; $506 junior suite. Lower rates are for weekdays. Discounts and promotions available in low season. AE, MC, V. Valet parking $22. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 bars; babysitting; free membership for guests at local health club; large outdoor pool; room service; smoke-free rooms; Wi-Fi (in common areas). *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar.

La Casona de Tita ★★ Simplicity with lots of style in that singularly Mexican way of blending colonial and modern themes. The six rooms of this hotel are distributed around a sharply designed central courtyard. They have an uncluttered, cool, and airy feel to them that quiets the spirit. The bathrooms are large and nicely appointed. The service is personal and attentive. This would be a great choice for anyone interested in the local art scene as the manager is a former museum director with connections to the best known artists in Oaxaca.

García Vigel 805 (at Cosijopi), 68000 Oaxaca, Oax. ✆ **951/516-1400.** www.lacasonadetita.com. 6 units. High season 2,100–2,800 pesos double, 3,300 pesos suite; low season 1,700–2,600 pesos double, 2,900 pesos suite. Rates include full breakfast. MC, V. Free parking. Children 11 and under permitted only for renting out entire house. **Amenities:** Room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Expensive

Hotel Victoria ★★ (Finds) High above the downtown area, the Hotel Victoria offers that rare combination of actual proximity with the feeling of distance. It's ideal for those who want a little more peace than staying downtown can offer. And you're only a couple of minutes away on the hotel's shuttle bus. The Victoria also has a lovely view. You can enjoy it from a room or suite in one of the main buildings (three stories, no elevator), or you can stay in one of the villas distributed about the grounds, each with its own terrace. Rooms are large and carpeted, and have modern furnishings.

Lomas del Fortín 1, 68070 Oaxaca, Oax. ✆ **951/502-0850.** Fax 951/515-2411. www.hotelvictoriaoax.com.mx. 150 units. 1,785 pesos double; 2,142 pesos villa; 3,094 pesos junior suite. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; large outdoor heated pool; complimentary shuttle to downtown; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Moderate

Casa Colonial Bed and Breakfast ★ The casual and comfortable setting created by attentive host Jane Robison promptly sets guests at ease. This is an especially attractive place for first-timers to Oaxaca, who can tap into the owner's knowledge of the area and perhaps even tour some villages with her. The good-size rooms open to a large garden filled with tropical plants and flowers; they are simply but comfortably furnished. Breakfast is cooked to order and includes a large variety of foods. The hotel is 9 blocks from the *zócalo,* a few blocks past La Soledad. Occasionally on Sunday afternoons a small jazz combo plays in the patio. The inn offers a three-meal plan.

Negrete 105 (Apdo. Postal 640), 68000 Oaxaca, Oax. ✆ **800/758-1697** in the U.S., or ✆/fax 951/516-5280. www.casa-colonial.com. 15 units. $90–$110 double. Rates include full breakfast. MC, V. Free parking. *In room:* No phone, Wi-Fi.

Casa Vértiz ★ (Value) This is a small courtyard hotel in a good location. Rooms are medium size and come with either one or two queen-size beds. They are nicely done, with ceramic tile floor, beamed ceiling, stucco walls, and a few artsy decorations. There's good luggage space. Bathrooms are attractive.

Reforma 404, 68000 Oaxaca, Oax. ✆ **951/516-1700.** www.hotelvertiz.com.mx. 14 units. 950–1150 pesos double. MC, V. Parking nearby 100 pesos. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Hotel Aitana ★ (Finds) This stylish hotel is only 7 blocks from the *zócalo* and 6 blocks from Santo Domingo, but it's about 30m (98 ft.) uphill on a noisy street. All the rooms are away from the street, though, past a courtyard restaurant. They are well lit and beautifully decorated. Most hold two twin beds; a few have either two doubles or a king. Bathrooms are attractive and spacious, with tub/showers. For most of the year, the low-season rates apply.

Crespo 313, 68000 Oaxaca, Oax. ✆ **951/514-3788,** -3839. Fax 951/516-9856. www.hotelaitanaoaxaca.com.mx. 23 units. High season 1,250 pesos double; low season 800 pesos double. Rates include full breakfast during high season. Often the 4th night is free. MC, V. Parking 50 pesos. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; room service. *In room:* TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Inexpensive

Hotel Casa Arnel (Value) (Kids) Not far from the bus station and less than a kilometer (about a half-mile) from the *zócalo,* this lodging, located in the quiet Jalatlaco neighborhood, offers good value. It's a nice option for those traveling with kids as there is a garden courtyard with parrots and other birds. From the rooftop terrace, you can admire the view and soak up some sun. Most rooms are plain but comfortable. Across the street in

Finds Oaxacan Street Food

Unless it's during a festival, don't be surprised to find many restaurants empty. Oaxaqueños do not frequent restaurants, but do like eating in market and street stalls. They favor foods such as tacos, tamales, *tlayudas* (12-in. tortillas, slightly dried and chewy, with a number of toppings), and empanadas (in Oaxaca, large tortillas heated on the *comal*—a flat, earthenware pan—or among the coals, with several types of fillings). For adventurous diners, here are my picks for enjoying the people's food.

Empanadas are a morning food, and the best place to eat them is in **La Merced** market (on Murguía, about 10 blocks east of Alcalá), where you'll find a number of food stalls. Everyone has a favorite (mine comes with *huitlacoche*); try **La Güerita** or **La Florecita.**

The following places open only at night: A little *taquería* called **Tacos Sierra** (on corner of Morelos and Alcalá) is a Oaxacan institution. They make simple tacos with pork filling and a spicy salsa, but I can never order enough. It closes when the pork runs out, usually by 10pm. Don't expect these tacos to come cheap. Another *taquería* is **El Mesón,** which is across from the northeast corner of the *zócalo* at Hidalgo 805. It serves *tacos de la parrilla* (grilled meats) and *de cazuela* (meats and vegetables cooked in a variety of chile sauces).

For *tlayudas,* seek out **El Chepil,** a hole in the wall on Constitución around the corner from Calzada de la República. They come with a number of toppings, and with *tasajo* (dried beef) or *cecina* (pork rubbed with red chile) on the side. If you don't like lard, tell them that you want your *tlayuda sin asiento.* It also prepares good *tostadas.* For **tamales,** find the woman who sets up her little stand on Avenida Hidalgo and 20 de Noviembre, in front of the pharmacy. She often doesn't get there until 7:30pm, but when she does, she quickly draws a crowd. She sells seven flavors, and my favorite is always the last one I've eaten. Given that you're in Oaxaca, though, you might want to ask for a tamal made with *mole negro, mole amarillo,* or *chepil* (an herb).

the new wing are three additional rooms with two double beds (junior suites), plus four furnished, full-service apartments with fully equipped kitchens. Breakfast, at extra cost, is served on the patio. At Christmas, the family involves guests in the traditional Mexican celebrations, or *posadas,* which are held during the 12 nights before Christmas.

Aldama 404, Col. Jalatlaco, 68080 Oaxaca, Oax. ✆/fax **951/515-2856.** www.casaarnel.com.mx. 40 units (8 with shared bathroom). $25 double with shared bathroom; $45–$50 double; $75–$80 suite; $450 apt monthly. Rates may go up a little for Easter, Guelaguetza, Días de los Muertos, and Christmas. No credit cards. Parking $3. *In room:* No phone, Wi-Fi.

Hotel Casa Cué Value A modern hotel 2 blocks from the *zócalo,* Casa Cué has good air-conditioning, good service, and bathrooms with instant hot water. The terrace on top of the three-story building (there's no elevator) has patio furniture and a fine view of the mountains. The midsize standard rooms are attractively furnished and well lit; they contain two twin beds. Junior suites are large and come with a sofa, coffee table, and writing

table; most hold two double beds (some have one king and one double). The suites are still larger, and the second bedroom makes them perfect for a family. The hotel is well managed. It's across the street from the market, which can be a little noisy, but the double-glazed windows do a good job of blocking out the noise.

Aldama 103, 68000 Oaxaca, Oax. ✆/fax **951/516-7786.** www.hotelcasacue.com. 23 units. 650 pesos double; 750 pesos junior suite; 1,000 pesos suite. MC, V. Free covered, secure parking. *In room:* A/C, TV, Wi-Fi.

Hotel Maela This is a family hotel that the owners keep improving. The upkeep is good, the prices are good, and the location is a block behind Santo Domingo. Rooms are medium to small. Most have one double, two doubles, or one queen-size bed. The staff is helpful.

Constitución 206, 68000 Oaxaca, Oax. ✆/fax **951/516-6022.** www.mexonline.com/maela.htm. 26 units. High season 645 pesos double; low season 575 pesos double. No credit cards. Free guarded parking. *In room:* TV, Wi-Fi.

Las Golondrinas ★ This charming one-story hotel sits amid rambling patios with roses, fuchsia, bougainvillea, and mature banana trees. Owned and managed by Guillermina and Jorge Velasco, Las Golondrinas (the Swallows) is very popular, so make reservations in advance. The simply furnished rooms, with windows and doors opening onto courtyards, all have tile floors and a small desk and chairs. Each holds either one full or two twin beds. A few rooms have a king-size bed and go for a higher price. Breakfast is served in a small tile-covered cafe in a garden setting (50–80 pesos); nonguests are welcome. The hotel is 6½ blocks north of the *zócalo.*

Tinoco y Palacios 411 (btw. Allende and Bravo), 68000 Oaxaca, Oax. ✆ **951/514-3298** or ✆/fax 951/514-2126. www.hotellasgolondrinas.com.mx. 26 units. 590 pesos double. No credit cards. No parking. *In room:* No phone.

WHERE TO DINE

Oaxacan cooking has a great reputation in Mexico. It makes use of more ingredients from the lowlands than central Mexican cooking. It's known for its *moles* and for a wide variety of chiles, many of which you don't find in other parts of the country. Oaxaca is also known for its *mezcal,* a distillate of the *agave* or maguey plant (a different variety than the blue *agave,* from which tequila is made). This drink has a rougher taste than tequila, and it's commonly drunk with lime and *sal de gusano* (salt with powdered chile and ground-up maguey worms—the same that show up in some bottles of *mezcal*). Any cantina worth its salt will offer *sal de gusano* to its customers.

Something else bears mentioning. Restaurateurs here seem bent on providing travelers with something more cosmopolitan than the local cuisine. I'm not sure why. A number of fine-dining places are trying hard and, in my opinion, are overrated. **Casa Oaxaca,** the restaurant (Constitución 104; ✆ **951/516-8889;** www.casaoaxacaelrestaurante.com), gets the best press. If you're tired of *moles,* then you might want to try this place once; don't go twice. **Los Danzantes,** Macedonio Alcalá 403 (✆ **951/501-1184;** www.losdanzantes.com) brings Mexico City chic to Oaxaca. I like what the owners have done with the place, but not with the food. Go for drinks. **La Biznaga,** García Vigil 512 (✆ **915/516-1800**) usually has the most interesting menu—try it sometime when you feel completely at leisure, because the service is absurdly slow.

Good coffee and espresso are easier to come by these days, but you still have to make a point of seeking them out. **Café Brújula** (✆ **951/516-7255;** www.cafebrujula.com), at 409-D García Vigil, serves excellent coffee and light food to go with it, including

 bagels (a rarity in Mexico that the cafe makes on the premises), sandwiches, and other goodies.

Expensive

El Ché ★ STEAKS If you need a break from Mexican food, you can have a steak and salad in comfortable surroundings, and wash it all down with a glass of hearty red. The restaurant offers both American and Argentine cuts of beef; the rib-eye and the *churrasco* are the most popular. (To tell them how you'd like it cooked, see our dining guide, in chapter 22, p. 769.) The margaritas are good.

5 de Mayo 413. ✆ **951/514-2122.** Reservations recommended during special festivals. Steaks 170–260 pesos. MC, V. Mon–Sat 1–11pm; Sun 1–9pm.

Moderate

El Asador Vasco INTERNATIONAL/MEXICAN Of the restaurants circling the *zócalo,* this is probably the best. It offers the considerable advantage of a dining area overlooking the *zócalo* from a second-floor stone archway. This makes for more peaceful dining than on the ground floor. Take your pick of purely Mexican specialties (chiles rellenos, *moles, carne asada*) or dishes with a European twist (snapper filet cooked in olive oil and *guajillo* chile). I can recommend the tortilla soup and the *chile relleno de picadillo.*

Portal de Flores 11. ✆ **951/514-4755.** www.asadorvasco.com. Main courses 110–225 pesos. MC, V. Mon–Sat 1:30–11:30pm; Sun 2–11pm.

Los Pacos OAXACAN *Moles* are the specialty here. Ask for the *gustación de moles* (a small serving of several sauces) to help you make an educated choice for main course. I like the *negro* and the *rojo moles.* The table sauces are good, too. You can also try one of the other local dishes, such as the *filete al mezcal,* but I would avoid the *botana oaxaqueña* (not just here, but in any restaurant). There's a medium-size dining room as you enter, a couple of tables on the way to the kitchen, and a rooftop terrace that works well for dining in the evening.

Abasolo 121. ✆ **951/516-1704.** www.lospacos.com.mx. Main courses 85–195 pesos. MC, V. Daily noon–10pm.

Marco Polo ★ SEAFOOD Enjoy outdoor dining in an attractive shaded patio. The ceviche tostadas or the seafood cocktails are great starters (if you like your cocktail less tomato-y, tell the waiter you want it *a la marinera*). The specialty is the oven-baked fish (whole or filet), prepared several ways—I like their basic method, with just a *chile guajillo* marinade. For dessert, try the baked bananas. Marco Polo is just north of the central downtown area; it fronts the park known as Paseo Juárez. The two other locations—downtown at calle 5 de Mayo 103 (✆ **951/514-4360**), and in the Colonia Reforma at Calz. Porfirio Díaz 802 (✆ **951/518-4309**), which also has steaks on the menu—are not as attractive as the main one.

Pino Suárez 806. ✆ **951/513-4308.** Breakfast 40–50 pesos; main courses 90–165 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 8am–6pm.

Yu Ne Nisa ★ REGIONAL In the hot lowlands of eastern Oaxaca, an area called the isthmus, you find a different cooking tradition known as *cocina istmeña.* Try sampling some of the region's specialties at this restaurant, located in a residential part of the Colonia Reforma. Start off with some *garnachas* for appetizers—little corn patties covered in sauce—and then try one of the regional specialties such as shrimp *mole* or another kind of *mole* called *gucheguiña.* It just depends on what the owner has cooked up that day.

Seafood plays a big part in *cocina istmeña.* Usually the chef can offer guests seafood cocktails and soups. She will close occasionally, so call first. Only Spanish is spoken.

Amapolas 1425, Col. Reforma. ✆ **951/515-6982.** http://yunenisa.com. Main courses 70–150 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 1–8pm.

Inexpensive

Doña Elpidia (Finds) OAXACAN The home-style cooking *a la mexicana* is delicious and a great value here. Nothing is a la carte. There's a four-course *comida corrida,* with usually two or three options for the main course, including a *mole.* The house is 5½ blocks south of the *zócalo,* in the untouristy working-class part of the city. Look for a small sign saying only RESTAURANT. Upon entering, you will find some tables in a garden patio and a dining room. Beer and other beverages are extra.

Miguel Cabrera 413 (btw. Arista and Nuño del Mercado). ✆ **951/513-0126.** Fixed-price lunch 50 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 1–6pm.

Itanoni ★ (Finds) MEXICAN/REGIONAL This business began as a specialty tortilla shop. The owner then decided to branch out into making other things. He is dedicated to preserving different forms of native corn and makes use of their varying characteristics in the cooking. The dishes are simple and safe, and include traditional *antojitos* such as tacos, quesadillas, *memelitas,* and tamales. You can get them with a variety of fillings, including bean, fresh cheese, mushrooms, and squash blossoms. Most dishes are cooked on a classic Mexican griddle, nothing is fried here, and you can watch the women as they make your order. This place is well worth the short cab ride from downtown and is a good choice for vegetarians.

Belisario Domínguez 513, Col. Reforma. ✆ **951/513-9223.** www.itanoni.com.mx. Antojitos 9–25 pesos. MC, V. Mon–Sat 10am–4pm; Sun 7am–2pm.

Los Compadres ★ (Value) OAXACAN This is a people's restaurant in the working-class district south of the *zócalo.* The food is very Oaxacan and both delicious and safe. It's a bargain, too. The owner and cook is Asunción Sorrosa García, who has been doing her thing for 32 years. She cooks for a steady crowd of locals. Everything I had was good, especially the *estofado* (a kind of *mole*), the fresh *huitlacoche* (corn fungus available from June–Oct) *quesadillas,* and the *sopa de guías* (soup made from zucchini greens). A lot of simple Oaxacan fare is on the menu, as well, such as *tlayudas, tasajo,* and *cecina.* There are several kinds of *antojitos.* All lettuce is disinfected. You enter the restaurant through a garden; the dining area is an informal, open space with lots of room.

Lucero 109 (btw. Armenta y López and Fiallo). ✆ **951/516-3597.** Main courses 30–70 pesos. No credit cards. Mon–Sat 11am–7pm.

EXPLORING OAXACA

With so much sightseeing to do inside and outside Oaxaca, you have to be sure to allow for some idle time in the *zócalo.* In the traffic-free square, you can relax while getting a feel for the town and Oaxacan society. I recommend going in the late afternoon and taking a seat at the outdoor cafe with a good view of the cathedral. You can get a beer or order a bowl of the traditional drink of Oaxaca: chocolate. The afternoon light filters through the shiny green leaves of the laurel trees, heightening the color of the cathedral's green stone. As dusk comes, a small drill corps enters stage left and performs a flag-lowering ceremony with much pomp and circumstance. Then the marimba or the municipal band usually strikes up in the central bandstand.

Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Oaxaca The MACO, 2½ blocks north of the *zócalo,* exhibits the work of contemporary artists, primarily from Oaxaca state (which has produced some of Mexico's most famous painters). It also books traveling exhibitions. A small bookstore is to your right as you enter. The 18th-century building merits a visit for its own sake. It's called the Casa de Cortés, and many locals say that it was built by order of Hernán Cortez after he received the title of Marqués of the Valley of Oaxaca. The record shows that it was actually built a century later.

Alcalá 202, btw. Murguía and Morelos. ✆ **951/514-7110.** Admission 20 pesos. Wed–Mon 10:30am–8pm.

Museo Regional de Oaxaca ★★★ Next to the Santo Domingo Church (6 blocks north of the *zócalo*) is the most impressive museum in the city, housed in a former Dominican convent—one of the greatest of colonial Mexico. Construction was largely completed by the early 1600s. The government has spent millions to renovate the former convent, and it shows. The stairs, the arches, the cupolas—everywhere you look, are decorative details in stone or in the remnants of Colonial-Era murals. The museum is an ambitious project that displays the course of human development in the Oaxaca valley from earliest times to the 20th century.

The most treasured possessions are the artifacts from Monte Albán's Tomb 7, which were discovered in 1932. The tomb contained 12 to 14 corpses and some 500 pieces of jewelry and art, making use of 3.6 kilograms (8 lb.) of gold and turquoise, conch shell, amber, and obsidian. This is part of a larger collection of artifacts from Monte Albán, which you would do well to see before going up to the ruins. In the many ceramics and carvings, you can see definite Olmec and Teotihuacán influences, yet they display a style different from either culture. Other rooms are dedicated to the present-day ethnographic makeup of Oaxaca and a brief history of the efforts of the Dominican order in the region. Attached to the convent is the Santo Domingo Church (see "Churches," below). From some points on the north side of the convent, you can look down over the botanical garden. Entrance to the garden is by guided tour only (at 1 and 6pm). Sign up at the front desk of the museum the same day of the tour. Two tours a week are in English (100 pesos); ask for info at the front desk.

Gurrión at Alcalá. ✆ **951/516-2991.** Admission 51 pesos. 35 pesos for use of video camera. Tues–Sun 10am–6:15pm.

Museo Rufino Tamayo de Arte Prehispánico de México ★★★ The artifacts displayed in this museum were chosen "solely for the aesthetic rank of the works, their beauty, power, and originality." The result is a striking collection of pre-Hispanic art. The famed Oaxacan artist Rufino Tamayo amassed the collection over a 20-year period. The artifacts range from the pre-Classic period up to the Aztec, from far northwest Nayarit to southeastern Chiapas: terra-cotta figurines, scenes of daily life, lots of female fertility figures, Olmec and Totonac sculpture from the Gulf Coast, and Zapotec long-nosed figures. The well-displayed works reveal the great variety of styles of pre-Columbian art in Mexico.

Av. Morelos 503, north of the *zócalo* btw. Tinoco y Palacios and Porfirio Díaz. ✆ **951/516-4750.** Admission 35 pesos. Mon and Wed–Sat 10am–2pm and 4–7pm; Sun 10am–3pm. Closed holidays.

Museo Textil de Oaxaca Set in the former monastery of San Pablo, this museum exhibits all manner of textiles. Naturally, there's a partiality for Mexican and Oaxacan works, but exhibits include textiles from around the world and examine the various

techniques used in their creation. There are three galleries and a library. Exhibits rotate, but the library always features the works of one or another contemporary Oaxacan artist. The gallery space is in an attractive, well-restored colonial building, well worth viewing for its own sake.

Hidalgo 917, corner of Fiallo, 2 blocks east of the *zócalo*. ✆ **951/501-1104.** Free admission, donations requested. Wed–Mon 10am–8pm.

Churches

Basílica de la Soledad ★★ The Basílica is the religious center of Oaxaca, and its Virgin is the patroness of the entire state. Adjoining the church is a former convent with a small but charming museum in back. A huge celebration on and around December 18 honors the Virgin, attracting penitents from all over Oaxaca. She is famous for her vestments, which are encrusted with pearls. (Until a few years ago, she had a crown of silver and jewels, which was stolen.) As with most Virgins, there is a story behind her. The short version is that her figure was found in a box on the back of a burro that didn't belong to anyone. The burro sat down on an outcropping of rock and refused to get up. This was the spot where the Virgin revealed herself and, consequently, where the basilica (completed in 1690) was constructed. You can still see the outcropping of rock, surrounded by a cage of iron bars, immediately to your right along the wall as you enter the church.

The concave facade of the church projecting forward from the building is unique in Mexico's religious architecture. The way the top is rounded and the tiers are divided suggests an imitation in stone of the baroque wooden *retablos* (altarpieces) common in Mexican churches. The interior is most impressive, too, but what I really like is the museum, which contains a curious blend of pieces—some museum quality, others mere trinkets that might as well have come from my grandmother's attic.

The Basílica's upper plaza is an outdoor patio and theater (Plaza de la Danza) with stone steps that serve as seats. Here spectators view the famous Bani Stui Gulal (see "Fiesta Guelaguetza" under "Special Events & Festivals," earlier). When visiting the Basílica, it is traditional to eat ice cream; vendors have stands in the lower plaza in front of the church.

Independencia at Galeana. No phone. Museum admission by donation. Mon–Sat 9am–2pm and 4–6pm; Sun 11am–2pm. Basílica daily 7am–2pm and 4–9pm.

Catedral de Oaxaca ★★ The cathedral was built in 1553 and reconstructed in 1773. Its elaborate 18th-century baroque facade is an excellent example of the Oaxacan style. The central panel above the door depicts the assumption of the Virgin. Note the heavy, elaborate frame around the picture and the highly stylized wavelike clouds next to the cherubs—these elements, repeated in other churches in the region, are telltale signs of Oaxacan baroque. An uncommon and quite lovely detail is how the Virgin's cape and its folds are depicted in angular lines and facets. The cathedral's interior is not as interesting as its exterior because it was plundered during the Reform Wars.

Fronting the Parque Alameda. No phone. Free admission. Daily 7am–9pm.

Iglesia de San Felipe Neri This church, 2½ blocks northeast of the *zócalo,* was built in 1636 and displays all the architectural opulence of that period: The altar and nave are covered with ornately carved, gilded wood, and the walls are frescoed. In the west transept and chapel is a small figure of St. Martha and the dragon; the faithful have bedecked her with ribbons in hopes of obtaining her assistance.

Tinoco y Palacios at Independencia. No phone. Free admission. Daily 8am–11pm.

Iglesia de Santo Domingo ★★★ Moments There are 27 churches in Oaxaca, but none can equal the splendor of this one's interior. The church was started in the 1550s by Dominican friars and finished a century later; it contains the work of all the best artists of that period. Ornate plaster statues and flowers cover the extravagantly gilded walls and ceiling. When the sun shines through the yellow stained-glass window, it casts a golden glow over the whole interior and looks like a baroque vision of heaven. Just as you enter, look up at the ceiling formed by the choir loft to examine the elaborate organizational tree of the Dominican order, which starts with don Domingo de Guzmán, Saint Dominic himself.

Corner of Gurrión and Alcalá. No phone. Free admission. Daily 7am–2pm and 4–11pm.

San Juan de Dios This is the oldest church in Oaxaca, originally built in 1521 or 1522 of adobe and thatch. Construction of the present structure started during the mid-1600s and included a convent and hospital (where the 20 de Noviembre Market is now). The exterior is sweetly simple; the interior has an ornate altar and Urbano Olivera paintings on the ceiling. Oaxaqueños especially revere the glass shrine to the Virgin near the entrance, as well as one dedicated to Christ (off to the right). Because it's by the market, 1 block west and 2 blocks south of the *zócalo,* many of the people who visit the church are villagers who have come to Oaxaca to buy and sell.

20 de Noviembre s/n (btw. Aldama and Arteaga). No phone. Free admission. Daily 6am–11pm.

More Attractions

Besides visiting the places mentioned below, try to get to the **Casa de Cortés,** which houses the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo (see above), and the former convent of **Santa Catalina,** home of the Camino Real Oaxaca (p. 432).

Casa de Juárez This modest museum occupies the house where Benito Juárez first lived when he came to the city as a servant boy. It doesn't have any of his personal effects or any furniture belonging to the house, but it shows how a typical 19th-century household would have looked. An audiovisual presentation of Juárez's life is in Spanish, as is the rest of the museum's explanatory material, but there's talk of inserting some material in English as well.

García Vigil 609. ✆ **951/516-1860.** Admission 37 pesos. Tues–Sun 10am–7pm.

Cerro del Fortín To capture Oaxaca in a glance, take a cab to the top of this hill on the west side of town for a panoramic view. It's especially pretty just before sunset. Atop the hill are the statue of Benito Juárez and a stadium built to hold 15,000 spectators. The annual Fiesta Guelaguetza is held here. You can walk to the hill: Head up Díaz Ordaz/Crespo and look for the Escaleras del Fortín (Stairway to the Fortress) shortly after you cross Calle Delmonte; the 218 steps (interrupted by risers) are a challenge, but from the top you can take in distant vistas.

Díaz Ordaz at Calle Delmonte.

Teatro Macedonio de Alcalá This beautiful 1903 Belle Epoque theater, 2 blocks east of the *zócalo,* is still used for performances. It's worth a peek but opens only for concerts, and the management is quite lax about publishing a calendar of events, but sometimes you can find one in the cafe that occupies part of the first floor.

Independencia at Armenta y López. No phone. Open only for events.

OTHER THINGS TO DO

COOKING CLASSES **Susana Trilling** (✆ **951/518-7726;** www.seasonsofmyheart.com), author of the cookbook *Seasons of My Heart,* operates a cooking school of the same name just outside Oaxaca. In downtown Oaxaca, Sra. Pilar Cabrera, owner of La Olla restaurant, gives cooking classes at Libres 205. She can be reached at ✆ **951/516-5704** or at bugambilias2@yahoo.com.mx.

SPANISH CLASSES Oaxaca has about a half-dozen language schools. For total immersion, and with prior notice, most can arrange home stays with a Mexican family. The **Instituto Cultural Oaxaca,** Av. Juárez 909 (Apdo. Postal 340, 68000 Oaxaca, Oax.; ✆ **951/515-3404;** www.instculturaloax.com.mx), has the biggest name and the least flexibility. Besides language skill, classes focus on Oaxaca's history and archaeology. The **Instituto de Comunicación y Cultura,** Alcalá 307–312 (68000 Oaxaca, Oax.; ✆/fax **951/516-3443;** www.iccoax.com), provides group and private instruction, and uses music, art, and handicrafts to get students into the swing of things. Classes are small. **Becari Language School,** M. Bravo 210 (68000 Oaxaca, Oax.; ✆ **951/514-6076;** www.becari.com.mx), was founded in 1994, and I've heard good things from students—lots of flexibility and small classes.

HIKING & BIKING Northwest of the city of Oaxaca is a mountain range known as the Sierra Norte that is cooler and wetter than the valley. The native communities offer guides and simple lodging for active sorts who are interested in seeing yet another side of Mexico. Several ecotourism outfits work with these communities. For information, ask at the State Tourism Office (✆/fax **951/516-0123**). **Zona Bici,** García Vigil 406 (✆ **951/516-0953;** www.oaxacawebs.org/zonabici), does bike tours on back roads for about 400 pesos for a 4-hour tour.

SHOPPING

Oaxaca and the surrounding villages are wonderful hunting grounds for handcrafted pottery, woodcarvings, and weavings. The hunt itself may be the best part. Specialties include the shiny **black pottery** for which Oaxaca is famous, **woolen textiles** with the deep reds and purples produced using the natural dye *cochineal,* and highly imaginative ***alebrijes*** **(woodcarvings).**

Shops & Galleries

Most of the shops, galleries, and boutiques are in the area between **Santo Domingo** and the *zócalo,* comprising the streets of **Alcalá, 5 de Mayo,** and **García Vigil** and the **cross streets.** Standard store hours are Monday to Saturday 10am to 2pm and 4 to 7pm.

Amate Books This shop has perhaps the best selection anywhere of books in English about Mexico. It stocks English-language magazines as well as a number of books about Oaxacan handicrafts. Alcalá 307-2, a few steps from Santo Domingo. ✆ **951/516-6960.** http://amatebooks.com.

Arte Piel This store is an outlet for a local factory that makes leather goods using its own designs. Merchandise includes bags, purses, wallets, belts, and coats. It keeps standard store hours. 20 de Noviembre at Aldama. ✆ **951/501-0219.**

Instituto Oaxaqueño de las Artesanías Also known as ARIPO, this government store with a broad range of goods can be a productive stop for exploring Oaxacan handicrafts, but in my opinion the **Casa de las Artesanías** and **MARO** are better stores.

 Open Monday through Friday from 9am to 7pm and Saturday from 9am to 3pm. It's 2 blocks above the Benito Juárez house. García Vigil 809 (at Cosijopi). ✆ **951/514-4030.**

Café Galería Brújula The owner of this cafe has opened some gallery space in the back of his establishment for the exhibition of prints. He has quietly lined up some of the best known print artists in Mexico. García Vigil 409-D. ✆ **951/516-7255.** www.cafebrujula.com.

Casa de las Artesanías de Oaxaca As with MARO, this store is one-stop shopping for almost all of state's many crafts. It has a finer selection of goods, but in some ways it's not as fun shopping here as at MARO. At any rate, a visit here can help you decide whether you want to take a trip to some of the craft-making villages in the highland valleys and which specific villages to go to. Hours are Monday to Saturday 9am to 9pm and Sunday 10am to 6pm. Matamoros 105 at García Vigil. ✆ **951/516-5062.** www.casadelasartesanias.com.mx.

Galería Arte de Oaxaca This gallery represents some of the state's leading contemporary artists and several important artists from other parts of Latin America. It has six rooms of exhibition space and a permanent exhibition of the work of Rodolfo Morales. It's open Monday to Friday from 11am to 3pm and 5 to 8pm, and Saturday from 11am to 6pm. Murguía 105. ✆ **951/514-0910,** -1532. http://artedeoaxaca.com.

Galería Quetzalli The appearance of this modest-looking art gallery behind the Church of Santo Domingo belies the fact that it represents some of the biggest names in Mexican art, such as Francisco Toledo and José Villalobos, as wells as some up-and-coming artists. It has additional exhibition space at the store's "bodega" at Murguía 400, and a contemporary design store at Bravo 109 called Tienda Q. Constitución 104. ✆ **951/514-0030.** www.galeriaquetzalli.com.

La Mano Mágica Come here to see some of the best rug weaving in Oaxaca (by Arnulfo Mendoza) before you head to Teotitlán to see the work of other weavers. In the back rooms, you can find well-chosen pieces of regional folk art. Shipping is available. The store is opposite the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo. Alcalá 203 (btw. Morelos and Matamoros). ✆ **951/516-4275.** www.lamanomagica.com.

MARO This is the store of Mujeres Artesanas de la Región de Oaxaca, a completely independent cooperative of women artisans with more than 200 member producers. There's lots of variety and lots of inventory displayed in its 20 small showrooms. You'll find all the handicrafts of the state represented here. Things are well priced and the quality of the goods is high. Open daily 9am to 8pm. 5 de Mayo 204 (btw. Murguía and Morelos). ✆ **951/516-0670.**

Markets

Oaxaca City has two market areas: one just south of the *zócalo,* and the newer Abastos Market, about 10 blocks west. Both areas bustle with people and are surrounded by small shops selling anything from hardware to leather goods to fabrics.

A few shops specialize in chocolate (not for eating, but for making hot chocolate) and *mole* paste. The neighboring state of Tabasco grows most of the cacao beans used for the chocolate. They are ground with almonds and cinnamon and pressed into bars or tablets. To prepare the drink, you dissolve the chocolate in hot milk or water and beat until frothy. *Mole* paste, which contains chocolate, is used to make the classic Oaxacan dishes *mole negro* and *mole rojo.* A good place to hunt for chocolate and *mole* paste is along Mina Street, on the south side of the 20 de Noviembre Market (see below). Here you'll find

Chocolate Mayordomo and **Chocolate La Soledad.** Both offer a variety of preparations to fit American and European tastes.

Note: Markets are generally open daily from 8am to 5pm.

Benito Juárez Market One block south of the *zócalo,* this covered market is big and busy; stalls sell vegetables, flowers, medicinal preparation, meats, cheeses, and even clothing. Btw. calles Las Casas, Cabrera, Aldama, and 20 de Noviembre.

Mercado Abastos The Abastos Market is open daily but is most active on Saturday, when Indians from the villages come to town to sell and shop. You'll see dried chiles, herbs, vegetables, crafts, bread, and even burros for sale at this bustling market. 10 blocks west of zócalo, btw. Calle Mercaderes and the periférico.

Mercado de Artesanía Located 1 block south and 1 block west of the 20 de Noviembre Market, this market sells textiles and articles of clothing at cheap prices. I rarely see tourists here. J. P. García and Zaragoza.

20 de Noviembre Market This market is just south of the Benito Juárez Market, across Aldama. There are a lot of food stalls, but also some arts and crafts. On the south side, along Mina, are stores selling chocolate and *mole* paste. Btw. calles Aldama, Cabrera, Mina, and 20 de Noviembre.

OAXACA AFTER DARK

If you are interested in seeing the region's traditional dances, you can check out the small-scale **Guelaguetza** performed by professional dancers at the Hotel Camino Real on Fridays from 7 to 10pm. The cost (360 pesos) includes a buffet. Another place to view the dances is **La Casa de Cantera** (✆ **951/514-9522;** www.casadecantera.com), at Federico Ortiz 104, just off Calzada Porfirio Díaz in the Colonia Reforma. It offers something similar. The cover charge of 185 pesos is for the show only, which runs most nights from 8:30 to 10:15pm. Supper costs another 150 pesos, which doesn't include drinks. Call for reservations.

Concerts and dance programs take place all year at the **Teatro Macedonio de Alcalá,** Independencia and Armenta y López. Schedules are often posted by the front doors of the theater. In the early evening, the *zócalo* is a happening place, with all sorts of people out and about. The municipal brass band and marimba players perform free concerts on alternating nights. As the night wears on, you'll usually find some mariachis hanging about.

Just south of the *zócalo* is a 90-year-old cantina called **La Farola** (✆ **951/516-5352**), at 20 de Noviembre 3. Daily from 9:30am to 1:30am it serves *mezcal,* both its own house brand and many others. You can also get beer and other forms of alcohol, of course. It has an original section and a newer section, so you should explore it a bit before you settle down for a drink.

For salsa, go to **La Candela,** Murguía 413 (✆ **951/514-2010**), with live music Thursday through Saturday from 10:30pm to 2am. The cover is usually 50 pesos.

2 ROAD TRIPS FROM OAXACA CITY

The countryside around Oaxaca is dotted with small archaeological sites and villages, and the most important are easy to reach. The landmark ruins in the region are **Monte Albán** (30 min.) and **Mitla** (1 hr.). If you're heading toward Mitla, you can make some interesting stops (see "The Road to Mitla: Ruins & Rug Weavers," below). A number of interesting

villages in other directions make good day trips from Oaxaca. The Tourism Office will give you a map that shows nearby villages where beautiful handicrafts are made. The visits are fun excursions by car or bus. If you would like a guided tour of archaeological ruins or crafts villages, contact **Juan Montes Lara.** He is the thinking person's guide to this area, as well as to most of southern Mexico. He speaks English and conducts tours for small groups throughout Oaxaca and Chiapas. He stays pretty busy, so contact him well in advance—the best way is by e-mail (✆ **951/515-7731;** jmonteslara@yahoo.com).

Many villages have, in the past several years, developed fine small municipal museums. **San José El Mogote,** site of one of the earliest pre-Hispanic village-dweller groups, has a display of carvings and statues found in and around the town, and a display model of an old hacienda. **Teotitlán del Valle** also has a municipal museum; it features displays on the weaving process. Ask at the State Tourism Office for more information.

MONTE ALBAN: RUINS WITH A VIEW

Had I been the priest-king of a large Indian nation in search of the perfect site on which to build a ceremonial center, this would have been it. **Monte Albán** sits on a mountain that rises from the middle of the valley floor—or, rather, divides two valleys. From here you can see all that lies between you and the distant mountains.

Starting around 2000 B.C., village-dwelling peoples of unknown origin inhabited the Oaxaca valleys. Between 800 and 500 B.C., a new ceramic style appeared, indicating an influx of new peoples, now called Zapotec. Around 500 B.C., these peoples began the monumental exercise of leveling the top of a mountain, where they would build Monte Albán (*mohn*-teh ahl-*bahn*).

As you enter the site, you'll see a museum, a shop with guidebooks to the ruins, a cafe, and a craft shop. Video camera permits cost 50 pesos. The site is open daily from 8am to 6pm. Admission to the ruins is 51 pesos. Licensed guides charge 200 pesos per person for a walking tour.

Very little of the original structures remain; they've either been obscured beneath newer construction or had their stones reused for other buildings. A center of Zapotec culture, Monte Albán was also influenced by contemporary cultures outside the valley of Mexico. You can see Olmec influence in the early sculptures; more recent masks and sculptures reflect contact with the Maya. When Monte Albán was at its zenith in A.D. 300, it borrowed architectural ideas from Teotihuacán. By around A.D. 800, the significance of Monte Albán in Zapotec society began to wane. Although most likely never completely abandoned, it became a shadow of its former grandeur. At the beginning of the 13th century, the Mixtec appropriated Monte Albán. The Mixtec, who had long coexisted in the area with the Zapotec, began expanding their territory. At Monte Albán, they added little to the existing architecture; however, they seem to have considered it an appropriate burial ground for their royalty. They left many tombs, including **Tomb 7,** with its famous treasure.

Monte Albán centers on the **Gran Plaza,** a man-made area created by flattening the mountaintop. From this plaza, aligned north to south, you can survey the Oaxacan valley. The excavations at Monte Albán have revealed more than 170 tombs, numerous ceremonial altars, stelae, pyramids, and palaces.

Begin your tour of the ruins on the eastern side of the Great Plaza at the I-shaped **ball court.** This ball court differs slightly from Maya and Toltec ball courts, in that there are no goal rings, and the sides of the court slope. Also on the east side of the plaza are several **altars** and **pyramids** that were once covered with stucco. Note the sloping walls, wide

stairs, and ramps; all are typical of Zapotec architecture and reminiscent of the architecture of Teotihuacán. The building, slightly out of line with the plaza (not on the north-south axis), is thought by some to have been an observatory; it was probably aligned with the heavenly bodies rather than with the points of the compass.

The south side of the plaza has a large **platform** that bore several stelae, most of which are now in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. A good view of the surrounding area can be had from the top of this platform.

The west side has more ceremonial platforms and pyramids. Atop the pyramid substructure are four columns that likely supported the roof of the temple at one time.

The famous building of **Los Danzantes (The Dancers),** on the west side of the plaza, is the earliest known structure at Monte Albán. This building is covered with large stone slabs that have distorted naked figures carved into them (the ones you see are copies; the originals are protected in the site museum). There is speculation about who carved these figures and what they represent, although there is a distinct resemblance to the Olmec baby faces at La Venta, in Tabasco State. The distorted bodies and pained expressions might connote disease. Clear examples of figures representing childbirth, dwarfism, and

 infantilism are visible. Because of the fluid movement represented in the figures, they became known as Los Danzantes—merely a modern label for these ancient and mysterious carvings.

The **Northern Platform** is a maze of temples and palaces interwoven with subterranean tunnels and sanctuaries. Take time to wander here, for there are numerous reliefs, glyphs, paintings, and friezes along the lintels and jambs, as well as the walls. In this section of the ruins, you are likely to see vendors discreetly selling "original" artifacts found at the site. These guys come from the nearby town of Arrazola, where the fabrication of "antiquities" is a long-standing cottage industry. I like to buy a piece from them occasionally and pretend I'm getting the real thing just to get an opportunity to talk with them.

Leaving the Great Plaza, head north to the **cemetery** and **tombs.** If you have a day to spend at Monte Albán, be sure to visit some of the tombs, which contain magnificent glyphs, paintings, and stone carvings of gods, goddesses, birds, and serpents. Lately, the tombs have been closed to the public, but check anyway. Of the excavated tombs, the most famous is **Tomb 7,** next to the parking lot. It yielded some 500 pieces of gold, amber, and turquoise jewelry, as well as silver, alabaster, and bone art objects. This amazing collection is on display at the Museo Regional de Oaxaca (p. 438).

To get to Monte Albán, take a bus from the Hotel Rivera del Angel, at Mina 518 between Mier y Terán and Díaz Ordaz. **Transportadora Turística, Arqueología e Historia** (✆ **951/516-0666**) makes hourly runs to the ruins. A round-trip ticket costs 38 pesos. Additional buses usually run during high season. If for any reason this company isn't running vans, you can buy a ticket with the competition, **Autobuses Turisticos** (✆ **951/516-5327**), at Mina 505, just down the block. They use buses and charge the same for a round-trip ticket. If you're driving from Oaxaca, take Calle Trujano out of town. It becomes the road to Monte Albán, which is about 10km (6¼ miles) away.

THE ROAD TO MITLA: RUINS & RUG WEAVERS

East of Oaxaca, the Pan American Highway (Hwy. 190) leads to Mitla and passes several important archaeological sites, markets, and craft villages.

Many little stops dot this route, and some are a bit off the highway, so I recommend hiring a taxi, renting a car, or signing up with a small tour rather than using local bus transportation. If you take a tour, ask which sites it includes. To get to the highway, go north from downtown to Calzada Niños Héroes and turn right. This feeds directly on to the highway. All the sites are listed in order, from west (Oaxaca) to east (Mitla).

SANTA MARÍA DEL TULE'S 2,000-YEAR-OLD TREE Santa María del Tule is a small town 8km (5 miles) outside Oaxaca. It's famous for the immense **El Tule Tree,** an *ahuehuete* (Montezuma cypress, akin to the bald cypress) standing in a churchyard just off the main road. Now over 2,000 years old, it looks every bit its age, the way large cypresses do. However, this one is the most impressive tree I've ever seen for the sheer width of its trunk and canopy. It is said to have the broadest trunk of any tree in the world. When the tree was younger, the entire region around Santa María del Tule was marshland; in fact, the word *tule* means "reed." Now the water table has dropped, so to protect the tree, a private foundation waters and takes care of it. The admission fee of 5 pesos goes toward these efforts.

The **Iglesia de San Jerónimo Tlacochahuaya,** 6km (3¾ miles) farther along, is the next stop. You'll see a sign pointing right; go less than another kilometer (about a half-mile) into town. Inside the church are an elaborately carved altar and a crucifix fashioned out of a ground paste made from the corn plant. The murals decorating the walls were

the work of local artists of the 18th century and are a sweet mix of Spanish and Indian aesthetics. Make a point of seeing the beautifully painted baroque organ in the choir loft. The church is usually open daily from 10am to 2pm and 4 to 8pm.

DAINZÚ'S ZAPOTEC RUINS Three kilometers (1¾ miles) farther, visible from the highway (26km/16 miles from Oaxaca), you'll see a sign pointing to the right. It's less than a kilometer (a half-mile) to the ruins, which were first excavated in the 1960s. Dainzú is a pre-Classic site that dates from between 700 and 600 B.C. Increasingly sophisticated building continued until about A.D. 300. The site occupies the western face of a hill, presumably for defense. The main building is a platform structure whose walls were decorated with carvings resembling Monte Albán's Danzantes. These carvings are now in a protective shed; a caretaker will unlock it for interested parties. These figures show Olmec influence but differ from the Danzantes because they wear the trappings of the "ball game," which make them, in all likelihood, the earliest representations of the ball game in Mexico. And, in fact, a partially reconstructed ball court sits below the main structure. The site provides an outstanding view of the valley. Admission is 31 pesos.

TEOTITLÁN DEL VALLE'S BEAUTIFUL RUGS The next major turnoff you come to is 2km (1¼ miles) farther along, 3km (1¾ miles) from the highway. This is Teotitlán, famous for weaving and now an obviously prosperous town, to judge by all the current development. This is where you'll want to go for rugs, and you'll find no shortage of weavers and stores. Most weavers sell out of their homes and give demonstrations. The prices are considerably lower than in Oaxaca City.

The church in town is well worth a visit. The early friars used pre-Hispanic stones to build the church and then covered them with adobe. When the townspeople renovated the church, they rediscovered these stones with carved figures and now proudly display them. You'll see them in odd places in the walls of the church and sacristy. Teotitlán also has a small community museum, opposite the artisans' market and adjacent to the church. The museum has an interesting exhibit on natural dye-making, using herbs, plants, and *cochineal* (a red dye derived from insects).

For a bite to eat, consider the **Restaurant Tlamanalli,** Av. Juárez 39 (✆ **951/524-4006**), run by three Zapotec sisters who serve Oaxacan cuisine. Its reputation attracts lots of foreigners. It's on the right on the main street as you approach the main part of town, in a red brick building with black wrought-iron window covers. It's open Monday through Friday from 1 to 4pm. A bit farther on, there's another nice restaurant on the left where the main street intersects with the town center.

LAMBITYECO'S RAIN GOD Getting back to the highway and continuing eastward, in 3km (1¾ miles), you'll see a turnoff on the right for the small archaeological site of Lambityeco. Of particular interest are the two beautifully executed and preserved **stucco masks** of the rain god Cocijo. At Lambityeco, a major product was salt, distilled from saline groundwater nearby. Admission is 31 pesos.

TLACOLULA'S FINE MARKET & UNIQUE CHAPEL Located about 30km (19 miles) from Oaxaca (1.5km/1 mile past Lambityeco), Tlacolula is in *mezcal* country, and along the road from here to Mitla, you'll see a couple of small distilleries and distillery outlets advertising their product. Stop by any one of them to taste their wares. *Mezcal* is distilled from a species of agave different from that of tequila. Most *mezcal* has a very strong smell and may or may not come with a worm in the bottle. Many of these small distilleries flavor their *mezcal* in much the same way that Russians flavor vodka.

Sunday is market day in Tlacolula, with rows of textiles fluttering in the breeze and aisle after aisle of pottery and baskets. If you don't go on market day, you won't have to compete with crowds. The **Capilla del Mártir** of the parochial church is a stunning display of virtuosity in wrought iron. The doorway, choir screen, and pulpit, with their baroque convolutions, have no equals in Mexico's religious architecture. Also eye-catching (to say the least) are the graphic, almost life-size sculptures of the Twelve Apostles in their various manners of martyrdom. A few years ago, a secret passage was found in the church, leading to a room that contained valuable silver religious pieces. The silver was hidden during the Revolution of 1910; the articles are now back in the church.

YAGUL'S ZAPOTEC FORTRESS Yagul, a fortress city on a hill overlooking the valley, is a couple of kilometers (about 1½ miles) farther on down the highway. You'll see the turnoff to the left; it's less than a kilometer (about a half-mile) off the road. The setting is spectacular, and, because the ruins are not as fully reconstructed as those at Monte Albán, you're likely to have the place to yourself. Bring a picnic.

The city was divided into two sections: the fortress at the top of the hill and the palaces lower down. The center of the palace complex is the plaza, surrounded by four temples. In the center is a ceremonial platform, under which is the **Triple Tomb.** The door of the tomb is a large stone slab decorated on both sides with beautiful hieroglyphs. The tomb may be open for viewing; if there are two guards, one can leave the entrance to escort visitors.

Look for the beautifully restored, typically Zapotec **ball court.** North of the plaza is the **palace** structure built for the chiefs of the city. It's a maze of rooms and patios decorated with painted stucco and stone mosaics. Visible here and there are ceremonial mounds and tombs decorated in the same geometric patterns found in Mitla. The panoramic view of the valley from the fortress is worth the rather exhausting climb.

Admission is 31 pesos. Still cameras are free, but use of a video camera costs 35 pesos. The site is open daily from 8am to 5:30pm.

It's just a few kilometers farther southeast to Mitla. The turnoff comes at a very obvious fork in the road.

MITLA'S LARGE ZAPOTEC & MIXTEC SITE Mitla is 4km (2½ miles) from the highway; the turnoff terminates at the **ruins** by the church. If you've come here by bus, it's less than a kilometer (about half a mile) up the road from the dusty town square to the ruins; if you want to hire a cab, there are some in the square.

The Zapotec settled Mitla around 600 B.C., and it became a Mixtec bastion in the late 10th century. This city was still flourishing at the time of the Spanish Conquest, and many of the buildings were used through the 16th century.

Tour groups often bypass the **town of Mitla** (pop. 7,000), but it is worth a visit. The University of the Americas maintains the **Museum of Zapotec Art** (previously known as the Frissell collection) in town. It contains some outstanding Zapotec and Mixtec relics. Admission is 35 pesos and includes admission to the ruins. Be sure to look at the Leigh collection, which contains some real treasures. The museum is in a beautiful old hacienda.

You can easily see the most important buildings in an hour. Mixtec architecture is based on a quadrangle surrounded on three or four sides by patios and chambers, usually rectangular. The chambers are under a low roof, which is excellent for defense but makes the rooms dark and close. The stone buildings are inlaid with small cut stones to form geometric patterns.

There are five groups of buildings, divided by the Mitla River. The most important buildings are on the east side of the ravine. The **Group of the Columns** consists of two quadrangles, connected at the corners with palaces. The building to the north has a long chamber with six columns and many rooms decorated with geometric designs. The most common motif is the zigzag pattern, the same one seen repeatedly on Mitla blankets. Human and animal images are rare in Mixtec art. In fact, only one **frieze** has been found (in the Group of the Church, on the north patio). Here you'll see a series of figures painted with their name glyphs.

Admission to the site is 31 pesos. Use of a video camera costs 35 pesos. Entrance to the museum is included in the price. It's open daily from 8am to 5pm.

Outside the ruins, vendors will hound you. The moment you step out of a car, every able-bodied woman and child for miles around will come charging over with shrill cries and a basket full of bargains—heavily embroidered belts, small pieces of pottery, fake archaeological relics, and cheap earrings. Offer to pay half the price the vendors ask. A modern handicrafts market is near the ruins, but prices are lower in town.

SOUTH OF MONTE ALBAN: ARRAZOLA, CUILAPAN & ZAACHILA

Though the two roads to these towns are unnumbered, they are clearly signposted along the way.

ARRAZOLA: WOODCARVING CAPITAL Arrazola lies in the foothills of Monte Albán, about 24km (15 miles) southwest of Oaxaca. The tiny town's most famous resident is **Manuel Jiménez,** the septuagenarian grandfather of the resurgence in woodcarving as folk art. Jiménez's polar bears, anteaters, and rabbits carved from copal wood are shown in galleries throughout the world; his home is a magnet for folk-art collectors. Now the town is full of other carvers, all making fanciful creatures painted in bright, festive colors. Little boys will greet you at the outskirts offering to guide you to individual homes for a small tip. Following them is a good way to get to know the town, and after a bit you can take your leave of them.

If you're driving to Arrazola, take the road out of Oaxaca City that goes to Monte Albán, then take the left fork after crossing the Atoyac River and follow the signs for Zaachila. Turn right after the town of Xoxo and you will soon reach Arrazola. You can also take a bus from the second-class station near the Abastos Market.

CUILAPAN'S DOMINICAN MONASTERY Cuilapan (kwi-*lah*-pan) is about 15km (9¼ miles) southwest of Oaxaca. The Dominican friars inaugurated their second **monastery** here in 1550. Parts of the convent and church were never completed due to political complications in the late 16th century. The roof of the monastery has fallen in, but the cloister and the church remain. The church, which is still in use, is being restored. There are three naves with lofty arches, large stone columns, and many frescoes. It is open daily from 10am to 6pm; entry is 31 pesos, with an additional cost of 35 pesos for use of a video camera. The monastery is visible on the right a short distance from the main road to Zaachila, and there's a sign as well. The bus from the second-class station stops within a few hundred feet of the church.

ZAACHILA: MARKET TOWNS WITH MIXTEC TOMBS Farther on from Cuilapan, 24km (15 miles) southwest of Oaxaca, Zaachila (sah-*chee*-lah) has a **Thursday market;** baskets and pottery are sold for local household use, and the produce market is always

full. Also take note of the interesting livestock section and a **mercado de madera (wood market)** just as you enter town.

Behind the church is the entrance to a small **archaeological site** containing several mounds and platforms and two interesting tombs. The artifacts found here now reside in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, but **Tomb 1** contains carvings that are worth checking out.

At the time of the Spanish Conquest, Zaachila was the last surviving city of the Zapotec rulers. When Cortez marched on the city, the Zapotec offered no resistance, and he formed an alliance with them. This outraged the Mixtec, who invaded Zaachila shortly afterward. The site and tombs are open daily from 9am till 4pm, and the entrance fee is 31 pesos.

In Zaachila is a great outdoor restaurant called **La Capilla** (✆ **951/528-6115**). It's large and set up to handle lots of people, but often there will be only a few tables occupied. It's a peaceful, attractive setting, and the cooking is delicious. You can enjoy all manner of regional specialties, including *moles, tlayudas,* special roasted chicken, and *barbacoa* on Sundays. You also get handmade tortillas and fresh fruit drinks (made with filtered water and ice). La Capilla is open daily 10am to 7pm. It's located just off the highway at Km 14.5.

To return to Oaxaca, your best option is to line up with locals to take one of the *colectivos* on the main street across from the market. If you're driving, see the directions for Arrazola, above.

SOUTH ALONG HWY. 175

SAN BARTOLO COYOTEPEC'S POTTERY San Bartolo is the home of the famous **black pottery** sold all over Oaxaca. It's also one of several little villages named Coyotepec in the area. Buses frequently operate between Oaxaca and this village, about 15km (9¼ miles) south on Hwy. 175. In 1953, a native woman named Doña Rosa invented the technique of smoking the pottery during firing to make it black and rubbing the fired pieces with a piece of quartz to produce a sheen. Doña Rosa died in 1979, and her son, **Valente Nieto Real,** carries on the tradition. Watching Valente change a lump of coarse clay into a work of art with only two crude plates (used as a potter's wheel) is an almost magical experience. The family's home and factory is a few blocks off the main road; you'll see the sign as you enter town. It's open daily from 9am to 5:30pm.

You can buy black pottery at many shops on the little plaza or in the artists' homes. Villagers who make pottery often place a piece of their work near their front door, by the gate, or on the street. It's their way of inviting prospective buyers to come in.

SAN MARTÍN TILCAJETE: WOODCARVING VILLAGE San Martín Tilcajete, about 15km (9¼ miles) past San Bartolo, is home to **woodcarvers** who produce *alebrijes*—fantastical, brightly painted animals and imaginary beasts—much like those produced in Arrazola. You can wander from house to house viewing the amazing collections of hot-pink rabbits, bright-blue twisting snakes, and two-headed Dalmatians.

SANTO THOMÁS JALIETZA About 2km (1¼ miles) beyond San Martín, you'll see a sign on the left for this village of **weavers** who use backstrap looms. The village cooperative runs a market in the middle of town. Prices are fixed; you'll find the greatest variety of goods on Friday.

OCOTLÁN Twenty minutes farther on Hwy. 175 brings you to this fairly large market town. This city is notable for a few reasons: One is the **Aguilar sisters** (Josefina, Guillermina, Irene, and Concepción) and their families, who produce red clay pottery figures

that are colorful, sometimes humorous, and prized by collectors. You'll see their row of home-workshops on the right as you enter, with pottery figures on the fence and roof. (Don't go around town asking for the Aguilar family. Most of the town's inhabitants are named Aguilar.)

Ocotlán is also the home of **Rodolfo Morales,** a painter who, upon becoming rich and famous, took an active role in aiding his hometown with renovation projects. Two projects worth visiting are the parish church and former convent. Inside the convent, you can see some of the original decorations of the Dominicans. The noticeable sheen of the stucco walls is produced using the viscous innards of the *nopal* cactus. The convent is now a community museum.

Friday is market day in Ocotlán, and the town fills with people and goods. It's a very good market where you can find a variety of things at reasonable prices.

NORTH OF OAXACA

GUELATAO: BIRTHPLACE OF BENITO JUÁREZ High in the mountains north of Oaxaca, this lovely town has become a living monument to its favorite son, Benito Juárez. Although usually peaceful, the town comes to life on **Juárez's birthday** (Mar 21). The museum, statues, and plaza all attest to the town's obvious devotion to the patriot. A second-class bus departs from Oaxaca's first-class station six times daily. There are also several departures from the second-class station. The trip takes at least 2 hours, through gorgeous mountain scenery. Buses return to Oaxaca every 2 hours until 8pm.

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Eastward from Mexico City: Puebla & Veracruz

by David Baird

El Oriente is what the Mexicans call this region stretching from the central valley of Mexico east to the Gulf. It includes the states of Puebla, Tlaxcala, and Veracruz, and has much to recommend it. For adventure travelers, it affords excellent white-water rafting, challenging climbs that include Mexico's highest mountain—a dormant volcano called the Pico de Orizaba—and scuba diving along Veracruz's coastal reefs. For the culture crowd, the region has three fascinating ruins, some excellent museums and historical sites, and great food and architecture.

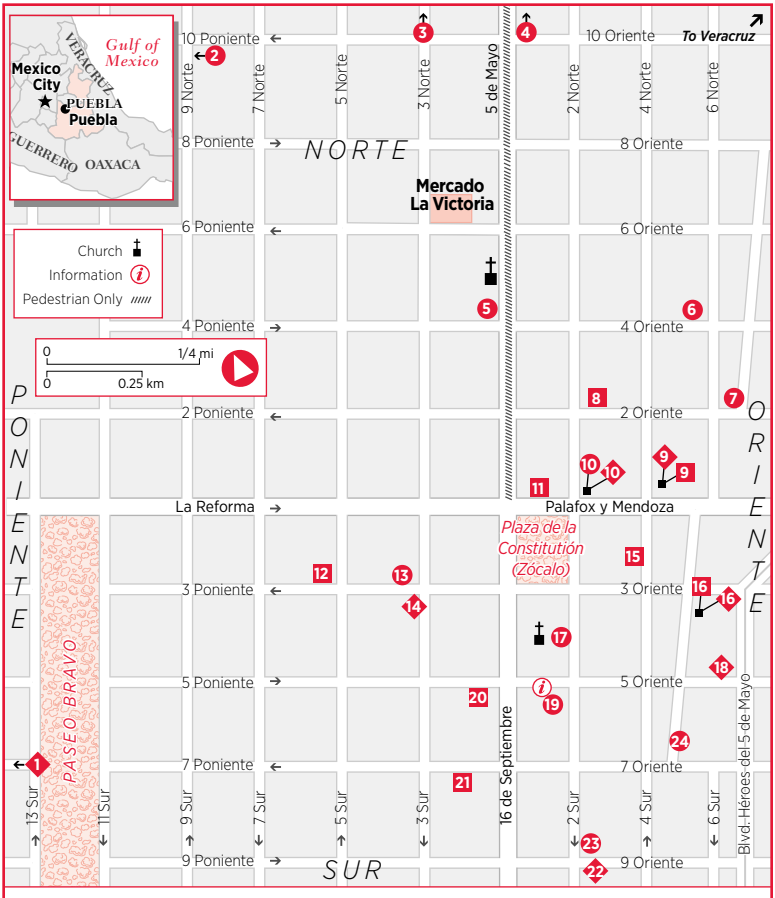
Puebla and **Cholula** have the ideal highland climate, beautiful colonial churches and palaces, incredible food, and a strong local culture. The ruins in the area feature the startlingly vivid pre-Columbian murals of Cacaxtla and the New World's largest man-made structure, the great pyramid of Cholula. Farther east you'll find the magnificent anthropology museum in **Xalapa,** and the ruins of **El Tajín.** Finally, you get to the coast and the old port of **Veracruz,** a fun town for music, dancing and nightlife, and for soaking up the easygoing rhythms of the Tropics.

1 PUEBLA & CHOLULA ★★★

128km (79 miles) E of Mexico City; 285km (177 miles) W of Veracruz

Puebla and Cholula sit in a broad valley that lies between mountain ranges and snow-capped volcanoes. The valley is 2,150m (7,052 ft.) above sea level and has a mild climate and fertile soils. Puebla was founded by the Spanish in early colonial times; Cholula's origins date back to the earliest civilizations of Mexico. Until the Spanish arrived, it had displayed a remarkable continuity for an ancient city in central Mexico. It seems never to have been sacked and abandoned in the manner of Teotihuacán or Tula or many other cities. And although it was a large city, it was never the capital of an empire. Rather, it seems to have been a religious center. The Spanish chroniclers noted that it had 365 temples, one for each day of the year. But none of this remains today, as the city was sacked and destroyed during the Spanish Conquest. Only the Great Pyramid still stands.

Though these two cities—one Indian, one Spanish—have recently grown together into one metropolitan area, they still remain worlds apart. Puebla has a large historic center with magnificent architecture, including so many convents, churches, and public palaces that it has been named a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Its architecture differs from that of the rest of Mexico in the extensive use of painted tiles, gold leaf, and molded plaster. Facades and exterior walls are commonly surfaced with clay and Talavera tiles to



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hide or lend color to the dark gray-black building stone. Cholula, on the other hand, has an architecture that reflects humility and simplicity and has nothing of the grandiose about it. The building materials are of the simplest sort, and the churches, houses, and plazas are unassuming in size and design, with an inherent Indian quality in their most expressive elements.

There are several reasons to visit this part of the world: to sample the food for which Puebla is famous, to take in the colonial architecture, to gaze upon the volcanoes, to explore the Great Pyramid, and to visit the Talavera workshops. Depending on how much you want to do, you could stay here anywhere from 3 days to a week.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING

By Plane Puebla has an international airport (airport code PBC), but most air travelers still fly into Mexico City because it has more flights. From the Mexico City airport, you can take an express bus directly to Puebla. Buses leave every half-hour and cost 180 pesos. They will arrive at either the main bus station (CAPU) or the small downtown bus station. **Continental ExpressJet** (✆ **800/231-0856** in the U.S., or 01-800/900-5000 in Mexico) has a direct flight connecting Puebla and Houston. A taxi to downtown costs 210 pesos.

By Car From Mexico City the quickest route is **Hwy. 150D.** It's a four-lane toll road that continues on to Veracruz. From Mexico City the tolls add up to 120 pesos; from Veracruz they add up to 350 pesos. From Xalapa, take **Hwy. 140** west to the intersection with 150D.

If you're coming from Querétaro, there's a new road that bypasses Mexico City and Texcoco, making for a much shorter trip by avoiding city traffic. Completed in September 2009, its official name is **El Arco Norte.** It connects with the Autopista México-Querétaro

Cinco de Mayo & the Battle of Puebla

In the United States, the Mexican holiday Cinco de Mayo is often compared to the Fourth of July, but it's not Mexican Independence Day. The date commemorates the Battle of Puebla, on May 5, 1862, which resulted in a memorable victory against foreign invaders.

At the time, Napoleon III of France was scheming to occupy Mexico. A well-trained and handsomely uniformed army of 6,000, under the command of General Laurencez, landed in Veracruz with the objective of occupying Mexico City. In its path were 4,000 ill-equipped Mexicans under Gen. Ignacio Zaragoza. Despite the odds, the Mexicans won a resounding victory. The French were humiliated and suffered their first defeat in nearly a half-century at the hands of the penniless, war-torn republic of Mexico.

For Mexico, it marked the nation's first victory against foreign attack, and the battle remains a matter of national pride. Never mind that by the following year the French were in possession of both Puebla and Mexico City. Today the Cinco de Mayo holiday is an enduring symbol of Mexico's sense of patriotism.

On a trip to Puebla, you can visit the forts of Guadalupe and Loreto, where the battle took place, just north of the old part of the city.

just south of the turnoff for Tula and stretches east and then south before joining up with the Autopista México-Puebla near San Martín Texmelucan. Tolls add up to about 250 pesos, which is well worth it.

By Bus The ride from **Veracruz** to Puebla takes 3½ hours and costs around 260 pesos. From **Mexico City,** it takes 2 hours and costs 120 pesos. Several bus lines have regular departures from Mexico City's **TAPO bus station,** as frequently as every 15 minutes. You can also catch a bus to Puebla directly from the **Mexico City airport** (see "By Plane," above). There is good bus service between Puebla and Oaxaca (4½ hr.) and now, with the new bypass that circumvents Mexico City, there is direct bus service between Querétaro and Puebla (4 hr.).

You'll probably arrive at a large **bus station,** known by its acronym, capu. To get to downtown Puebla, look for one of several booths marked TAXI AUTORIZADO. Taxi service to almost anywhere in Puebla costs 60 pesos. Many buses to and from the Mexico City airport use the small downtown **Estrella Roja station,** at Calle 4 Poniente 2110.

VISITOR INFORMATION The **State Tourism Office** (✆ **222/777-1519** or 777-1520) is at Calle 5 Oriente 3, across the street from the cathedral. The office is open Monday through Saturday from 8am to 8pm, Sunday from 9am to 2pm. The city's tourism office is under the archway that runs along Palafox y Mendoza in front of the *zócalo* (Portal Hidalgo 14; ✆ **222/404-5047**). It's open Monday to Friday 9am to 8pm, with shorter hours on the weekends. The staff at the state office is much more helpful.

CITY LAYOUT Puebla's streets are laid out on a Cartesian quadrant. Two main avenues serve as the x- and y-axes, but instead of separating the positive from the negative numbers, they separate odd from even. The role of x-axis is played by **Avenida Reforma/Palafox.** North of it are even-numbered streets; south of it are odd-numbered streets. The north-south axis (y-axis) is **5 de Mayo/16 de Septiembre.** East of it are even-numbered streets, and west are odd-numbered. So if someone tells you that some place is at the intersection of calles 6 and 10, you know it's in the northeast quadrant. Street names also include a direction—*norte, sur, oriente, poniente* (north, south, east, west). So if someone tells you that a church is on Calle 7 Oriente, then you know what part of town it's in: *Oriente* tells you that it's the eastern portion of an east-west street, and the odd number indicates that it's south of Palafox (or Palafox y Mendoza, to use the full name). Each main axis changes names after it passes the center point of the city.

Don't count on taxi drivers to know where certain restaurants, hotels, or attractions are located; keep addresses handy.

Fast Facts Puebla

Area Code The telephone area code is **222.**

Drugstores Pharmacies are almost as common as churches. They usually close around 9pm but take turns staying open late *(de turno).* **Farmatodo** (✆ **222/248-1302**) delivers to downtown hotels until 10pm. **Farmacias Guadalajara** (✆ **222/246-0052**) has a 24-hour location at the corner of 11 Sur and Paseo Bravo.

Emergency The emergency number is ✆ **066.**

Hospital **Beneficiencia Española** is at 19 Norte 1001 (✆ **222/232-0500**).

Internet Access There are several Internet access businesses downtown. Ask around, preferably ask young people.

Post Office The *correo* is around the corner from the State Tourism office, on Avenida 16 de Septiembre. Hours are Monday through Friday from 8am to 6:30pm, and Saturday 9am to 4pm.

WHERE TO STAY

Except for two small properties in Cholula, all these establishments are in Puebla's city center. Staying in Cholula is a bit more relaxing because it still feels like a small town. From late March through May, the area can experience heat waves. Consider getting a room with air-conditioning for those months. Prices quoted include the 18% tax.

Very Expensive

Hotel Camino Real Puebla ★★★ This hotel, in the 16th-century former convent of the Immaculate Conception, is a nicely restored colonial gem. Courtyards spill into more courtyards, and remnants of poly-chromed Colonial-Era frescoes are everywhere, even in the guest rooms, which are decorated handsomely with period-style paintings, and furniture. There is considerable variation in size and amenities. Most have clay tile or stone floors and beamed ceilings. Upstairs rooms are generally preferable. The hotel is 2½ blocks south of the *zócalo*.

Calle 7 Poniente 105 (btw. Calle 3 Sur and Av. 16 de Septiembre), Centro Histórico, 72000 Puebla, Pue. ✆ **800/722-6466** in the U.S., or 222/229-0909, -0910. Fax 222/232-9251. www.caminoreal.com/puebla. 84 units. 3,050 pesos deluxe; 3,615 pesos superior deluxe; 4,305–5,000 pesos suite. Packages sometimes available. AE, DC, MC, V. Valet parking 50 pesos. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; exercise room; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Internet, minibar.

La Casona de la China Poblana ★★★ According to the owners of this property, La China Poblana actually resided here toward the end of her life. This could be true; the house is across the street from the Jesuit church that was her favorite. But whatever the truth, the important thing to know is that this house is a great place to reside now. Rooms are comfortable, surprisingly quiet, and can be made completely dark thanks to the restoration of the Colonial-Era wooden doors that close over the balcony windows. This is one of those revealing details that indicate the level of effort put into the restoration. All the rooms are upstairs. The style of decor varies from modern to colonial to eclectic, but all the rooms have flare. In general, rooms are large and have tile or wood floors.

Calle 4 Norte 2 (at Palafox y Mendoza), 72000 Puebla, Pue. ✆/fax **222/242-5621** or 01-800/1-CASONA (227662) in Mexico. www.casonadelachinapoblana.com.mx. 10 units. 2,223 pesos luxury double; 2,632 pesos junior suite; 3,744 pesos and up suite. Rates include full breakfast. AE, MC, V. Free secured parking. No children 11 and under. **Amenities:** Restaurant (p. 459); bar; concierge; membership in local heath club; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV w/DVD, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Expensive

Estrella de Belem ★★★ This hotel in Cholula occupies a smaller house than the other property here (La Quinta Luna), but its location is great, a block from the entrance to the pyramid. The service is friendly and personal. A young Mexican couple, fluent in English, own and manage the house, and they are quite amiable. Rooms are an attractive mix of old and modern, except for one master suite decorated exclusively with 1890s

furnishings and details. All rooms have heated floors and large bathrooms; master suites come with two-person Jacuzzi tubs and king-size beds. Junior suites come with a queen-size bed. The rooftop pool with terrace is a big plus, as are the elaborate breakfasts. This property is completely smoke-free.

Av. 2 Oriente 410, 72760 Cholula, Pue. ✆ **222/261-1925.** Fax 222/261-1725. www.estrelladebelem.com.mx. 6 units. 1,895 pesos junior suite; 2,477 pesos master suite. Rates include full breakfast. AE, MC, V. Free secure parking. No children. **Amenities:** Bar; rooftop pool; smoke-free rooms; spa. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Hotel La Quinta Luna ★★★ This boutique hotel in Cholula is simple and elegant. The seven rooms are all off a large garden courtyard. They are spacious and comfortable, and they come with quite a few extras. The windows are double-glazed for quiet. The bathrooms are modern and each is finished differently, but they are all large and well arranged. The service is attentive, and the food at the little restaurant is quite good.

Calle 3 Sur 702, 72760 Cholula, Pue. ✆ **800/728-9098** in the U.S. and Canada, or 222/247-8915. Fax 222/247-8916. www.laquintaluna.com. 7 units. 1,930 pesos double; 2,223 pesos junior suite; 2,691 pesos and up master suite. AE, MC, V. Free secured parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; concierge; room service; smoke-free rooms; spa. *In room:* TV w/DVD, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Mesones Sacristía ★★★ If you want colonial flavor seasoned with *mucho ambiente,* try this hotel. It's a fun adaptation of a colonial house in an excellent location in downtown Puebla, near the church of La Compañía. It lets guests experience the old city in all its antiquity and even quirkiness. Despite basic modern amenities such as plumbing, electricity, and air-conditioning, the interiors still feel like a step back in time. For instance, the doors haven't been resized, and in a couple of rooms you have to bow slightly to enter. (This feature of colonial architecture enamored the great modern Mexican architect, Luis Barragán, who saw the act of bowing as you enter a room as an aspect of colonial religious life.) In the courtyard, a restaurant and popular nightspot serves Poblano specialties. A guitarist or a trio performs romantic songs and ballads until about 11pm. This is not the place for someone who likes to retire early. The hotel offers packages for guests interested in cooking lessons or Talavera.

Calle 6 Sur 304, Callejón de los Sapos, 72000 Puebla, Pue. ✆/fax **222/232-4513** or 242-3554. www.mesones-sacristia.com. 8 units. 1,880–2,223 pesos double. Rates include full breakfast. AE, MC, V. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; access to local health club; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Moderate

Hotel Posada San Pedro ★ Kids This convenient and comfortable downtown hotel is a better bargain than others in the neighborhood, especially for families. Spacious rooms come with plain wooden furniture, comfortable beds, and midsize bathrooms. There is a well-manicured courtyard with a small pool, surrounded by four stories of rooms. It's a family hotel, with afternoon videos for the kids, and child-care service can be provided if requested with sufficient advance notice.

Calle 2 Oriente 202, 72000 Puebla, Pue. ✆ **222/891-5700** or 01-800/712-2808 in Mexico. Fax 222/246-5376. www.hotelposadasanpedro.com.mx. 80 units. 1,053 pesos double; 1,500 pesos suite. Special Internet rates available. AE, MC, V. Free covered parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; outdoor heated pool; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

NH Puebla ★★ This hotel in the center of town offers reasonably priced lodging in modern, uncluttered rooms. The overall feel of the place is quiet and soothing. Guest rooms come furnished with deep, comfortable mattresses, soft lights, and a muted color

scheme. The modern bathrooms with frosted glass counters are of comfortable size. The junior suites are reasonably priced. The NH is just the place to relax after a busy day walking around this city, which can at times overwhelm the senses.

Calle 5 Sur 105 (at 3 Poniente), 72000 Puebla, Pue. ✆ **800/400-0064** worldwide, or 222/309-1919. www.nh-hotels.com. 128 units. $94–$146 double; $109–$161 deluxe; $117–$176 junior suite. AE, MC, V. Valet parking $3. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; concierge; fitness room; small heated outdoor pool; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Inexpensive

Hotel Colonial This four-story hotel (with elevator) has a great location on the walkway in front of the church of La Compañía. The rooms are ample and attractive. Try to avoid units along Calle 3, which can be noisy from traffic below. The furnishings are simple, but the recent remodeling has freshened them up quite a bit. Standard rooms usually contain two twin or double beds. Bathrooms are basic but very clean. The Colonial is popular with European tour groups.

Calle 4 Sur 105 (at 3 Oriente), 72000 Puebla, Pue. ✆ **222/246-4612.** Fax 222/246-0818. www.colonial.com.mx. 67 units. 770 pesos double. AE, MC, V. Parking 100 pesos per day. **Amenities:** Restaurant; room service; smoke-free rooms; Wi-Fi (in common areas). *In room:* TV.

Hotel Puebla Plaza The Puebla Plaza is almost in the shadow of the cathedral. Rooms are small to midsize, with small bathrooms. Most have one double or two twin beds. Reserve a room in back to avoid the commotion in the front courtyard and at the restaurant next door. The lower prices apply to rooms with one double bed. Of the three inexpensive properties listed here, this would be my last choice; both of the others are better maintained.

Calle 5 Poniente 111, 72000 Puebla, Pue. ✆ **222/246-3175** or 01-800/926-2703 in Mexico. Fax 222/242-5792. www.hotelpueblaplaza.com.mx. 48 units. 550–650 pesos double. AE, MC, V. Secure parking 40 pesos. **Amenities:** Wi-Fi (in common areas). *In room:* TV.

Hotel Royalty This hotel on Puebla's main square is a sweet deal. You get the central location, yet the rooms are pretty quiet. They are small to medium in size (there's a good bit of variation) with laminate or carpeted flooring and either two double or two twin beds. Most of the junior suites have balconies or at least windows with views of the square. Some of these have larger beds yet don't cost much more.

Portal Hidalgo 8, 72000 Puebla, Pue. ✆ **222/242-4740,** or 01-800/638-9999 in Mexico. www.hotelr.com. 45 units. 565 pesos double; 1,100 pesos junior suite. Rates include full breakfast except on Sun. AE, MC, V. No parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* TV, minibar, Wi-Fi.

WHERE TO DINE

Puebla is known throughout Mexico for *mole poblano,* a spicy sauce with more than 20 ingredients, including chocolate. Another regional specialty, *pipián,* is similar to *mole* but based on ground, toasted pumpkinseeds. July through September is the season for *chiles en nogada,* and the city goes crazy for them. You'll see them as daily specials on all the menus. This is a dish of contrasts involving a poblano chile; a spicy-sweet filling made of pork, chicken, and sweetmeats; and a walnut cream sauce.

Besides the restaurants listed below, try the one in the **Mesones Sacristía** (see above). I've enjoyed the *mole* there. Also, I've eaten well in the museum restaurant at **La Casa de los Muñecos.** It has a good reputation and a menu that features several local foods. For a steak, try **Chimichurri** (✆ **222/249-1534**), at the corner of Avenida Juárez and Calle 27 Sur, in the restaurant district (take a cab).

Very Expensive

La Conjura ★★★ SPANISH Perhaps it's odd to eat Spanish food in this city known for its Mexican cuisine, but this restaurant is special. It plays with combinations of old- and new-world ingredients, such as tapas of *chistorra* (Spanish sausage) cooked with a small amount of *guajillo* peppers, or a shrimp dish with locally made goat cheese and passion-fruit sauce. The menu changes daily, with offerings of seafood, lamb, and beef. If they have *arroz negro con calamares* (rice with squid cooked in the squid's ink), give it some consideration, or the *huachinango en alberino* (snapper in a scented wine sauce topped with mussels, clams, and shrimp). The small, attractive dining room with its low, vaulted ceiling was formerly a bodega. On this last trip, the restaurant was holding Flamenco shows on Friday nights in the restaurant annex.

Calle 9 Oriente 201. ✆ **222/232-9693.** Reservations recommended. Tapas 40–150 pesos; main courses 200–430 pesos. AE, MC, V. Sun–Tues 2–6pm; Wed–Sat 2–11pm.

Expensive

Ekos NUEVA COCINA This restaurant, located in the sheltered courtyard of a boutique hotel, La Casona de la China Poblana (p. 456), offers a beautiful and relaxing place for dinner and/or drinks. Most of the dishes are original and incorporate traditional Mexican ingredients. Dishes come and go, depending on the season, but a representative example would be salmon cooked in a hibiscus sauce with a dusting of crumbled pumpkinseeds. The kitchen produces its own *mole,* which is a little different from the traditional recipes. It's served over a chicken breast stuffed with zucchini blossoms. You can also count on delicious soups and fresh ceviche.

Calle 4 Norte 2. ✆ **222/242-5621,** ext. 115. Reservations recommended. Main courses 115–190 pesos. AE, MC, V. Sun–Tues 8am–6pm; Wed–Sat 8am–11pm.

Moderate

Celia's Café Finds REGIONAL/MEXICAN This restaurant near the Callejón de Los Sapos is also the store for Talavera Celia. Everything served here is on handmade dishes from the factory. The restaurant's regional specialties are quite good, including *pipián* and *mixiotes.* I tried both recently and was happy I did. Prices are low, and the service is great. There are also a few dishes from other countries and some fresh salads. The dining experience is informal and friendly. In the evenings musicians show up, and the scene becomes bohemian as regulars sing along to old favorites until 11pm or even midnight—but you must show up by 9pm before they lock the door to keep out any late arrivals. If you want to take a tour of the workshop, ask if one is available.

Calle 5 Oriente 608. No phone. Main courses 50–135 pesos. MC, V. Daily 9am–9pm.

Fonda de Santa Clara Overrated REGIONAL This is one of those restaurants invariably associated with a particular city. For many people, it is the automatic choice in Puebla, but this fame has resulted in a decline in quality. However, the service is still good, the Talavera dining room is well worth seeing, and the *mole* is worth trying. Many visitors walk away happy, especially those who don't harbor high expectations.

Calle 3 Poniente 307. ✆ **222/242-2659.** www.fondadesantaclara.com. Main courses 70–120 pesos lunch, 90–160 pesos dinner. AE, MC, V. Daily 9am–10pm.

Mi Ciudad ★★ MEXICAN They serve some excellent renditions of all of Puebla's traditional dishes here, including stellar *pipián verde* and chiles rellenos. Situated in the center of Puebla's restaurant and club district along Avenida Juárez, Mi Ciudad is either

Fun Facts La China Poblana: Princess, Slave, Mystic, Icon

In Puebla you'll notice the iconic figure of "La China Poblana" virtually everywhere. She was a historical figure whose life would make for a great opera. She was a young princess from India (not China) who was captured by Portuguese pirates, sold into slavery, and shipped to Mexico on the Manilla galleon in the 17th century. Eventually, she was sold to a rich family of Puebla. This family, impressed with the woman's simplicity and spirituality, adopted her. Thus freed from domestic chores, she delved into a life of religious devotions, mixing elements of her native beliefs with Catholicism. She gradually gained fame as a mystic who led an austere life of prayer and became revered by the population of the city. At her death, she was interred in the church of the Compañía, but church authorities later moved her remains when a cult began to form around them. Her form of dress has become the standard folkloric outfit of the city.

a short cab ride or a long walk from downtown. The menu is large and varied. Two soups, *chile atole* and *sopa poblana,* are excellent choices. By special request, they will prepare half-portions of either *mole* and *pipián* or *pipián rojo* and *pipián verde.* They also offer steaks and seafood prepared in a variety of ways. The dining room decor makes lots of references to Puebla. An attractive bar area with full food service is to the left as you enter. Another location is in the Zona Dorada, at the corner of 31 Oriente and 14 Sur (✆ **222/245-4556**).

Av. Juárez 2507. ✆ **222/231-5326.** Reservations recommended. Main courses 85–165 pesos. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 1pm–midnight.

EXPLORING PUEBLA

Puebla is a city full of stories and anecdotes that color the colonial houses and convents of the historic district. For historical tours of the city or a tour of the surrounding area, you might want a guide. One I can recommend is **Carlos Rivero Tours** (✆ **222/304-2855;** www.riveros.com.mx). He speaks English, knows his city, and is very capable. For a quick sightseeing tour of the city, you can hop on one of the buses that park on the street between the *zócalo* and the cathedral (Calle 3 Oriente). Tours are in Spanish, depart every half-hour, and cost 40 pesos. Or you can climb on to one of the new **Turibus** (www.turibus.com.mx) open-air double-decker buses, with narrative in several languages. Your ticket (110 pesos) is valid for the entire day and allows you to get off at any location and board the next bus that comes along. The circuit of both buses includes a quick view of the site where the Battle of Cinco de Mayo was fought. Both also offer tours to Cholula, but just on the weekends.

Churches

If you were to stop to examine every church you pass in Puebla, you would be in for a long stay. Still, it is something I enjoy doing, even with the smaller churches. Many have simple, austere interiors that express a sweetness and humility that I like. But three churches in the Puebla's historic district require special mention.

The **cathedral** ★★★, completed in 1649, has the tallest bell towers in Mexico. Its dark-stone exterior and severe *Herrerian* (Spanish Renaissance) design lend it a lugubrious

appearance that may befit a cathedral but takes a little while to warm up to. The inside is worth a peek. Near the front doors, you can usually find guides (or they'll find you) who offer a short tour.

The **Iglesia de Santo Domingo** ★★★, on the corner of 5 de Mayo and 4 Poniente, was originally part of a Dominican monastery completed in 1611. Lining the walls of the nave are some exquisite baroque altars. In the left transept you'll find the **Capilla del Rosario,** built in 1690. It is a masterpiece of gold leaf and plaster convolutes dedicated to the Virgin of the Rosary. Some observers point to it as the epitome of Mexican baroque architecture. Note, too, the intricate Talavera wainscoting.

The massive **church of La Compañía,** built by the Jesuits, is where La China Poblana worshiped and was briefly entombed. Look to the right of the church doorway, and you'll see a curious bit of text in Talavera. It marks the date of the execution of a con man who arrived in Mexico on a boat from Spain carrying papers identifying him as a *visitador* (papal emissary and inspector). He was wined and dined by the bishops in the capital and in Puebla, and lived the good life for several weeks before being found out. As the text notes, he was executed, and his head was hung above the doorway. The message, I guess: It's not nice to fool the mother church.

Near Cholula are two other impressive churches: Tonantzintla and San Francisco Acatepec. See more about them below.

Museums

In addition to the museums listed below, a couple of smaller attractions are worth visiting: The **Biblioteca Palafoxiana** ★ is an impressive colonial library, the collection of the famous 17th-century bishop who went on to become viceroy, Juan Palafox y Mendoza. The library is on the second floor of the Casa de Cultura, next to the state tourism office. The **Casa de Alfeñique** is a colonial mansion and a landmark known for its exterior plaster decoration, reminiscent of cake icing; the museum collection, a hodgepodge of things Poblano, is fun if you have time. It's at the intersection of calles 4 Oriente and 6 Norte. The **Casa de los Muñecos,** Calle 2 Norte 4, is more important for its exterior than for the museum collection inside. The large grotesques that adorn the late-18th-century facade are said to be caricatures of the town council, though this story is apocryphal.

Exconvento de Santa Mónica After independence, a long political struggle ensued between the national government and the Church. It climaxed in the Reform Wars of the 1850s, when the liberal government instituted several anticlerical measures, including expropriation of the convents. The nuns at Santa Mónica discreetly walled up their doors and kept functioning as a religious community with the aid of their neighbors and the blind eye of local officials. They survived with little assistance from the outside as, over the years, the convent slowly crumbled around them. Then in 1934 (during another political feud btw. church and state), a local official "discovered" them. This history makes for an interesting visit: Displays include the contents of this and two other clandestine convents confiscated at the same time. These nuns weren't sitting on great treasures—most of the paintings are poor representatives of their era—but you will find a rare set of paintings on velvet predating Elvis or poker-playing dogs. Don't miss the crypt, the chapel, and the upper and lower *coros* (choirs). This museum was closed for restoration work for part of 2009 and 2010. ***Note:*** In the church next door is the much-revered image of *Nuestro Señor de las Maravillas* to the left as you enter. He is an important and popular saint in Puebla, and there's often a crowd of worshipers surrounding him.

Calle 18 Poniente 103. ✆ **222/232-0178.** Admission 30 pesos. Tues–Sun 9am–6pm.

Exconvento de Santa Rosa ★ Unlike Santa Mónica, this former convent was unable to postpone confiscation and served variously as barracks, hospital, and public housing. It's now the home of the **Museo de Arte Popular.** It can be seen only by tour, which includes a visit to the kitchen where *mole* was invented, and a large display of the crafts practiced in the state. If you enjoy handicrafts, don't miss this place, but the experience varies greatly depending on the knowledge of the tour guide. I've had good guides; I've had bad guides. Unfortunately, the best don't speak English. Tours take 1 hour and usually start on the hour.

Calle 3 Norte 1203. ✆ **222/232-7792.** Admission 25 pesos. Tues–Sun 10am–5pm (last tour at 4pm).

Museo Amparo ★★★ The finest museum in the city, the Museo Amparo (named for the deceased wife of the founder) has a brilliant collection of pre-Columbian pieces from across Mexico, beautifully displayed and intelligently organized. Its collections of colonial and modern art are good, and the museum gets traveling exhibitions, which usually don't require an additional admission charge. The collection of *arte virreinal* (colonial art) is on the second floor and includes decorative objects and furniture. It is exhibited in the restored living quarters of the original mansion. The interiors are from the *Porfiriato* (1880–1910), with the elaborate decoration of that period. Inexpensive audio tours of the pre-Columbian collection are available. Or you can hire an English-speaking guide for the entire museum (180 pesos). Signs are in Spanish and English.

Calle 2 Sur 708. ✆ **222/229-3850.** Admission 35 pesos adults, 25 pesos children 3–12 and students. Free Mon. Wed–Mon 10am–6pm.

Museo Bello y González ★★ Located near the corner of Calle 3 Sur and Calle 3 Poniente, a block west of the *zócalo,* this museum houses a fine collection of 17th-, 18th-, and 19th-century art, furniture, and antiques from all over the world. Many of the Oriental objects in the museum were brought over in colonial times on the Manilla galleon. Viewing the house is another reason for seeing the place. Only the first floor has been restored, but the museum closed in late 2009 in order to restore more of the house. My favorite room is almost completely covered in Talavera, and the display cabinets are filled with Talavera from several centuries. The museum is named for José Luis Bello y González, the father of Mariano Bello, the man who gathered this collection. A guided tour (in English or Spanish) is included in the price of admission.

Calle 3 Poniente 302. ✆ **222/232-9475.** Admission 20 pesos. Tues–Sun 10am–5pm.

Museo Nacional del Ferrocarril This museum exhibits several train engines and cars in a large open space, including both steam and diesel locomotives, a baggage car, passenger cars, a dining car, a Pullman coach, and a caboose. You can board several of these, but a couple of the best are off-limits. Some of the cars serve double-duty as gallery space for photos and artwork relevant to railroads.

Calle 11 Norte and Calle 12 Poniente. ✆ **222/774-0100.** Admission 10 pesos. Tues–Sun 9am–5pm.

EXPLORING CHOLULA

Volcanoes & Pyramids

On the western outskirts of Puebla is the small town of **Cholula,** which offers a good vantage point for viewing the volcanoes, Popocatépetl and Ixaccihuatl. These volcanoes separate the Valley of Mexico from the Valley of Puebla. The best time for viewing them is on a clear morning in the winter or early spring, when the snowcaps would be at their largest.

In pre-Columbian times, Cholula was a large city—the religious capital of highland Mexico. The Spanish razed the hundreds of temples that stood here, and we know little about them. But the **Great Pyramid** still exists, the largest pyramid in the New World. At first glimpse, it looks more like a hill crowned by a church (Nuestra Señora de los Remedios). All the surfacing of the pyramid was removed in earlier times, but you can readily make out the geometry of the stepped platform, which rises from the ground in four levels. One face of the pyramid has been partially reconstructed. Tunnels dug by archaeologists give you an idea of how the thing was built. From atop the neighboring platform (if the guards allow you to climb it), you can get a view of the volcano with the church in the foreground. The entrance fee for the Cholula pyramid is 41 pesos; the site is open daily from 9am to 5:30pm. Tour guides charge 150 pesos per person and can be located at the entrance to the main tunnel.

While you're in Cholula, you might want to walk around the town's center. A restaurant under the stone archway bordering the *zócalo* offers a decent, inexpensive meal. It's called **Los Tulipanes.**

Tonantzintla & San Francisco Acatepec

A perfect complement to this trip is a visit to the church of **Tonantzintla** ★★★, just to the south. Leave the town on Bulevar Miguel Alemán, which becomes the road to Tonantzintla. Less than 1.5km (1 mile) ahead, the church is within plain sight of the road. It's famous for its jewel-box interior, executed in an endearing style of Indian baroque. It has mesmerized many visitors, including R. Gordon Wasson, who saw in its manifold imagery allusions to a secret mushroom cult. If this visit hasn't quenched your appetite for visiting churches, proceed a bit farther down the road and you will imperceptibly cross into the neighboring community of **San Francisco Acatepec** ★★. Its church is also along the road and stands out for its stunning tile facade.

SHOPPING

Talavera ★★★ is a type of majolica earthenware fashioned into dishes, tiles, and decorative objects. It traces its origins back to the Moors, who introduced it into Spain in the 9th century, setting up workshops in the town of Talavera. From there, artisans took the practice to Puebla in the 16th century—hence the name.

It's no exaggeration to say that Talavera is the face of Puebla. Its widespread use as facing for buildings is the most distinctive characteristic of the local architecture. You see it almost anywhere you look. And you'll definitely see it anywhere you shop. But the best and most expensive Talavera is produced by a dozen factories in Puebla and Cholula, all members of an association that sets standards and certifies manufacturers. To be officially certified, a workshop must use only the traditional methods and ingredients (no commercial ceramic mix or glazes); practically everything must be done by hand. There's no restriction on artistic taste, just the methods for making Talavera. So there's a good bit of variety from one workshop to another. The genuine article is not cheap, so you should look around in the showrooms until you learn how to discern the knockoffs from the real stuff and find a style you prefer over others.

If you're interested in watching people make Talavera, consider a workshop tour. **Uriarte Talavera,** Calle 4 Poniente 911 (✆ **222/232-1598**), charges 50 pesos for its tour. The factory has an impressive facade made completely of Talavera. And inside you'll see some great pieces displayed. There's one factory in the Parián area—**Talavera Armando,** at Calle 6 Norte 408 (✆ **222/232-6468**). If enough people are around, they'll get a free tour. One factory, **Talavera Celia** (✆ **222/242-3663**), has a shop/restaurant downtown,

at Calle 5 Oriente 608, that serves meals on its own Talavera. See Celia's Café, above. Inquire there about touring the workshop, which isn't too far from downtown. **Talavera de la Luz** specializes in large maps and panoramic views rendered in Talavera tiles. It has shown some of its largest pieces in museums in the United States. Unfortunately, it doesn't open very much.

The **Mercado de Artesanías (El Parián)** is a pedestrian-only, open-air shopping area just east of Calle 6 Norte between calles 2 and 6 Oriente. You'll see rows of neat brick shops selling inexpensive crafts and souvenirs. The shops are open daily from 10am to 8pm. Bargain to get a good price. While you're in this area, you can take a look at the **Teatro Principal.**

For antiques browsing, go to **Callejón de los Sapos (Alley of the Frogs),** about 3 blocks southeast of the *zócalo* near Calle 4 Sur and Calle 7 Oriente. Wander in and out; there's good stuff, large and small. Shops are generally open daily from 10am to 2pm and 4 to 6pm. On Saturday mornings, there's a flea market in the little square. If you're there in the afternoon, stop by **La Pasita,** across Calle 5 from the Plaza de los Sapos, to taste homemade cordials and browse through the owner's humorous collection of Mexicana. The owner keeps flexible hours and only opens if the mood strikes him. Start with a *pasita,* then work your way up to a China Poblana—a layered cordial of red, white, and green liqueurs.

If you're out walking around Puebla, you might amble over to a short stretch of Calle 6 Oriente between 4 Norte and 5 de Mayo. It has a few picturesque candy shops selling famous local sweets, such as *camotes* (sweets made from yams in various flavors), which are very popular with Mexicans but are not to my taste. There's also a Victorian-era shopping mall made of wrought iron, which has been fixed up nicely: Ex-Mercado La Victoria, which is behind Santo Domingo.

PUEBLA AFTER DARK

Mariachis play daily, beginning at 6pm, on **Plaza de Santa Inés,** Calle 11 Poniente and Calle 3 Sur. They stroll through the crowds that gather at the sidewalk cafes. Another square where you can hear live music is **Plaza de los Sapos,** Calle 7 Oriente near Calle 6 Sur. Another place to hear live music is in the courtyard of the **Mesón Sacristía de la Compañía,** Calle 6 Sur 304. A singer/guitarist entertains with popular ballads until 11pm.

Along Avenida Juárez, there are several popular bars and clubs. When the weather is agreeable, one of my favorite places for drinks is the rooftop bar of the **NH Puebla** hotel at the corner of calles 3 and 5 (p. 457). It offers a great view. **Teorema,** Reforma 540, near Calle 7 Norte (✆ **222/242-1014**), is a good coffee shop and bookstore that features guitarists and folk singers every evening. It's open daily from 9:30am to 2:30pm and 4:30pm to midnight.

2 TLAXCALA ★

120km (74 miles) E of Mexico City; 40km (25 miles) N of Puebla

Tlaxcala is the capital of Mexico's smallest state (also named Tlaxcala) and a Colonial-Era city that is much slower paced than Puebla. It's close enough to be visited in a day trip from Puebla, but I enjoy spending the night and getting to know the city at leisure. To

ATTRACTIONS
- Museo de Artesanías **1**
- Museo Regional (Exconvento) **7**
- Palacio del Gobierno (Government Palace) **2**
- Plaza de la Constitución **3**
- Plaza Xicoténcatl **5**
- Templo de San Francisco **8**

ACCOMMODATIONS
- Hotel Alifer **6**
- Hotel Posada San Francisco **4**

understand Tlaxcala and its inhabitants, one must go back 500 years, to before the conquest, when the Tlaxcalan federation of city-states was the bitter rival of the Aztec Empire, and both were locked in a mortal struggle that the Tlaxcalans were losing. Along come the conquistadors. And Cortez, crafty Spaniard that he was, played on this enmity to enlist the Tlaxcalan warriors in his siege of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán, now Mexico City. As a reward for being the first and foremost allies of the Spanish, the Tlaxcalan rulers received special rights and privileges and a certain level of independence that no other cities enjoyed.

Over the centuries, power and wealth was concentrated in the capital city. Tlaxcala became something of a backwater. But to this day (and I'm not exaggerating), locals conceive of Tlaxcala as the rival of Mexico City. The other notion that surfaces when you spend any time chatting with the locals is a latent sheepishness for having befriended the invading forces and betrayed the New World. To mitigate these feelings of guilt much is made of Xicoténcatl, a Tlaxcalan prince who rebelled against the Spanish and has become a symbol of cultural resistance, much the same way as the Aztec prince Cuauhtémoc is for most Mexicans. There is also a local equivalent of La Virgen de Guadalupe—**La Virgen de Ocotlán.**

This fascinating history and the relaxed pace of life here make for pleasant exploration. Tlaxcala retains its small-town atmosphere and overall low prices. ***Tip:*** It's best to visit Tlaxcala during the week because it has become a weekend getaway for city dwellers.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING A taxi ride from Puebla takes 30 to 40 minutes and costs 250 pesos. The bus takes an hour, costs 16 pesos and leaves every 15 to 30 minutes from a station on 6 Poniente, between 11 Norte and 13 Norte.

VISITOR INFORMATION Tlaxcala's **tourist information office** is at the intersection of avenidas Juárez and Lardizábal (✆ **246/465-0900,** or 01-800/509-6557 in Mexico). Office hours are daily 9am to 7pm. On Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, it sponsors small bus tours of the city (in Spanish) that cost 20 pesos. It used to offer a Sunday tour of the Cacaxtla site, and it might do so again. Inquire at the office.

FAST FACTS The telephone **area code** is **246.** Most hotels have Internet access, but there is also **free Wi-Fi** on the main square, and a number of small Internet cafes spread about the downtown area. The **post office** is on the main square beside the Hotel Posada San Francisco and is open from 9am to 5pm Monday through Friday.

EXPLORING TLAXCALA

Two blocks from the main plaza is a classic old bullring, still in use, and across from it is the old **Templo de San Francisco,** supposedly the site where the Tlaxcalan chiefs were baptized. The church is noted for the elaborately inlaid Moorish ceiling below the choir loft. A painting inside the Chapel of the Third Order shows the baptism of the chiefs. To the right of the Templo is the former convent, now a museum containing early paintings and artifacts from nearby archaeological sites.

The **Government Palace** ★★, on the handsome, tree-shaded *zócalo,* contains vivid murals by a local artist, Desiderio Hernández Xochitiotzin, who died in 2007. The murals illustrate the city's history. The expanded **Museo de Artesanías** (✆ **246/462-2337**), on Sanchez Piedras between Lardizábal and Primera de Mayo, showcases the state's wide-ranging crafts and customs. Here local artisans give visitors demonstrations in such crafts as embroidery, weaving, and *pulque*-making (juice of fermented *agaves*). The museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 10am to 6pm; admission is 6 pesos.

Less than 1km (just over half a mile) from the town center is the **Santuario de Ocotlán** ★★, constructed after Juan Diego Bernardino claimed to have seen an apparition of the Virgin Mary on that site in 1541. Baroque inside and out, it has elaborate interior decorations of carved figures and curling gilded wood that date from the 1700s. The carvings are attributed to Francisco Miguel Tlayotehuanitzin, an Indian sculptor who labored for more than 20 years on the building's decoration.

Exploring the Cacaxtla Archaeological Site ★★★

Cacaxtla (pronounced "kah-*kahsh*-tlah") is perhaps Tlaxcala's main attraction. It's a pre-Hispanic hilltop site 19km (12 miles) southwest of the city with some of the most vivid murals in Mexico. The site was uncovered in 1975. What the archaeologists found—vivid murals in red, blue, black, yellow, and white, showing Maya warriors (from the Yucatán)—revolutionized our understanding of settlement patterns in central highland Mexico. Since then, more murals, history, and at least eight construction phases have been uncovered.

Scholars attribute the influence of the site to a little-known tri-ethnic group (Náhuatl, Mixtec, and Chocho-Popoloca) known as Olmec-Xicalanca, from Mexico's Gulf Coast. Among the translations of its name, "merchant's trade pack" seems most revealing. Like Casas Grandes, north of Chihuahua City and Xochicalco between Cuernavaca and Taxco, Cacaxtla appears to have been an important crossroads for merchants, astronomers, and others in the Mesoamerican world. Its apogee, between A.D. 650 and 900, corresponds with the abandonment of Teotihuacán, the decline of the Classic Maya civilization, and the emergence of the Toltec culture at Tula.

How—or even if—those events affected Cacaxtla isn't known. The principal **mural** is a vividly detailed victory scene, with triumphant dark-skinned warriors wearing jaguar skins, and the vanquished dressed in feathers and having their intestines extracted. Numerous symbols of Venus (a half-star with five points) found painted at the site have led archaeoastronomy scholar John Carlson to link historical events such as wars, captive taking, and ritual sacrifice with the appearance of Venus; all of this was likely undertaken in hope of ensuring the continued fertility of crops.

The latest mural discoveries show a wall of corn plants from which human heads sprout, next to a merchant whose pack is laden with goods. The murals flank a grand **acropolis** with unusual architectural motifs. A giant steel roof protects the grand plaza and murals.

Xochitécatl is a small ceremonial center on a hilltop overlooking Cacaxtla, about 1km (a half-mile) to the east and in plain sight of Cacaxtla. It was probably inhabited, at least in the classical period, by the same people living in Cacaxtla. A curious **circular pyramid** stands atop this hill, 180m (590 ft.) above the surrounding countryside. Beside it are two other **pyramids** and three massive **boulders** (one about 3m/9¾ ft. in diameter), which were hollowed out for some reason. Hollowed boulders appear to have been restricted to the Puebla-Tlaxcala valley. Excavation of the Edificio de la Espiral (circular pyramid), dated between 1000 and 800 B.C. (middle formative period), encountered no stairways. Access is thought to have been by its spiral walkway. Rounded boulders from the nearby Zahuapan and Atoyac rivers were used in its construction. Cone-shaped platforms in this part of Mexico are thought to have been dedicated to Ehecatl, god of the wind. The base diameter exceeds 55m (180 ft.); it rises to a height of 15m (49 ft.).

The stepped and terraced **Pyramid of the Flowers** was started during the middle formative period. Modifications continued into colonial times, as exemplified by faced-stone and stucco-covered adobe. Of the 30 bodies found during excavations, all but one were children. Little is known about the people who built Xochitécatl. Evidence suggests that the area was dedicated to Xochitl, goddess of flowers and fertility. The small **museum** contains pottery and small sculpture, and a **garden** holds larger sculpture. On a very clear day, one can see from top of the hill of Xochitécatl the snowcaps of both Popocatépetl and Pico de Orizaba.

Admission to both sites is 35 pesos, plus 35 pesos for a video or still camera. Both sites are open daily 9am to 5pm. To get there and back in a taxi, you will have to contract the taxi on an hourly basis (100 pesos/hour) so that he'll wait for you. Before doing that, ask at the tourism office to see if any set tours to Cacaxtla are running.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE IN TLAXCALA

Tlaxcala has several restaurants beneath the stone arches *(portales)* on the east side of the *zócalo.* One of them, **Los Portales** (no phone) has handmade corn tortillas all day and makes good breakfasts. Just across the small Plaza Xicoténcatl, at Calle Independencia

7-A, is **Tirol** (✆ **246/462-3754**), a restaurant serving several regional specialties and traditional dishes.

Hotel Alifer The Alifer's rooms are medium size and simply furnished. Most have carpeting; some have tile floors. The rooms are a little worn but aren't dirty or uncomfortable. The poor lighting is the only other thing that I can complain about, which is saying quite a lot for a hotel in this price range with this kind of location. The price varies by number and size of beds.

Morelos 11, 90000 Tlaxcala, Tlax. ✆ **246/462-5678** or 462-3062. www.hotelalifer.com.mx. 40 units. 400–600 pesos double. MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant. *In room:* TV, Wi-Fi.

Hotel Posada San Francisco de Tlaxcala This hotel is in a 19th-century mansion facing the town's main square called La Casa de Piedra (House of Stone). Most of the guest rooms are in the back of the property in two modern buildings fronting a large pool that is shaded by a roof. The rooms are attractive and comfortable. Half of them were recently updated, many have carpeting; others have tile floors and area rugs. Five rooms in the *zona antigua* have more character but are a little smaller. They are in one of the original buildings and are grouped around a small stone patio.

Plaza de la Constitución 17, 90000 Tlaxcala, Tlax. ✆ **246/462-6022.** Fax 246/462-6818. www.posadasanfranciscodetlaxcala.com. 68 units. 1,155 pesos double; 1,700 pesos suite. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor heated pool; room service; tennis court. *In room:* TV, Wi-Fi.

3 XALAPA ★

102km (63 miles) NW of Veracruz; 203km (126 miles) NE of Puebla

Xalapa (pronounced "hah-*lah*-pa" and sometimes spelled "Jalapa") is a highland city in the middle of Mexico's prime coffee-growing area and the capital of the state of Veracruz. Less than 2 hours from the port of Veracruz, it offers an easy escape from the high temperatures there. It's a hilly city, crisscrossed by narrow, winding streets and alleys. A fine, misty rain known as *chipi chipi* often floats in the air, cloaking the views in a vaporous shroud. When the sky is clear, you can sometimes make out in the distance the snowcapped peak of Pico de Orizaba (also known as Citlaltépetl), an extinct volcano that is Mexico's tallest peak, at 5,747m (18,850 ft.).

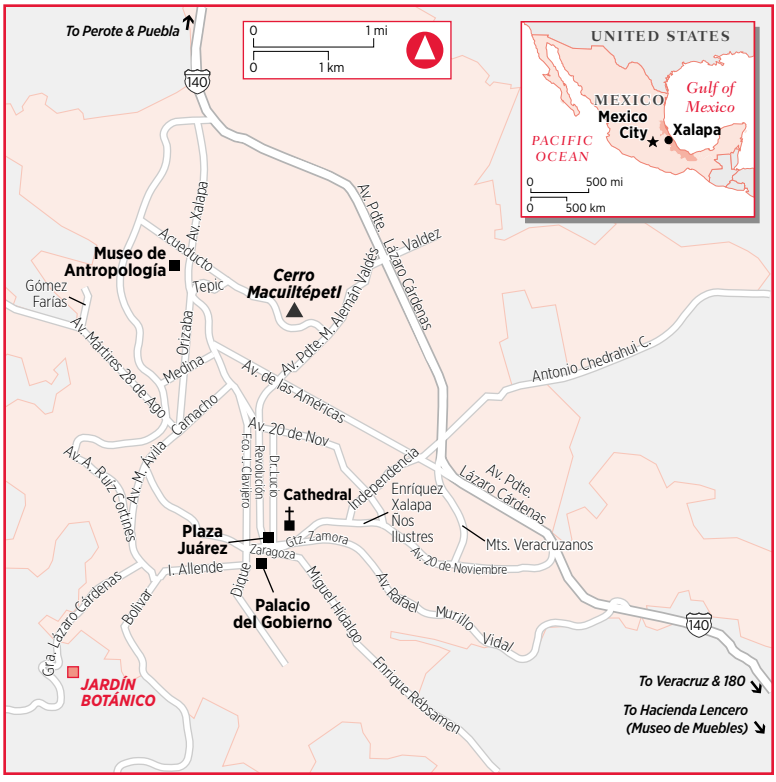
Fun Fact

Xalapa, or "Jalapa," lent its name to the famed jalapeño pepper.

Xalapa is a university town and has the best music school in the country, which is part of the University of Veracruz. It's easy to come across chamber music and symphony concerts. Xalapa also has an excellent anthropology museum that is second only to Mexico City's monster of a museum. And for active types, there's excellent white-water rafting nearby.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE Veracruz, 1½ hours away, has the closest major airport. If you're **driving** from Veracruz, take Hwy. 180 to Cardel, and then go west on Hwy. 140. From Papantla, you can avoid the mountains by taking Hwy. 180 south to Cardel. From Mexico City and Puebla, there's a turnoff for Hwy. 140 on the toll highway to Veracruz (Hwy. 150D). Fog is common and dangerous between Perote and Xalapa. The trip by bus to or from Papantla takes 4 hours.



The **bus station** (CAXA) is 2.5km (1½ miles) east of the town center just off Calle 20 de Noviembre. Taxis are downstairs, and prices are controlled. Tickets to downtown cost around 35 pesos. Buses run to Veracruz every 20 to 30 minutes and to Puebla 15 times a day. You can buy tickets downtown at the same information booth in front of the city hall where tourism has a staff person. Hours are Monday to Saturday 8am to 9pm.

VISITOR INFORMATION Go to the **tourist information booth** in front of the Ayuntamiento (city hall), across from the Plaza Juárez. Hours are Monday through Friday from 9am to 3pm.

CITY LAYOUT Xalapa is a hilly town with streets that defy order. In the center of town is the large **Plaza Juárez,** where on a clear day the Pico de Orizaba is visible to the southwest. Across the street (north) from the plaza is the Ayuntamiento (city hall); just east is the Palacio del Gobierno (state capitol). The cathedral is across (north) from this.

GETTING AROUND Most of the recommended hotels and restaurants (see "Where to Stay" and "Where to Dine," below) are within easy walking distance of the central Plaza Juárez. Taxis in Xalapa are inexpensive, as are city buses. Because streets in the center of town are busy and narrow, cabs aren't allowed to stop just anywhere. Sometimes you have

to look for a TAXI sign. Otherwise, try to hail a cab in a place that permits traffic to pass. If you would like a guide to give you a tour of the city or the surrounding region, contact José Ernesto Hernández (see "River Rafting," below).

FAST FACTS The telephone **area code** is **228.** The city is 1,430m (4,690 ft.) above sea level. The climate is humid and cool, for the most part. It can be warm from March to early May. The light chipi chipi rain comes and goes at any time of year. The rainy season is May through July and can bring strong downpours.

EXPLORING XALAPA

For information on cultural events, go to **El Agora,** a cultural center with a coffee shop beneath the Plaza Juárez (reached by steps on the south side of the plaza). Look for posters announcing upcoming concerts. There's usually something going on. Also look in the local paper, *Diario de Xalapa,* or in the *Cartelera,* a monthly publication of the Instituto Veracruzano de Cultura.

Hacienda El Lencero Occasionally called the Museo de Muebles (Furniture Museum), this country estate 14km (8¾ miles) southeast of the town center was for 14 years (1842–56) the home of Antonio López de Santa Anna, the 11-time president of Mexico. Here he retreated from the world, though on occasion he opened his doors to receive notable visitors. Furniture from Mexico, Europe, and Asia fills the rooms, illustrating the cosmopolitan tastes of Mexico's upper classes during the 19th century. Among the notable pieces is the leader's bed, embellished with the national emblem (an eagle holding a serpent in its beak). The grounds are lovely and shaded by ancient trees. The grand house overlooks a spring-fed pond.

Carretera Xalapa-Veracruz Km 10. No phone. Admission 30 pesos; free guided tours (in Spanish only) on request. Tues–Sun 10am–5pm. Bus: Banderilla–P. Crystal–Lencero from Av. Lázaro Cárdenas to village of Lencero or nearby spot along the highway. Drive or take a taxi (130 pesos) about 10km (6¼ miles) south of town on Hwy. 140 toward Veracruz, past the country club; watch for the signs on the right.

Museo Antropología de Xalapa ★★★ This museum exhibits excellent examples of the megalithic heads and other monumental sculptures made by the Olmec—better than those in Mexico City or at the museum in Villahermosa. The collection of Totonac pieces, from the highly stylized smiling faces to the unadorned, realistic sculptures of faces and heads, is the best anywhere. The museum is laid out in order from earliest to latest cultures, from the Olmec—the mother culture of Mesoamerican civilization—to the post-Classic civilizations of Veracruz. Explanatory text is in Spanish. Bilingual guides are available. A taxi runs about 35 pesos.

Av. Xalapa s/n. ✆ **228/815-4952,** -0708. www.uv.mx/max. Admission 50 pesos, free for children 11 and younger. Tues–Sun 9am–5pm.

River Rafting

Close by Xalapa are three popular rivers for rafting and a number of rafting companies that can accommodate you. No experience is necessary. If you're planning ahead, contact José Ernesto Hernández at **Eco Expediciones** (✆ **228/812-1176;** www.ecoexpediciones.net). He is the most trustworthy guide out there.

WHERE TO STAY

Mesón del Alférez ★★ In most other parts of Mexico, rooms such as these, in a beautiful colonial house, would go for much more money. The owners have thoroughly

renovated the old house and retained its residential feel. Most rooms are spacious and beautifully decorated. Standard rooms come with one double bed or one queen, suites with a choice of two doubles or one king. Rooms are colonial in style, accented by bright colors and stone. In some, a loft creates extra space. There are two smaller rooms in front that get noise from the street. Additional rooms are around the corner in a modern house, Balcones del Alférez. They are comfortable, modern, and a little quieter. The hotel faces the back of the Palacio del Gobierno.

Sebastián Camacho 2, corner of Zaragoza, 91000 Xalapa, Ver. ✆/fax **228/818-0113.** www.pradodelrio.com. 17 units. 640 pesos standard; 890 pesos suite. Rates include continental breakfast. MC, V. Free secure parking 1 block away. **Amenities:** Restaurant; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Posada del Cafeto Value This well-managed, comfortable hotel has three stories of rooms surrounding a tidy garden. Furnishings and decor are simple and attractive: clay tile floors, white plaster walls with cheerful accents, and rustic wood furniture. Each room is slightly different. Some are small, but all have ample bathrooms. Bed choices include one double, two twins, a twin and a double, or two doubles for a higher rate.

Canovas 8, 91000 Xalapa, Ver. ✆ **228/817-0023.** www.pradodelrio.com. 32 units. 460–520 pesos double; 850 pesos suite. Rates include continental breakfast. MC, V. No parking. **Amenities:** Cafe (breakfast); Wi-Fi (in lobby). *In room:* TV, hair dryer.

WHERE TO DINE

Because Xalapa is a student town, you can eat well for little money. **Callejón del Diamante** is an alley near the cathedral, with a half-dozen inexpensive restaurants that cater to office workers and students. One, **La Sopa,** offers a daily blue-plate special for 50 pesos. Most of these restaurants are open Monday through Saturday from 8am to 10pm. Another option is the restaurant at the **Mesón del Alférez** hotel. I had a good meal there on my latest trip. At night you can get some delicious tamales at **Tamales y Atoles Doña Adelina** (✆ **228/841-0317**) at Ursula Galván 108 (3 blocks west of the Parque Juárez). Each tamal goes for 12 to 18 pesos, and they are big enough that two would make a meal.

Churrería del Recuerdo MEXICAN This is a popular place for supper, and I've eaten well here. The traditional supper fare is *antojitos*—enchiladas, *gorditas,* and tamales, which you can wash down with *tepache* (fermented pineapple drink). You might want to try the *churros,* best described as the Spanish equivalent of doughnuts, but crispy and usually eaten with hot chocolate. The restaurant is across from the Hotel Xalapa; take a cab (30 pesos from downtown).

Victoria 158. ✆ **228/841-4961.** *Antojitos* 45–60 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 6pm–midnight.

La Casona del Beaterio MEXICAN A colonial house near the main square is the setting. You can dine in a small patio by a fountain or in one of the large dining rooms under high, beamed ceilings. The menu offers variety; the specialty is beef, grilled and served plain or with some form of chile marinade. There are also plenty of Mexican standards, including *sopa azteca* (tortilla soup), *pechuga poblana* (chicken breast cooked in a poblano chile cream sauce), and enchiladas. Among the main courses is a platter of traditional dishes called *cazuelitas Mexicanas,* which allows you to try a bit of several things. La Casona is 2 blocks east of Parque Juárez on the south side of the street. Live music begins at 9pm from Thursday to Sunday.

Zaragoza 20. ✆ **228/818-2119.** Breakfast 50–60 pesos; *comida corrida* Mon–Sat 60 pesos; main courses 60–200 pesos. AE, MC, V. Tues–Sun 8am–midnight; Mon 8am–10pm.

4 VERACRUZ CITY ★

402km (249 miles) E of Mexico City; 279km (173 miles) E of Puebla; 102km (63 miles) SE of Xalapa

Veracruz has a reputation as a town with a rich history but little to show for it. True enough, because much of that rich history involved sackings by pirates; heavy bombardment by three different foreign powers (including once with the French in the wonderfully named French Pastry War); and epidemics of malaria, yellow fever, and cholera. One might not necessarily want to preserve such a history, even when those same events didn't destroy the city. For this reason, and for the character of the natives, Veracruz (unlike Puebla) is better suited to cafegoers than museumgoers. With the exception of the old fort of San Juan de Ulúa and perhaps the aquarium, the museums can be missed. You come here for the feel of the Tropics, the balmy air, and the carefree attitude of the locals.

Veracruz brings to mind other Gulf and Caribbean port cities—part New Orleans, part Maracaibo. Things such as schedules are managed rather loosely, even by Mexican standards. You won't find punctuality and order here. Instead, you relax: You get your coffee in the morning at the Café de la Parroquia, you stroll down the *malecón* (boardwalk), you take in the party scene at the *zócalo* (town square) at night. It's a simple life. The city attracts a lot of Mexicans, who come here to take a break from the social constraints of their hometowns. In many parts of Mexico, for instance, a woman walking into a bar by herself would be frowned upon; not here.

Music is important to Veracruz. Specific to the port city are *marimba, danzonera,* and *comparsa* (carnavalesque) music. Just south of the city begins the Jarocha region of the state, whose music is rhythmic, with sexually suggestive lyrics that depend on double meanings. This is the home of "La Bamba," popularized by Ritchie Valens. In the northern part of the state is the Huasteca region. Its music, the *huapango huasteco,* involves a violin, a couple of strumming guitars, and harmonized singing.

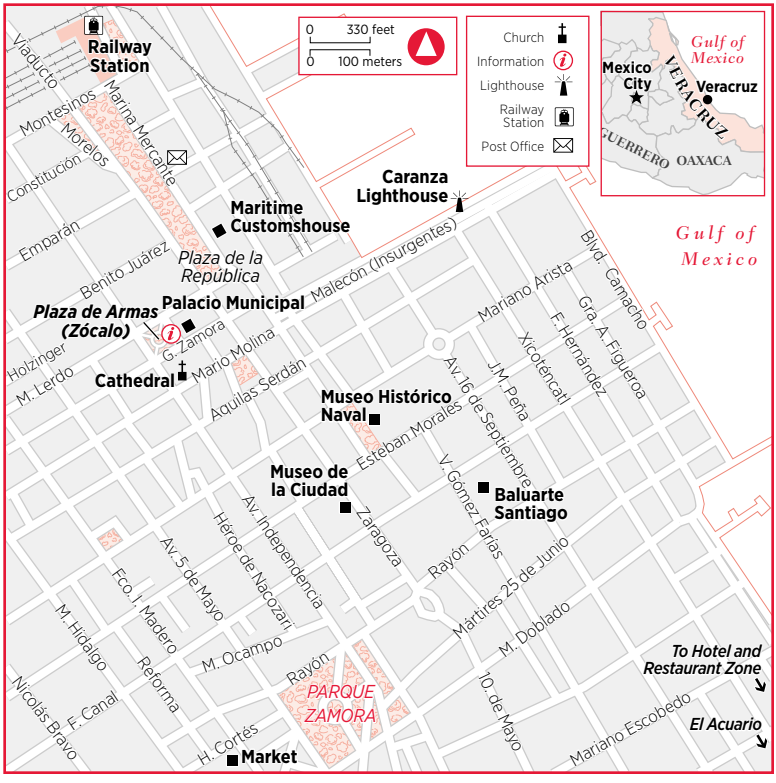
Cortez first landed a bit north of where the port is now, and his name for the place gives you an idea of what was on his mind: Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz ("Rich town of the true cross"). In colonial times, the Spanish galleons sailed for Spain from here, loaded with silver and gold. Pirates repeatedly attacked, and on one occasion, captured the city. The citizens defended themselves, eventually constructing a high wall around the old town and a massive fort, San Juan de Ulúa. The walls surrounding the city are gone now, but the fort remains.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING

By Plane **Continental** (✆ **800/231-0856** in the U.S., or 01-800/900-5000 in Mexico) has nonstop service to and from Houston. **Aeroméxico** (✆ **800/237-6639** in the U.S., or 01-800/021-4000, 229/935-0283, or 934-1534) and **Mexicana** (✆ **800/531-7921** in the U.S., or 229/932-2242 or 938-0008) and their affiliates offer service to and from Mexico City and other domestic destinations.

The **airport** is 11km (6¾ miles) from the town center. Getting there by **taxi** costs 130 pesos. Major car-rental agencies with counters at the airport and locations in downtown hotels include **Avis** (✆ **800/331-1212** in the U.S., or 229/931-1580), **Dollar** (✆ **800/800-4000** in the U.S., or 229/935-5231), and **National** (✆ **800/328-4567** in the U.S., or 229/931-7556).



By Car From Mexico City (6 hr.) and Puebla (3½ hr.), take the ***autopista*** **(toll Hwy. 150D)** into Veracruz. From Xalapa (1½ hr.), take **Hwy. 140** to coastal toll **Hwy. 180** south.

By Bus The **ADO** first-class bus station is 20 blocks south of the town center on Díaz Mirón between calles Orizaba and Molina. There is frequent service to Mexico City, Puebla, Xalapa, and other cities. Taxis wait in front of the terminal; the trip to the center costs around 30 pesos. You can buy a bus ticket downtown at the **Ticket Bus** agency (✆ **01-800/702-8000** in Mexico), at the corner of Mario Molina and Independencia. It's open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 7pm.

VISITOR INFORMATION The **tourism office** (✆/fax **229/200-2071**) is downtown by the *zócalo,* on the ground floor of the Palacio Municipal (City Hall). It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 8pm, Sunday from 10am to 6pm.

CITY LAYOUT Downtown Veracruz is a jumble of streets. The social center of town is the ***zócalo,*** or town square (formally Plaza de Armas), where you'll find the tourism office. Two short blocks away is another landmark, ***el malecón,*** a long promenade fronting the harbor. Starting at the *malecón* and running south along the coast is **Bulevar**

Avila Camacho, known as *el bulevar.* It connects downtown to Veracruz's hotel and restaurant zone, which stretches along the coast all the way to the one-time village of **Boca del Río.**

GETTING AROUND **Taxis** are plentiful and inexpensive. Getting from the downtown area to the restaurant and hotel district to the south takes 5 to 10 minutes.

Fast Facts Veracruz

Area Code The telephone area code is **229.**

Climate Veracruz is hot and humid most of the year, but the hottest months are May and June. In the winter, strong winds, known as *nortes,* occasionally bring cool, even chilly, weather.

Drugstore **Farmacía Las Torres,** Av. Díaz Mirón 295, at Cañonero Tampico (✆ **229/923-5807**), is open daily 24 hours.

Emergencies Dial ✆ **060.**

High Season The peak tourist times are Carnaval, Easter, July and August, and December. Veracruz is more popular with Mexicans than with foreigners.

Hospital The **Hospital de María** is at Alacio Pérez 1004, between Carmen Serdán and 20 de Noviembre (✆ **229/931-3626** or 931-3619).

Post Office The *correo,* on Avenida de la República near the Maritime Customs House, is open Monday through Saturday from 8am to 4pm.

WHERE TO STAY

Most hotels have high- and low-season rates. High-season rates apply during Carnaval, Easter, July and August, December, and long weekends. Low season is the rest of the year. Prices quoted include the 18% tax.

Very Expensive

Fiesta Americana Veracruz ★★ (Kids) Veracruz's most resortlike hotel is six stories high and very long, stretching out across a wide beachfront. Spacious and decorated in muted colors, most rooms have either terraces or balconies, and all have ocean views. Each contains two full beds or one king. It's on the Playa Costa de Oro, one of Veracruz's nicest beaches, but there is also a large and inviting pool area, with an ample shaded section.

Bulevar Avila Camacho s/n, 94299 Boca del Río, Ver. ✆ **800/343-7821** in the U.S. and Canada, or 229/989-8989. Fax 229/989-8909. www.fiestaamericana.com. 233 units. 2,350–2,525 pesos double; 3,000–3,705 pesos junior suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; poolside snack bar; bar; babysitting; children's activities; concierge; health club; 2 large pools (1 indoor); 2 whirlpools; room service; smoke-free rooms; spa; lighted tennis court; watersports. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Expensive

Gran Hotel Diligencias ★★★ With the best rooms and service in the downtown area, and located across from the *zócalo,* this hotel beats all the competition. I tried a large standard room with a window looking out over the square, and found the room quiet. Bathrooms are large and attractive, and the mattresses are comfortable. Plans are in the works to open a beach club so that guests can have a place to enjoy the water.

Independencia 1115, 91700 Veracruz, Ver. ✆ **229/923-0280,** or 01-800/505-5595 in Mexico. www.granhoteldiligencias.com. 120 units. High season 1,900–2,130 pesos double; low season 1,500 pesos double. AE, MC, V. Free valet parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; fitness center; Jacuzzi; outdoor pool; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Hotel Emporio My favorite things about this hotel are the view of the harbor from the hotel's upper floors and its location by the *malecón.* It was closed in 2008 and completely gutted for a massive renovation. The hotel is scheduled to reopen in May 2010, but you might want to check if you're looking to stay downtown.

Paseo del Malecón s/n, 91700 Veracruz, Ver. ✆ **229/932-0020,** or 01-800-295-3000 in Mexico. Fax 229/931-2261. www.hotelesemporio.com. 203 units. High season 1,500–2,000 pesos double, 2,200 pesos junior suite; low season 1,100–1,500 pesos double, 1,800 pesos junior suite. AE, MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; babysitting; health club; 2 large outdoor pools; heated indoor pool; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer.

Hotel Lois ★ Good location, good service, and a wide variety of amenities for the price are the biggest reasons for staying here. The Lois is located on the coast between downtown and the Boca del Río hotel zone. It's a modern 10-story building. Rooms are competitively priced and comfortable. They are midsize, with two double beds or one king. The lighting, though not great, is better than at other hotels in this price range. The suites are larger, with larger bathrooms, and some have Jacuzzi tubs. The large pool area on a third-floor terrace affords a good view of the coastline and the Isla de Sacrificios directly offshore. The hotel bar has live music 2 nights a week.

Calzada Ruiz Cortines 10, 94294 Boca del Río, Ver. ✆ **229/937-8290,** or 01-800/712-9136 in Mexico. www.hotellois.com.mx. 124 units. High season 1,250 pesos double, 1,550–1,800 pesos suite; low season 950–1,100 pesos double, 1,250–1,500 pesos suite. AE, MC, V. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; health club w/sauna and Jacuzzi; large outdoor pool; room service; squash courts. *In room:* A/C, TV, Wi-Fi.

Hotel Mocambo ★★ Kids The Mocambo, built in 1932, was the city's first resort hotel, host to presidents and movie stars during the 1940s and 1950s. It's on the beach in the hotel zone south of downtown. No bunched rooms and boxy corridors here. The Mocambo makes luxurious use of space, with wide, breezy walkways and terraces that overlook the ocean, the gardens, and the coconut palms. The architecture is simple and of the period. The hotel may show its age, but it echoes Mexico's age of glamour with stylish touches such as the Art Deco indoor pool and an elevated promenade. Most of the simply furnished rooms are large, with sea views and tile floors. My favorite are those on the upper floors, which have balconies. The grounds and a small play area are fenced in so kids can't escape, and there's a water slide at the pool.

Calzada Ruíz Cortines 4000, Boca del Río (Apdo. Postal 263), 94290 Veracruz, Ver. ✆ **229/922-0205.** Fax 229/922-0212. www.hotelmocambo.com.mx. 104 units. High season 1,850–2,130 pesos double; low season 1,150–1,600 pesos double. AE, MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; babysitting; gym w/sauna and steam room; 2 pools (1 indoor); whirlpool; room service; smoke-free rooms; spa; tennis court; Wi-Fi (in lobby). *In room:* A/C, TV.

Moderate

Hotel Colonial Two hotels sit next door to each other on the *zócalo:* the Hotel Colonial (which isn't so colonial), and the Hotel Imperial (which isn't so imperial). In terms of rooms, services, and price, they are much the same—comfortable, but not fancy. The location is great: You can enjoy the music and party atmosphere in the *zócalo* and then retire to your room (preferably an interior one). The Colonial has two sections. Rooms in the new section are the ones worth getting. Rooms in the old section are dark and

worn. The Imperial's rooms are nicer than the Colonial's old section but aren't quite equal to the new section. Still, I think of these hotels as interchangeable. If you can't get a room at the Colonial, try the Imperial (✆ **229/932-1204;** www.hotelimperialveracruz.com). Lower rates below are for the old section.

Miguel Lerdo 117, 91700 Veracruz, Ver. ✆/fax **229/932-0193.** 178 units. High season 900–1,000 pesos double, 1,200 pesos balcony room; low season 585–650 pesos double, 780 pesos balcony room. AE, MC, V. Covered guarded parking 25 pesos. **Amenities:** Sidewalk cafe and bar; indoor pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV, Wi-Fi.

WHERE TO DINE

If you want to have seafood with the locals, go to the city fish market on Landero y Coss around the corner from the *malecón.* Facing the street are several small restaurants. Find the one called **La Cría.**

Expensive

Restaurant El Cacharrito ★★★ STEAKS Midway between downtown and the Boca del Rio hotel zone is this family-run steakhouse. The steaks are expertly cooked and served Argentine style. They should be eaten Argentine style, too, meaning you should wash them down with lots of red wine. You'll find a large wine list for the purpose. The *bife de chorizo* (rib-eye) is the most popular cut. Also, you might want to try the Argentine empanadas, one of the salads, or the *jugo de carne,* a rich and satisfying essence of beef. On my last trip I had the grilled octopus. It was amazingly tender, with just the right hint of smoke. The new location is a half-block from the old location (around the corner from the Hotel Lois). The upstairs dining room is large with a high ceiling. There's a new location in Mocambo, which serves more seafood. It's across from the Hotel Mocambo.

Bulevar Ruiz Cortines Lote 37–38. ✆ **229/935-7288.** Reservations recommended. Steaks 220–400 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 2–11pm.

Mariscos Villa Rica Mocambo ★★★ SEAFOOD This establishment prides itself on cooking Veracruz style. The menu includes all the seafood standards, plus a few dishes that are harder to come by in Mexico, let alone north of the border. On my last trip I enjoyed a classic *Campechana* seafood cocktail with lots of fresh lime and finely minced *chile serrano,* followed by *pampano al acuyo* (pompano cooked in a sauce of green herbs). Other possibilities include conch filet *al ajillo* (with toasted strips of *guajillo* peppers), and *steak de camarón a la naranja* (shrimp pressed together and cooked in orange sauce). Service is excellent. Look for an open-air thatched structure below the Mocambo hotel.

Calzada Mocambo 527. ✆ **229/922-2113.** Main courses 155–270 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily noon–10pm.

Inexpensive

Gran Café de la Parroquia ★★ Moments MEXICAN/COFFEE More than a coffeehouse, La Parroquia is an institution. Making the scene here for morning or afternoon coffee is mandatory on any trip to Veracruz. The action takes place in a large, bustling dining area facing the *malecón.* There's nothing fancy about it; the furniture is simple, and there's a minimum of decoration. The thing to order is *café lechero.* You'll get a few ounces of dark coffee in a glass. Add sugar, if desired, and stir, clinking your spoon against the glass. This will attract the attention of the waiter who circulates with the kettle of steaming milk. Don't be shy. The sound of clinking glass rings throughout the dining room. The cafe also offers pastries and decent breakfasts, but some of the main courses disappoint.

Av. Gómez Farías 34. ✆ **229/932-2584.** Breakfast 22–48 pesos; coffee 22–28 pesos; main courses 55–140 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 6am–midnight.

Gran Café del Portal Value MEXICAN In the *portales* facing the front door of the cathedral is this dependable restaurant with good prices and local color. In the evenings, a parade of strolling troubadours, harpists, marimba players, and shoeshine men passes by. For the midafternoon meal, the *comida corrida* provides lots of food at a reasonable price. Avoid the overcooked pasta and most beef dishes, which are tough. The exception is the tenderized *milanesa,* which is good. For seafood, ask the waiter what's freshest. The enchiladas and the soups are good, and the *flan napolitano* could feed a family of four.

Independencia at Zamora. ✆ **229/931-2759.** Main courses 85–220 pesos; *comida corrida* Mon–Sat 62–95 pesos, Sun 105–120 pesos. MC, V. Daily 7am–midnight.

Samborcito ★ Finds REGIONAL No need to say the name twice to any cabdriver in town; everybody knows this place. Samborcito is simple eating at its best. The name pokes fun at Sanborn's, the oldest, best-known chain of restaurants in Mexico. Classic dishes include *picadas* (*masa* pancake with cheese and sauce—a Veracruz tradition), and puffy *gordas* (puffy soft tortilla with black-bean paste and flavored with the toasted leaf of the aguacatillo—not spicy), and the *empanada de picadillo.* Tamales are available on weekends. It all happens under a long thatched roof, and there's live music on weekends. Samborcito is near downtown; a cab will run about 20 pesos.

16 de Septiembre 727. ✆ **229/931-4388.** Breakfast 35–55 pesos; *antojitos* 25–65 pesos; main courses 80–160 pesos. MC, V. Daily 7am–7:30pm.

EXPLORING VERACRUZ

The ***zócalo*** ★★★ is the social hub, where locals hang out in the cafes chatting with friends while the *marimbas, Jarocha* bands, and mariachis make a lively scene, playing well into the night. Bordering the *zócalo* are the **cathedral** and the **Palacio Municipal (City Hall).** There always seems to be some kind of performance on the square: exhibitions of ***danzón*** (see "Music, Dance & Carnaval," below), clown acts, band concerts, and comedy sketches.

One block east is the **Plaza de la República,** a long plaza where you'll find the **post office,** the old **Customs house,** and the civil registry, all built around the turn of the 19th century. On the north side is the old train station, **Estación de Ferrocarriles,** with its remarkable yellow-and-blue tile facade. From the east side of this plaza, you can board a bus to Veracruz's most famous tourist attraction, the fortress of **San Juan de Ulúa.** Around the corner from the south side of the plaza is the *malecón* (boardwalk), where you can take a boat ride or have coffee at the city's most popular gathering spot, **El Café de la Parroquia.**

A national company called **Turibus** (www.turibus.com.mx) runs sightseeing buses around the downtown area and then south along the shore past the hotel zone, all the way to the township of Boca del Rio. Explanations are given in several languages, including English. You buy a ticket on board the bus (110 pesos), which entitles you to get off at any of the 20 stops and catch any later bus that same day. Schedules and hours of operation vary depending on the season. You can get details from the tourism office (see above).

Music, Dance & Carnaval

Hang out in the *zócalo,* and you'll be serenaded with *danzonera, marimba, Jarocha,* mariachi, and *norteño* music playing to a large crowd of Veracruzanos who've stopped to drink and chat with friends. On Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, a band plays in front of the Palacio Municipal for couples dancing the *danzón.* It's a stately affair: They alternate between dancing perfectly erect in a slow rumbalike fashion and promenading arm in arm while the women wave their fans. The *danzón* came to Veracruz from Cuba in the 1890s; today you won't often see it elsewhere.

If you would like to see more styles of traditional dance, inquire at the tourism office in the *zócalo* (see above) about performances by the **Ballet Tradiciones de México.** Several times throughout the year, the company appears at the **Teatro Clavijero** (✆ **229/931-0574** or 932-6693 for reservations). Tickets cost 50 to 80 pesos. The shows are fun and colorful.

In the week before Ash Wednesday, Veracruz explodes with **Carnaval,** one of the best in Mexico. By local tradition, Carnaval begins with the ritual burning of "ill humor" and ends with the funeral of "Juan Carnaval." Visitors flood in from all over the country, packing the streets and hotels.

Carros alegóricos (floats) are made with true Mexican flair—bright colors, papier-mâché figures, flowers, and live entertainment. Groups from neighboring villages dance in peacock- and pheasant-feathered headdresses. Draculas, drag queens, and women in sparkling dresses fill the streets. The parades follow Bulevar Avila Camacho; most of the other activities center in the *zócalo* and begin around noon, lasting well into the night.

On the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, the longest and most lavish of the Carnaval parades takes place on the *malecón.* Parades on Monday and Tuesday are scaled-down versions of the Sunday parade (ask at the tourist office about these routes); by Wednesday, it's all over.

The Top Attractions

El Acuario ★ Kids For most Mexican visitors, the aquarium is one of the city's major attractions. The largest aquarium in Latin America, with numerous tanks, large and small displaying a multitude of marine environments, it's an impressive sight that can hold its own with American public aquariums. The doughnut-shaped reef tank gives the illusion of being surrounded by the ocean and its inhabitants. The large shark tank also impresses. In late 2010, the aquarium is set to open a new dolphin tank.

Plaza Acuario Veracruzano, Bulevar M. Avila Camacho. ✆ **229/931-1020.** www.acuariodeveracruz.com. Admission 70 pesos adults, 35 pesos children 2–11. Daily 9am–7pm.

Fort of San Juan de Ulúa ★★★ Built to ward off pirates and foreign invasions, the fortress was enlarged throughout the colonial period until it became the massive work you see today. After independence, it served as a prison noted for its harsh conditions and for the famous people incarcerated there, among them Benito Juárez. It's a formidable example of colonial military architecture, with crenelated walls projecting straight up some 11m (36 ft.) from the water's edge, and bastions at each corner. Inside is a large courtyard, with wide ramps along the inside walls, storehouses, barracks, and old prison cells. English-speaking guides are available at the entrance. A narrow stretch of landfill connects the one-time island to the mainland. A cab from downtown will cost 50 pesos.

Recinto Portuario s/n ✆ **229/938-5151.** Admission 40 pesos. Tues–Sun 9am–4:30pm.

More Attractions

Baluarte Santiago Built in 1635, this bastion is all that remains of the wall and fortifications that encircled the city. It was one of the nine original bastions protecting the wall. A small collection of pre-Hispanic gold jewelry, recovered several years ago by a fisherman along the coast just north of Veracruz, is on permanent display here.

Calle Canal and 16 de Septiembre. ✆ **229/931-1059.** Admission 41 pesos. Tues–Sun 10am–4:30pm.

Museo de la Ciudad This small city museum is on the ground floor of a 19th-century building. The exhibits concern the history of the city and its social evolution

from colonial times to the present. Text and audio are in Spanish; most of the exhibits are photos or dioramas.

Zaragoza 397. ✆ **229/200-2236.** Free admission. Tues–Sun 10am–6pm. From the Palacio Municipal, walk 5 blocks south on Zaragoza; it's on the right.

Museo Histórico Naval This museum occupies the old naval academy. Exhibits concern the history of navigation, including nautical paraphernalia, the history of the naval academy, and Mexico's struggles with other countries. In the courtyard, the foundations of the old wall that used to encircle the city are visible. As you enter, look for uniformed guides, who will show you around free.

Mariano Arista btw. Landero y Coss and Gómez Farías. No phone. Free admission. Tues–Sun 10am–5pm.

Other Things to See & Do

BEACHES Veracruz has beaches, but they mostly have brown sand, and the Gulf water is a dull green. The nearest true beach is at the **Villa del Mar,** a little way down *el bulevar,* followed by **Costa de Oro** and then **Mocambo** beach.

BOAT TRIPS Boats tour the harbor (most narration is in Spanish only), around the tankers and ships docked in the port and San Juan de Ulúa fortress, and out to the Isle of Sacrifices. Departures are sporadic (depending on the weather and demand) from the *malecón* in front of the Hotel Emporio. The cost is 100 pesos for adults and 50 pesos for children ages 2 to 8.

EXCURSIONS Popular day-trip destinations include **La Antigua;** the Totonac ruins at **Zempoala; Xalapa,** the state capital and home of an excellent anthropology museum; and the archaeological site at **El Tajín.** For prices and reservations, contact **VIP Tours** (✆ **229/922-3315** or 922-1918) or **Centro de Reservaciones de Veracruz** (✆ **229/935-6422**).

SCUBA DIVING Divers can explore series of reefs and shipwrecks south of town toward Boca del Río. Contact **Dorado Divers** (✆ **229/931-4305;** www.doradobuceo.com) at Avila Camacho 865. Or try **Mundo Submarino** (✆ **229/980-6374;** www.mundosubmarino.com) at Avila Camacho 3549.

SHOPPING Veracruz excels in one category of shopping and no other. It has sublimely **tacky souvenirs,** which make perfect payback for co-workers who have burdened you with white elephants. On the *malecón* across from Café de la Parroquia, you'll find a long row of small souvenir shops that constitute Veracruz's version of San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf. Another place of interest (not so much for buying as for looking) is the **city market** at the corner of Madero and Cortez.

VERACRUZ AFTER DARK

The first thing that always comes to mind with Veracruz is the scene on the *zócalo,* which on a weekend can go on until the wee hours of the morning. The evening shows presented by the municipal government can be quite good. I've seen some great dance troupes perform *jarocho.*

There's a small bar downtown with a real local feel, where on weekends you can hear live groups play *son montuno,* an old-style Latin tropical music. The bar's name is **Rincón de la Trova** (no phone) and it's at Plazuela de la Campana, which is simply the widening of the pedestrian-only Callejón Lagunilla between Arteaga and Serdán. Live music is Thursday to Saturday. Friday and Saturday, there's a 35-peso cover.

There are several dance clubs to choose from. Most play Latin music and are in or near the hotel zone. One with good acts is **La Casona de la Condesa** (✆ **229/933-5451**), at Bulevar Avila Camacho 2014.

5 EL TAJIN & THE TOWN OF PAPANTLA

THE RUINS OF ZEMPOALA

Headed north on Hwy. 180 toward Papantla, you'll pass by the village of **Antigua,** 22km (14 miles) north of the port of Veracruz. It's not very well known today, but for 75 years beginning in 1525, it was the main port used by the Spanish. The village is known locally for its seafood restaurants and is especially popular on weekends.

Continuing north, you come to the ruins of **Zempoala,** 40km (25 miles) north of Veracruz. The ruins are surrounded by lush foliage. Though not as large as the site of El Tajín, they're still noteworthy. Zempoala was the principal city of the Totonac at the time of the Spanish Conquest. The name means "place of the 20 waters," for the several creeks that meander by the site.

Zempoala is a late post-Classic city. Most of the buildings date from the 14th century. The Great Temple is constructed in the Aztec style. The Temple of Quetzalcóatl, the feathered serpent god, is a square platform, and the Temple of Ehecatl, god of the wind, is (as usual) round. On weekends and during vacation months, you're likely to find a group of the famous *voladores* (flyers) from Papantla performing their acrobatic ritual (see the "The Ruins of El Tajín" on p. 481).

Admission to the archaeological site is 45 pesos; it's open daily from 9am to 5pm. A video camera permit costs 35 pesos.

EL TAJIN & THE CITY OF PAPANTLA

El Tajín (ehl tah-*heen*) is among the most important archaeological sites in Mexico. It has a large ceremonial center with several pyramids, platforms, and ball courts, some in the architectural styles of other cultures (Olmec, Teotihuacán, Maya) and some in the city's own unique style. It was probably built and inhabited (at least, in its last stages) by the Totonac Indians, who still live in this region. The Totonac culture is most famous for the "dance" of the ***voladores,*** a pre-Columbian religious ritual in which four men are suspended from the top of a tall pole while another beats a drum and plays a flute while balancing himself at the top.

The major stopover for seeing these ruins is **Papantla,** a hilly city of 165,000 in the coastal lowlands 225km (140 miles) north of Veracruz. In many respects, it's a typical Mexican town, with lots of clay-tile roofs, a jumble of small shops, and a lively street scene. It's best known for producing vanilla beans. Vanilla is native to Mexico and was used principally to flavor a beverage made with cacao, also indigenous to Mexico.

Essentials

GETTING THERE **By Car** If you're driving from the south, follow the coastal road, **Hwy. 180,** from Veracruz. From Xalapa, it's best to do the same: Drive down to the coast and then north.

By Bus The quaint **ADO station** (✆ **784/842-0218**) is at the corner of Venustiano Carranza and Benito Juárez, 4 blocks below the main square. Almost all buses are *de paso*

(originating elsewhere), so departure times can be a little earlier or later than the schedule says. Taxis pass in front of the station frequently.

CITY LAYOUT Easily visible from many parts of town, the parish church and the Hotel El Tajín are at the top of a hill. This is where you'll find the *zócalo.*

GETTING AROUND **Taxis** are available around the central plaza, and **city buses** go to the ruins of El Tajín (see below). Almost everything worth seeing is within easy walking distance of the central plaza.

FAST FACTS The telephone **area code** is **784.** The **climate** is steamy for most of the year, except for a few occasions in winter when a north wind blows.

SPECIAL EVENTS The **Feast of Corpus Christi,** the ninth Sunday after Easter, is part of a very special week in Papantla. Well-known Mexican entertainers perform, and the native *voladores* make special appearances. Lodging is scarce during this week, so be sure to book ahead.

Exploring Papantla & El Tajín

In Papantla, the shady *zócalo* built of ceramic tile is where couples and families come in the evenings to sit or stroll. The large wall below the church facing the *zócalo* is covered with the image of El Tajín and a modern depiction of Totonac carved reliefs.

THE RUINS OF EL TAJÍN The city lies among some low hills clothed in thick tropical forest. The views are lovely, but climbing on the pyramids is forbidden; your best view is from a high terrace that supports the Tajín Chico buildings toward the back. The city is divided into **Tajín Viejo** and **Tajín Chico**—the old and new sections. Of the 150 buildings identified at the site, 20 have been excavated and conserved, resurrecting their forms from what were grass-covered mounds. At least 12 ball courts have been found, of which 6 have been excavated. The most impressive structure, in the old section, is the **Pyramid of the Niches,** which is a unique stone-and-adobe pyramid with 365 recesses extending to all four sides of the building. The pyramid was formerly covered in red-painted stucco, and the niches were painted black. Try to imagine how that must have looked. Near the Pyramid of the Niches is a restored **ball court** with beautiful carved reliefs depicting gods and kings.

The most important building in the Tajín Chico section is the **Temple of the Columns.** A stairway divides the columns, three on either side, each decorated with reliefs of priests and warriors and hieroglyphic dates. Many mounds remain unexcavated, but with the reconstruction that has been done so far, it's becoming easier to visualize the ruins as a city.

In a clearing near the museum, a group of local Totonac Indians called ***voladores*** **(flyers)** performs the acrobatic and religious ritual. This is a traditional, solemn ceremony that dates back centuries. The Totonac perform the unusual ritual in honor of the four directions of the earth. There's no set schedule for performances; the sound of a slow-beating drum and flute signals that the *voladores* are preparing to perform. Five flyers, dressed in brightly colored ceremonial garments and cone-shaped hats with ribbons and small round mirrors, climb to a square revolving platform at the top of a 25m (82-ft.) pole. Four of the five flyers perch on the sides of the platform and attach themselves by the waist to a rope, while the fifth stands atop the pole and plays an instrument called a *chirimía.* The instrument is a small bamboo flute with a deerskin drum attached. The performer plays the three-holed flute with his left hand and beats the drum with his right hand. When the time is right, the four flyers fall backward, suspended by the rope, and descend as they revolve around the post.

The small but impressive **museum** is worth seeing as well. A small snack and gift shop and small restaurant are across from the museum. Admission to the site and museum is 50 pesos. The fee to use a personal video camera is 35 pesos. If you look like a professional photographer, the authorities will ask you to get a permit from the **Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia** in Mexico City. If you watch a performance of the *voladores,* one of them will collect an additional 25 pesos from each spectator. The site is open daily from 9am to 5pm.

To El Tajín from Papantla, taxis charge about 200 pesos, but it's easy to take a local bus. Look for buses marked CHOTE/TAJIN, which run beside the town church (on the uphill side) every 15 minutes beginning at 7am. Buses marked CHOTE pass more frequently and leave you at the Chote crossroads; from there, take a taxi for around 50 pesos. From Veracruz, take Hwy. 180 to Papantla, then Route 127, a back road to Poza Rica that runs through El Tajín.

SHOPPING There are two markets in Papantla, both near the central plaza. **Mercado Juárez** is opposite the front door of the church. **Mercado Hidalgo** is 1 block downhill on the same street. The former has more food stalls, where you can order a bowl of *zacahuil,* a typical dish of the region. The latter has locally made baskets; vanilla extract; *Xanath,* a locally produced vanilla liqueur; and whole vanilla beans.

Where to Stay

Hotel Provincia Express Opened in 1990, this hotel is a good choice in a place with meager selections. Rooms are nicely furnished, with tile floors, and hold a king-size or two double beds. The medium-to-small bathrooms have showers. On occasion, it takes a while for water to heat up, but it will. Nos. 1 to 6 have small balconies overlooking the *zócalo.* Others, toward the back, are windowless and quiet, and are reached through a tunnel-like hallway.

Enríquez 103, 93400 Papantla, Ver. ✆ **784/842-1645.** Fax 784/842-4213. provinciaexpress_papantla@hotmail.com. 20 units. 520–680 pesos double. MC, V. Free secure parking half a block away. **Amenities:** Cafe; room service; Wi-Fi (in lobby). *In room:* A/C, TV.

Hotel Tajín At the top of the hill toward the back of the church sits this large, easily visible hotel. Rooms are medium size, and several have a view. Bed choices include one or two doubles or one king.

Núñez 104, 93400 Papantla, Ver. ✆ **784/842-0121,** -1623. Fax 784/842-1062. hoteltajin@hotmail.com. 73 units. 500–650 pesos double. MC, V. Free secure parking a half-block away. **Amenities:** Restaurant; outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, TV.

Where to Dine

In the morning, numerous stands at the Mercado Juárez offer the local specialty, *zacahuil* (a huge tamal cooked in a banana leaf). In Papantla, the *zacahuil* is cooked in enough liquid to be served in a bowl. Look around until you see a cook with a line of patrons—that's where you'll get the best *zacahuil.*

Plaza Pardo MEXICAN This upstairs restaurant facing the main plaza serves Mexican standards and a couple of regional dishes. A few tables are on a balcony looking out over the *zócalo,* church, and giant statue of the *volador.* Specialties include *bocales* (small *gorditas* with different fillings), enchiladas, and *mole.*

Enríquez 105-altos. ✆ **784/842-0059.** Breakfast 22–42 pesos; sandwiches 28–42 pesos; main courses 52–85 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 7:30am–11pm.

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Cancún

by Shane Christensen

It may be commercialized and more American than Mexican in design, but Cancún remains one of the finest resort destinations in the world—with breathtaking beaches and enough pleasure pursuits to make even the most unrelenting hedonists blush. And while Cancún may be a top travel destination for Americans and other Western travelers who flock here like sun-seeking swallows in winter and spring, it's also a favorite for Mexicans who come to holiday year-round.

Due to Cancún's ideal mix of elements—its transparent turquoise sea, powdery white sand, and immense potential for growth—a group of Mexican government computer analysts targeted the town for tourism development in 1974, transforming it from a deserted beach area to a five-star resort. Since then, Cancún has sustained the devastations of hurricanes and other powerful tropical storms, only to emerge stronger and more irresistible. In the wake of Hurricane Wilma, which tore through the Yucatán peninsula in 2005, wreckage rapidly gave way to exacting renovations, luxurious upgrades, and brand-new destinations. Today Cancún is better than ever.

The double whammy of the worldwide economic crisis and worries caused by H1N1 has not made for an easy time in Cancún in the past couple years. Hotels, restaurants, and tourist services across-the-board have suffered here, just as they have elsewhere in the region. But what's amazing to me is the resilience of Cancún's tourist industry, and the high hopes for all those involved of a hefty rebound. And as of press time that rebound seems to be gathering steam.

The allure hasn't changed much over the years—it's still the spectacular Caribbean beach. Cancún (which means "golden snake" in Mayan) stretches from the downtown area known as Cancún City east to the Hotel Zone, also known as Isla Cancún, which is a narrow 24km (15-mile) island that runs southwest and is framed on one side by the beautiful Caribbean Sea and on the other by the picturesque Nichupté lagoon.

Cancún embodies Caribbean splendor and the exotic joys of Mexico, but even a Western traveler feeling apprehensive about visiting foreign soil will feel completely at ease here. English is spoken and dollars accepted; roads are well paved and lawns manicured. Some travelers are surprised to find that Cancún is more like a U.S. beach resort than a part of Mexico. Indeed, signs of Americanism are rampant. U.S. college students continue to descend in droves during spring break—which, depending on your perspective, may be reason to rush headlong into the party or stay far, far away during this season. One astonishing statistic suggests that more Americans travel to Cancún than to any other foreign destination in the world. Indeed, almost three million people visit annually—most of them on their first trip to Mexico.

You won't find much in the way of authentic Mexican charm in the Hotel Zone, although you can get a glimpse of this in Cancún City, where most of the local population lives. You'll find good value hotels, a number of outstanding traditional restaurants, and some excellent shopping here. Cancún is also a convenient distance from the more traditional

Mexican resorts of Isla Mujeres and the Riviera Maya, making for easy day trips.

You will likely run out of vacation days before you run out of things to do in Cancún. Snorkeling, dolphin swims, jungle tours, and visits to ancient Maya ruins and modern ecological theme parks are among the most popular diversions. A dozen malls sell name-brand and duty-free goods (with European imports for less than in the U.S.). With tens of thousands of hotel rooms and more than 350 restaurants and nightclubs, there's something for every taste and budget.

Cancún's luxury hotels have swimming pools so spectacular that you may find it tempting to turn into what I'd like to call a pool potato—but don't. Set aside some time to get yourself to the beach and wriggle your toes in the fine, brilliant white sand. It is, after all, what put Cancún on the map—and no tempest of nature has been able to sweep it away.

1 ORIENTATION

GETTING THERE

BY PLANE If this is not your first trip to Cancún, you'll notice that the **airport**'s (✆ **998/848-7200**) facilities and services continue to expand. Most international flights, including those to and from the U.S. (except for JetBlue, which uses Terminal 2), now go through the new Terminal 3, which has money-exchange services, duty-free shops, restaurants, medical services, an express spa, and even a welcome bar serving beer and margaritas just outside the terminal. **Aeroméxico** (✆ **800/237-6639** in the U.S., or 01-800/021-4000 in Mexico) operates connecting service to Cancún through Mexico City. **Mexicana** (✆ **800/531-7921** in the U.S., 01-800/801-2010 in Mexico, or 998/881-9090) runs connecting flights to Cancún through Miami or Mexico City. In addition to these carriers, many **charter** companies—such as Apple Vacations (www.applevacations.com) and Funjet (www.funjet.com)—travel to Cancún; these package tours make up as much as half of arrivals by U.S. visitors.

Regional carrier **Click Mexicana,** a Mexicana affiliate (✆ **01-800/112-5425** in Mexico), flies from Havana, Cuba, and Chetumal, Cozumel, Mexico City, Mérida, and other points within Mexico. You'll want to confirm departure times for flights to the U.S. **Interjet** (✆ **01-800/01-12345** in Mexico) and **Volaris** (✆ **01-800/122-8000** in Mexico) are two other regional carriers that fly to Cancún from Mexico City. Domestic flights generally use Terminal 1, and flights to and from other destinations in Latin America use Terminal 2.

The following major international carriers serve Cancún: **Alaska** (✆ 800/426-0333 in the U.S.), **American** (✆ 800/433-7300 in the U.S.), **Continental** (✆ 800/231-0856 in the U.S.), **Delta** (✆ 800/221-1212 in the U.S.), **Frontier** (✆ 800/432-1359 in the U.S.), **JetBlue** (✆ 800/538-2583 in the U.S.), **Spirit** (✆ 800/225-2525 in the U.S.), **United** (✆ 800/772-7117 in the U.S.), and **US Airways** (✆ 800/428-4322 in the U.S.).

Most major car-rental firms have outlets at the airport, so if you're renting a car, consider picking it up and dropping it off at the airport, to save on airport-transportation costs. Another way to save money is to arrange for the rental before you leave home. If you wait until you arrive, the daily cost will be around $50 to $75 for a compact vehicle. Major agencies include **Alamo** (✆ 800/462-5266 in the U.S., or 998/886-0448), **Avis** (✆ 800/331-1212 in the U.S., or 998/886-0221), **Budget** (✆ 800/527-0700 in the U.S., or 998/886-0417; fax 998/884-4812), **Hertz** (✆ 800/654-3131 in the U.S. and Canada, or 998/884-1326), **National** (✆ 800/227-7368 in the U.S., or 998/886-0153),

and **Thrifty** (✆ 800/847-4389 in the U.S., or 998/886-0333). The Zona Hotelera (Hotel Zone) lies 10km (6¼ miles)—a 20-minute drive—from the airport along wide, well-paved roads.

The rate for a **private taxi** from the airport is $60 to Ciudad Cancún (downtown) or the Hotel Zone. The return trip with an airport taxi is discounted by 50%. Green Line and Gray Line **van shuttles** (✆ **01-800/021-9097;** www.graylinecancun.com) run from the airport into town approximately every 20 minutes. Buy tickets, which cost about $15, from the booth to the far right as you exit the airport. These services accept U.S. dollars, though you'll get a more favorable rate if you pay in pesos. **Local bus** transportation on ADO (40 pesos) goes from the airport to Ciudad Cancún. From there, you can take another bus for less than a dollar to Puerto Juárez, where passenger ferries leave to Isla Mujeres regularly. There is no shuttle service returning to the airport from Ciudad Cancún or the Hotel Zone, so you'll have to take a taxi, but the rate will be much less than for the trip from the airport. (Only federally chartered taxis may take fares *from* the airport, but any taxi may bring passengers *to* the airport.) Ask at your hotel what the fare should be, but expect to pay about half what you paid from the airport to your hotel.

BY CAR From Mérida or Campeche, take **Hwy. 180** east to Cancún. This is mostly a winding, two-lane road that branches off into the express **toll road 180D** between Izamal and Nuevo Xcan. Nuevo Xcan is approximately 40km (25 miles) from Cancún. Mérida is about 320km (198 miles) away.

BY BUS Cancún's **ADO bus terminal** (✆ **01-800/702-8000** or 998/884-4352; www.ado.com.mx) is in downtown Ciudad Cancún at the intersection of avenidas Tulum and Uxmal. All out-of-town buses arrive here. Buses run to Playa del Carmen, Tulum, Chichén Itzá, other nearby beach and archaeological zones, and other points within Mexico. ADO buses also operate between the airport and downtown.

Tips The Best Websites for Cancún

- **All About Cancún: www.cancunmx.com** This site is a good place to start planning. Their database, called "The Online Experts," answers many of the most common questions. It's slow but current, with input from lots of recent travelers to the region.
- **Cancún Convention & Visitors Bureau: www.cancun.travel** The official site of the Cancún Convention & Visitors Bureau lists excellent information on events and attractions. Its hotel guide is one of the most complete available and includes events and news related to Cancún.
- **Cancún Online: www.cancun.com** This comprehensive guide has lots of information about things to do and see in Cancún, though most details come from paying advertisers. The site lets you reserve package trips, accommodations, activities, and tee times.
- **Cancún Travel Guide: www.go2cancun.com** These online information specialists are also an excellent resource for Cancún rentals, hotels, and attractions. Note that this site lists only paying advertisers, which means you'll find most of the major players here.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The **Cancún Municipal Tourism Office** is downtown at Avenida Nader at the corner of Avenida Cobá (✆ **998/887-3379**). It's open Monday through Friday from 8am to 6pm, Saturday from 9am to 2pm. The office lists hotels and their rates, as well as ferry schedules. For information prior to your arrival in Cancún, visit the Convention Bureau's website, **www.cancun.travel**. The state tourism website is in Spanish, at www.qroo.gob.mx.

Pick up copies of the free booklet ***Cancún Tips*** (www.cancuntips.com.mx), and a seasonal tabloid of the same name.

CITY LAYOUT

There are really two Cancúns: **Ciudad Cancún (Cancún City)** and **Isla Cancún (Cancún Island).** Ciudad Cancún, on the mainland, is the original downtown area, where most of the local population lives. It's home to traditional restaurants, shops, and less expensive hotels, as well as pharmacies, dentists, automotive shops, banks, travel and airline agencies, and car-rental firms—all within an area about 9 square blocks. The city's main thoroughfare is **Avenida Tulum.** Heading south, Avenida Tulum becomes the highway to the airport and to Tulum and Chetumal; heading north, it intersects the highway to Mérida and the road to Puerto Juárez and the Isla Mujeres ferries.

Isla Cancún is a sandy strip 22km (14 miles) long, shaped like a 7. It's home to the famed **Zona Hotelera,** or Hotel Zone (also called the Zona Turística, or Tourist Zone), connected to the mainland by the Playa Linda Bridge at the north end and the Punta Nizuc Bridge at the southern end. Between the two areas lies Laguna Nichupté. Avenida Cobá from Cancún City becomes Bulevar Kukulkán, the island's main traffic artery. Cancún's international airport is just inland from the south end of the island.

FINDING AN ADDRESS

Cancún City's street-numbering system is a holdover from its early days. Addresses are still given by the number of the building lot and by the *manzana* (block) or *supermanzana* (group of blocks). The city is relatively compact, and the downtown commercial section is easy to cover on foot.

On the island, addresses are given by kilometer number on Bulevar Kukulkán or by reference to some well-known location. In Cancún, streets are named after famous Maya cities. Boulevards are named for nearby archaeological sites, Chichén Itzá, Tulum, and Uxmal.

GETTING AROUND

BY TAXI

Taxi prices in Cancún are clearly set by zone, although keeping track of what's in which zone can take some doing. The minimum fare within the Hotel Zone is 70 pesos per ride, making it one of the most expensive taxi areas in Mexico. In addition, taxis operating in the Hotel Zone feel perfectly justified in having a discriminatory pricing structure: Local residents pay about half of what tourists pay, and prices for guests at higher-priced hotels are about double those for budget hotel guests—these are all established by the taxi union. Rates should be posted outside your hotel; if you have a question, all drivers are required to have an official rate card in their taxis, though it's generally in Spanish. Taxi drivers will accept dollars, though at a less favorable rate than pesos.

Within the downtown area, the cost is about 20 pesos per cab ride (not per person); within any other zone, it's 70 to 110 pesos. It'll cost about 180 pesos to travel between the Hotel Zone and downtown. Settle on a price in advance, or check at your hotel. Trips to the airport from most zones cost about 280 pesos (up to four people). Taxis can also be rented for 250 pesos per hour for travel around the city and Hotel Zone. If you want

to hire a taxi to take you to Chichén Itzá or along the Riviera Maya, expect to pay about 350 pesos per hour—many taxi drivers feel that they are also providing guide services.

BY BUS Bus travel within Cancún continues to improve and is increasingly popular. In town, almost everything lies within walking distance. **Ruta 1** and **Ruta 2** (HOTELES) city buses travel frequently from Puerto Juárez on the mainland to the beaches along Avenida Tulum (the main street) and all the way to Punta Nizuc at the far end of the Hotel Zone on Isla Cancún. **Ruta 8** buses go to Puerto Juárez/Punta Sam for ferries to Isla Mujeres. They stop on the east side of Avenida Tulum. All these city buses run between 6am and 10pm daily. Buses also go up and down the main strip of the Hotel Zone day and night. Public buses have the fare painted on the front; at press time, the fare was 7.50 pesos.

BY SCOOTER Scooters are a convenient but dangerous way to cruise through the very congested traffic. Rentals start at about $30 for a day, not including insurance, and a credit card voucher is required as security. You should receive a crash helmet (it's the law) and instructions on how to lock the wheels when you park. Read the fine print on the back of the rental agreement regarding liability for repairs or replacement in case of accident, theft, or vandalism.

Fast Facts Cancún

Area Code The telephone area code is **998.**

ATMs & Banks Most banks sit downtown along Avenida Tulum and are usually open Monday through Friday from 9am to 3pm, although some are open later and even half the day on Saturday. Many have ATMs for after-hours cash withdrawals. In the Hotel Zone, you'll find an HSBC bank in Kukulcán Plaza that's open Monday through Saturday from 9am to 7pm.

Consulates The **U.S. Consular Agent** is in the Plaza Caracol Dos, Bl. Kukulkán Km 8.5, 3rd level, 320–323 (✆ **998/883-0272;** cancunagency@gmail.com); open Monday through Friday from 9am to 2pm. The **Canadian Consulate** is in the Plaza Caracol Dos, 3rd level, Loc. 330 (✆ **998/883-3360;** cancun@canada.org.mx); open Monday through Friday from 9am to 3:30pm. The **United Kingdom** has a consular office at the Royal Sands Hotel (✆ **998/881-0100;** consular.mexico@fco.gov.uk); open Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm. Irish, Australian, and New Zealand citizens should contact their embassies in Mexico City.

Crime Car break-ins are just about the only frequent crime here. They happen repeatedly, especially around the shopping centers in the Hotel Zone. Rapes have also been reported in Cancún. Most have taken place at night or in the early morning.

Currency Exchange Cancún has many *casas de cambio* (exchange houses). Downtown merchants are eager to change cash dollars, but island stores don't offer very good exchange rates. Avoid changing money at the airport as you arrive, especially at the first exchange booth you see—its rates are less favorable than those of any in town or others farther inside the airport. Dollars are widely accepted throughout Cancún.

Drugstores Across the street from Señor Frog's in the Hotel Zone, at Bulevar Kukulkán Km 9.5, **Farmacías del Ahorro** (✆ **998/892-7291**) is open from 7am to 11pm. Plenty of drugstores are in the major shopping malls in the Hotel Zone and are open until 10pm. In downtown Cancún, **Farmacía Cancún** is located at Av. Tulum 17 (✆ **998/884-1283**). It's open Monday to Saturday from 9am to 10pm, and Sunday from 10am to 10pm. You can stock up on over-the-counter and many prescription drugs without a prescription.

Emergencies The local **Red Cross** (✆ **998/884-1616**), is open 24 hours on Av. Yaxchilán between avenidas Xcaret and Labná, next to the Telmex building.

Hospital **Galenia Hospital** is one of the city's most modern, offering full emergency and other services with excellent care, at Av. Tulum, SM 12, at Nizuc (✆ **998/891-5200;** www.hospitalgalenia.com). **AMAT,** Av. Nader 13, SM 2, at Avenida Uxmal (✆ **998/887-4422**), is a small emergency hospital with some English-speaking doctors open 24 hours. Desk staff may have limited command of English. **U.S. Air Ambulance** (Global Ambulance) service is available by calling ✆ **800/948-1214** in the U.S., or 01-800/305-9400 in Mexico (www.usairambulance.net).

Internet Access All of **Kukulcán Plaza,** Bl. Kukulkán Km 13, offers free Wi-Fi. You'll need to pick up a password at Customer Services, near the main entrance. Also in Kukulcán Plaza, **Cyber Terrace** offers computers with Internet access for 60 pesos per hour. There's a cafe here, and it's open daily from 10am to 10pm. Most hotels now have Internet access, and five-star hotels have business centers.

Luggage Storage & Lockers Hotels will generally tag and store luggage while you travel elsewhere.

Newspapers & Magazines Most hotel gift shops and newsstands carry English-language magazines and English-language, Mexican-edition newspapers, such as *USA Today*. *Cancún Tips* (www.cancuntips.com.mx) is an entertainment magazine that offers descriptions of local activities, maps, and tourist information.

Police Dial ✆ **066** for the police in an emergency. Cancún also has a fleet of English-speaking tourist police to help travelers. Dial ✆ **998/885-2277.** The **Procuraduría Federal del Consumidor ("Profeco," the consumer protection agency),** Av. Cobá 9–11 (✆ **998/884-2634**), is opposite the Social Security Hospital and upstairs from the Fenix drugstore. It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 3pm.

Post Office The main *correo* lies at the intersection of avenidas Sunyaxchen and Xel-Ha (✆ **998/884-1418**). It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 4pm, and Saturday from 9am to noon for the purchase of stamps only.

Seasons Technically, high season runs from December 15 to April; low season extends from May to December 15, when prices drop 10% to 30%. Some hotels are starting to charge high-season rates during June and July, when Mexican, European, and school-holiday visitors often travel, although rates may still be lower than in winter months.

Weather It's hot but not overwhelmingly humid. The rainy season is May through October. August to November is hurricane season, which brings erratic weather. November through February is generally sunny but can also be cloudy, windy, somewhat rainy, and even cool.

2 WHERE TO STAY

Island hotels—almost all of them offering modern facilities and English-speaking staffs—line the beach like concrete dominoes. Extravagance is the byword in the newer hotels. Some hotels, while exclusive, affect a more relaxed attitude. The water on the upper end of the island facing Bahía de Mujeres is placid, while beaches lining the long side of the island facing the Caribbean are subject to choppier water and crashing waves on windy days. (For more information on swimming safety, see "Beaches, Watersports & Boat Tours," later in this chapter.) Be aware that the farther south you go on the island, the longer it takes (20–30 min. in traffic) to get back to the "action spots," which are primarily between the Plaza Flamingo and Punta Cancún on the island and along Avenida Tulum on the mainland.

Following Hurricane Wilma's devastation, the news item that received the most coverage was the destruction of Cancún's famed white-sand beaches. Immediately following the storm, literally all of the sand was washed away from the northern border of Isla Cancún, and from Punta Cancún. The Mexican government has since made a series of efforts to pump the dislocated sand back to the beach, most recently in late 2009. The southern beaches of Isla Cancún actually benefited from the storm, and now they have especially wide beachfronts.

Almost all major hotel chains have real estate on Cancún Island (the "Hotel Zone"). The reality is that Cancún is so popular as a **package destination** from the U.S. that prices and special deals are often the deciding factor for consumers rather than loyalty to any one hotel brand. Ciudad Cancún offers independently owned, smaller, less-expensive lodging. For condo, home, and villa rentals, check with **Cancún Hideaways** (✆ **817/522-4466;** www.cancun-hideaways.com), an American company specializing in luxury properties, downtown apartments, and condos—many at prices much lower than comparable hotel stays. Owner Maggie Rodriguez, a former resident of Cancún, has made this niche market her specialty.

The hotel listings in this chapter begin on Cancún Island and finish in Cancún City (the real downtown), where bargain lodgings are available. Unless otherwise indicated, parking is free at Cancún's hotels.

ISLA CANCUN

Very Expensive

Aqua ★★ Resurrected after being destroyed by Hurricane Wilma in 2005, Aqua once again stands at the pinnacle of Cancún's hotel scene. The ultramodern resort—New Age music seems to be piped in from each corner, behind every palm tree, and around the eight tempting pools—attracts a chic clientele pampered by an exceptionally gracious staff. The spa is outstanding, with indoor and outdoor treatments that incorporate the best techniques from around the globe. All of the soothing guest rooms face the ocean and have i-Home sound systems, aromatherapy menus, and Molton Brown bath amenities and artisan soaps. I don't remember the last time I slept in such a comfortable bed; Egyptian cotton sheets share company with a plush collection of form-fitting pillows. The only thing calling you out of bed is likely to be the clear blue skies, deep turquoise waters, and brilliant white sand outside your window. Some of Mexico's top chefs oversee the gourmet restaurants, including acclaimed chef Martha Ortiz, who created **Siete,** featuring floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Caribbean and the resort pools.

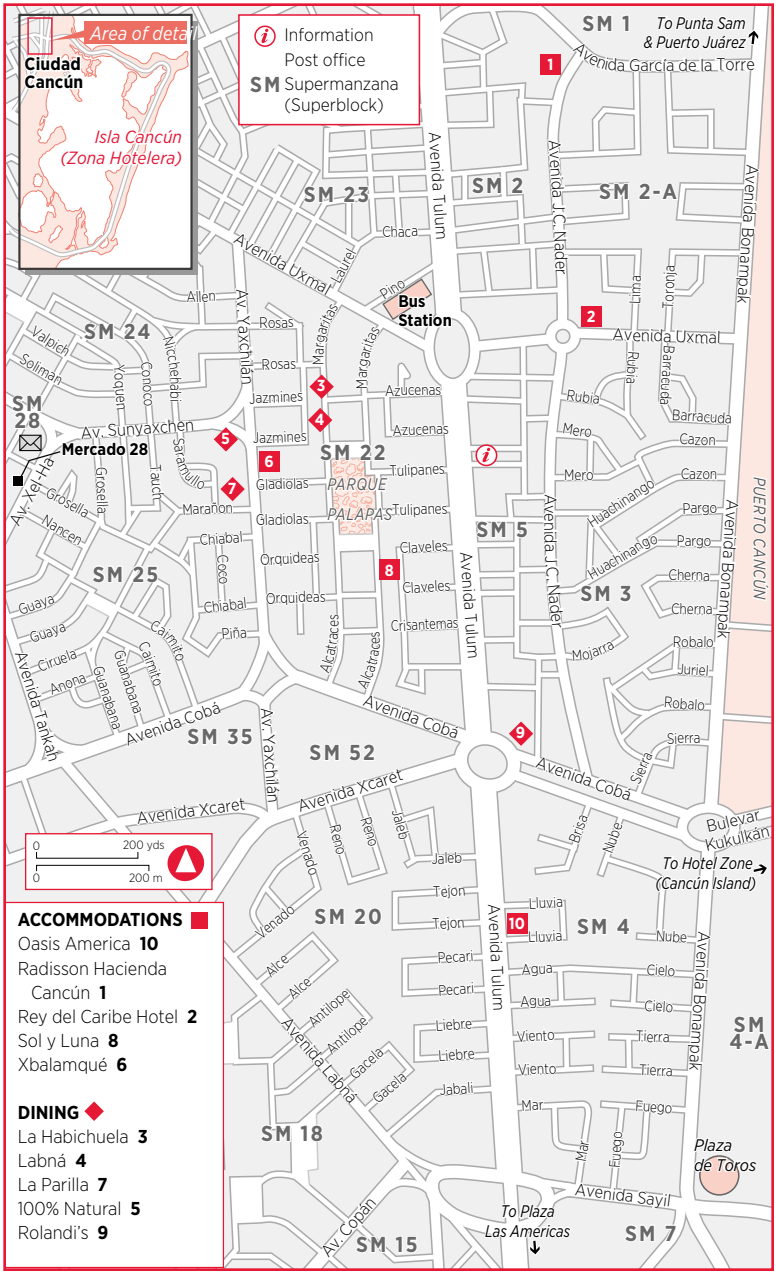
Bulevar Kukulkán Km 12.5, 77500 Cancún, Q. Roo. ✆ **800/343-7821** in the U.S., or 998/881-7600. Fax 998/881-7635. www.feel-aqua.com. 371 units. High season $370 and up double, $630 and up suite; low season $150–$311 double, $442 and up suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 gourmet restaurants; 3 bars; concierge w/multilingual staff; fitness center; 8 outdoor pools w/luxury cabañas for rent; room service; sauna; boutique spa; 2 tennis courts. *In room:* A/C, flatscreen TV w/DVD, i-Home, aromatherapy and pillow menu, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi (for a fee).

Fiesta Americana Grand Coral Beach ★★★ Kids This grand coral-colored resort sits on Punta Cancún, offering relative seclusion despite lying within easy walking distance of the Hotel Zone's key entertainment. Most of the hotel was renovated in 2009, and looks as magnificent as ever. In front, the whitest sand beach glides into emerald waters, where the surf is calm and perfect for swimming. Yet you may feel tempted not to leave the beautiful multitiered pools with waterfalls, fountains, swim-up bars, and lush surroundings. The all-suites hotel includes junior suites with sunken sitting areas, whitewashed furniture, marble bathrooms, and soothing California colors. Guests staying in Grand Club suites enjoy access to a private rooftop lounge, exclusive check-in, continental breakfast, hors d'oeuvres, and beverages. Service throughout this luxury property is gracious and attentive, and the magnificent lobby is embellished with elegant dark-green granite and fresh flowers. The Fiesta Kids Activities include nonstop games, contests, and shows for the little ones, and there are daylong sports and social activities planned for adults as well. The resort's international clientele includes many European, Japanese, Mexican, and American visitors. An American Express travel agency is located here.

Bulevar Kukulkán Km 9.5, 77500 Cancún, Q. Roo. ✆ **800/343-7821** in the U.S., or 998/881-3200. Fax 998/881-3288. www.fiestamericanagrand.com. 602 units. High season $403 and up double, $571 and up club-floor double; low season $200 and up double, $350 and up club-floor double. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants; 4 bars; babysitting; kids' club; concierge w/multilingual staff; fitness center; concierge floor; outdoor pool w/swim-up bars; room service; sauna; boutique spa; watersports. *In room:* A/C, flatscreen TV, i-Home, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi (for a fee).

Hilton Cancún Golf & Spa Resort ★★ Kids Full of energy, this is a grand resort in every sense. The Hilton Cancún sits on 100 hectares (247 acres) of prime beachside property, which means every room has a sea view (some have both sea and lagoon views). And there's an 18-hole par-72 golf course across the street. Like the sprawling resort, guest rooms are spacious and decorated in minimalist style. The Beach Club villas are the largest and best-located rooms, and come with continental breakfast and an evening cocktail hour. This Hilton is a kid-friendly hotel, with one of the island's best children's activity programs, children's pool, and babysitting. The spectacular multisection swimming pool stretches out to the gorgeous beach. The Hilton is especially appealing to golfers because it's one of only two in Cancún with an on-site course (the other is the Meliá). Greens fees for guests during high season are $79 for 9 holes, $159 for 18 holes (low season and twilight discounts offered), and come with use of a cart. The Wellness Spa includes oceanfront massage cabañas, yoga, and aromatherapy. This Hilton has a friendly vibe and excellent service.

Bulevar Kukulkán Km 17, Retorno Lacandones, 77500 Cancún, Q. Roo. ✆ **800/548-8690** in the U.S., or 998/881-8000. Fax 998/881-8080. www.hiltoncancun.com. 426 units. High season $249 and up double, $309 and up villa room, $409 and up suite; low season $159 and up double, $199 and up villa room, $279 and up suite. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; 2 bars; babysitting; kids' club; concierge; golf course across the street; golf clinic; 10 interconnected outdoor pools w/swim-up bar; 2 whirlpools; room service; wellness spa and fully equipped gym; 2 lighted tennis courts; watersports. *In room:* A/C, flatscreen TV, CD/MP3 player, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi (for a fee).


Area of detail
Ciudad Cancún
Isla Cancún (Zona Hotelera)
Information
Post office
SM Supermanzana (Superblock)
SM 1
To Punta Sam & Puerto Juárez
Avenida García de la Torre
SM 23
SM 2
SM 2-A
Avenida Tulum
Avenida J.C. Nader
Avenida Bonampak
Chaca
Avenida Uxmal
Laurel
Pino
Bus Station
Ailen
Av. Yaxchilán
Rosas
Margaritas
Jazmines
Azucenas
SM 24
SM 28
Mercado 28
Av. Sunyaxchen
Av. Kel-Ha
Valpich
Soliman
Nicchehabi
Comoco
Yoquen
Saramullo
Tauch
Grosella
Nancen
Marañon
SM 22
PARQUE PALAPAS
Gladiolas
Tulipanes
SM 25
Chiabal
Coco
Guaya
Piña
Orquideas
Claveles
Crisantemas
Alcatraces
SM 5
SM 3
Huachinango
Pargo
Cherna
Mero
Cazon
Rubia
Barracuda
Lupina
Toronja
Barreleva
Mojarra
Robalo
Juriel
Sierra
PUERTO CANCÚN
Avenida Coba
SM 35
SM 52
Av. Yaxchilán
Avenida Xcaret
Avenida Tankah
Ciruela
Anona
Guanabana
Caimito
Bulevar Kukulkán
To Hotel Zone (Cancún Island)
Brisa
Nube
Reno
Venado
Jaleb
Tejon
SM 20
SM 4
Lluvia
Pecari
Alce
Antilope
Gacela
Liebre
Agua
Cielo
Viento
Tierra
Mar
Fuego
SM 4-A
SM 18
Avenida Labná
Plaza de Toros
Avenida Sayil
To Plaza Las Americas
Av. Copán
SM 15
SM 7
0 200 yds
0 200 m
ACCOMMODATIONS
Oasis America 10
Radisson Hacienda Cancún 1
Rey del Caribe Hotel 2
Sol y Luna 8
Xbalamqué 6
DINING
La Habichuela 3
Labná 4
La Parilla 7
100% Natural 5
Rolandi's 9

Tips Deciphering Hotel Prices

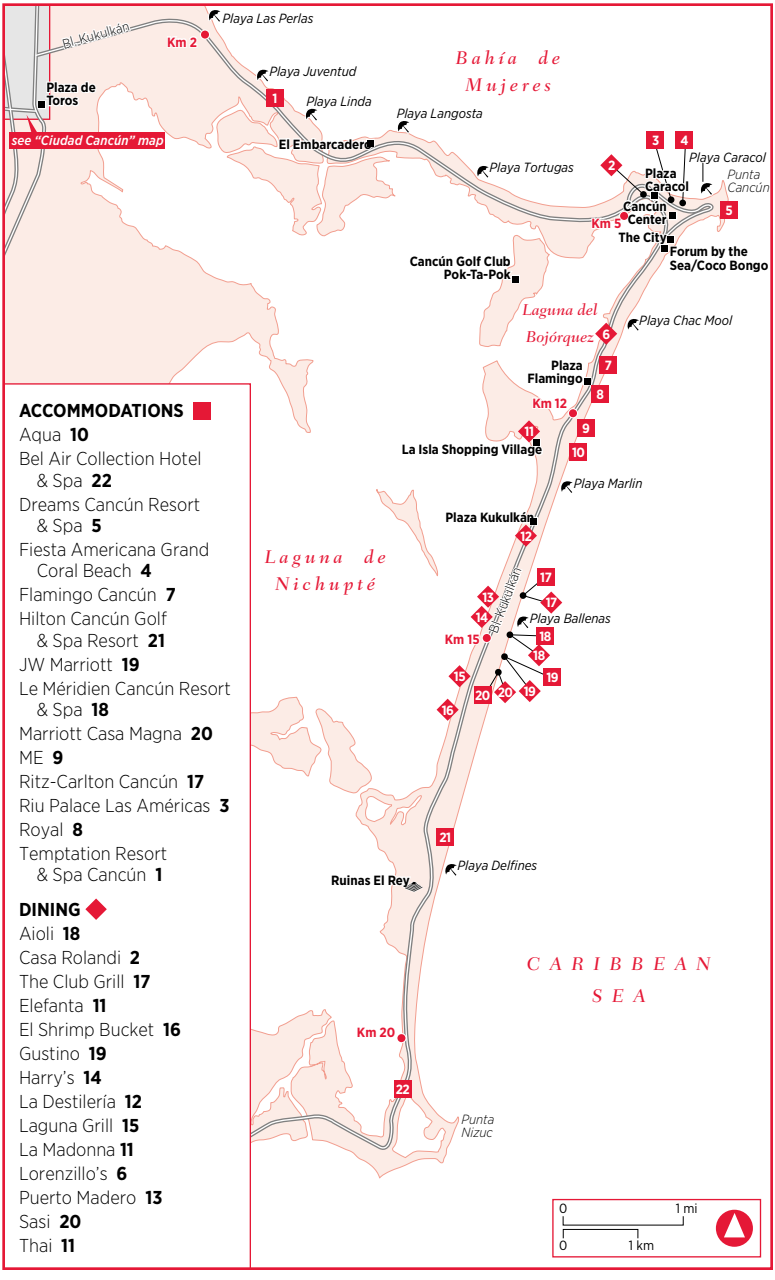
In all price categories, Cancún's hotels generally set their rates in dollars, so they are immune to variations in the peso. Travel agents and wholesalers always have air/hotel packages available. Cancún also has numerous all-inclusive properties, which allow you to take a fixed-cost vacation. Note that the price quoted when you call a hotel's reservation number may not include Cancún's 12% tax (a 10% federal tax and 2% state lodging tax). Prices can vary considerably throughout the year and have dropped considerably during the global financial crisis, so it pays to consult a travel agent or shop around.

JW Marriott ★★★ This remains my favorite resort in Cancún, a refined oasis that offers exceptional service without pretense. Despite its many touches of elegance, the JW is friendly and even family friendly—although more families stay at the neighboring and less expensive Marriott CasaMagna (p. 495). From the beautifully decorated marble and flower-filled lobby to the luxurious oceanview guest rooms, the resort combines classic and Caribbean styling with warm Mexican service. Guest rooms feature exquisite marble bathrooms with separate tub and shower, private balconies, flatscreen TVs, bathrobes and slippers, and twice-daily maid service. The wonderful free-form infinity pool meanders through the property and overlooks the sea. A spectacular 3,252-sq.-m (35,004-sq.-ft.) spa includes an indoor pool and Jacuzzi, high-tech fitness center, and full range of massages, body scrubs and polishes, facials, and healing water treatments. **Gustino** (p. 500) is the hotel's outstanding Italian restaurant seated off the lobby.

Bulevar Kukulkán Km 14.5, 77500 Cancún, Q. Roo. ✆ **800/223-6388** in the U.S., or 998/848-9600. Fax 998/848-9601. www.jwmarriottcancun.com. 448 units. High season $449 and up double; low season $300 and up double. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; deli; lobby bar and pool bar; access to kids' club at Marriott CasaMagna; concierge; club floor w/special amenities and complimentary cocktails; expansive outdoor pool; dive pool w/waterfalls; indoor pool; 3 whirlpools; room service; sauna; full-service spa; steam room. *In room:* A/C, flatscreen TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi (for a fee).

Le Méridien Cancún Resort & Spa ★★ Frequented by Europeans familiar with this fine chain of hotels, Le Méridien is among Cancún's most inviting luxury options. The elegant lobby, featuring original artwork, fresh flowers, and subtle lighting, creates a sense of intimacy that extends throughout the hotel. Guest rooms are generous in size, with small balconies overlooking the pool; due to the hotel's design, they do not have full ocean views. Each has a large marble bathroom with a separate tub and glassed-in shower. The resort's **Spa del Mar** is one of Mexico's most complete European spa facilities, with more than 4,570 sq. m (49,191 sq. ft.) of services dedicated to your body and soul. It consists of an extensive fitness center, full-service salon, selection of treatment rooms, men's and women's steam rooms, saunas, whirlpools, and cold plunge pools. **Aioli** (p. 499) is the splendid fine-dining restaurant connected to the lobby. The hotel staff offers calm, personalized service.

Retorno del Rey Km 14, Zona Hotelera, 77500, Cancún, Q. Roo. ✆ **800/543-4300** in the U.S., or 998/881-2200. Fax 998/881-2201. www.meridiencancun.com.mx. 213 units. $300 and up double, $400 and up suite. Ask about special spa packages. AE, DC, MC, V. Small dogs accepted with prior reservation. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; babysitting; supervised children's program w/clubhouse, play equipment, and wading pool; concierge; 3 cascading outdoor pools; whirlpool; room service; spa; 2 lighted championship tennis courts; watersports. *In room:* A/C, flatscreen TV, CD player, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi (for a fee).



ACCOMMODATIONS
Aqua **10**
Bel Air Collection Hotel & Spa **22**
Dreams Cancún Resort & Spa **5**
Fiesta Americana Grand Coral Beach **4**
Flamingo Cancún **7**
Hilton Cancún Golf & Spa Resort **21**
JW Marriott **19**
Le Méridien Cancún Resort & Spa **18**
Marriott Casa Magna **20**
ME **9**
Ritz-Carlton Cancún **17**
Riu Palace Las Américas **3**
Royal **8**
Temptation Resort & Spa Cancún **1**

DINING
Aioli **18**
Casa Rolandi **2**
The Club Grill **17**
Elefanta **11**
El Shrimp Bucket **16**
Gustino **19**
Harry's **14**
La Destilería **12**
Laguna Grill **15**
La Madonna **11**
Lorenzillo's **6**
Puerto Madero **13**
Sasi **20**
Thai **11**

Ritz-Carlton Cancún ★★★ Kids The exclusive Ritz-Carlton fronts a gorgeous white-sand beach, having recently added a significant stretch of sand as part of Cancún's $71-million beach recovery project. Rooms and public areas overlook the pools and beach and offer the low-key elegance that's a hallmark of the Ritz chain—think plush carpets; chandeliers; fresh flowers; and rooms with marble bathrooms, fluffy feather beds, and 400-count bed linens. Several features will enhance your stay, including a fabulous culinary center under the direction of acclaimed Executive Chef Rainer Zinngrebe offering gourmet cooking classes, as well as wine and tequila tastings. A group of specially designed "Itzy Bitzy Ritz Kids" guest rooms offer baby-friendly amenities and conveniences. In addition to the daytime Kids Camp, the Ritz offers a "Kids' Night Out" program that allows parents to steal away for the evening. The beachfront Kayantá Spa bases many of its treatments on traditional Maya rituals and therapies. The resort's oceanfront restaurant, **Casitas,** is the only beachside dining spot in Cancún, where you can dine on steakhouse fare in candlelit cabañas. The hotel's primary restaurant, the **Club Grill,** is reviewed in the "Where to Dine" section, later; **Fantino,** is similarly outstanding and focuses on Mediterranean cuisine; and the **Lobby Lounge** (p. 511) is a refined space for an evening out. The resort itself, as well as the Club Grill and Fantino, another Ritz-Carlton restaurant, has received AAA five diamonds.

Retorno del Rey 36, off Bulevar Kukulkán Km 13.5, 77500 Cancún, Q. Roo. ✆ **800/241-3333** in the U.S. and Canada, or 998/881-0808. Fax 998/881-0815. www.ritzcarlton.com. 365 units. May 1–Dec 21 $309–$409 double, $489 and up club floor and suites; Dec 21–Jan 3 $799–$1,099 double, $1,679 and up club floor and suites; Jan 4–Apr 30 $549–$629 double, $769 and up club floor and suites. Ask about golf, spa, and weekend packages. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 6 restaurants; lounge w/sushi bar; babysitting; Kids Camp; concierge; fully equipped fitness center; club floors; 2 outdoor pools (heated in winter); room service; spa; a Cliff Drysdale tennis center w/3 lighted tennis courts. *In room:* A/C, flatscreen TV, CD player, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi (for a fee).

Riu Palace Las Américas ★ Kids The all-inclusive Riu Palace is part of a family of Riu resorts in Cancún known for their grand, opulent style. This one is the smallest of the three and the most over-the-top, steeped in pearl-white Greco architecture. It looks more like it belongs on the Las Vegas strip than next to the Caribbean Sea. The location is prime—near the central shopping, dining, and nightlife centers, and just a 5-minute walk to the Convention Center. All rooms are spacious junior suites with an ocean or lagoon view, separate seating area with sofa or sofa bed, and a balcony or terrace. Eight have Jacuzzis. The beautiful central pools overlook the ocean and a small stretch of beach. Riu Palace offers guests virtually 24 hours of all-inclusive snacks, meals, and beverages. Activities include watersports, daytime entertainment for adults and kids, live music and shows at night, and access to other Riu hotels in Cancún. The hotel's European opulence stands in contrast to the mostly informal North American guests.

Bulevar Kukulkán Km 8.5, Lote 4, 77500 Cancún, Q. Roo. ✆ **888/666-8816** in the U.S., or 998/891-4300. Fax 998/891-4301. www.riu.com. 372 units. High season $412 and up double; low season $322 and up double. Rates are all-inclusive, and a 2-night stay may be required. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 6 restaurants; 2 bars; access to golf and tennis; fitness center; 2 outdoor pools; room service; spa; nonmotorized watersports, including introductory scuba lessons; Wi-Fi (in lobby). *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, hair dryer.

Royal ★★ Opened in early 2007, this adults-only all-suites hotel is my favorite of Cancún's all-inclusive establishments, offering a level of services and amenities unmatched almost anywhere. From the stunning infinity pools and gorgeous beach to the gourmet restaurants and sophisticated spa, the owners have spared no expense. The elegant marble lobby looks out one side to the Caribbean and the other to the lagoon,

with sit-down check-in and a champagne welcome. All of the innovative suites feature flatscreen TVs with CD/DVD players, marble bathrooms with rain showers, two-person Jacuzzis, and oceanview balconies with hammocks. Swim-up master suites have semiprivate plunge pools facing the resort's pool and beach; guests in the top-category suites have access to BMW Mini Coopers. The Maya-inspired oceanview spa includes a massage room, Jacuzzi, sauna, traditional *temazcal* steam bath, massage waterfall, and state-of-the-art fitness center. Actually, the range of services is almost hard to believe, except that you will be paying top dollar for it. The all-inclusive package includes gourmet meals, premium drinks, and evening entertainment.

Bulevar Kukulkán Km 11.5, 77500 Cancún, Q. Roo. ✆ **800/760-0944** in the U.S., or 998/881-7340. www.realresorts.com.mx. 288 units. $400–$800 double. AE, DC, MC, V. No children 15 and younger. **Amenities:** 6 restaurants; 8 bars; concierge; well-equipped fitness center; expansive outdoor pool; room service; sauna; full-service spa; steam room. *In room:* A/C, flatscreen TV, CD/DVD player, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Expensive

Dreams Cancún Resort & Spa Kids Operated by the Apple Vacations charter group, the all-inclusive Dreams Resort enjoys one of the island's most idyllic locations—29 hectares (72 acres) at the tip of Punta Cancún. The setting is casual, and the hotel welcomes children. Bright colors and strategic angles define the design, which now looks somewhat dated relative to Cancún's newer establishments. Choose from two sets of rooms: those in the 17-story club section with ocean views and extra services and amenities, and those in the pyramid overlooking the dolphin-filled lagoon. The all-inclusive concept here includes meals, 24-hour room service, and premium-brand drinks, as well as the use of all resort amenities, nonmotorized watersports, theme-night entertainment, and tips. The spa costs extra. One of the resort's restaurants is **Paloma Bonita,** for Mexican cuisine. Unfortunately, service at the resort is inconsistent.

Bulevar Kukulkán, 77500 Punta Cancún (Apdo. Postal 14), Cancún, Q. Roo. ✆ **866/237-3267** in the U.S., or 998/848-7000. Fax 998/848-7001. www.dreamsresorts.com. 376 units. High season $400 and up double; low season $285 and up double. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants; 5 bars; babysitting; bikes; kids' club; cooking classes; dance lessons; fitness center w/steam bath; 2 outdoor pools; private saltwater lagoon w/dolphins and tropical fish; lighted tennis court; watersports including kayaks, Catamarans, paddleboats, snorkeling equipment, and scuba lessons; beach volleyball; yoga. *In room:* A/C, TV w/DVD/CD player, hair dryer, minibar.

Marriott CasaMagna ★★ Kids This picture-perfect Marriott resort is one of the most enticing family destinations in Cancún. Entering through a half-circle of Roman columns, you'll pass through a domed foyer to a wide, lavishly marbled lobby filled with plants and shallow pools. It looks out to the sparkling pool and enormous whirlpool at the edge of the beach. Guest rooms are decorated with Mexican-Caribbean furnishings and have balconies facing the sea or lagoon. The Marriott caters to family travelers (up to two children stay free with parent), and the supervised children's program is one of the best of any resort here. That said, the resort never feels overrun by kids, and young couples will also have a wonderful time. Among the many places to dine, my favorite is the *teppanyaki*-style (cook-at-your-table) Mikado Japanese restaurant. Service throughout the resort is excellent.

Bulevar Kukulkán Km 14.5, 77500 Cancún, Q. Roo. ✆ **800/228-9290** in the U.S., or 998/881-2000. Fax 998/881-2085. www.casamagnamarriott.com. 450 units. $249–$309 double; $454 and up suite. Ask about packages. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 5 restaurants (including Sasi, p. 501); lobby bar w/live music; babysitting; concierge; health club w/sauna and aerobics; outdoor pool and whirlpool; room service; spa; 2 lighted tennis courts. *In room:* A/C, flatscreen TV, hair dryer, minibar.

ME ★ The Spanish ME hotel by Meliá brings to Cancún a new level of minimalist chic with an atmosphere befitting a trendy nightclub more than a beach resort. Bathed in hues of beige and mauve, with polished marble, onyx lamps, and modern artwork, the hotel creates its own fashion statement—and the hip clientele reflects it. The modern lobby feels a bit like an urban cocktail lounge, with designer bars and chill-out music filling the space. Guest rooms have distinctive contemporary furnishings, plasma TVs, MP3 players, and marble bathrooms with rain showers and Aveda bath products; half look to the Caribbean Sea and the other half to the lagoon. The super-stylish Yhi Spa overlooks the ocean and offers body glows and exfoliations, aromatherapy massages, body masks, and wraps. The Beach House restaurant appears sunken into the main pool and joins the beach in front. One drawback: Service is not as consistent as you might expect from such an upscale resort.

Bulevar Kukulkán Km 12, 77500 Cancún, Q. Roo. ✆ **877/954-8363** in the U.S., or 998/881-2500. Fax 998/881-2501. www.mecancun.travel. 448 units. $239 and up double. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; Internet cafe; 2 bars; beach club; concierge; fitness center; concierge floor; 3 outdoor pools; whirlpool; full-service luxury spa. *In room:* A/C, flatscreen TV, MP3 player, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi (for a fee).

Moderate

Bel Air Collection Hotel & Spa ★ (Value) This trendy boutique hotel attracts the young, hip, and hot—making this beachfront hotel into something you'd expect to find in Miami, standing in direct contrast to the nearby all-inclusive megaresorts. Of the hotel's 156 rooms, nearly half face the ocean; the rest face the lagoon, which offers splendid sunset views. Guest rooms are modern and spacious, with minimalist white-and-red decor. There's an asymmetrical infinity pool that seems to spill over onto the turquoise Caribbean Sea, with guests lazing around it on comfortable mattresses while lounge music plays in the background. The Collection Spa offers a variety of moderately priced services, including a chocolate facial. ***Note:*** This hotel is a 15-minute ride from the center of the Hotel Zone, and children 11 and under are not allowed, so if you're looking for privacy and peace, this is the place for you.

Bulevar Kukulkán Km 20.5, 77500 Cancún, Q. Roo. ✆ **998/193-1770.** www.belaircollection.com. 156 units. High season $150 and up double; low season $100 and up double. Meal plans available. AE, MC, V. No children 11 and under. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; sushi bar; 2 bars; concierge; exercise room; Jacuzzi; infinity outdoor pool; room service; spa; Wi-Fi (in lobby). *In room:* A/C, satellite TV/DVD, hair dryer, minibar.

Flamingo Cancún (Kids) The all-inclusive Flamingo seems to have been inspired by the dramatic, slope-sided architecture of the Dreams Cancún, but the Flamingo is considerably smaller and less expensive (guests can opt out of the all-inclusive package, which includes three meals and domestic drinks). With two pools and a casual vibe, it's also a friendly, accommodating choice for families. The bright guest rooms—all with balconies—border a courtyard facing the interior swimming pool and *palapa* pool bar. Some, but not all, of the rooms have been remodeled in recent years. The Flamingo lies in the heart of the island hotel district, opposite the Flamingo Shopping Center and close to other hotels, shopping centers, and restaurants.

Bulevar Kukulkán Km 11, 77500 Cancún, Q. Roo. ✆ **998/848-8870.** Fax 998/883-1029. www.flamingocancun.com. 260 units. High season $199 double, low season $112 double; all-inclusive plan high season $400 double, low season $200 double. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; kids' club; fitness center; 2 outdoor pools; room service; Wi-Fi (in lobby). *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar.

Temptation Resort & Spa Cancún This adults-only (21 and over) getaway is a spirited all-inclusive resort favored by those looking for significant social interaction.

Although it's not advertised as such, the hotel is widely known for its popularity with "swingers." By day, pool time is all about flirting, seducing, and getting a little wacky with adult games such as teasing time and a dirty jokes contest. The main pools are top-optional. Note that tops are also optional on the beach in front, which has calm waters for swimming. Come night, theme dinners, shows, and other live entertainment keep the party going. The small, somewhat dated rooms are housed in two sections, with quiet rooms in one and "sexy" rooms, complete with red lighting, in another. Surrounded by acres of tropical gardens, this moderate hotel lies at the northern end of the Hotel Zone, close to the major shopping plazas, restaurants, and nightlife. It reminds me of a Carnival Cruise, but on land.

Bulevar Kukulkán Km 3.5, 77500 Cancún, Q. Roo. ✆ **877/485-8367** in the U.S., or 998/848-7900. Fax 998/848-7994. www.temptationresort.com. 384 units. High season $179 per person per night double occupancy; low season $139 per person per night double occupancy. Rates include food, beverages, and activities. AE, MC, V. Guests must be at least 21 years old. **Amenities:** 6 restaurants; 5 bars; exercise room w/daily classes; marina; 3 outdoor pools; 7 whirlpools; limited room service; snorkeling and scuba lessons; spa; nonmotorized watersports. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi (for a fee).

CIUDAD CANCUN

Moderate

Oasis America One of downtown's better hotels, Oasis America sits off the main business street and is a 20-minute ride from the Hotel Zone. Of the hotel's two sections, the "Sens" side is superior, offering handsomely appointed rooms decorated in muted tones with king-size beds, flatscreen TVs, plenty of work space, and bathrooms with showers only. The "standard" rooms have smaller beds and more basic furnishings. The swimming pool is the highlight of the hotel, surrounded by palm trees, waterways, and lounge chairs and beds. There's also a small spa offering among the best massage rates of any spa you'll find in Cancún. Service throughout the hotel is polite but unexceptional.

Av. Tulum (corner of Brisa), Centro, 77500 Cancún, Q. Roo. ✆ **998/848-9144** or 848-8600. Fax 998/884-1953. www.oasishoteles.com. 177 units. 1,500 pesos and up double. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; small gym; outdoor pool w/separate wading area for children; limited room service; spa; Wi-Fi (in lobby). *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar.

Radisson Hacienda Cancún ★ (Value) This is the top hotel in downtown Cancún, and one of the best values in the area. The business-friendly Radisson offers all the expected comforts of the chain, yet resembles a hacienda with the distinct manner of Mexican hospitality. Guest rooms surround a warm, rotunda-style lobby with a cool onyx bar, as well as lush gardens and an inviting pool area. All have brightly colored fabric accents; views of the garden, the pool, or the street; and a small sitting area and balcony. The hotel lies within walking distance of downtown Cancún.

Av. Nader 1, SM2, Centro, 77500 Cancún, Q. Roo. ✆ **800/333-3333** in the U.S., or 998/881-6500. Fax 998/884-7954. www.radissoncancun.com. 248 units. $100 and up double; $120 and up junior suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; lobby bar; small gym; outdoor pool w/adjoining bar and separate wading area for children; limited room service; sauna; lighted tennis courts; Wi-Fi (in lobby). *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer.

Rey del Caribe Hotel ★★ (Finds) This ecological hotel is a unique oasis where every detail works toward establishing harmony with the environment. You might easily forget you're in the midst of downtown Cancún in the tropical garden setting, with blooming orchids and other flowering plants. The lovely grounds include statues of Maya deities, hammocks, and a tiled swimming pool. There's a regularly changing schedule of hatha and flow yoga, as well as special classes on astrology, tarot, and other subjects. The on-site

spa offers facial and body treatments. Guest rooms, many of which were renovated in 2009, are large and sunny, with a kitchenette and your choice of one king-size or two full-size beds; some have a terrace. The extent of ecological sensitivity is impressive—ranging from the use of collected rainwater to waste composting. Recycling is encouraged, and solar power is used wherever possible.

Av. Uxmal SM 2A (corner of Nader), 77500 Cancún, Q. Roo. ✆ **998/884-2028.** Fax 988/884-9857. www.elreydelcaribe.com. 31 units. High season $85 double; low season $65 double. Rates include breakfast. MC, V. **Amenities:** Outdoor pool; Jacuzzi; spa. *In room:* A/C, TV, kitchenette, Wi-Fi.

Inexpensive

Sol y Luna Value This simple but cheerful hotel next to the Parque Las Palapas has 11 individually decorated rooms with small balconies, and mosaic-trimmed bathrooms with showers only. A tiny bridge crosses the small pool at the entrance. Come here if you want to explore the downtown and experience Cancún's more local flavor, but don't expect much in the way of service or amenities. The hotel sits up one flight of stairs, just above a tapas and wine bar.

Calle Alcatraces 33, 77500 Cancún, Q. Roo. ✆ **998/887-5579.** www.hotelsolylunacancun.com. 11 units. $50–$70 double. AE, MC, V. Street parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant/bar; outdoor pool; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge.

Xbalamqué ★ Creatively designed to resemble a Maya temple, this downtown hotel features a lovely pool and waterfall, full-service spa, and authentic Mexican cantina. Live music plays evenings in the bookstore/cafe adjacent to the lobby. Guest rooms and 10 junior suites have rustic furnishings with regional touches, colorful tilework, and small bathrooms with showers. Ask for a room overlooking the ivy-filled courtyard. A tour desk is available to help you plan your vacation activities, and the spa offers some of the best rates of any hotel in Cancún.

Av. Yaxchilán 31, SM 22, Mza. 18, 77500 Cancún, Q. Roo. ✆ **998/884-9690.** Fax 998/884-9690. www.xbalamque.com. 99 units. $75 double; $85 suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; cafe; cantina; lobby bar; outdoor pool; spa. *In room:* A/C, TV.

3 WHERE TO DINE

More than 300 restaurants spanning North American, European, and Asian cuisines have opened across Cancún. They have come to supplement the many U.S.-based franchise chains that have long dominated the Cancún restaurant scene. These include Hard Rock Cafe, Rainforest Cafe, Tony Roma's, Ruth's Chris Steak House, and the gamut of fast-food burger places. One inexpensive, reliable Mexican chain that serves tasty meals, including breakfasts, is **Vips,** across from the Convention Center. The establishments listed below are typically locally owned, one-of-a-kind restaurants or exceptional selections at area hotels. Many schedule live music. Unless otherwise indicated, parking is free.

One unique way to combine dinner with sightseeing is aboard the **Lobster Dinner Cruise** (✆ **998/849-4748;** www.thelobsterdinner.com). Cruising around the tranquil, turquoise waters of the lagoon, passengers feast on steak and lobster dinners accompanied by wine. Cost is $79 per person for the surf-and-turf menu. The two daily departures are from the Aquatours Marina (Bulevar Kukulkán 6.5). A sunset cruise leaves at 5pm during the winter and 5:30pm during the summer; a moonlight cruise leaves at 8pm winter, 8:30pm summer. Another—albeit livelier—lobster dinner option is the **Captain Hook**

Lobster Dinner Cruise (✆ **998/849-4451;** www.pirateshipcancun.com), which is similar, but with the added attraction of a pirate show involving two 28m (93-ft.) replicas of 18th-century Spanish galleons, making this a fun choice for families. The steak option costs 1,026 pesos per person, and the lobster option is 1,130 pesos per person. It departs at 7pm from El Embarcadero at Playa Linda, and returns at 10:30pm.

ISLA CANCUN

Very Expensive

Aioli ★★ FRENCH The Provençal—but definitely not provincial—Aioli offers exquisite French and Mediterranean gourmet specialties in a warm and cozy country French setting. Though it serves perhaps the best breakfast buffet in Cancún (for 312 pesos), most diners from outside the hotel come here in the evening, when low lighting and superb service promise a romantic experience. To start, the foie gras medallions and caramelized figs with a cherry Brandy sauce are the obvious choice. Among my favorite main courses are roasted sea bass with an artichoke fricassee and basil cream sauce, rack of lamb with polenta sauce, and seared breast of duck. Desserts are decadent, especially the signature "Fifth Element" with chocolate and a rich berry sauce.

In Le Méridien Cancún Resort & Spa (p. 492), Retorno del Rey Km 14. ✆ **998/881-2200.** Reservations recommended. No sandals or tennis shoes; men must wear long pants. Main courses 324–540 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 6:30am–11pm.

The Club Grill ★★★ INTERNATIONAL Under the direction of Executive Chef Rainer Zinngrebe, the five-diamond Club Grill is one of Mexico's top restaurants. Even rival restaurateurs give it an envious thumbs up. The gracious service starts as you enter the anteroom, with its elegant seating and superb selection of cocktails and wines. It continues in the candlelit dining room, with shimmering silver and crystal. Sophisticated plates of prime cuts, escargot, seared scallops, foie gras, truffles, and roasted duck arrive at a leisurely pace. Don't miss the soufflé station before concluding your meal. There's a martini bar next door, and a jazz band plays from 7:30pm on. Guests seeking an even more gastronomically rich experience can sign up for the chef's table or take a gourmet cooking class at the hotel's fabulous culinary school.

In the Ritz-Carlton Cancún (p. 494), Retorno del Rey, 36 Bulevar Kukulkán Km 13.5. ✆ **998/881-0808.** Reservations required. No sandals or tennis shoes; men must wear long pants and collared shirts. Main courses $30–$46. AE, DC, MC, V. Tues–Sun 7–11pm.

Lorenzillo's ★★ Kids SEAFOOD This longtime Cancún favorite hasn't changed much over the years. Lobster remains the star, and part of the appeal is selecting your dinner out of the giant lobster tank set in the lagoon (Lorenzillo's sits right on the lagoon under a giant *palapa* roof). A dock leads down to the main dining area, and when that's packed, a wharf-side bar handles the overflow. You'll find a large captain's wheel at the entrance to this nautical-themed restaurant. To start, I recommend *El Botin,* which consists of two soft-shell crabs breaded and fried to perfection. Good bets for the entree include lobster (which comes prepared in any of 20 different ways), shrimp stuffed with cheese and wrapped in bacon, the *Pescador* (Caribbean grouper prepared to taste), and steak and seafood combinations. Desserts include the tempting crêpes suzette, prepared tableside. Lorenzillo's is as popular with families as it is with couples looking for lagoon-side romance. It's connected by a walkway to Limoncello, the waterfront Italian restaurant next door.

Bulevar Kukulkán Km 10.5. ✆ **998/883-1254.** www.lorenzillos.com.mx. Reservations recommended. Main courses $22–$49. AE, MC, V. Daily 1pm–midnight.

Expensive

Casa Rolandi ★★★ INTERNATIONAL Trained in Lyon, France, chef-owner Danielle Muller has taken the reigns and redesigned both the dining space and the menu of Casa Rolandi. Famous personalities, from international actors to Mexican presidents, have dined here over the years, and Casa Rolandi remains one of Cancún's best tables. Among the artfully presented selections are homemade ravioli stuffed with wild mushrooms over a creamy Alba truffle sauce, fresh seafood tagliolini draped in black ink, red snapper or sea bass baked in salt, and grilled 18-ounce rib-eye served sizzling. Finish with the sublime tiramisu accompanied by Kahlúa and coffee. Special international menus are offered each month. Service remains personalized and friendly, and a sophisticated cigar and wine lounge called **Very Wine** has been added upstairs (p. 512).

Bulevar Kukulkán Km 8.5, in Plaza Caracol. ✆ **998/883-2557.** www.rolandi.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses 182–385 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 1–11:30pm.

Elefanta ★★ INDIAN Opened in April 2009 as a partner restaurant to Thai (p. 502), Elefanta is the trendiest new table to hit Cancún's dining scene. The exotic waterfront space has two open kitchens overseen by an Indian chef—one for tandoori cooking and the other for curries. The kitchens focus on fish, shrimp, and chicken dishes, and there are plentiful vegetarian options. Dishes can be ordered on regular or half-size plates and are perfect for sharing. Elefanta's chill-out music is coordinated with Thai, next door, and a DJ here spins hot mixes Thursday through Saturday nights. If you're in the mood for a cocktail, try one of the 30 exotic martinis.

La Isla Shopping Center, Bulevar Kukulkán 12.5. ✆ **998/176-8070.** Reservations recommended during high season. Main courses 200–400 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 4–11:30pm.

Gustino ★★★ ITALIAN JW Marriott's signature restaurant Gustino offers romantic Italian dining unsurpassed in Cancún. The exquisite dining room includes a gorgeous centerpiece candle display, floor-to-ceiling windows looking out to a lazy man-made lagoon and the beach beyond, and live saxophone. For an *antipasto,* I recommend the unusual pear carpaccio with Parmesan nuggets and caramelized grapes, or the sautéed shrimp in a white-wine sauce with capers and roasted celery crouton. The warm tossed spinach salad is one of the best I've ever tasted, topped with pancetta, mushrooms, sun-dried tomatoes, and walnuts. Expertly prepared main dishes include open lasagna with lobster and black olives, and roasted loin of venison with a stuffed potato croquette. The menu, which changes seasonally, features other homemade pastas and succulent steak and seafood selections. Gustino has a wine cellar with an excellent variety of international grapes. Service is outstanding.

In the JW Marriott (p. 492), Bulevar Kukulkán Km 14.5. ✆ **998/848-9600.** www.jwmarriottrestaurants.com. Reservations required. Main courses 195–585 pesos. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 6–11pm.

Harry's ★★ STEAK Situated adjacent to the Nichupté Lagoon, this prime steakhouse and raw bar is a hot addition to Cancún's dining scene. The dining room and waterfront terrace combine local stone and wood with burned orange marble and large expanses of glass to create a sense of California chic. The attentive waitstaff brings to your table a tempting selection of different cuts of beef, as well as a presentation from the raw bar. The New York strips, rib-eyes, and other cuts of beef are broiled in a 1,700°F (1,000°C) oven, while the fish and seafood are grilled on a *parilla.* Dishes are served a la carte, and the food is prepared with careful attention to detail. Don't expect a kids' menu here: Even the Kobe beef burger is so big it could feed a family. An excellent selection of international and Mexican boutique wines accompanies the menu.

Bulevar Kukulkán Km 14.2. ✆ **998/840-6550.** www.harrys.com.mx. Reservations recommended. Main courses 300–1,250 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 1pm–1am.

Laguna Grill ★★ FUSION Laguna Grill offers diners a contemporary culinary experience in a picturesque setting overlooking the lagoon. A tropical garden welcomes you at the entrance, while a small creek traverses the *palapa*-covered dining room set with tables made from the trunks of tropical trees. As magical as the decor is, the real star here is the kitchen, with its selection of contemporary international cuisine fused with regional flavors. Starters include a light lobster bisque or martini *gyoza* (steamed dumplings) filled with shrimp and vegetables. Fish and seafood dominate the menu. Grilled shrimp come marinated in rum, mint, and lime; surf-and-turf fusion dishes may include grilled lobster, beef, and shrimp skewers. For beef-lovers, the rib-eye served with mashed potatoes and black olives is excellent. For dessert, I recommend the crème brûlée served with a touch of Bailey's. If you're an early diner, request a table on the outside deck for a spectacular sunset view. An impressive selection of wines is available.

Bulevar Kukulkán Km 16.5. ✆ **998/885-0320.** www.lagunagrill.com.mx. Reservations recommended. Main courses 150–400 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 5–11pm.

La Madonna ★ SWISS/ITALIAN This architecturally dazzling restaurant and bar emerges unexpectedly from La Isla shopping center like an Italian Renaissance showroom along the canal. Inside, the dining room resembles one of the mystical international Buddha Bars, with an enormous replica of the Mona Lisa looking over the dazzled clientele. La Madonna offers authentic Italian and Swiss cuisine, including pasta, grilled fish, steak, and fondues. Among the best main dishes is the battered veal chop with fresh mozzarella, tomato sauce, and Parmesan cheese over homemade basil pasta. For dessert, request the tableside flambéed strawberries. Many people come just for dessert and drinks, too (p. 511).

La Isla Shopping Center, Bulevar Kukulkán 12.5. ✆ **998/883-2222.** Reservations recommended. Main courses 150–800 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily noon–1am.

Puerto Madero ★★ ARGENTINE/STEAK/SEAFOOD As a tribute to the famed Puerto Madero of Buenos Aires, this trendy restaurant has quickly earned a reputation for its steak and fish as well as its buzzing atmosphere. Overlooking the Nichupté Lagoon, the decor re-creates a 20th-century dock warehouse similar to what you'd find in the real Puerto Madero, with dark woods, exposed brick, and visible pipes. This steakhouse offers an extensive selection of prime-quality beef cuts, pastas, grilled fish, and shellfish, meticulously prepared with Argentine gusto. In addition to the classic carpaccio, the tuna tartar and halibut steak are favorites, but the real standouts here are the tender grilled steaks (particularly the rib-eye). Enjoy a cocktail or glass of wine from the extensive selection, while viewing the sunset from the lagoon-side deck. Service is excellent and the restaurant stays open late.

Marina Barracuda, Bulevar Kukulkán Km 14. ✆ **998/885-2829,** -2830. www.puertomaderorestaurantes.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses 170–630 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 1pm–1am.

Sasi ★★ THAI One of two outstanding Thai restaurants in Cancún—and the more family friendly of the two—Sasi sparkles under a series of *palapas* lit by soft onyx lamps. To start, I recommend ordering the Sasi Sampler which comes with a selection of shrimp, pork, beef, and chicken dumplings presented in a *Domburi* basket. Excellent main courses include stir-fried rice plates with chicken or shrimp, two versions of pad Thai, and a variety of curries prepared with toasted herbs and Jasmine rice. Those looking for spicy selections will find worthy contenders in the Tom Yang Goong shrimp soup and

the chicken and shrimp green curry. Dishes arrive carefully prepared and artfully presented, and the bartender mixes among the best martinis I've found in this city. The waitstaff is Mexican, and the service every bit as gracious as you'd find if you were in Thailand.

In the Marriott CasaMagna (p. 495), Bulevar Kukulkán Km 14.5. ✆ **998/881-2092.** Reservations recommended. Main courses 140–240 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 5:30–11pm.

Thai ★★★ Moments THAI This sensual restaurant and lounge feels like it should be in Southeast Asia rather than the edge of a Mexican shopping plaza. The stunning outdoor setting includes thick foliage and bamboo, with private *palapas* (open-air huts, each with its own table, sofa, and flickering candles) constructed like tiny islands over the expansive lagoon. Unobtrusive service, soft red-and-blue lighting, and Asian chill and lounge music contribute to the chic ambience. Classic Thai specialties such as spicy shrimp soup with lemon grass and mushrooms, glass noodle salad, chicken satay, and chicken and shrimp curries and stir-fries are served alongside exotic cocktails to the beautiful crowd. A DJ works the stylish lounge on weekends. Thai opens at sunset.

La Isla Shopping Center, Bulevar Kukulkán Km 12.5. ✆ **998/176-8070.** Reservations recommended during high season. Main courses 220–395 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 6pm–1am.

Moderate

El Shrimp Bucket Kids SEAFOOD This festive, family-friendly restaurant on the lagoon is all about "meaty, magnificent, and tender" shrimp cooked to your liking—peel-and-eat, breaded, beer-battered, coconut, grilled, and even bacon-barbecued. The kitchen serves only wild-caught shrimp from the Pacific coast of Mexico, which are extremely rich in flavor. The menu offers other fish and seafood selections, including ceviches, fish tacos, seafood pastas, and fish sandwiches. The casual eatery features a fun kids' playground that advises the children to "keep an eye on your parents." The indoor and outdoor seating is decorated with fishnets, shrimp buckets, and other nautical knickknacks. Salsa music plays in the background, and the servers are as cheerful as the atmosphere.

Bulevar Kukulkán Km 15. ✆ **998/840-6466.** www.shrimpbucket.com. Main courses 100–300 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily noon–midnight.

La Destilería MEXICAN To experience Mexico's favorite export on an enticing terrace overlooking the lagoon, this is your place (keep an eye out for Tequila, the lagoon crocodile who often comes to visit). Renovated in 2009, La Destilería is more than a tequila-inspired restaurant; it's a minimuseum honoring the "spirit" of Mexico. It serves over 150 brands of tequila, including some treasures that never find their way across the country's northern border. A tequila tour is offered daily at 4:30pm, and patrons can always order tequila "samplers" at their tables. No surprise, the margaritas are also among the island's best. When you decide to order food with your tequila, you'll find a creative Mexican menu, with everything from quesadillas with zucchini flower, cheese, and poblano pepper to *arrachera* beef fajitas served in a hot pot with roasted *nopales* (cactus), Mexican sausage, and avocado.

Bulevar Kukulkán Km 12.65, across from Kukulcán Plaza. ✆ **998/885-1086,** -1087. www.ladestileria.com.mx. Main courses 150–470 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 1pm–midnight.

CIUDAD CANCUN

Expensive

La Habichuela ★★ Moments SEAFOOD In a musically accented garden setting with flowering white-lit hibiscus trees, this longtime favorite remains downtown's most

elegant table. For an unforgettable culinary adventure, order crème of *habichuela* (string bean) soup; giant shrimp in any number of sauces, including Jamaican tamarind, tequila, or ginger and mushroom; and exotic Maya coffee prepared tableside with Xtabentun (a strong, sweet, anise-based liqueur). Grilled seafood and steaks are excellent, and the menu includes luscious ceviches, Caribbean lobsters, an inventive seafood "parade," and shish kabob flambé with shrimp and lobster or beef. For something divine, try *cocobichuela,* lobster and shrimp in sweet curry served in a coconut shell with rice and topped with fruit. Top it off with one of the boozy butterscotch crepes. La Habichuela now has a second branch in the Hotel Zone called **La Habichuela Sunset,** which features giant windows overlooking the lagoon and is close to La Isla shopping center. It's open daily from noon to midnight.

Margaritas 25. ✆ **998/884-3158.** (La Habichuela Sunset at Bulevar Kukulkán Km 12.6, ✆ 998/840-6280.) www.lahabichuela.com. Reservations recommended in high season. Main courses 157–396 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily noon–midnight.

Moderate

Labná ★★ YUCATECAN Coming for a meal at Labná is like a very special trip to a Yucatecan home, a place that serves delicious Maya food and treats you like a friend. Specialties include a sublime lime soup, *poc chuc* (marinated, barbecue-style pork), chicken or pork *pibil* (sweet and spicy barbecue sauce served over shredded meat wrapped in banana leaves), and appetizers such as *papadzules* (tortillas stuffed with boiled eggs in a pumpkinseed sauce). The Labná Special is a sampler of four typically Yucatecan main courses, including *poc chuc,* while another specialty of the house is baked suckling pig, served with guacamole. The refreshing Yucatecan beverage, *agua de chaya*—a blend of sweetened water and the leaf of the *chaya* plant, abundant in the area, to which sweet Xtabentun liquor (a type of anise) can be added for an extra kick—is also served here. The vaulted ceiling dining room is decorated with a mural of a pre-Hispanic Yucatecan scene, as well as with black-and-white photographs of Mérida, the capital of the Yucatán, dating from the 1900s. A local trio plays weekends from 3 to 5pm.

Margaritas 29, next to Cristo Rey church and the Habichuela restaurant. ✆ **998/892-3056.** www.labna.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses 78–198 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily noon–10pm.

La Parilla ★★ MEXICAN A downtown institution, La Parilla is a celebration of Mexican folklore featuring a colorful open-air dining room, nightly mariachi music, and a rich menu promising excellent food. You'll find authentic dishes from the garden, the kettle, and the Caribbean, as well as Mexican specialties like *mole* enchiladas or grilled Aztec steak wrapped in cactus leaves and stuffed with onions. There are also tacos of every variety, sumptuous grilled steaks and seafood, and Maya treats such as "poc-chuc" pork tenderloin. This is a place to eat, drink, and be merry, and tequila samplers are available for those willing to risk a hangover tomorrow morning. One drawback: There are fans but no air-conditioning, so take a cold shower before you come here on a hot, humid night.

Av. Yaxchilán 51. ✆ **998/287-8118.** www.laparilla.com.mx. Reservations not accepted. Main courses 150–350 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily noon–2am.

Inexpensive

100% Natural ★ BREAKFAST/HEALTH FOOD If you want a healthy reprieve from an overindulgent night—or just like your meals as fresh and natural as possible—this is your oasis. No matter what your dining preference, you owe it to yourself to try a Mexican tradition, the fresh-fruit *licuado.* These tropical smoothies combine fresh fruit, ice, and water or milk. More creative combinations may mix in yogurt, granola, or other

goodies. 100% Natural serves more than just quality drinks—there's a bountiful selection of healthy Mexican plates and terrific sandwiches served on whole-grain bread, with options for vegetarians. Breakfast is delightful and the attached bakery features all-natural baked goods such as chocolate croissants and apple-cinnamon muffins. There are several 100% Natural locations in town, including branches at Playa Chac-Mool, in front of Señor Frog's, and downtown.

Av. Sunyaxchen 63. ✆ **998/884-0102.** www.100natural.com.mx. Reservations not accepted. Main courses 50–184 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 7am–11pm.

Rolandi (Kids) ITALIAN At this shaded patio bar, restaurant, and pizzeria known for dependably tasty Italian delights, you can choose from an enticing selection of spaghetti, calzones, and Italian-style chicken and beef, as well as from almost two dozen delicious, if greasy, wood-oven pizzas (individual size). Why not try the deliciously spicy "Fiesta Mexicana" pizza with tomato, cheese, Mexican pepperoni, and jalapeños or the "Pizza del Patrone" with prosciutto and arugula? A Cancún institution here since 1979, Rolandi's has additional branches in Isla Mujeres and Cozumel (see chapter 15). It's as popular with locals as with tourists.

Av. Cobá 12. ✆ **998/884-4047.** Fax 998/884-4047. www.rolandi.com. Reservations recommended. Pasta 90–120 pesos; pizza and main courses 70–140 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 12:30pm–12:30am.

4 BEACHES, WATERSPORTS & BOAT TOURS

THE BEACHES Cancún recently added significant stretches of sand to its beaches as part of a $71-million beach recovery project to counter the amount of sand eroded by various storms in recent years. Big hotels dominate the best stretches of beach. All of Mexico's beaches are public property, so you can use the beach of any hotel by walking through the lobby or directly onto the sand. Be especially careful on the east-facing beaches fronting the open Caribbean, where the undertow can be quite strong. By contrast, the waters of **Bahía de Mujeres (Mujeres Bay),** at the north end of the island, are usually calm and ideal for swimming. Get to know Cancún's water-safety pennant system, and make sure to check the flag at any beach or hotel before entering the water. Here's how it goes:

White	Excellent
Green	Normal conditions (safe)
Yellow	Changeable, uncertain (use caution)
Black or **red**	Unsafe—use the swimming pool instead!

In the Caribbean, storms can arrive and conditions can change from safe to unsafe in a matter of minutes, so be alert: If you see dark clouds heading your way, make for the shore and wait until the storm passes.

Playa Tortuga (Turtle Beach), Playa Langosta (Lobster Beach), Playa Linda (Pretty Beach), and Playa Las Perlas (Beach of the Pearls) are some of the public beaches. At most beaches, you can rent a sailboard and take lessons, ride a parasail, or partake in a variety of watersports. There's a small but beautiful portion of public beach on Playa Caracol, by the Xcaret Terminal. It faces the calm waters of Bahía de Mujeres and, for that reason, is preferable to those facing the Caribbean.

WATERSPORTS Many beachside hotels offer watersports concessions that rent rubber rafts, kayaks, and snorkeling equipment. On the calm Nichupté lagoon are outlets for

renting **sailboats, jet skis, sailboards,** and **water skis.** Prices vary and are often negotiable, so check around.

DEEP-SEA FISHING You can arrange a shared or private deep-sea fishing charter at one of the numerous piers or travel agencies. Prices fluctuate widely depending on the length of the excursion (there's usually a 4-hr. minimum), number of people, and quality of the boat. Marinas will sometimes assist in putting together a group. Charters include a captain, a first mate, bait, gear, and beverages. Rates are lower if you depart from Isla Mujeres or from Cozumel—and, frankly, the fishing is better closer to those departure points. **Lagoonview Marina & Fishing Club** (✆ **998/845-0749**), located at Bulevar Kukulkán Km 13.5, rents 9.6m (32-ft.) Welcraft boats (maximum six people) for $450 for 4 hours, $675 for 6 hours, and $795 for 8 hours.

SCUBA & SNORKELING Known for its shallow reefs, dazzling color, and diversity of life, Cancún is one of the best places in the world for beginning scuba diving. Punta Nizuc is the northern tip of the **Gran Arrecife Maya (Great Mesoamerican Reef),** the largest reef in the Western Hemisphere and one of the largest in the world. In addition to the sea life along this reef system, several sunken boats add a variety of dive options. Inland, a series of caverns and cenotes (wellsprings) are fascinating venues for the more experienced diver. Drift diving is the norm here, with popular dives going to the reefs at **El Garrafón** and the **Cave of the Sleeping Sharks**—although be aware that the famed "sleeping sharks" have departed, driven off by too many people watching them snooze.

A variety of hotels offer resort courses that teach the basics of diving—enough to make shallow dives and slowly ease your way into this underwater world of unimaginable beauty. One preferred dive operator is **Scuba Cancún,** Bulevar Kukulkán Km 5 (✆ **998/849-4736;** www.scubacancun.com.mx), on the lagoon side. Full open-water PADI certification takes 3 days and costs $410. A half-day resort course for beginners with theory, pool practice, and a one-tank dive at a reef costs $88. Scuba Cancún is open daily from 7am to 8pm. For certified divers, Scuba Cancún also offers PADI specialty courses and diving trips in good weather to 18 nearby reefs, as well as to cenotes (9m/30 ft.) and Cozumel. The average dive is around 11m (36 ft.), while advanced divers descend farther (up to 18m/59 ft.). Two-tank dives to reefs around Cancún cost $68, and one-tank dives cost $54; those to farther destinations cost $140. Discounts apply if you bring your own gear. Dives usually start around 9:30am and return by 1:30pm. Snorkeling trips cost $29 and leave daily at 1:30pm and 4pm for shallow reefs about a 20-minute boat ride away.

The largest dive operator is **Aquaworld,** across from the Meliá Cancún at Bulevar Kukulkán Km 15.2 (✆ **998/848-8300;** www.aquaworld.com.mx). It offers resort courses and diving at a reef barrier, as well as snorkeling, parasailing, jet-ski "jungle tours," fishing, day trips to Isla Mujeres and Cozumel, and other watersports activities. Single-tank dives cost $65, two-tank dives $75. Aquaworld has the **Sub See Explorer,** a boat with picture windows beneath the surface. The vessel doesn't submerge—it's an updated version of a glass-bottom boat—but it does provide nondivers with a worthwhile peek at life beneath the sea. It costs $40 per person.

Another interesting option is **BOB Submarines** (✆ **998/849-7284**), located at El Embarcadero next to Playa Linda, which rents propelled breathing observation bubbles (BOBs). These personal minisubs let you discover the Caribbean with a big air bubble over your head and operate much like a scooter would. The tours include instruction, soft drinks, and a 30-minute assisted dive. The cost is $80 per person and the minimum age is 12, with departures at 9am, 11:30am, and 2pm.

Besides snorkeling at **El Garrafón Natural Park** (see "Boating Excursions," below), travel agencies offer an all-day excursion to the natural wildlife habitat of **Isla Contoy,** which usually includes time for snorkeling. The island, 90 minutes past Isla Mujeres, is a major nesting area for birds and a treat for nature lovers. You can call any travel agent or see any hotel tour desk to get a selection of boat tours to Isla Contoy. Prices range from $50 to $80, depending on the length of the trip, and generally include drinks and snorkeling equipment.

The Great Mesoamerican Reef also offers exceptional snorkeling opportunities. In Puerto Morelos, 37km (23 miles; p. 543) south of Cancún, the reef hugs the coastline for 15km (9¼ miles). The reef is so close to the shore (about 460m/1,509 ft.) that it forms a natural barrier for the village and keeps the waters calm on the inside of the reef. The water here is shallow, from 1.5 to 9m (5–30 ft.), resulting in ideal conditions for snorkeling. Stringent environmental regulations implemented by the local community have kept the reef here unspoiled. Only a select few companies are allowed to offer snorkel trips, and they must adhere to guidelines that will ensure the reef's preservation. **Cancún Mermaid** (✆ **998/843-6517;** www.cancunmermaid.com), in Puerto Morelos, is considered the best—it's a family-run ecotour company that has operated in the area since the 1970s. It's known for highly personalized service. The tour typically takes snorkelers to two sections of the reef, spending about an hour in each area. When conditions allow, the boat drops off snorkelers and then follows them along with the current—an activity known as "drift snorkeling," which enables snorkelers to see as much of the reef as possible. The trip costs $50 for adults, $35 for children, and includes boat, snorkeling gear, life jackets, a light lunch, bottled water, sodas, and beer, plus round-trip transportation to and from Puerto Morelos from Cancún hotels. Departures are Monday through Saturday at 9am. For snorkelers who just can't get enough, a combo tour for $30 more adds a bicycle tour to additional snorkeling destinations. Reservations are required at least 1 day in advance; MasterCard and Visa are accepted.

JET-SKI/FAST BOAT TOURS Several companies offer the thrilling **Jungle Cruise,** in which you drive your own small speedboat (called a *lancha*) or WaveRunner rapidly through Cancún's lagoon and mangrove estuaries out into the Caribbean Sea and a shallow reef. The excursion lasts about 2½ hours and costs $60 to $70, including snorkeling equipment. Many people prefer two-person boats rather than WaveRunners, since they can sit side by side rather than one behind the other.

Jungle cruise operators and names offering excursions change often. To find out what's available, check with a local travel agent or hotel tour desk. The popular **Aquaworld,** Bulevar Kukulkán Km 15.2 (✆ **998/848-8300**), calls its trip the Jungle Tour and charges $66 for the 2½-hour excursion, which includes 30 minutes of snorkeling time. It even gives you a free snorkel and has the WaveRunner-style one-behind-the-other seating configuration. Departures are daily at 9am, noon, and 2:30pm. If you'd prefer a side-by-side boat so that you and your partner can talk or at least look at each other, try **Blue Ray,** Bulevar Kukulkán Km 13.5, next to Mambo Café (✆ **998/885-1108**), which charges $55, with departures every hour between 9am and 3pm. Expect to get wet, and wear plenty of sunscreen. If you just want to rent a WaveRunner, Aquaworld offers them for $45 per half-hour.

BOATING EXCURSIONS

ISLA MUJERES The island of **Isla Mujeres,** just 13km (8 miles) offshore, is one of the most pleasant day trips from Cancún. At one end is **El Garrafón Natural Park,** which

is good for snorkeling. At the other end is a captivating village with small shops, restaurants, and hotels, and **Playa Norte,** the island's best beach. If you're looking for relaxation and can spare the time, it's worth several days. For complete information about the island, see chapter 15.

There are four ways to get there: **public ferry** from Puerto Juárez, which takes between 15 and 20 minutes; **shuttle boat** from Playa Linda or Playa Tortuga, an hour-long ride, with irregular service; **water taxi** (more expensive, but faster), next to the Xcaret Terminal; and daylong **pleasure-boat cruises,** most of which leave from the Playa Linda pier.

The inexpensive but fast Puerto Juárez **public ferries** ★ lie just a few kilometers from downtown Cancún. From Cancún City, take the Ruta 8 bus on Avenida Tulum to Puerto Juárez. The air-conditioned ***Ultramar*** (✆ **998/843-2011;** www.granpuerto.com.mx) boats cost 70 pesos per person each way and take 15 to 20 minutes. Departures are every half-hour from 5am to 8:30pm and then at 9:30pm, 10:30pm, and 11:30pm. Upon arrival, the ferry docks in downtown Isla Mujeres near all the shops, restaurants, hotels, and Norte beach. You'll need a taxi to get to El Garrafón park at the other end of the island. You can stay as long as you like on the island and return by ferry, but be sure to confirm the time of the last returning ferry.

Pleasure-boat cruises to Isla Mujeres are a favorite pastime. Modern motor yachts, sailboats (including the "Sea Passion" catamaran), and even old-time sloops—more than 25 boats a day—take swimmers, sun lovers, snorkelers, and shoppers out on the translucent waters. Some tours include a snorkeling stop at El Garrafón, lunch on the beach, and a short time for shopping in downtown Isla Mujeres. Most leave at 9:30 or 10am, last about 5 or 6 hours, and include continental breakfast, lunch, and rental of snorkel gear. Others, particularly sunset and night cruises, go to beaches away from town for pseudo-pirate shows and include a lobster dinner or Mexican buffet (p. 498). If you want to actually see Isla Mujeres, go on a morning cruise, or travel on your own using the public ferry from Puerto Juárez. Prices for the day cruises run around $80 per person. Reservations aren't necessary.

An all-inclusive entrance fee of $69, $50 for children to **Garrafón Natural Reef Park** ★★ (✆ **998/849-4748;** www.garrafon.com), includes transportation from Playa Langosta in Cancún; meals; open bar with domestic drinks; access to the reef; and use of snorkel gear, kayaks, inner tubes, life vests, the pool, hammocks, and public facilities and showers (but not towels, so bring your own). There are also nature trails and several on-site restaurants.

Other excursions go to the **reefs** in glass-bottom boats, so you can have a near-scuba-diving experience and see many colorful fish. However, the reefs are some distance from the shore and are impossible to reach on windy days with choppy seas. They've also suffered from overvisitation, and their condition is far from pristine. Nautibus's **Atlantis**

Tips An All-Terrain Tour

Cancún Mermaid (✆ **998/843-6517;** www.cancunmermaid.com), about 30 minutes south of Cancún, offers all-terrain-vehicle (ATV) jungle tours for $49 per person if riding double or $66 if riding single. The ATV tours travel through the jungles of Cancún and emerge on the beaches of the Riviera Maya. The 5-hour tour (including transportation time from your hotel to the destination) includes gear, instruction, the services of a tour guide, lunch, and bottled water; it departs Monday through Saturday at 8am and 1:30pm. Reservations are required.

Submarine (✆ **987/872-5671;** www.atlantisadventures.com) takes you close to the aquatic action. Departures vary, depending on weather conditions. Prices are $79 for adults, $45 for children ages 4 to 12. The submarine descends to a depth of 30m (98 ft.). Atlantis Submarine departs daily at 9am, 11am, and noon; the tour lasts about 40 minutes. The submarine departs from Cozumel, so you need to either take a ferry to get there or purchase a package that includes round-trip transportation from your hotel in Cancún ($103 adults, $76 children 4–12). Reservations are recommended.

5 OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES & ATTRACTIONS

DOLPHIN SWIMS On Isla Mujeres, you have the opportunity to swim with dolphins at **Dolphin Discovery** ★★ (✆ **998/877-0207** or 849-4757; www.dolphindiscovery.com). Groups of eight people swim with two dolphins and one trainer. Swimmers view an educational video and spend time in the water with the trainer and the dolphins before enjoying 15 minutes of free swimming time with them. Reservations are recommended (you can book online), and you must arrive an hour before your assigned swimming time, at 10:30am, noon, 2pm, or 3:30pm. The cost is $149 per person for the Dolphin Royal Swim. There are less expensive programs that allow you to learn about, touch, and hold the dolphins (but not swim with them) starting at $69. Ferry transfers from Playa Langosta in Cancún are available.

La Isla Shopping Center, Bulevar Kukulkán Km 12.5, has an impressive **Interactive Aquarium** (✆ **998/883-0411,** -0436, -0413; www.aquariumcancun.com.mx), with dolphin swims and shows and the chance to feed a shark while immersed in the water in an acrylic cage. Guides inside the main tank use underwater microphones to point out the sea life, and even answer your questions. Open exhibition tanks enable visitors to touch a variety of marine life, including sea stars and manta rays. The educational program and dolphin swim costs 1,120 pesos and the shark-feeding experience runs 790 pesos. The entrance fee to the aquarium is 140 pesos for adults, 90 pesos for children under 11, and it's open daily from 9am to 6pm.

GOLF & TENNIS The 18-hole **Cancún Golf Club at Pok-Ta-Pok** (✆ **998/883-0871;** www.cancungolfclub.com), located at Bulevar Kukulkán Km 7.5, is a Robert Trent Jones II design on the northern leg of the island. Greens fees run $145 for 18 holes, including breakfast or lunch and golf cart (discounted fees after 2pm), with clubs renting for $45. A caddy costs $20 plus tip. The club is open daily from 6:30am to 5pm and accepts American Express, MasterCard, and Visa.

The **Hilton Cancún Golf & Spa Resort** (✆ **998/881-8016;** www.hiltongolfclub.com/golf) has a championship 18-hole, par-72 course around the Ruinas Del Rey. Greens fees during high season for the public are typically $199 for 18 holes and $125 for 9 holes; Hilton Cancún guests pay discounted rates of $159 for 18 holes, or $79 for 9 holes, which includes a golf cart. Low-season and twilight discounts are available. Golf clubs and shoes are available for rent. The club is open daily from 6am to 6pm and accepts American Express, MasterCard, and Visa. The **Gran Meliá Cancún** (✆ **998/881-1100**) has a 9-hole executive course; the fee is $30. The club is open daily from 7am to 3pm and accepts American Express, MasterCard, and Visa.

The first Jack Nicklaus Signature Golf Course in the Cancún area has opened at the **Moon Palace Spa & Golf Club** (✆ **998/881-6000;** www.palaceresorts.com), along the Riviera Maya. The $260 greens fee includes cart, snacks, and drinks.

HORSEBACK RIDING **Cancún Mermaid** (✆ **998/843-6517;** www.cancunmermaid.com), about 30 minutes south of town at the Rancho Loma Bonita, is a popular option for horseback riding. Five-hour packages include 2 hours of riding through the mangrove swamp to the beach, where you have time to swim and relax. The tour costs $66 for adults and $60 for children 12 and under. Tours include transportation to the ranch, riding, soft drinks, and lunch, plus a guide and insurance. Only cash or traveler's checks are accepted.

6 SHOPPING

Aside from the surrounding natural splendor, Cancún is known throughout Mexico for its diverse shops and festive malls catering to international tourists. Visitors from the United States may find apparel more expensive in Cancún, but the selection is much broader than at other Mexican resorts. Numerous duty-free shops offer excellent value on European goods. The largest is **Ultrafemme,** Av. Tulum, SM 25 (✆ **998/884-1402**), specializing in imported cosmetics, perfumes, and fine jewelry and watches. The downtown Cancún location offers slightly lower prices than branches in Plaza Caracol, La Isla, and Kukulcán Plaza. It's open Monday to Saturday from 9:30am to 9pm and Sunday from 2 to 9pm.

Handicrafts are more limited and more expensive in Cancún than in other regions of Mexico because they are not produced here. They are available, though; the best **open-air crafts market** is Mercado 28 in Cancún City. A less enticing open-air market in the Hotel Zone is **Coral Negro,** Bulevar Kukulkán Km 9.5, next to Plaza Dady'O, open daily from 7am to 11pm. **Plaza La Fiesta,** next to the Cancún Center (✆ **998/883-4519**), is a large Mexican outlet store selling handicrafts, jewelry, tequila, leather, and accessories. It's open daily from 7am to midnight.

Cancún's main venues are the **malls**—not quite as grand as their U.S. counterparts, but close. All are air-conditioned, sleek, and sophisticated. Most are on Bulevar Kukulkán between Km 7 and Km 12. They offer everything from fine crystal and silver to designer clothing and decorative objects, along with numerous restaurants and clubs. Stores are generally open daily from 10am to 10pm.

The **Kukulcán Plaza** (✆ **998/885-2200;** www.kukulcanplaza.com) houses more than 300 shops, restaurants, and entertainment. It has a bank, a bowling alley, several crafts stores, a Play City with gambling machines, a liquor and tobacco store, several bathing-suit specialty stores, music stores, a drugstore, a leather-goods shop (including shoes and sandals), and a store specializing in silver from Taxco. U.S. franchise eateries include Häagen-Dazs and Ruth's Chris Steak House. The adjacent Luxury Avenue complex features designer labels such as Cartier, Coach, Fendi, Louis Vuitton, Salvatore Ferragamo, and Ultrafemme. The mall is open daily from 10am to 10pm, until 11pm during high season. Assistance for those with disabilities is available upon request, and wheelchairs, strollers, and lockers are available at the information desk.

The long-standing **Plaza Caracol** (✆ **998/883-1038;** www.caracolplaza.com) is one of Cancún's least glamorous malls but holds, among other things, Casa Rolandi (p. 500) restaurant and its Very Wine lounge. It's just before you reach the Convention Center as you come from downtown Cancún, and is open daily from 10am to 10pm.

Most people come to entertainment-oriented **Forum by the Sea,** Bulevar Kukulkán Km 9 (✆ **998/883-4425;** www.forumbythesea.com.mx), for the food and fun, choosing

 from Hard Rock Cafe, Carlos 'n' Charlie's, Rainforest Cafe, and CoCo Bongo, plus an extensive food court. Shops include Diesel, Harley-Davidson, Massimo Dutti, Señor Frog's, Sunglass Island, and Zingara Beachwear and Swimwear. The mall is open daily from 10am to midnight (bars remain open later).

One of Mexico's most appealing malls is the **La Isla Shopping Village,** Bulevar Kukulkán Km 12.5 (✆ **998/883-5025;** www.laislacancun.com.mx), a wonderful open-air complex that borders the lagoon. Walkways lined with quality shops and restaurants cross little canals (boat rides are even offered through the canals), and an attractive boardwalk lines the lagoon itself, as well as an interactive aquarium and dolphin swim facility (p. 508). Shops include Bulgari, Guess, Nautica, Nine West, Puma, Tommy Hilfiger, Ultrafemme, and Zara, as well as a large Mexican handicrafts store called Casa Mexicana. Among the dining choices are Johnny Rockets, Chili's, Italianni's, Planet Hollywood, the romantic Thai restaurant (p. 502), and the new Elefanta (p. 500). You will also find a movie theater, video arcade, and several bars, including La Madonna (p. 511).

7 CANCUN AFTER DARK

Cancún's party reputation is not confined to spring break—the action here continues year-round. While the revelry often begins by day at the beach, the sun-drenched crowd heads at happy hour to the rocking bars located along the Hotel Zone, which often serve two-for-one drinks at sunset. Hotels play in the happy hour scene, with special drink prices to entice visitors and guests from other resorts. Come night, the hottest centers of action are also along Kukulkán, and include **Plaza Dady'O, Forum by the Sea,** and **La Isla Shopping Village.** These entertainment plazas transform into true spring break madness for most of March and April.

THE CLUB & MUSIC SCENE

Clubbing in Cancún is a favorite part of the vacation experience and can go on each night until the sun rises over that incredibly blue sea. Several big hotels have nightclubs or schedule live music in their lobby bars. At the clubs, expect to stand in lines on weekends, pay a cover charge of about $40 with open bar, or $15 to $25 without open bar; and then pay $8 to $10 for a drink. Some of the higher-priced clubs include live entertainment. The places listed in this section are air-conditioned and accept American Express, MasterCard, and Visa.

Numerous restaurants, such as **Carlos 'n' Charlie's, Hard Rock Cafe,** and **Señor Frog's**, double as nighttime party spots, offering wildish fun at a fraction of the price of more costly clubs.

Grupo Dady offers a package deal enticing clubbers to party in all five of its neighboring bars, including Dady'O, Terresta, UltraClub, Dady Rock, and Dos Equis Bar. It costs $45 to $55 per person depending on the night and includes open bar; buy tickets at any of the Grupo Dady bars.

If you have been drinking when you're ready to go back to your accommodations, take public transportation or have someone with you rather than drive or get in a taxi alone.

Bling ★★ This is one of the coolest nightspots in Cancún, featuring a chic outdoor terrace overlooking the lagoon. A fashionable 30-something crowd congregates amid sofas under the stars, a killer sound system, and flowing cocktails. A sushi and sashimi

bar and some Mediterranean dishes are also offered. This upscale lounge is considerably more sophisticated than Cancún's typical frat-style bars, and it's open daily from 6pm to 2am. Bl. Kukulkán Km 13.5. ✆ **998/840-6014.** www.blingcancun.com.

The City ★★ One of Cancún's hottest and largest nightclubs, the City features nine bars over three floors with progressive electronic music spun by visiting DJs from New York, L.A., and Mexico City (the DJ station looks like an airport control tower). This is where celebrities come to party when they're in town. You actually need never leave, as the City is a day-and-night club. The Playa Cabana beach club opens at 10am and features beach cabañas, a pool, and food and bar service with frequent activities, pool parties, and bikini contests. The Terrace Bar, overlooking the action on Bulevar Kukulkán, serves food and drinks all day long. For a relaxing evening vibe, the Lounge features comfy couches, chill music, and an extensive menu of martinis, snacks, and desserts. Open from 10:30pm to 4am, the 743-sq.-m (8,000-sq.-ft.) nightclub features a 1-million-watt sound system, stunning light shows, and several VIP areas. Bl. Kukulkán Km 9.5. ✆ **998/848-8380.** www.thecitycancun.com. Cover $25; $45 with open bar.

CoCo Bongo ★★★ Continuing its reputation as the hottest party venue in town, CoCo Bongo combines an enormous dance club with extravagant theme shows. It has no formal dance floor, so you can dance anywhere—and that includes on the tables, on the bar, or even on the stage with the occasional live band. This place regularly packs in as many as 3,000 people—you have to experience it to believe it. Despite its capacity, lines are long on weekends and in high season. The music alternates between Caribbean, salsa, house, hip-hop, techno, and classics from the '70s, '80s, and '90s. Open from 10:30pm to 3:30am, CoCo Bongo draws a hip young crowd. Forum by the Sea, Bl. Kukulkán Km 9.5. ✆ **998/883-5061.** www.cocobongo.com.mx. Weekend cover $60 with open bar, $50 weekdays with open bar.

Dady'O This is a popular rave among the young and brave, with frequent long lines. Grupo Dady offers a package deal that includes open bar and entrance to all five of its neighboring bars (see above), and this is the granddaddy of them. It opens nightly at 10pm and has a giant dance floor and awesome light system. Bl. Kukulkán Km 9.5. ✆ **998/883-3333.** www.dadyo.com. Cover $20–$25.

Dady Rock Bar and Club The offspring of Dady'O, Dady Rock opens at 8pm and goes as long as any other nightspot, offering a combination of live rock bands and DJs spinning grooves, along with an open bar, full meals, a buffet, and dancing. Bl. Kukulkán Km 9.5. ✆ **998/883-1626.** www.dadyo.com. Cover $20–$25.

La Madonna With more than 150 creative martini selections accompanied by ambient music, La Madonna also offers authentic Swiss-Italian cuisine, including fondues, as well as delicious desserts (p. 501). Enjoy your red mandarin, lychee, or green apple martini or glass of wine elbow to elbow with Cancún's beautiful people on the outdoor patio. Bossa nova and lounge music are the norm. It's open daily from noon to 1am. La Isla Shopping Village, Bl. Kukulkán Km 12.5. ✆ **998/883-2222**. www.lamadonna.com.

The Lobby Lounge ★ This is the most refined of Cancún's nightly gathering spots, with a terrace overlooking the lagoon, a special martini collection, and a list of more than 80 premium tequilas for tasting or sipping. There's also a sushi and seafood bar, as well as a humidor collection of Cuban cigars. It's open daily from 5pm to midnight, with live music Wednesday through Saturday. Ritz-Carlton Cancún (p. 494), Retorno del Rey 36, off Bl. Kukulkán Km 13.5. ✆ **998/881-0808.**

Very Wine ★ This elegant wine bar sits on the upper level of Casa Rolandi (p. 500), a relaxed place to come for a predinner drink or a nightcap. The gourmet bar has a fine wine and liquor selection, and also offers tapas, fondues, and desserts, as well as cigars. This is a refined alternative to Cancún's more raucous bars and clubs. It's open from 1pm until the last customer leaves. Plaza Caracol, Bl. Kukulkán Km 8.5. ✆ **998/883-1817.**

THE PERFORMING ARTS

Several hotels host **Mexican fiesta nights,** including a buffet dinner and a folkloric dance show; admission with dinner and open bar costs about $50, unless you're at an all-inclusive resort that includes this as part of the package. Check out the show at **Hacienda Sisal** (✆ **998/848-8220**), located at Bulevar Kukulkán Km 13.5, which is offered Tuesday and Thursday nights at 8pm.

15 Isla Mujeres & Cozumel

by Shane Christensen

These two Caribbean islands are among the most laid-back beach destinations in Mexico, both easy jaunts from Cancún and the Riviera Maya. During the winter high season, both receive a lot of day-trippers and cruise-ship visitors, but if you stay on to the evening, the relaxed pace of island life is yours to enjoy. Neither Isla Mujeres nor Cozumel is particularly large, and they still have that island feel—with small roads that don't go very far, lots of mopeds, few (if any) trucks, and a sense of remoteness from the rest of the world. Both offer a range of lodging options, ample outdoor activities, and a relaxed atmosphere that contrasts with much of the mainland experience.

Fish-shaped **Isla Mujeres** is 13km (8 miles) northeast of Cancún, a quick boat ride away. Hotels range from rustic to regal. Passenger ferries travel to Isla Mujeres from Puerto Juárez, and car ferries leave from Punta Sam, both near Cancún. More expensive passenger ferries, with fewer departures, leave from the Playa Linda pier on Cancún Island.

Larger than Isla Mujeres and farther from the mainland (19km/12 miles off the coast from Playa del Carmen), **Cozumel** has its own international airport. Life here revolves around two major activities: scuba diving and cruise ships making a port of call. Cozumel remains far and away the most popular destination along this coast for both activities, although tourism here declined dramatically in the wake of the global recession and H1N1.

The result is that Cozumel feels as relaxed as ever. There's just one town, San Miguel de Cozumel; to the north and south lie resorts. The rest of the shore is deserted and predominantly rocky, with a scattering of small, sandy coves that you can have all to yourself. Unfortunately, there's no way to travel directly between Cozumel and Isla Mujeres, but you can get from one to the other by traveling via Cancún and Playa del Carmen.

1 ISLA MUJERES ★★★

13km (8 miles) N of Cancún

Isla Mujeres (Island of Women) is a casual, easygoing refuge from the heady tempo of Cancún. It lies not far off the coast and is visible from the resort. As Caribbean islands go, Isla is a bargain and a good fit for anyone who prefers simplicity and ease over variety and action. The island's only town is right next to North Beach, the best beach on the island. With beach towel in hand, you can leisurely stroll to the beach from any hotel in town; there's no need for transportation unless you want to tour the whole island, in which case a golf cart will do. Isla Mujeres is small, the town is small, the hotels (with a couple of exceptions) are small, the restaurants, the bars, the excursion boats—small, small, small. Choose from several inexpensive hotels, mostly in town, and a smattering of luxury boutique hotels spread out to other parts of the island.

The scale of the island heightens the contrast between high season and low season, making the crowds and bustle much more noticeable at peak travel times. At midday, suntanned visitors from the Cancún tour boats hang out in open-air cafes and stroll the pedestrian streets lined with zealous souvenir vendors calling attention to their wares. The scene takes on a carnivalesque hue during the hours when the tour-boat traffic is at its peak. Then, later in the afternoon, things settle down.

Trips to the Isla Contoy bird sanctuary are popular, as are the diving, snorkeling, and fishing jaunts. In 1998, the island's coral coast became part of Mexico's Marine National Park system. The reef suffered substantial hurricane damage in 2005, but continues to rebound. The water clarity illuminates the wonderful array of coral and tropical fish living here. The underwater life you are likely to see includes French angelfish, longspine squirrelfish, trumpet fish, four-eye butterfly fish, green angelfish, stoplight parrotfish, southern stingrays, sharp-nose puffer fish, blue tang, and great barracuda.

The island and several of its hotels attract regular gatherings of yoga practitioners. In the evening, most people find the slow, casual pace one of the island's biggest draws. The cool night breeze offers a perfect accompaniment to casual open-air dining and drinking in small street-side restaurants. This is just how island living is meant to be.

ESSENTIALS

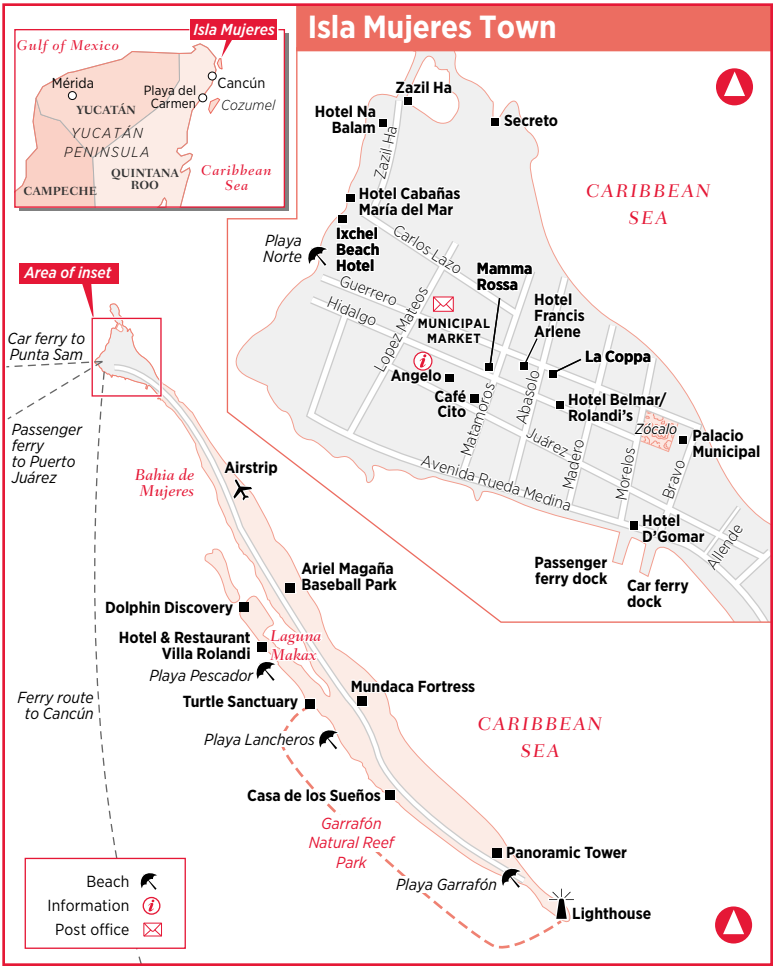
GETTING THERE & DEPARTING

Puerto Juárez, just north of Cancún, is the dock (✆ **998/877-0382**) for passenger ferries to Isla Mujeres. ***Ultramar*** (✆ **998/843-2011;** www.granpuerto.com.mx) has fast boats leaving every half-hour from "Gran Puerto" in Puerto Juárez, making the trip in 15 minutes. There is storage space for luggage and the fare is 70 pesos each way. These boats operate daily, starting at 6am and usually ending at 10:30pm (check beforehand for latest schedules). They might leave early if they're full, so arrive ahead of schedule. Pay at the ticket office or on board if the ferry is about to leave.

Note: Upon arrival by taxi or bus in Puerto Juárez, be wary of pirate "guides" who tell you either that the ferry is canceled or that it's several hours until the next ferry. They'll offer the services of a private *lancha* (small boat) for about 450 pesos—and it's nothing but a scam. Small boats are available and, on a co-op basis, charge 200 to 350 pesos one-way, based on the number of passengers. They take about 50 minutes and are not recommended on days with rough seas. Check with the ticket office—the only accurate source for information.

On your return to Puerto Juárez, you'll see taxi fares posted by the street where the taxis park, so be sure to check the rate before agreeing to a taxi for the ride back to Cancún. Rates generally run 120 to 150 pesos, depending upon your destination. Moped and bicycle rentals are also readily available as you depart the ferry. This small complex also has public bathrooms, luggage storage, a snack bar, and souvenir shops.

Isla Mujeres is so small that a vehicle isn't necessary, but if you're taking one to the island, you'll use the **Punta Sam** port a little beyond Puerto Juárez. The 40-minute car ferry (✆ **998/877-0065**) runs five or six times daily between 8am and 8pm, year-round except in bad weather. Times are generally as follows: Cancún to Isla 8 and 11am and 2:45, 5:30, and 8:15pm; Isla to Cancún 6:30 and 9:30am and 12:45, 4:15, and 7:15pm. Always check with the tourist office in Cancún to verify this schedule. Cars should arrive an hour before the ferry departure to register for a place in line and pay the posted fee, which varies depending on the weight and type of vehicle. A gas pump is at Avenida Rueda Medina and Calle Abasolo, northwest of the ferry docks.



Ferries to Isla Mujeres also depart from **Playa Linda,** known as the Embarcadero pier in Cancún, but they're less frequent and more expensive than those from Puerto Juárez. There are four to six scheduled departures per day to Isla Mujeres, depending upon the season. Adult fares are 150 pesos round-trip; kids ages 3 to 12 pay 75 pesos; children 2 and younger ride free. A **Water Taxi** (✆ **998/886-4270**) to Isla Mujeres operates from the Embarcadero (just off Bl. Kukulkán Km 4 on the northern tip of the Hotel Zone/Isla Cancún).

To get to Puerto Juárez or Punta Sam from **Cancún,** take any Ruta 8 city bus from Avenida Tulum. From the Cancún airport, take the shuttle bus to the pier (160 pesos).

Tips The Best Websites for Isla Mujeres & Cozumel

- **Isla Mujeres Tourist Information: www.isla-mujeres.net** The official site of the Isla Mujeres Tourism Board provides complete information on Isla, from getting there to where to stay.
- **My Isla Mujeres: www.myislamujeres.com** Get a local's view of the island; the active message boards are especially good.
- **Cozumel.net: www.cozumel.net** This site is a cut above the typical dining/lodging/activities sites. Click on "About Cozumel" to find schedules for ferries and island-hop flights, and to check the latest news. There's also a comprehensive listing of B&Bs and vacation-home rentals.
- **Cozumel Travel Planner: www.go2cozumel.com** This is a well-done guide to area businesses and attractions, by an online Mexico specialist.
- **Cozumel Hotel Association: www.islacozumel.com.mx** Operated by the tourism-promotion arm of the hotel association, this site gives more than just listings of the member hotels. There's info on packages and specials, plus brief descriptions of most of the island's attractions, restaurants, and recreational activities.

VISITOR INFORMATION The **City Tourist Office** (✆/fax **998/877-0767** or 877-0307) is at Av. Rueda Medina 130, just across the street from the pier. It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 4pm, closed on Saturday and Sunday. *Islander* is a free publication with local information, advertisements, and event listings.

ISLAND LAYOUT Isla Mujeres is about 8km (5 miles) long and 4km (2½ miles) wide, with the town at the northern tip. "Downtown" is a compact 4 blocks by 6 blocks, so it's very easy to get around. The **passenger ferry docks** are at the center of town, within walking distance of most hotels, restaurants, and shops. The street running along the waterfront and in front of the ferry docks is **Avenida Rueda Medina,** commonly called the ***malecón*** **(boardwalk).** The **Mercado Municipal (town market)** is by the post office on **Calle Guerrero,** an inland street at the north edge of town, which, like most streets in the town, is unmarked.

GETTING AROUND A popular form of transportation on Isla Mujeres is the electric **golf cart,** available for rent at many hotels or rental shops for 180 pesos per hour or 600 pesos for 24 hours. Prices are set the same at all rental locations. **El Sol Golf Cart Rental,** Av. Benito Juárez Mza 3 no. 20 (corner of Matamoros; ✆ **998/877-0791**), is one good option in the town center. The golf carts don't go more than 30kmph (19 mph), but they're fun. Anyway, you aren't on Isla Mujeres to hurry. Many people enjoy touring the island by ***moto*** **(motorized bike or scooter).** Fully automatic versions are available for around 450 pesos per day or 100 pesos per hour. They come with helmets and seats for two people. There's only one main road with a couple of offshoots, so you won't get lost. Be aware that the rental price does not include insurance, and any injury to yourself or the vehicle will come out of your pocket. **Bicycles** are also available for rent at some hotels for about 35 pesos an hour or 120 pesos per day, usually including a basket and a lock.

Tricycle taxis are the least expensive and easiest way to get to your hotel if it's in town. From the ferry pier to any of the downtown hotels will cost about 20 to 30 pesos. If you ask the guys, they'll say "Oh, whatever you care to give." I will let them haul my bags and lead the way while I walk.

If you prefer to use a taxi, rates are about 25 pesos for trips within the downtown area, or 50 pesos for a trip to the southern end of Isla. You can also hire them for about 100 pesos per hour. Regular taxis are always lined up in a parking lot to the right of the pier, with their rates posted. The number to call for taxis is ✆ **998/877-0066.**

Fast Facts Isla Mujeres

Area Code The telephone area code is **998.**

ATMs & Banks Isla has only one bank, **HSBC Bank** (✆ **998/877-0005**), across from the ferry docks. It's open Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 6pm, and Saturday from 9am to 2pm. It has ATMs.

Consumer Protection You can reach the local branch of **Profeco** consumer protection agency at ✆ **998/887-3960.**

Currency Exchange Isla Mujeres has numerous *casas de cambio,* or currency exchanges, along the main streets. Most of the hotels listed here change money for their guests, although often at less favorable rates than the commercial enterprises.

Drugstore **Isla Mujeres Farmacía** (✆ **998/877-0178**) has the best selection of prescription and over-the-counter medicines. It's open daily from 9am to 10pm.

Hospital The **Hospital de la Armada** is on Avenida Rueda Medina at Ojón P. Blanco (✆ **998/877-0001**). It's less than a kilometer (a half-mile) south of the town center. It will treat you only in an emergency. Otherwise, you're referred to the **Centro de Salud,** on Avenida Guerrero, a block before the beginning of the *malecón* (✆ **998/877-0117**).

Internet Access **L'Argentina,** at Hidalgo and Matamoros, offers Wi-Fi and computers for 20 pesos per hour. It's open daily from 11am to 2am and serves coffee and grilled foods, too.

Post Office The *correo* is at Calle Guerrero 12 (✆ **998/877-0085**), at the corner of López Mateos, near the market. It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 4pm.

Seasons Isla Mujeres's tourist season (when hotel rates are higher) is a bit different from that of other places in Mexico. High season runs December through May, a month longer than in Cancún. Some hotels raise their rates in August, and some raise their rates beginning in mid-November. Low season is from June to mid-November.

BEACHES & OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

BEACHES & SWIMMING The most popular beach in town, and the best for swimming, is **Playa Norte** ★. It's a long stretch of beach extending around the northern tip of the island. This is perhaps the world's best municipal beach—a wide swath of fine

white sand and calm, translucent, turquoise-blue water. The beach is easily reached on foot from the ferry and from all downtown hotels. Watersports equipment, beach umbrellas, and lounge chairs are available for rent. Areas in front of restaurants usually cost nothing if you use the restaurant as your headquarters for drinks and food, and the best of them have hammocks and swings from which to sip your piña coladas.

Garrafón National Park ★★ (p. 519) is best known as a snorkeling area, but there is a nice stretch of beach on either side of the park. **Playa Lancheros** is on the Caribbean side of Laguna Makax and is probably the second best for swimming. Local buses go to Lancheros and then turn inland and return downtown. The beach at Playa Lancheros is nice, with a variety of casual restaurants.

There are no lifeguards on duty on Isla Mujeres, which does not use the system of water-safety flags employed in Cancún and Cozumel. The bay between Cancún and Isla Mujeres is calm, with warm, transparent waters ideal for swimming, snorkeling, and diving. The east side of the island facing the open Caribbean Sea is typically rougher, with much stronger currents.

FISHING To arrange a day of fishing, ask at the **Sociedad Cooperativa Turística** (the boatmen's cooperative), on Avenida Rueda Medina (✆ **998/877-1363**), next to Mexico Divers and Las Brisas restaurant. Four to six others can share the cost, which includes lunch and drinks. Capt. Tony Martínez (✆ **998/877-0274**) also arranges fishing trips aboard the ***Marinonis,*** with advanced reservations recommended. Year-round you'll find bonito, mackerel, kingfish, and amberjack. Sailfish and sharks (hammerhead, bull, nurse, lemon, and tiger) are in good supply in April and May. In winter, larger grouper and jewfish are prevalent. Four hours of fishing close to shore costs around $125; 8 hours farther out goes for $250. The cooperative is open Monday to Saturday, 8am to 1pm and 5 to 8pm, and Sunday from 7:30 to 10am and 6 to 8pm.

SCUBA DIVING Most of the dive shops on the island offer the same trips for similar prices, including reef, drift, deep, and night dives: one-tank dives cost about $55 to $75; two-tank dives about $65 to $85. **Bahía Dive Shop,** Rueda Medina 166, across from the car-ferry dock (✆ **998/877-0340**), is a full-service shop that offers dive equipment for sale or rent. Another respected dive shop is **Carey Dive Center,** at Matamoros 13A and Rueda Medina (✆ **998/877-0763**). Both offer 2-hour snorkeling trips for about $25.

Cuevas de los Tiburones (Caves of the Sleeping Sharks) is Isla's most renowned dive site—but the name is slightly misleading, as shark sightings are rare these days. Two sites where you could traditionally see the sleeping shark are the Cuevas de Tiburones and **La Punta,** but the sharks have mostly been driven off, and a storm collapsed the arch featured in a Jacques Cousteau film showing them, but the caves survive. Other dive sites include a **wreck** 15km (9¼ miles) offshore; **Banderas** reef, between Isla Mujeres and Cancún, where there's always a strong current; **Tabos** reef on the eastern shore; and **Manchones** reef, 1km (a half-mile) off the southeastern tip of the island, where the water is 4.5 to 11m (15–36 ft.) deep. The **Cross of the Bay** is close to Manchones reef. A bronze cross, weighing 1 ton and standing 12m (39 ft.) high, was placed in the water between Manchones and Isla in 1994, as a memorial to those who have lost their lives at sea.

SNORKELING One of the most popular places to snorkel is **Garrafón National Park** ★★ (p. 519). **Manchones Reef,** off the southeastern coast, is also good. It's just offshore and accessible by boat. You can snorkel around *el faro* (the lighthouse) in the **Bahía de Mujeres** at the southern tip of the island. The water is about 2m (6½ ft.) deep. Boatmen will take you for around 250 pesos per person if you have your own snorkeling equipment or 300 pesos if you use theirs.

YOGA Isla is becoming increasingly popular among yoga enthusiasts. The trend began at **Hotel Na Balam** ★★ (p. 521; ✆ **998/877-0279** or 877-0058; www.nabalam.com), which offers yoga classes on weekdays under its large poolside *palapa,* complete with yoga mats and props. The hotel also offers yoga vacations featuring respected teachers and a more extensive practice schedule; the current schedule of retreats is on their website. Another yoga center that is drawing together a community is **Elements of the Island** (www.elementsoftheisland.com). It's located at Juárez 64, between López Mateos and Matamoros.

ATTRACTIONS

DOLPHIN DISCOVERY ★★ You can swim with dolphins (✆ **998/849-4748** or 849-4757; fax 998/849-4751; www.dolphindiscovery.com) in an enclosure at Treasure Island, on the side of Isla Mujeres that faces Cancún. Groups of eight people swim with two dolphins and one trainer. Swimmers view an educational video and spend time in the water with the trainer and the dolphins before enjoying 15 minutes of free swimming time with them. Reservations are necessary, and you must arrive an hour before your assigned swimming time, at 10:30am, 12:15pm, 2:15pm, or 3:30pm. The cost is $149 per person for the Dolphin Royal Swim. There are less expensive programs that allow you to learn about, touch, and hold the dolphins (but not swim with them), starting at $79 ($69 for kids).

TURTLE SANCTUARY ★★ Years ago, fishermen converged on the island nightly from May to September to capture turtles when they would come ashore to lay eggs. Then a concerned fisherman, Gonzalo Chale Maldonado, began convincing others to spare the eggs, which he protected. It was a start. Following his lead, the fishing ministry founded the **Centro de Investigaciones Pesqueras** to find ways to protect the species and increase the turtle populations. Although the local government provides some assistance, most of the funding comes from private-sector donations. Since the center opened, tens of thousands of young turtles have been released, and local schoolchildren have participated, helping to educate a new generation of islanders for the cause. Releases are scheduled from May to October, and visitors are invited to take part. Inquire at the center.

Three species of sea turtles nest on Isla Mujeres. An adult green turtle, the most abundant species, is 1 to 1.5m (3¼–5 ft.) long and can weigh 204 kilograms (450 lb.). At the center, visitors walk through the indoor and outdoor turtle pool areas, where the creatures paddle around. Turtles are separated by age, from newly hatched up to 1 year. People who come here usually end up staying at least an hour, especially if they opt for the guided tour, which I recommend. They also have a small gift shop and snack bar. The sanctuary is on a spit of land jutting out from the island's west coast. The address is Carretera Sac Bajo #5; you'll need a taxi to get there. Admission is 30 pesos; the shelter is open daily from 9am to 5pm. For more information, call ✆ **998/877-0595.**

GARRAFÓN NATIONAL PARK & PUNTA SUR ★★ El Garrafón (✆ **998/849-4748;** www.garrafon.com) is at the southern end of the island. The pricey but well-equipped park has two restaurant/bars, beach chairs, a swimming pool, kayaks, changing rooms, rental lockers, showers, a gift shop, and snack bars. Once a public national underwater park, Garrafón is now operated by Dolphin Discovery. Activities include snorkeling, kayaking, and swimming (for an extra fee, there are swim-with-dolphins packages, too). On land are tanning decks, shaded hammocks, a 12m (39-ft.) climbing tower, and—of course—a souvenir superstore. Admission is $68 ($50 for children 11 and under); the all-inclusive package includes round-trip transportation between Cancún and

 Isla Mujeres, continental breakfast, domestic open bar, buffet lunch, and use of snorkeling equipment and kayaks. The park is open daily in high season from 9am to 5pm. In low season, it may close a couple days per week.

Next to the panoramic tower, you'll find **Sculptured Spaces,** an impressive and extensive garden of large sculptures donated to Isla Mujeres by internationally renowned sculptors as part of the 2001 First International Sculpture Exhibition. Among Mexican sculptors represented by works are José Luis Cuevas and Vladimir Cora.

Nearby is the **Caribbean Village,** with narrow lanes of colorful clapboard buildings that house cafes and shops displaying folk art. You can have lunch or a snack here at the kiosk and stroll around before heading on to the lighthouse and Maya ruins.

Also at this southern point of the island, and part of the ruins, is **Cliff of the Dawn,** the southeasternmost point of Mexico. Services are available from 9am to 5pm, but you can enter at any time; if you make it there early enough to see the sunrise, you can claim you were the first person in Mexico that day to be touched by the sun!

ISLA CONTOY ★ Try to visit this pristine uninhabited island, 30km (19 miles) by boat from Isla Mujeres. It became a national wildlife reserve in 1981. The 6km-long (3¾-mile) island is covered in lush vegetation and harbors 70 species of birds, as well as a host of marine and animal life. Bird species that nest on the island include pelicans, brown boobies, frigates, egrets, terns, and cormorants. Flocks of flamingos arrive in April. Most excursions troll for fish (which will be your lunch), anchor en route for a snorkeling expedition, skirt the island at a leisurely pace for close viewing of the birds without disturbing the habitat, and then pull ashore. While the captain prepares lunch, visitors can swim, sun, follow the nature trails, and visit the fine nature museum, which has bathroom facilities. The trip from Isla Mujeres takes about 45 minutes each way and can be longer if the waves are choppy. Because of the tight-knit boatmen's cooperative, prices for this excursion are the same everywhere: $55 for adults; half price for children 8 and under (cash only). You can buy a ticket at the **Sociedad Cooperativa** (✆ **998/877-1363**), on Avenida Rueda Medina, next to Mexico Divers and Las Brisas restaurant. Trips leave at 9am and return around 4pm. Boat captains should respect the cooperative's regulations regarding ecological sensitivity and boat safety, including the availability of life jackets for everyone on board. If you're not given a life jacket, ask for one. Snorkeling equipment is usually included in the price, but double-check before heading out.

A MAYA RUIN ★★ Just beyond the lighthouse, at the southern end of the island, are the remains of a small Maya temple. Archaeologists believe it was dedicated to the moon and fertility goddess Ixchel. The location, on a lofty bluff overlooking the sea, is worth seeing and makes a great place for photos. It is believed that Maya women traveled here on annual pilgrimages to seek Ixchel's blessings of fertility.

A PIRATE'S FORTRESS Almost in the middle of the island is a large building purported to have been a pirate fortress. A slave trader who arrived here in the early 19th century claimed to have been the pirate Mundaca Marecheaga. He set up a business selling slaves to Cuba and Belize, and prospered here. According to island lore, a charming local girl captivated him, only to spurn him in favor of a local.

SHOPPING

Shopping is a casual activity here. Several shops, especially concentrated on Avenida Hidalgo, sell Saltillo rugs, onyx, silver, Guatemalan clothing, blown glassware, masks, folk art, crafts, beach paraphernalia, and T-shirts in abundance. Prices are lower than in Cancún or Cozumel.

WHERE TO STAY

You'll find plenty of hotels in all price ranges on Isla Mujeres. The rates listed below include the 12% room tax. They do not necessarily apply to the brief Christmas/New Year's season, when many hotels charge extra. High season runs from December through May and sometimes includes August. Low season is the rest of the year.

Those interested in private home rentals or longer-term stays can contact **Mundaca Travel and Real Estate** on Isla Mujeres (✆ **866/646-0536** in the U.S., or 998/877-0025; www.mundaca.com.mx), or book online with **Isla Beckons** property rental service (www.islabeckons.com). Another helpful website for booking accommodations is www.travelyucatan.com.

Very Expensive

Hotel Villa Rolandi Gourmet & Beach Club ★★★ Moments Villa Rolandi is a romantic escape on a little sheltered cove with a pristine white-sand beach. Each of the luxurious suites holds a separate sitting area and large terrace or balcony with private whirlpool overlooking the sea. All rooms feature in-room sound systems, subtle lighting, and marble surfaces. The bathrooms have Bulgari products and enticing showers with multiple showerheads that convert into steam baths. In-room breakfast is delivered through a small portal. The hotel spa also offers an outdoor Thalasso therapy whirlpool and beachside massages. The owner is a Swiss-born restaurateur who made a name for himself with his restaurants on Isla Mujeres and in Cancún. You can eat well without having to go off property, which is reached directly by boat (provided by the resort) or via a 20-minute drive from the town.

Fracc. Lagunamar, SM 7, Mza. 75, Locs. 15 and 16, 77400 Isla Mujeres, Q. Roo. ✆ **998/999-2000.** Fax 998/877-0100. www.villarolandi.com. 35 units. High season $357 and up double, $438 and up junior suite; low season $254–$323 double, $288–$357 junior suite. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant (see "Where to Dine," below); airport transfer via van (for a fee) and catamaran (included); concierge; small fitness room; saltwater Jacuzzi; infinity pool w/waterfall; spa; room service. *In room:* TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Expensive

Hotel Na Balam ★★★ Finds This ecologically friendly hotel on Playa Norte promises a piece of Maya heaven on the beach, and I'd say that's just about right. Bleached white rooms lie in three sections separated only by sand, palms, and flowers; some face the beach and others lie in a garden setting with a swimming pool. They're individually decorated with a king-size or two double beds, seating area, folk-art decorations, and terrace or balcony with hammocks. Master suites feature additional amenities, including small pools with hydromassage. The older section is well kept and surrounds a lush inner courtyard and Playa Norte. Yoga practitioners take advantage of the numerous classes offered throughout the week; check with the reception for schedules. The beautiful turquoise cove in front of the hotel makes for perfect swimming and snorkeling. At night, tiki torches illuminate the enchanted grounds. Na Balam's restaurant, **Zazil Ha,** remains one of the island's most popular (see "Where to Dine," below), and the beachside bar is a beautiful spot for sunsets.

Zazil Ha 118, 77400 Isla Mujeres, Q. Roo. ✆ **998/877-0279.** Fax 998/877-0446. www.nabalam.com. 33 units. $127 standard, $142 beach view, $234 and up suite. Ask about weekly and monthly rates. Children 11 and under stay free. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; diving and snorkeling trips available; spa; Wi-Fi; yoga. *In room:* A/C, hair dryer, minibar, no phone.

Secreto ★★ This boutique hotel oozes a chic Mediterranean feel. Twelve suites overlook an infinity pool, Jacuzzi, and the open sea. Located on the northern end of the island, Secreto lies within walking distance of town, yet feels removed enough to make for an idyllic retreat. Tropical gardens surround the exquisite pool, and an outdoor living area offers large couches and small dining areas. Guest rooms are contemporary, featuring lots of space, simple and bold design lines, individual balconies, and rich amenities. Nine suites include king-size beds, while the remaining three have two double beds. Secreto is distinguished by its style and service. A spa and fitness center were under construction at press time.

Sección Rocas, Lote 1, 77400 Isla Mujeres, Q. Roo. ✆ **998/877-1039.** Fax 998/877-1048. www.hotelsecreto.com. 12 units. $252–$336 double. Extra person $25. 1 child 4 and younger stays free in parent's room. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Bar; outdoor pool; sun deck; dinner room service from Rolandi's restaurant; diving and watersports equipment/rentals (diving and snorkeling). *In room:* A/C, TV/DVD, iHome, fridge, hair dryer, minibar.

Moderate

Hotel Cabañas María del Mar ★ A good choice for simple beach accommodations, the Cabañas María del Mar sits on the popular Playa Norte. The older two-story section behind the reception area and beyond the garden offers nicely outfitted rooms facing the beach. All have two single or double beds, refrigerators, and oceanview balconies. Twenty-two single-story cabañas closer to the reception area are decorated in a rustic Mexican style. The third section, **El Castillo,** lies across the street, over and beside Buho's restaurant. All rooms are "deluxe," though some are larger than others. The five rooms on the ground floor have large patios and king-size beds. Upstairs rooms offer small balconies, and most have ocean views. The central courtyard contains a small pool.

Av. Arq. Carlos Lazo 1 (on Playa Norte, a half-block from the Hotel Na Balam), 77400 Isla Mujeres, Q. Roo. ✆ **998/877-0179.** Fax 998/877-0213. www.cabanasdelmar.com. 73 units. High season $130–$150 double; low season $66–$90 double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge.

Ixchel Beach Hotel Kids This moderately priced "condohotel" enjoys a privileged location on Playa Norte. Most of the stylish rooms have balconies with ocean and pool views, as well as small kitchens. Especially popular with families, Ixchel sits right on an idyllic stretch of beach with lounge chairs and umbrellas and nearby access to watersports. The swimming pool and bar sit adjacent to the beach, and the hotel is less than a 10-minute walk from the ferry dock and town center.

Calle Guerrero at Playa Norte, 77400 Isla Mujeres, Q. Roo. ✆/fax **998/999-2010.** www.ixchelbeachhotel.com. 117 units. High season $175–$205 double, $265 suite; low season $99–$119 double, $155 suite. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; snack bar; babysitting; outdoor pool; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, TV, kitchenette.

Inexpensive

Hotel Belmar ★★ In the center of Isla's entertainment district, this charming three-story hotel (no elevator) sits above the usually packed Rolandi's restaurant. The simple, attractive rooms come with tile floors, nicely finished bathrooms, and either a king-size bed or two twins or two doubles. The rooms are well maintained and have quiet air-conditioning. One large suite features a sitting area, large patio, and whirlpool. The rooms have double-glazed windows. Though I had no trouble with noise from the restaurant in my third-floor room, light sleepers might want to look elsewhere.

Av. Hidalgo 110 (btw. Madero and Abasolo, 3½ blocks from the passenger-ferry pier), 77400 Isla Mujeres, Q. Roo. ✆ **998/877-0430.** Fax 998/877-0429. www.rolandi.com. 11 units. High season 985 pesos double,

1,495 pesos suite; low season 695 pesos double, 1,495 pesos suite. Full breakfast included. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant/bar (see "Rolandi's," below); room service. *In room:* A/C, fan, TV.

Hotel D'Gomar Value This very simple hotel sits at the bottom of the inexpensive range; it's comfortable but don't expect any thrills. Rooms have two double beds and a wall of windows affording gentle breezes. The higher prices are for air-conditioned rooms with refrigerators. The hotel stretches four stories with no elevator, and is conveniently located cater-cornered from the ferry pier (look right). The name of the hotel is the most visible sign on the "skyline."

Rueda Medina 150, 77400 Isla Mujeres, Q. Roo. ✆/fax **998/877-0541.** www.hoteldgomar-islamujeres.com. 20 units. High season 550 pesos double; low season 350–450 pesos double. MC, V. *In room:* A/C, fan, TV and fridge (in some), no phone.

Hotel Francis Arlene ★ The Magaña family operates this neat little two-story inn built around a shady courtyard. It's bright, cheerful, and well managed, and features attractive common spaces. For these reasons, it gets a lot of return guests and remains especially popular with families and seniors. Some rooms have ocean views, and many are remodeled or updated each year. They are comfortable, with tile floors, tiled bathrooms, balconies or patios, and a very homey feel. Standard rooms include a coffeemaker and a refrigerator; top-floor rooms come with kitchenettes and offer an ocean view. Ten rooms have only a ceiling fan and are the lowest-priced doubles.

Guerrero 7 (5½ blocks inland from the ferry pier, btw. Abasolo and Matamoros), 77400 Isla Mujeres, Q. Roo. ✆/fax **998/877-0310** or 877-0861. www.francisarlene.com.mx. 24 units. High season $65–$75 double, $90 top-floor double; low season $45–$60 double, $80 top-floor double. MC, V. *In room:* A/C (in some), fridge, kitchenette (in some), no phone.

WHERE TO DINE

At the **Municipal Market,** next to the post office on Avenida Guerrero, obliging, hard-working women operate several little food stands. When you're in the mood for an ice cream, stop by **La Coppa** (no phone), at Hidalgo and Abasolo, where you can choose from among 18 flavors of Italian *gelato.* It's open daily from 3 to 11pm.

Expensive

Casa Rolandi ★★ ITALIAN/SEAFOOD This gourmet restaurant in the Villa Rolandi hotel offers a beautiful setting with windows over the island's western shore and an open-air terrace. The menu here is more sophisticated than Rolandi's downtown, with an open kitchen that serves fresh lobster, grilled salmon, shrimp brochettes, homemade pastas, and other creatively prepared dishes. Both restaurants make good use of wood-burning stoves to produce some great baked fish dishes. And take care with the wood-oven-baked bread—it arrives looking like a puffer fish and is so divine you're apt to fill up on it. This is a great place to enjoy the sunset, and there's a selection of fine international wines and more than 80 premium tequilas.

On the pier of Villa Rolandi (p. 521), Lagunamar SM 7. ✆ **998/999-2000.** Reservations necessary. Main courses 182–303 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 7am–10:30pm.

Moderate

Angelo ★ ITALIAN An Italian restaurant in the town center, Angelo offers a selection of antipasti, pasta, grilled seafood, and wood-oven-baked pizzas. The Sardinian-born owner instills his menu with the flavors of his homeland, including a rich tomato sauce. Consider starting with a bowl of seafood soup or black mussels au gratin and continuing

with the grilled shrimp kabobs or seafood pasta in an olive oil and white-wine sauce. The open-air restaurant includes an inviting sidewalk terrace and lies across the street from a casual Cuban restaurant also owned by Angelo.

Av. Hidalgo 14 (btw. Lopez Mateos and Matamoros). ✆ **998/877-1273.** Main courses 120–235 pesos. MC, V. Daily 4pm–midnight.

Rolandi's ★ ITALIAN/SEAFOOD This casual Italian eatery is an Isla institution, and usually the most crowded place in town. The thin-crust pizzas and calzones feature wide-ranging ingredients—from traditional tomato, olive, basil, and salami to more exotic seafood selections. A wood-burning oven imparts the signature flavor of the pizzas, as well as fish kabobs, baked chicken, and roast beef. The extensive menu offers a wealth of salads and appetizers, plus an ample array of homemade pasta dishes, steaks, fish, and desserts. The restaurant sits below the Hotel Belmar (p. 522), with sidewalk tables brushing up against the action on Avenida Hidalgo. Rolandi's serves breakfast, too.

In the Hotel Belmar (p. 522), Av. Hidalgo 110 (3½ blocks inland from the pier, btw. Madero and Abasolo). ✆ **998/877-0430.** www.rolandi.com. Reservations recommended. Breakfast 30–50 pesos; main courses 80–160 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 7:30am–11pm.

Zazil Ha ★★ CARIBBEAN/INTERNATIONAL Here you can enjoy some of the island's best food while sitting at tables on the sand among palms and gardens. Come night, candlelit tables sparkle underneath the open-air *palapa.* Specialties include the "surf and turf" lobster and rib-eye, and the Maya chicken stuffed with corn mushroom and goat cheese. A selection of fresh juices complements the vegetarian options, and there's even a special menu for those participating in yoga retreats. The delicious breads are baked in-house. Between the set mealtimes, you can order all sorts of enticing food, such as tacos and sandwiches, ceviche, terrific nachos, and vegetable and fruit drinks.

At the Hotel Na Balam (at the end of Playa Norte, almost at the end of Calle Zazil Ha; p. 521). ✆ **998/877-0279.** www.nabalam.com. Reservations recommended. Breakfast 60–120 pesos; main courses 80–250 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 7:30am–10:30pm.

Inexpensive

Café Cito CAFE Brisa and Luis Rivera own this adorable, Caribbean-blue corner restaurant where you can begin the day with flavorful coffee and a croissant and cream cheese (this is the only place in town where you can have breakfast until 2pm). Terrific crepes come with yogurt, ice cream, fresh fruit, or *dulce de leche* (caramel sauce made from goat's milk), as well as ham and cheese. The cafe dinner includes Caribbean dishes such as coconut shrimp and stuffed chicken with a rich mushroom sauce.

Calle Matamoros 42, at Juárez. ✆ **998/877-1470.** Reservations not accepted. Crepes 30–60 pesos; breakfast 40–60 pesos; sandwiches 35–50 pesos; dinner 120–150 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 7:30am–2pm and 5–10pm.

Mamma Rosa ★★ ITALIAN Opened in early 2009 by a Northern Italian family, Mamma Rosa serves mouthwatering pizzas and homemade pasta to happy patrons seated at candlelit sidewalk tables. The most extravagant pizza is the Diamante smothered with lobster, mozzarella, and tomatoes. For pasta, I recommend the simple meat lasagna or tortelli with ricotta cheese and spinach. The filet of grouper makes for a perfect main course, unless you're in the mood for an Angus steak with green pepper. Lots of olive oil is used in the light, Mediterranean-inspired cooking. Finish with the rich tiramisu. Waiters here speak Italian and little Spanish or English.

Av. Hidalgo 10 (at Matamoros). ✆ **998/200-1969.** Pizzas and pasta 75–220 pesos; main courses 105–220 pesos. MC, V. Wed–Mon 8am–noon and 5–11pm. Dinner only in low season.

ISLA MUJERES AFTER DARK

Those in a party mood by day's end may want to start out at the beach bar of the **Na Balam** hotel on Playa Norte, which usually hosts a crowd until around midnight. On Saturday and Sunday in high season, live music plays between 4 and 7pm. **Jax Bar & Grill,** on Avenida Rueda Medina, close to Hotel Posada del Mar, is a Texas-style sports bar offering live music nightly. **Las Palapas Chimbo's** restaurant on the beach becomes a jammin' dance joint with a live band from 9pm until whenever. Farther along the same stretch of beach, **Buho's,** the restaurant/beach bar of the Cabañas María del Mar, has its moments as a popular, low-key hangout, complete with swinging seats over the sand. If you want to sample one of nearly 100 tequila brands on a relaxing sidewalk terrace, stop by **Fayne's**, located at Av. Hidalgo 12 and open nightly from 7pm to midnight or later. It offers excellent live music that usually gets going after 10pm. Close by at Av. Hidalgo 17, **El Patio** has tables in the sand and live music nightly, including guitar, saxophone, and reggae. It's open nightly from 7pm to midnight or later except for Sundays, when it's closed. **Om Bar and Chill Lounge,** on Calle Matamoros, serves cocktails in an atmosphere that includes jazzy Latino music, open from 6pm to 2am.

2 COZUMEL ★★★

70km (43 miles) S of Cancún; 19km (12 miles) SE of Playa del Carmen

You might not expect such a sleepy island to be one of the world's top diving spots, but Cozumel's clear turquoise waters are spectacular for snorkeling and scuba diving. Tall reefs line the southwest coast, creating towering walls that offer divers a fairy-tale landscape to explore. The island is far quieter than Cancún, and there are no big highways, high-rises, or construction projects. One of my favorite things about Cozumel is that the water on the protected side (western shore) stays as calm as an aquarium, unless a front is blowing through. The island is 45km (28 miles) long and 18km (11 miles) wide, and lies 19km (12 miles) from the mainland. Most of the terrain is flat and clothed in a low tropical forest.

A strong sense of family and community continues to prevail here. There are about 80,000 people on the island, 2,000 of whom are Americans and the rest of whom are mostly Maya, Yucatecans, and Mexicans from elsewhere in the country. The only town on the island is San Miguel, which, despite the growth of the last 20 years, can't be called anything more than a small town. It's not a stunningly beautiful town, but its inhabitants are welcoming—life moves along at a slow pace, and every Sunday evening, residents congregate around the plaza to enjoy live music and see their friends. Staying in town can be fun and convenient. Avenida Rafael Melgar is the main waterfront road and includes a boardwalk with benches and sculptures along the way. A number of restaurants and nightspots line the avenue.

Because Cozumel is a frequent stop on the cruise ship circuit, the waterfront section of town holds wall-to-wall jewelry stores and duty-free and souvenir shops. This and the area around the main square are about as far as most cruise-ship passengers venture into town, and they're usually just here for a few hours in the middle of the day.

During pre-Hispanic times, Maya women would cross over to the island to make offerings to the goddess of fertility, Ixchel. More than 40 sites containing shrines remain around the island, and archaeologists still uncover the small dolls that were customarily

 part of those offerings. Though the island has its own ruins, they cannot compare with the major sites of the mainland.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There & Departing

BY PLANE During high season, several more international commercial flights fly in and out of Cozumel's airport (CZM) than in low season, including a few flights from northern U.S. cities. Airlines include **Aeroméxico, American, Continental, Delta, Frontier,** and **US Airways.** You might also inquire about buying a ticket on one of the charter flights in high season. Some packagers, such as **Fun Jet** (www.funjet.com), will sell you just a ticket. But look into packages, too. Several of the island's independent hotels work with packagers.

BY FERRY Passenger ferries run to and from Playa del Carmen. **México Waterjets** (✆ **987/872-1508**) and **Ultramar** (✆ **998/881-5890;** www.granpuerto.com.mx) offer departures almost every hour in the morning and about every 2 hours in the afternoon. The schedules change according to seasons but generally start at 7am and continue until 9 or 10pm. The trip takes 30 to 45 minutes, depending on conditions, and costs 140 pesos one-way. The boats are air-conditioned. In Playa del Carmen, the ferry dock is 1½ blocks from the main square. In Cozumel, the ferries use Muelle Fiscal, the town pier, a block from the main square. Luggage storage at the Cozumel dock costs 20 pesos per day.

The car ferry that used to operate from Puerto Morelos now uses the Calica pier just south of Playa del Carmen. The fare for a standard car is 600 pesos. **TransCaribe** (✆ **987/872-7688;** www.transcaribe.com.mx) has six departures daily; check the website for exact scheduling. The ferry docks in Cozumel at the **Muelle Internacional** (the **International Pier,** which is south of town near La Ceiba Hotel).

BY BUS If you plan to travel on the mainland by bus, purchase tickets in advance from the ticket office for **ADO buses** called **Ticket Bus** on the municipal pier (open while the ferries are running). Another is on Calle 2 Norte and Avenida 10 (✆ **987/872-1706**). Hours are from 8am to 9pm daily. ADO buses make the 1-hour trip from Cancún airport to Playa del Carmen (and back) throughout the day for 100 pesos; you can easily catch the ferry to Cozumel from Playa.

Orientation

ARRIVING Cozumel's **airport** is inland from downtown. **Transportes Terrestres** provides hotel transportation in air-conditioned Suburbans. Buy your ticket as you exit the terminal. To hotels downtown, the fare is 70 pesos per person; to hotels along the north shore, 100 pesos; and to hotels along the south shore, up to 150 pesos. Passenger ferries arrive at the Muelle Fiscal, the municipal pier, by the town's main square. Cruise ships dock at the **Punta Langosta** pier, several blocks south of the Muelle Fiscal, and at the **International Pier,** which is at Km 4 of the southern coastal road. A third cruise-ship pier, the **Puerta Maya** near the International Pier, is also operational.

Tips Be Streetwise

North-south streets—the *avenidas*—have the right of way, and traffic doesn't slow down or stop.

VISITOR INFORMATION The **Municipal Tourism Office** (✆/fax **987/869-0212;** www.cozumel.gob.mx) has information booths at the International Pier and Punta Langosta Pier. They're open 8am to 3pm Monday to Friday.

CITY LAYOUT San Miguel's main waterfront street is **Avenida Rafael Melgar.** Running parallel to Rafael Melgar are *avenidas* numbered in multiples of five—5, 10, 15. **Avenida Juárez** runs perpendicular to these, heading inland from the ferry dock. Avenida Juárez divides the town into northern and southern halves. The *calles* (streets) that parallel Juárez to the north have even numbers. The ones to the south have odd numbers, except for Calle Rosado Salas, which runs between calles 1 and 3. Vehicles on the *avenidas* have the right of way.

An All-Inclusive Vacation in Cozumel

Booking a room at an all-inclusive resort should be done through a vacation packager. Booking lodging directly through the hotel usually doesn't make sense, even with frequent-flier mileage to burn, because the discounts offered by most packagers are so deep. I include websites for you to find out more info about the properties, but don't expect to find clear info on rates. The game of setting rates with these hotels is complicated and always in flux.

Two all-inclusives are north of town: **El Cozumeleño** (www.elcozumeleno.com) and the **Meliá Cozumel** (www.solmelia.com). Both occupy multistory modern buildings and have attractive rooms. El Cozumeleño is the larger of the two resorts and has the nicest hotel pool on the island. It's best suited for active types. The Meliá is quieter and offers golf discounts for the nearby golf course. The Cozumeleño's small beach has to be replenished with sand periodically. The Meliá's beach is long, narrow, and pretty, but occasionally seaweed washes up, which doesn't happen on the rest of the island's coast. The advantages of staying in these two are the proximity to town, with its restaurants, clubs, movie theaters, and so on, and the fact that most rooms at these hotels come with views of the ocean.

The **Cozumel Palace** (www.palaceresorts.com) is right on the water on the southern fringes of town, occupying the property that used to be Plaza las Glorias. Despite the location, it doesn't have a beach. But that's not so bad. The water is usually so calm on Cozumel's west shore that swimming here is like swimming in a pool, and you can snorkel right out of the hotel.

Of the all-inclusives to the south, my favorites are the **Occidental** resort (**Grand Cozumel;** www.occidentalhotels.com) and the **Iberostar Cozumel** (www.iberostar.com). These are "village"-style resorts with two- and three-story buildings, often with thatched roofs, spread over a large area at the center of which is the pool and activities area. Rooms at the Grand Cozumel are larger and more attractive than the all-inclusives in the south. Like the Occidental chain, Iberostar has several properties in the Mexican Caribbean. This one is the smallest. I like its food and service and the beauty of the grounds. The rooms are attractive and well maintained. The advantage to staying in these places is that you're close to a lot of dive sites; the disadvantage is that you're somewhat isolated from town, and you don't have many rooms with ocean views.

Other all-inclusives include the **Wyndham Cozumel Resort and Spa** (www.wyndham.com), which used to be the Reef Club, and the **Holiday Village White Sands,** which used to be the Allegro Cozumel but is now a First Choice property (www.firstchoice.co.uk). It probably has one of the nicest beaches on the island. And finally, there's the **Hotel Cozumel & Resort** (formerly the Costa Club; www.hotelcozumel.com.mx), which is on the inland side of the road in a crowded section of the island.

ISLAND LAYOUT One road runs along the western coast of the island, which faces the Yucatán mainland. It has different names. North of town, it's **Santa Pilar** or **San Juan;** in the city, it is **Avenida Rafael Melgar;** south of town, it's **Costera Sur.** Hotels stretch along this road north and south of town. The road runs to the southern tip of the island (Punta Sur), passing **Chankanaab National Park. Avenida Juárez** (and its extension, the **Carretera Transversal**) runs east from the town across the island. It passes the airport and the turnoff to the ruins of San Gervasio before reaching the undeveloped ocean side of the island. It then turns south and follows the coast to the southern tip, where it meets the Costera Sur.

GETTING AROUND You can walk to most destinations in town, and it's very safe. Getting to outlying hotels and beaches requires a taxi, rental car, or moped.

Car rentals are about $45 for a VW bug and $60 for a Jeep Wrangler. **Avis** (✆ **987/872-0099**) and **Executive** (✆ **987/872-1308**) have counters in the airport. Other major rental companies have offices in town, including **Thrifty** (✆ **987/869-2957**) at Juárez 181, between avenidas 5 and 10 Norte. Rentals are easy to arrange through your hotel or at any of the many local rental offices.

Moped rentals are readily available and cost 250 to 500 pesos for 24 hours, depending upon the season. If you rent a moped, be careful. Riding a moped made a lot more sense when Cozumel had less traffic; now it involves a certain amount of risk as taxi drivers and other motorists have become more numerous and pushier. Moped accidents easily rank as the greatest cause of injury in Cozumel. Before renting one, inspect it carefully to see that all the gizmos—horn, light, starter, seat, mirror—are in good shape. I've been offered mopeds with unbalanced wheels, which made them unsteady at higher speeds, but the renter quickly exchanged them upon my request. You are required to stay on paved roads. It's illegal to ride a moped without a helmet outside of town (subject to a 300-peso fine).

Cozumel has lots of **taxis** and a strong drivers' union. Fares have been standardized—there's no bargaining. Here are a few sample fares for two people (there is an additional charge for extra passengers to most destinations): island tour, 500 pesos; town to southern Hotel Zone, 110 to 180 pesos; town to northern hotels, 50 to 70 pesos; town to Chankanaab, 100 pesos for up to four people; in and around town, 30 to 40 pesos.

Fast Facts Cozumel

Area Code The telephone area code is **987.**

ATMs, Banks & Currency Exchange The island has several banks and *casas de cambio,* as well as ATMs. Most places accept dollars, but you usually get a better deal paying in pesos.

Consular Office A **U.S. Consular Agency** is on Plaza Principal, between avenidas Rafael Melgar and 5 (✆ **987/872-4574;** Mon–Fri).

Hospital **Médica San Miguel** (✆ **987/872-0103**) works for most things and includes intensive-care facilities. It's on Calle 6 Norte between avenidas 5 and 10. **Centro Médico Cozumel** (✆ **987/872-3545**) is an alternative. It's at the intersection of Calle 1 Sur and Avenida 50.

Internet Access Several cybercafes are in and about the main square. If you go just a bit off Avenida Rafael Melgar and the main square, prices drop. **Modutel,** Av. Juárez 15 (at Av. 10), offers good rates. Hours are Monday through Saturday from 10am to 8pm.

Post Office The *correo* is on Avenida Rafael Melgar at Calle 7 Sur (✆ **987/872-0106**), at the southern edge of town. It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 3pm, Saturday from 9am to noon.

Recompression Chamber Cozumel has four *cámaras de recompresión*. The best are **Buceo Médico Mexicano,** staffed 24 hours, at Calle 5 Sur 21-B, between Avenida Rafael Melgar and Avenida 5 Sur (✆ **987/872-2387** or 872-1430); and the **Hyperbaric Center of Cozumel** (✆ **987/872-3070**), at Calle 6 Norte, between avenidas 5 and 10.

Seasons High season is from Christmas to Easter and August.

Weather From October to December, there can be strong winds all over the Yucatán, as well as some rain. June through October is the rainy season.

EXPLORING THE ISLAND

For **diving** and **snorkeling,** you have plenty of dive shops to choose from. For **island tours, ruins tours** on and off the island, **evening cruises,** and other activities, go to a travel agency, such as **InterMar Cozumel Viajes,** Calle 2 Norte 101-B, between avenidas 5 and 10 (✆ **987/872-1535;** www.intermar.com.mx). Office hours are Monday through Saturday from 8am to 8pm, Sunday from 9am to 5pm.

Watersports

SCUBA DIVING Cozumel is the number-one dive destination in the Western Hemisphere. Don't forget your dive card and dive log. Dive shops will rent you scuba gear but won't take you out on a boat until you show some documentation. If you have a medical condition, bring a letter signed by a doctor stating that you've been cleared to dive. A two-tank morning dive costs about $75 to $90; some shops offer an additional one-tank dive for a modest additional fee. A lot of divers save some money by buying a dive package with a hotel. These usually include two dives a day.

Diving in Cozumel is drift diving, which can be a little disconcerting for novices. The current that sweeps along Cozumel's reefs, pulling nutrients into them and making them as large as they are, also dictates how you dive here. The problem is that it pulls at different speeds at different depths and in different places. When it's pulling strong, it can quickly scatter a dive group. The role of the dive master becomes more important, especially with choosing the dive location. Cozumel has a lot of dive locations. To mention but a few: the famous **Palancar Reef,** with its caves and canyons, plentiful fish, and sea coral; the monstrous **Santa Rosa Wall,** famous for its depth, sea life, coral, and sponges; the **San Francisco Reef,** with a shallower drop-off wall and fascinating sea life; and the **Yucab Reef,** with its beautiful coral.

Finding a dive shop in town is even easier than finding a jewelry store. Cozumel has more than 50 dive operators. I can recommend **Aqua Safari,** which has a location on Avenida Rafael Melgar 429 at Calle 5 (✆ **987/872-0101;** www.aquasafari.com). **Liquid Blue Divers** (✆ **987/869-2812;** www.liquidbluedivers.com), on Avenida 5 between

ACCOMMODATIONS

- Hacienda de San Miguel **1**
- La Casona Real **9**
- Suites Vima **6**
- Vista del Mar **13**

DINING

- Comida Casera Toñita **10**
- El Amigo Mario **14**
- French Quarter **11**
- Guido's **4**
- Kinta **8**
- La Choza **12**
- La Cocay **3**
- Le Chef **14**
- Pancho's Backyard **2**
- Restaurant del Museo **5**
- Zermatt **7**

Moments Carnaval

Carnaval (similar to Mardi Gras) is Cozumel's most colorful fiesta. It begins the Thursday before Ash Wednesday, with daytime street dancing and nighttime parades on Thursday, Saturday, and Monday (the best).

Rosado Salas and Calle 3 Sur, offers quality tours with no more than 12 divers. **Scuba Du** (✆ **987/872-9505;** www.scubadu.com), based at the Presidente InterContinental resort (p. 538), offers excellent diving excursions, refresher courses, and all levels of diving certification.

SNORKELING Most resorts offer snorkeling equipment, and many dive shops do, as well. When contracting for a snorkel tour, stay away from the companies that cater to the cruise ships. Those tours are crowded and not very fun. For a good snorkeling tour, contact **Victor Casanova** (✆ **987/112-2553;** http://boshms.angelfire.com/wild_cat_diver). He speaks English, owns a couple of boats, and does a good 5-hour tour. He takes his time and doesn't rush through the trip. Even though you won't see a lot of the more delicate structures, such as fan coral, you will still see plenty of sea creatures and enjoy the clear, calm water of Cozumel's protected west side.

BOAT TRIPS Travel agencies and hotels can arrange boat trips, a popular pastime on Cozumel. Choose from evening cruises, cocktail cruises, glass-bottom boat cruises, and other options. One novel boat ride is offered by **Atlantis Submarines** (✆ **987/872-5671;** www.atlantisadventures.com). It operates almost 3km (1¾ miles) south of town in front of the Casa del Mar hotel and costs $89 per adult, $59 for kids ages 4 to 12. The tour duration is 1½ hours with 40 minutes underwater, and the sub can hold 48 people. This is a superior experience to the **Sub See Explorer** offered by **AquaWorld,** which is really just a glorified glass-bottom boat. You can make reservations online and get a bit of a discount.

FISHING The best months for fishing are March through June, when the catch includes blue and white marlin, sailfish, tarpon, and swordfish. The least expensive option would be to contact a boat owner directly. Try Victor Casanova, listed above under "Snorkeling." A reliable operator offering deep-sea fishing and bonefishing in Cozumel is **Aquarius Fishing** (✆ **987/872-1092;** www.aquariusflatsfishing.com), located at 20 Avenida Sur between Calle 3 Sur and Calle Rosado Salas.

Chankanaab National Park & Faro Celerain Ecological Reserve (Punta Sur)

Chankanaab National Park ★ is the pride of many islanders. In Mayan, Chankanaab means "little sea," which refers to a beautiful landlocked pool connected to the sea through an underwater tunnel—a sort of miniature ocean. Snorkeling in this natural aquarium is not permitted, but the park itself has a beach for sunbathing and snorkeling. Arrive before 9am to stake out a chair and *palapa* before the cruise-ship crowd arrives. The snorkeling is also best before noon. The park has bathrooms, lockers, a gift shop, several snack huts, a restaurant, and a *palapa* for renting snorkeling gear.

You can also swim with dolphins. **Dolphin Discovery** (✆ **800/293-9698;** www.dolphindiscovery.com) has several programs for experiencing these sea creatures. These

Tips For Experienced Divers

Bring proof of your diver's certification and your log. Underwater currents can be strong, and many of the reef drops are quite steep, so dive operators want to make sure divers are experienced.

are popular, so plan ahead—you should make reservations well in advance. The surest way is through the website—make sure to pick the Cozumel location, as there are a couple of others on this coast. There are three different programs for swimming with dolphins. The one of longest duration costs $149 and features close interaction with the beautiful swimmers. There are also swim-and-snorkel programs for about $100 that get you in the water with these creatures.

Admission to the park is $16, and half price for children 11 and under. It's open daily from 8am to 5pm and lies south of town, just past the Fiesta Americana Hotel. Taxis run constantly between the park, the hotels, and town (100 pesos from town for up to four people).

Faro Celerain Ecological Reserve (admission $10), also called Punta Sur, is an ecological reserve at the southern tip of the island that includes the Columbia Lagoon. A number of crocodiles make the lagoon their home, so swimming is not only a bad idea, it's not allowed. The only practical way of going out to the lighthouse, which lies 8km (5 miles) from the entrance, is to rent a car or scooter; there's no taxi stand, and usually few people. At the entrance to Punta Sur, you'll find a reggae beach bar and a sea turtle nesting area. The lovely beaches just in front are kept as natural as possible, but be cautious about swimming or snorkeling here depending on the winds and currents. Regular hours are daily 9am to 4pm. If you have a rental car, getting here is no problem, and this is usually a great place to get away from the crowds and have a lot of beach to yourself. Occasionally, boat tours of the lagoon are offered. Ask at the information office.

Beaches

Along both the west and east sides of the island you'll see signs advertising beach clubs. A "beach club" in Cozumel can mean just a *palapa* hut that's open to the public and serves soft drinks, beer, and fried fish. It can also mean a recreational beach with the full gamut of offerings, from banana boats to parasailing. They also usually have locker rooms, a pool, and food. The biggest of these is **Mr. Sancho's** (✆ **987/871-9174;** www.mrsanchos.com), south of downtown San Miguel at Km 15 on the main road between the Reef Club and Allegro Resort. It offers a restaurant, bar, massage service, and motorized and non-motorized watersports. Quieter versions are **Playa San Francisco** (no phone), **Paradise Beach** (no phone, next to Playa San Francisco), and **Playa Palancar** (no phone). All of these beaches are south of Chankanaab Park and easily visible from the road. Several have swimming pools with beach furniture, a restaurant, and snorkel rental. Most of these beaches cost around 50 pesos.

Once you get to the end of the island, the beach clubs become simple places where you can eat, drink, and lay out on the beach for free. **Paradise Cafe** is on the southern tip of the island across from Punta Sur Nature Park, and as you go up the eastern side of the island you pass **Playa Bonita, Chen Río,** and **Punta Morena.** Except on Sunday, when the locals head for the beaches, these places are practically deserted. Most of the

Tips Cenote Diving on the Mainland

A popular activity in the Yucatán is cave diving. The peninsula's underground **cenotes** (seh-*noh*-tehs)—sinkholes or wellsprings—lead to a vast system of underground caverns. The gently flowing water is so clear that divers seem to float on air through caves complete with stalactites and stalagmites. If you want to try this but didn't plan a trip to the mainland, contact **Yucatech Expeditions,** Avenida 5, on the corner of Calle 3 Sur (✆/fax **987/872-5659;** www.yucatech.net), which offers a trip five times a week. Cenotes are 30 to 45 minutes from Playa del Carmen, and a dive in each cenote lasts around 45 minutes. Dives are within the daylight zone, about 40m (131 ft.) into the caverns, and no more than 18m (59 ft.) deep. Open-water certification and at least five logged dives are required. For those without diving certifications, a cenote snorkeling tour is also offered.

east coast is unsafe for swimming because of the surf. The beaches tend to be small and occupy gaps in the rocky coast.

Island Tours

Travel agencies can arrange a variety of tours, including horseback, jeep, and ATV tours. Taxi drivers charge 700 pesos for a 3-hour tour of the island, which most people would consider only mildly amusing, depending on the driver's personality. The best horseback tours are offered at **Rancho Palmitas** (no phone), on the Costera Sur highway, across from the Occidental Cozumel resort.

Other Attractions

MAYA RUINS A popular island excursion is to **San Gervasio** (100 B.C.–A.D. 1600). Follow the paved transversal road, and you'll see the well-marked turnoff about halfway between town and the eastern coast. For what you see, it's a bit overpriced. You have to pay a 70-peso fee charged by the local institute; camera permits cost an additional 50 pesos. A small tourist center at the entrance sells handicrafts, cold drinks, and snacks. The ruins are open from 7am to 4pm.

When it comes to Cozumel's Maya ruins, getting there is most of the fun—do it for the mystique and for the trip, not for the size or scale of the ruins. The buildings, though preserved, are crudely made and would not be much of a tourist attraction if they were not the island's principal ruins. More significant than beautiful, this site was once an important ceremonial center where the Maya gathered, coming even from the mainland. The important deity was Ixchel, the goddess of weaving, women, childbirth, pilgrims, the moon, and medicine. Although you won't see any representations of Ixchel at San Gervasio today, Bruce Hunter, in his *Guide to Ancient Maya Ruins,* writes that priests hid behind a large pottery statue of her and became the voice of the goddess, speaking to pilgrims and answering their petitions. Ixchel was the wife of Itzamná, the sun god.

Guides charge 200 pesos for a tour for one to six people. A better option is to find a copy of the green booklet *San Gervasio,* sold at local checkout counters and bookstores, and tour the site on your own. Seeing it takes 30 to 60 minutes. Taxi drivers offer transportation for about 600 pesos, which includes the driver waiting for you outside the ruins.

Anatomy of the Coral Reef

Corals are polyps, tiny animals with hollow, cylindrical bodies that attach by the thousands to hard surfaces of the seafloor. The polyps extract calcium carbonate from the seawater to create hard, cup-shaped skeletons that assume an endless variety of shapes and sizes. These massive limestone structures shelter nearly one-fourth of all marine life. The soft, delicate polyps retreat into their skeletons during the day, but their protruding tentacles can be seen when they feed at night.

Two distinct types of coral formations dominate Cozumel's waters. Bases of the less developed platform reefs, such as Colombia Shallows, Paradise, and Yucab, are rarely more than 9 to 15m (30–50 ft.) in depth. Edge reefs are more complex structures built up over many millennia, and their layered structures peak high above the edge of the drop-off, extending as much as 55m (180 ft.) below the surface. These are found mostly in the south; examples include Palancar, Colombia Deep, Punta Sur, and Maracaibo.

A HISTORY MUSEUM The **Museo de la Isla de Cozumel** ★, Av. Rafael Melgar between calles 4 and 6 Norte (✆ **987/872-1475**), is more than just a nice place to spend a rainy hour. On the first floor, an exhibit illustrates endangered species, the origin of the island, and its present-day topography and plant and animal life, including an explanation of coral formation. The second-floor galleries feature the history of the town, artifacts from the island's pre-Hispanic sites, and Colonial-Era cannons, swords, and ship paraphernalia. It's open daily from 9am to 5pm (but closes at 4pm on Sun). Admission is 36 pesos. There's also a gift shop and a picturesque rooftop cafe that serves breakfast and lunch (p. 541; you don't need to pay admission to eat here, unless you plan to visit the museum, too).

GOLF Cozumel has an 18-hole course designed by Jack Nicklaus. It's at the **Cozumel Country Club** (✆ **987/872-9570;** www.cozumelcountryclub.com.mx), north of San Miguel. Greens fees are $169 for a morning tee time, including cart rental and tax. Afternoon tee times cost $105. Tee times can be reserved 3 days in advance. A few hotels have special memberships with discounts for guests and advance tee times; guests at Playa Azul Golf and Beach Club pay no greens fees, but the cart costs $25.

SHOPPING

If you're looking for silver jewelry or other souvenirs, go no farther than the town's coastal avenue, Rafael Melgar. Along this road, you'll find one store after another selling jewelry, Mexican handicrafts, and other souvenirs and duty-free merchandise. There are also some import/export stores in the Punta Langosta Shopping Center in the southern part of town in front of the cruise-ship pier. Prices for serapes, T-shirts, and the like are lower on the side streets off Avenida Melgar.

WHERE TO STAY

I've grouped Cozumel's hotels by location—**north** of town, **in town,** and **south** of town. The prices quoted are public rates and include the 12% tax. High season is from December

to Easter. Expect rates from Christmas to New Year's to be still higher than the regular high-season rates quoted here. Low season is the rest of the year, though a few hotels raise their rates in August, when Mexican families go on vacation.

All of the beach hotels in Cozumel, even the small ones, have deals with vacation packagers. Keep in mind that some packagers will offer last-minute deals to Cozumel with hefty discounts; if you're the flexible sort, keep an eye open for these.

Most hotels have an arrangement with a dive shop and offer dive packages. These can be good deals, but if you don't buy a dive package, it's quite okay to stay at one hotel and dive with a third-party operator—any dive boat can pull up to any hotel pier to pick up customers. Most dive shops won't pick up from the hotels north of town.

In addition to the hotels listed below, another reliable option is the **Fiesta Americana** (✆ **987/872-9600;** www.fiestamericana.com), located on Carretera Chankanaab Km 7.5, which is popular with families and has its own dive center. As an alternative to a hotel, you can try **Cozumel Vacation Villas and Condos,** Av. Rafael Melgar 685 (btw. calles 3 and 5 Sur; ✆ **800/224-5551** in the U.S. or 987/872-0729; www.cozumel-villas.com), which offers accommodations by the week.

North of Town

Carretera Santa Pilar, or San Juan, is the name of Avenida Rafael Melgar's northern extension. All the hotels lie close to each other on the beach side of the road a short distance from town and the airport.

Very Expensive

Playa Azul Golf-Scuba-Spa ★★ This quiet hotel is perhaps the most relaxing of the island's properties. It's smaller than the others, and an excellent choice for golfers; guests pay no greens fees, only cart rental. The hotel's small beautiful beach with shade *palapas* has a quiet little beach bar. All three categories of guest rooms have ocean views. The units in the original section are suites—very large, with oversize bathrooms with showers. The new wing has mostly standard rooms that are comfortable and large. The corner rooms are master suites with large balconies and Jacuzzis overlooking the sea. If you prefer lots of space over having a Jacuzzi, opt for a suite in the original building. Rooms contain a king-size or two double beds; some suites offer two convertible single sofas in the separate living room. The hotel also offers deep sea and fly-fishing trips.

Carretera San Juan Km 4, 77600 Cozumel, Q. Roo. ✆ **987/869-5160.** Fax 987/869-5173. www.playa-azul.com. 51 units. High season $210–$272 double, $255–$390 suite; low season $185–$255 double, $230–$340 suite. Rates include unlimited golf and full breakfast. Internet specials available. AE, MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 3 bars; babysitting; unlimited golf privileges at Cozumel Country Club; medium-size pool; room service; spa; dive shop; snorkeling equipment. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Expensive

Condumel Condobeach Apartments (Value) If you want some distance from the crowds, consider lodging here. It's not a full-service hotel, but in some ways, it's more convenient. The one-bedroom waterfront apartments are designed and furnished in practical fashion—airy, with sliding glass doors that face the sea and allow for good cross ventilation (especially in the upper units). They also have ceiling fans, air-conditioning, and two twin beds or one king-size. Each apartment has a separate living room and a full kitchen with a partially stocked fridge, so you don't have to run to the store on the first day. There's a small, well-tended beach area (with shade *palapas* and a grill for guests' use) that leads to a low, rocky falloff into the sea.

Carretera Hotelera Norte s/n, 77600 Cozumel, Q. Roo. ✆ **987/872-0892.** Fax 987/872-0661. www.condumel.com. 10 units. High season $142 double; low season $120 double. Dive packages available. No credit cards. *In room:* A/C, kitchen, no phone, Wi-Fi.

In Town

Staying in town is not like staying in the town on Isla Mujeres, where you can walk to the beach. The oceanfront in town is too busy for swimming, and there's no beach, only the *malecón*. Prices are considerably lower, but you'll have to drive or take a cab to the beach; it's pretty easy. English is spoken in almost all of the hotels.

Moderate

Hacienda San Miguel ★ (Value) This is a peaceful hotel built in Mexican colonial style around a large garden courtyard. The property is well maintained and the service is good. It's located a half-block from the shoreline on the town's north side. The large guest rooms offer rustic Mexican furnishings and fully equipped kitchens. Most of the studios have a queen-size bed or two doubles, while the junior suites have more living area and a queen-size as well as a twin bed. The two-bedroom suite comes with four double beds. For this hotel, high season runs from January to August; low season is from September to December, excluding the holiday season.

Calle 10 Norte 500 (btw. Rafael Melgar and Av. 5), 77600 Cozumel, Q. Roo. ✆ **866/712-6387** in the U.S., or 987/872-1986. Fax 987/872-7043. www.haciendasanmiguel.com. 11 units. High season 1,222 pesos studio, 1,313 pesos junior suite, 2,002 pesos 2-bedroom suite; low season 1,027 pesos studio, 1,222 pesos junior suite, 1,586 pesos 2-bedroom suite. Rates include continental breakfast and free entrance to Mr. Sancho's beach club. MC, V. Guarded parking on street. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, kitchen, no phone, Wi-Fi.

Vista del Mar ★ This hotel is located on the town's shoreline boulevard. Guest rooms have been renovated and are bright and cheerfully decorated with bamboo furnishings. Bathrooms are medium size or a little smaller and have showers. The rooms in front offer ocean views with wrought-iron balconies. The rooms in back go for 100 pesos less than the oceanview rooms and look out over a small pool and large Jacuzzi. This hotel is operated by the same people who run Hacienda San Miguel, and it has the same high season/low season split, with higher rates for Carnaval and Christmastime.

Av. Rafael Melgar 45 (btw. calles 5 and 7 Sur), 77600 Cozumel, Q. Roo. ✆ **888/309-9988** in the U.S., or 987/872-0545. Fax 987/872-7036. www.hotelvistadelmar.com. 20 units. High season $110 double; low season $78–$90 double. Discounts sometimes available. AE, MC, V. Limited street parking. **Amenities:** Bar; Jacuzzi; outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge, hair dryer, free local calls, Wi-Fi.

Inexpensive

La Casona Real (Value) Five blocks from the waterfront, this cheerful two-story hotel is a bargain for those wanting a hotel with a pool. The simple rooms are small to medium in size, with a king-size or two double beds, good air-conditioning, and colorful Mexican decor. A courtyard with an oval pool is on the west side of the building, and some rooms have views of the pool while others look toward the town (and are a bit noisier). Families can make good use out of the one-bedroom suite, which has a futon in the living room, full kitchen, and cable TV with a DVD player.

Av. Juárez 501, 77600 Cozumel, Q. Roo. ✆ **987/872-5471.** www.hotel-la-casona-real-cozumel.com. 15 units. $45–$55 double; $80 suite. No credit cards. Limited street parking. **Amenities:** Medium-size outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, TV, no phone.

Suites Vima (Value) This three-story hotel sits 4 blocks from the main square. It offers large, plainly furnished rooms for a good price. The lighting is okay, the showers are

good, and every room comes with its own fridge, which for island visitors can be a handy feature. The rooms are fairly quiet. Choose between two doubles or one king-size bed. There is no restaurant, but there is a pool and lounge area. As is the case with other small hotels on the island, the staff at the front desk doesn't speak English. Reservations through e-mail can be made in English. This is one of the few hotels in town that doesn't use high season/low season rates.

Av. 10 Norte btw. calles 4 and 6, 77600 Cozumel, Q. Roo. ✆ **987/872-5118.** 12 units. 550 pesos double. No credit cards. Limited street parking. **Amenities:** Tiny pool. *In room:* A/C, fridge.

South of Town

The hotels in this area tend to be more spread out and farther from town than hotels to the north. Some are on the inland side of the road; some are on the beach side, which means a difference in price. Those farthest from town are all-inclusive properties. The beaches tend to be slightly better than those to the north, but all the hotels have swimming pools and piers from which you can snorkel, and all of them accommodate divers. Head south on Avenida Rafael Melgar, which becomes the coastal road **Costera Sur** (also called Carretera a Chankanaab).

Very Expensive

Presidente InterContinental Cozumel ★★★ Widely considered the best resort in Cozumel, the Presidente spreads out across a long stretch of coast with only distant hotels for neighbors. Rooms come in seven categories offering pool, ocean, or beachfront views and are separated by quiet corridors displaying vivid original art. Even if the resort seems a bit architecturally dated, the rooms are not: guests enjoy Egyptian cotton sheets, marble bathrooms, Mexican artwork and onyx lamps, Maya-inspired turndown service, and complimentary tea or coffee in the morning. Beachfront "reef" rooms and suites occupy the resort's most exclusive section and include 24-hour butler service and hammocks. There's a full-service spa here, and a pyramid of iguanas out by the pool that is thrilling for children to see. The excellent poolside dive shop (**Scuba Du,** p. 532) offers introductory and one- and two-tank dives as well as certification programs. A long stretch of sandy beach, dotted with *palapas* and palm trees, fronts the entire hotel, and the sunsets are amazing. Service here is first class.

Costera Sur Km 6.5, 77600 Cozumel, Q. Roo. ✆ **800/327-0200** in the U.S., or 987/872-9500. Fax 987/872-9528. www.intercontinentalcozumel.com. 220 units. High season $330 pool view, $398 ocean view, $582 and up for beachfronts and suites; low season $257–$291 pool view, $302–$358 ocean view, $370–$504 and up for beachfronts and suites. Internet specials sometimes available. AE, MC, V. Free valet parking. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 4 bars; babysitting; 24-hr. butler service in reef section; kids' club; concierge; dive shop; deep-sea fishing trips; access to golf club; putting green; 2 outdoor pools including adults-only pool; room service; full-service spa with salon and fully equipped fitness center; 2 lighted tennis courts; tennis lessons; watersports; yoga. *In room:* A/C, flatscreen TV w/pay movies, iHome, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

WHERE TO DINE

The island offers a number of tasty restaurants. Taxi drivers will often steer you toward restaurants that pay them commissions; don't heed their advice.

Zermatt (✆ **987/872-1384**), a nice little bakery, is on Avenida 5 at Calle 4 Norte. It's open Monday to Saturday from 7am to 9pm. For inexpensive local fare during the day, I like **Comida Casera Toñita** (✆ **987/872-0401**), at Calle Rosado Salas 265 between avenidas 10 and 15. It's daily hours are from 8am to 6pm. For morning tacos of *cochinita pibil* (traditionally a breakfast item), go to **El Amigo Mario** (✆ **987/872-0742**), on Calle 5 Sur, between Francisco Mújica and Avenida 35. The doors close at 12:30pm.

Expensive

Cabaña del Pescador (Lobster House) ★★ LOBSTER The story's a little strange, but brothers Fernando and Enrique, who no longer speak with each other due to a business dispute, run adjacent restaurants both called the Lobster House. They have slight differences in decor, but both restaurants are excellent. Fresh lobster is weighed, then grilled or boiled with a hint of spices, and served with melted butter or garlic, accompanied by sides of rice, vegetables, and bread. Does lobster require anything more? Lobster is the only thing on the menu at Fernando's restaurant, but Enrique will also cook up steaks, shrimp, or fish. The setting is quite tropical—a pair of thatched bungalows bordering a pond with lily pads and reeds, traversed by a small footbridge. The open-air rooms are softly lit with the glow of candles and furnished with rustic tables and chairs. The restaurants ramble around quite a bit, so explore until you find the spot most to your taste. Finish with the signature Key lime pie.

Carretera Santa Pilar Km 4 (across from Playa Azul Hotel). No phone. Reservations not accepted. Lobster (by weight) $13–$40. No credit cards. Daily 6–10:30pm.

French Quarter ★★ SOUTHERN Owner Mike Slaughter brings his Louisiana roots to this downtown favorite where you can order Southern and Creole classics, such as jambalaya and étouffée, or the daily catch blackened, grilled, or stuffed. The restaurant also serves Black Angus beef, and a filet mignon with red-onion marmalade that's delicious. I appreciate the uniqueness of the menu, but the dishes are pricey for this area. The downstairs bar is a popular hangout for many locals, especially for sports events.

Av. 5 Sur 18. ✆ **987/872-6321.** Reservations recommended during Carnaval. Main courses $15–$36. AE, MC, V. Wed–Mon 5–10:30pm.

Guido's ★★ MEDITERRANEAN The inviting terrace, with director's chairs and rustic wood tables, makes this a restful place in daytime and a romantic spot at night. The specialties are oven-baked pizzas and homemade pastas, including lasagna with a Bolognese and béchamel sauce, ravioli stuffed with spinach and beef, and spaghetti with shrimp, garlic, olive oil, and Parmesan. My favorite main courses include sautéed grilled shrimp and the spinach-stuffed chicken breast. The other item people love here is the *pan de ajo*—a house creation of fresh bread prepared with olive oil, garlic, and rosemary. In addition to an impressive wine list, pitchers of sangria are available.

Av. Rafael Melgar, btw. calles 6 and 8 Norte. ✆ **987/872-0946.** Reservations accepted. Main courses 162–312 pesos; pizzas 150–174 pesos. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 11am–11pm.

La Cocay ★★★ MEDITERRANEAN/SEAFOOD La Cocay, which means "firefly" in Mayan, serves the most original cooking on the island. The intimate dining room and outdoor courtyard, glittering with white lights wrapped around a sprawling palm tree, create an alluring atmosphere. For an appetizer, the empanadas with goat cheese and caramelized apples make for excellent tapas, as do the figs with prosciutto. For a main course, try the 8-ounce filet mignon, roasted stuffed chicken breast, or mixed grilled seafood served with Spanish rice. Give special consideration to the daily specials and the wonderful chocolate torte. It takes a little extra time to prepare, so order it early. The wine list offers excellent selections from South America.

Calle 8 Norte 208 (btw. avenidas. 10 and 15). ✆ **987/872-5533.** www.lacocay.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses 130–340 pesos. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 5:30–11pm.

Moderate

Coconuts ★★ (Finds) SEAFOOD This fun-filled beach restaurant and bar sits on the highest point in Cozumel, which really isn't saying much but nevertheless offers a magnificent view of the Caribbean. Coconuts is open only during the day and has no electricity—running only a daytime generator using solar power. Grab a plastic table in the sand or a seat under the open-air *palapa* and check out the proverbs around you. One says, "beer, so much more than just a breakfast drink," while another advises, "sex is like air, it's really not that important until you're not getting any." If you do nothing else here, please order the mixed seafood ceviche. It's just too delicious. There are also sumptuous shrimp quesadillas, the freshest guacamole, and all kinds of tacos and fajitas.

Carratera Oriente Km 43.5. ✆ **987/105-7622.** Reservations not accepted. Main courses 100–180 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 10am–6pm.

El Moro ★ (Value) REGIONAL El Moro is an out-of-the-way place that has been around for a long time and has always been popular with the locals, who come for the food, the service, and the prices—but not the decor, which is orange, orange, orange, and Formica. Get there by taxi, which will cost a couple of bucks. Portions are generous. Any of the shrimp dishes use the real jumbo variety when available. For something different, try the *pollo Ticuleño,* a specialty from the town of Ticul, a layered dish of tomato sauce, mashed potatoes, crispy baked corn tortillas, and fried chicken breast, topped with shredded cheese and green peas. Other specialties include enchiladas and seafood prepared many ways, plus grilled steaks and sandwiches.

75 bis Norte 124 (btw. calles 2 and 4 Norte). ✆ **987/872-3029.** Reservations not accepted. Main courses 50–150 pesos. MC, V. Fri–Wed 1–11pm.

Kinta ★★ CARIBBEAN An excellent example of Mexican creativity, this chic restaurant blends tropical decor with a cool urban style. Chill-out music fills the air of the lush garden terrace decorated with palms, tiny white lights, stone and wood designs, and a pond. Chef Kris Wallenta, who previously worked at Guido's and trained at New York's French Culinary Institute, has created a menu celebrating contemporary Mexican cuisine. I recommend the "Mexikanissimo" to start—crispy warm *panela* cheese over a green tomato sauce with herbs. Then order a chile relleno—a poblano pepper with vegetable ratatouille and cheese, baked and cooked over red sauce with a chipotle cream. The filet mignon with *huitlacoche* (corn mushroom), mashed potatoes, and poblano chile sauce is terrific, too. Service is a bit slow on busy nights, so come for a leisurely evening.

5 Av. 148B (btw. calles 2 and 4 Norte). ✆ **987/869-0544.** Reservations not accepted. Main courses 120–195 pesos. MC, V. Tues–Sun 5:30–11:30pm; closed Mon.

La Choza ★ YUCATECAN/MEXICAN A favorite among locals, La Choza is an open-air restaurant with well-spaced tables under a tall thatched roof. Platters of poblano chiles stuffed with shrimp, grilled *brochetas* (kabobs), and *pollo en relleno negro* (chicken in a sauce of blackened chiles) are all delicious. Be sure to add some of the zesty table sauces and guacamole to your meal. Breakfasts are tasty here, as well.

Rosado Salas 198 (at Av. 10 Sur). ✆ **987/872-0958.** Reservations accepted for groups of 6 or more. Breakfast 45 pesos; main courses 100–160 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 7am–10pm.

Pancho's Backyard ★★★ MEXICAN Despite its popularity with visitors, the number of locals also eating here attests to Pancho's authenticity. Owned by father and son duo Pancho and Panchito, this charming open-air restaurant surrounded by palms, banana trees, and fountains occupies one of the town's original buildings. Cuisine here

focuses on traditional Mexican fare—corn, beans, vegetables, and rice—with a healthy selection of chicken and fish plates. My favorite is the mahimahi filet topped with an almond, mango, orange, and pineapple *pico de gallo.* Homemade tortilla chips are served with fresh tomato and onion salsa, as well as a bowl of extraordinarily spicy habanero sauce. Crisply dressed waiters wearing white *guayaberas* with blue bandannas offer friendly, efficient service. There's also an outstanding artesian store selling quality arts and crafts here.

Av. Melgar 27 at Calle 8 Norte. ✆ **987/872-2141.** www.panchosbackyard.com. Lunch $6–$16; dinner $12–$18. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 10am–11pm; Sun 6–11pm.

Inexpensive

Restaurant del Museo BREAKFAST/MEXICAN The museum's rooftop restaurant and cafe remains my favorite place in San Miguel for breakfast or lunch (weather permitting). It offers a serene view of the water, removed from the traffic noise below and sheltered from the sun above. Breakfasts include huevos rancheros with corn tortillas, fried eggs, and salsa; Mexican and American omelets; fresh fruit platters; and pancakes. The Spanish menu offers even more choices than the English menu (including dishes with *nopales,* or cactus). Simple lunch dishes include sandwiches and enchiladas.

Av. Rafael Melgar (corner of Calle 6 Norte). ✆ **987/872-0838.** Reservations not accepted. Breakfast 55–75 pesos; lunch main courses 64–110 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 7am–2pm.

COZUMEL AFTER DARK

Most of the music and dance venues are along Avenida Rafael Melgar. **Carlos 'n' Charlie's** (✆ **987/869-1648**), which is in the Punta Langosta shopping center, is practically next to **Señor Frog's** (✆ **987/869-1650**). Punta Langosta lies just south of Calle 7 Sur. The **Hard Rock Cafe** (✆ **987/872-5271**) is also on Avenida Rafael Melgar, at no. 2, just north of the municipal pier, and remains open until 2am or later with live music on weekends.

In town, there are a few Latin music clubs. These open and close with every high season, prospering when people have cash in their pockets, but closing down when the flow of tourism stops bringing in money. Calle 1 Sur between 5 Avenida Sur and 10 Avenida Sur is a pedestrian walking street housing a number of local bars, some with live music.

For sports events, the best bar is at the **French Quarter** (p. 539, open Wednesday to Monday from 5pm to midnight. On Sunday evenings, the place to be is the main square, which usually has a free concert and lots of people strolling about and visiting with friends. Various cafes and bars surround the square.

San Miguel's **movie theater** is Cinépolis, the modern multicinema in the Chedraui Plaza Shopping Center at the south end of town. It mainly shows Hollywood movies. Most of these are in English with Spanish subtitles *(película subtitulada);* before buying your tickets, make sure the movie hasn't been dubbed *(doblada).*

16

The Riviera Maya & the Southern Caribbean Coast

by Christine Delsol & Maribeth Mellin

You've heard it more times than you can count: "Caribbean coast," "endless stretch of pristine beach," "soft white sand caressed by turquoise waves . . ." So let's skip the prose and move on to what you really need to know.

The Yucatán's Caribbean coast stretches 380km (236 miles) from Cancún to Chetumal, at the Belize border. The northern part of the coast from Cancún to Tulum has been dubbed the Riviera Maya; the southern half, the Costa Maya. In between is the vast Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve.

The Great Mesoamerican Reef, the second-longest mountain of coral in the world, protects most of the shoreline. You usually find the best beaches where the reef is far from shore, such as around Playa del Carmen, Xpu-Ha, and Tulum. However, feverish construction along this coastline has harmed many beaches, and currents can carry away all the sand. Some resorts are using unsightly sandbags as artificial reefs to protect their beaches. Others have created sandy terraces above the shore.

But sand is secondary to the Caribbean's gorgeous aquamarine water, and it's easy to find places to snorkel and dive with lots of fish and other sea creatures. Mangroves growing inland are now protected by the federal government, which is slowly helping the coastline return to its more natural state. You'll also find jungle, caverns, underground rivers, and the peninsula's famous cenotes (freshwater sinkholes) inland—and the even more famous Maya archaeological sites. Sights and activities abound.

So do lodging options. On this coast, you can stay in a variety of communities or distance yourself from all of them. You can bunk down in rustic cabins, secluded spa resorts, boutique hotels, all-inclusive megaresorts, bed-and-breakfasts, family-run guesthouses. You've got some decisions to make. I hope this chapter will help.

A single road, Hwy. 307, traces the coastline from Cancún to Chetumal, a 4½-hour trip by car. The section between Cancún's airport and Tulum is now a four-lane divided highway with speed limits up to 110kmph (68 mph). Overpasses have replaced the traffic lights and reduced-speed zones at Puerto Morelos, Playa del Carmen, and Tulum. It takes about 1½ hours to make the 130km (81-mile) drive from the Cancún airport to Tulum.

From Tulum, the highway turns inland to skirt the edges of Sian Ka'an. The roadway is two lanes, but here, too, the government has been hard at work, bypassing a significant fraction of the *tope*-pocked villages and providing shoulders almost as wide as the lanes, making passing easier and safer. Driving from Tulum to Chetumal takes 3 hours.

1 PUERTO MORELOS & VICINITY

BETWEEN CANCUN & PLAYA DEL CARMEN

The coast directly south of the Cancún airport has several roadside attractions, all-inclusives, small cabaña hotels, and some spa resorts. Much of the latest development targets the well-heeled traveler—small boutique hotels and astonishingly luxurious all-inclusives. The agreeable town of **Puerto Morelos** lies midway along this 51km (32-mile) stretch of coast between the airport and Playa del Carmen.

Roadside Attractions

Near the Puerto Morelos turnoff is Rancho Loma Bonita, which offers horseback riding and ATV tours, but I prefer **Rancho Punta Venado** (p. 560), just south of Playa. You'll also find **Jardín Botánico Dr. Alfredo Barrera** (✆ **998/206-9223;** www.ecosur.mx/jb/YaaxChe). Opened in 1990 and named after a biologist who studied tropical forests, this botanical garden is the largest swath of undeveloped land along the coast, save for the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve (p. 576). Ceiba trees, sacred to the Maya, stand tall amid bromeliads, ferns, orchids, and small archaeological sites. Biology students working here are happy to share details (it helps to speak Spanish). Spider monkeys, nearly extinct along the coast, frolic here along with tropical birds. The park is open Monday to Saturday from 9am to 5pm. Admission is 70 pesos. Wear insect repellent!

Kids are more likely to enjoy the interactive zoo, **CrocoCun** ★ (✆ **998/850-3719;** www.crococunzoo.com), a mile north of Puerto Morelos. Formerly a crocodile farm, it now runs a captive breeding program that has helped to restore the reptiles' population in Cancún's Nichupté Lagoon. Currently, it protects all animals native to the Yucatán; those in residence include iguanas, spider monkeys, a boa constrictor, and immense tarantulas. A guided tour with one of the enthusiastic veterinary students who volunteer here lasts 1 hour. Again, wear bug repellent. Open daily from 9am to 5pm. Entrance fees are high, as are most roadside attractions on this coast: $20 adults, $12 children 6 to 12, free for children 5 and younger.

Spa Resorts ★★★

Several resorts with first-rate spas are clustered between Puerto Morelos and the Cancún airport. They're actually more convenient for quick getaways than those along Cancún's Hotel Zone, and all offer airport transfers for the 15- to 20-minute commute. Rates quoted below are for high season, but don't include the often exorbitant holiday periods. These hotels are mostly all-inclusive (there are few other dining choices nearby). Some add a 10% or 15% service charge.

Ceiba del Mar ★★ Closest to the town of Puerto Morelos, this peaceful resort consists of seven three-story buildings along a landscape of gardens, ponds, and pools. Rooms are large, with a terrace or balcony complete with hammocks. The bathrooms have both showers and tubs, some with an ocean view. Service is attentive and unobtrusive—exemplified by the morning coffee and juice delivery quietly slipped into a niche by the door. The spa's excellent therapists quickly assess each client's needs and preferences. I try to spend at least 1 night here after my travels through the Riviera Maya for a pre-flight massage.

Av. Niños Héroes s/n, 77580 Puerto Morelos, Q. Roo. ✆ **877/545-6221** in the U.S., or 998/872-8060. Fax 998/872-8061. www.ceibadelmar.com. 88 units. High season $316–$445 deluxe and junior suite, from $445 master suite; low season $133–$257 deluxe and junior suite, from $468 master suite. Spa and dining

Tips Driving the Riviera Maya

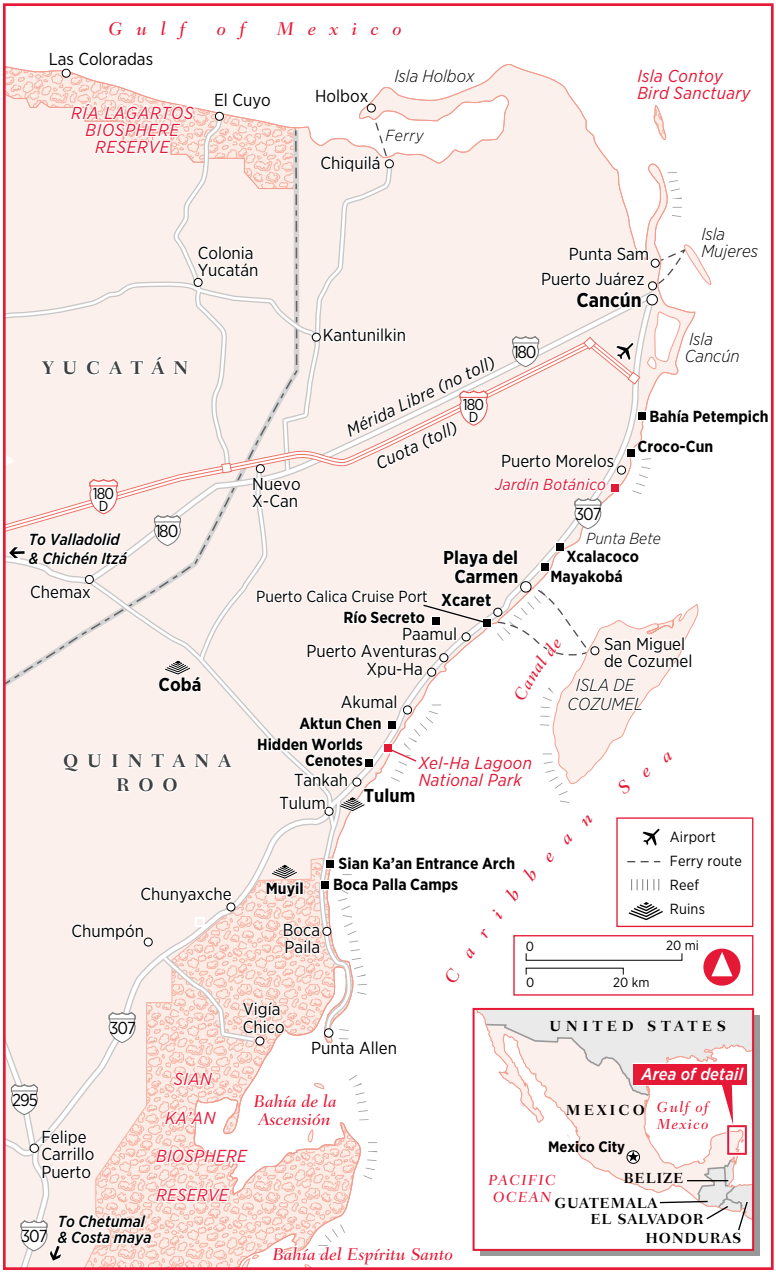
Driving along this coast isn't difficult, but it takes eagle-eyed attention, especially for first timers. With only one highway, you can't get too lost unless you miss the signs for your hotel. Turnoffs can be from either the right or left lane; if you miss the one you want, go a bit farther and circle back. You're not allowed to stop on the highway to make a left turn, but there are several short left-turn lanes at many points across the road from major resorts. In some places, the exit leads to the right, where you should stop before charging across the road to the other side. I can't stress enough just how dangerous this highway can be, especially during high season when you've got locals speeding to work, tour buses clogging the lanes, truck and bus drivers barreling along, and confused or distracted tourists changing lanes on whim. Speed limits are clearly posted and change constantly. Keep an eye out for speed signs, especially around towns and resorts. Lots of drivers ignore speed limits, often to their chagrin. The police have become ever more sophisticated at ticketing speeders and are eagle-eyed around stoplights and one-way streets.

All that said, I can't imagine traveling around the Riviera Maya without a rental car. So many wonderful places to explore are right beside the highway and along side roads to the beach and jungle. First-class gas station plazas with minimarts and fast-food spots are becoming a common sight. Attendants pump the gas (be sure they don't overfill the tank) and will check your oil. Make sure you receive the right change, and tip attendants if they provide extra services. As long as you study your maps in advance and keep your wits about you, driving allows freedom for serendipitous discoveries.

packages available. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; babysitting; bikes; concierge; dive shop w/watersports; state-of-the-art gym w/sauna, steam room, whirlpool, and Swiss showers; 2 outdoor pools (1 heated); room service; smoke-free rooms; spa. *In room:* A/C, TV/VCR, CD player, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Zoetry Paraíso de la Bonita ★★ Both a luxurious all-inclusive hotel and a serious wellness center with an elaborate thalassotherapy spa, this resort offers a bit of everything. Macaws squawk and lovebirds coo in an indoor aviary. Drinks are served in the library amid celeb photos, shared computers, and plush sofas. Guest rooms are decorated around global themes—guests reside in Bali, India, or Africa. The over-the-top design melds sunken marble tubs, beds so puffy short people have to hop to get on, and stone carvings jutting from lintels. Ground-floor rooms have a plunge pool; upstairs rooms have balconies. Artfully placed sculptures of Chinese dragons and Maya deities are spread through hallways and gardens between the two restaurants, pool, and outdoor cocktail lounge. Weddings and incentive trips are popular here.

Carretera Cancún–Chetumal Km 328, Bahía Petempich, 77710 Q. Roo. ✆ **888/496-3879** in the U.S., or 998/872-8300. Fax 998/872-8301. www.zoetryparaisodelabonita.com. 90 units. High season $1,000 and up suite; low season $800 and up suite. Rates include ground transfer and meals, drinks, and some activities. AE, MC, V. Free valet parking. No children 11 and under. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; concierge; 2 Jacuzzis; 4 outdoor pools; room service; smoke-free rooms; spa; lighted tennis court; watersports. *In room:* A/C, TV/DVD, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.


Gulf of Mexico
Las Coloradas
El Cuyo
RÍA LAGARTOS BIOSPHERE RESERVE
Holbox
Isla Holbox
Ferry
Chiquilá
Isla Contoy Bird Sanctuary
Isla Mujeres
Punta Sam
Puerto Juárez
Cancún
Isla Cancún
Colonia Yucatán
Kantunilkin
YUCATÁN
Mérida Libre (no toll)
Cuota (toll)
180
180 D
307
Bahía Petempich
Croco-Cun
Puerto Morelos
Jardín Botánico
Nuevo X-Can
To Valladolid & Chichén Itzá
Chemax
Punta Bete
Playa del Carmen
Xcalacoco
Mayakobá
Puerto Calica Cruise Port
Xcaret
Río Secreto
Paamul
Puerto Aventuras
Xpu-Ha
San Miguel de Cozumel
Canal de
ISLA DE COZUMEL
Cobá
Akumal
Aktun Chen
Hidden Worlds Cenotes
Xel-Ha Lagoon National Park
QUINTANA ROO
Tankah
Tulum
Caribbean Sea
Sian Ka'an Entrance Arch
Boca Palla Camps
Muyil
Chunyaxche
Chumpón
Boca Paila
Vigía Chico
Punta Allen
SIAN KA'AN BIOSPHERE RESERVE
Bahía de la Ascensión
Felipe Carrillo Puerto
To Chetumal & Costa maya
Bahía del Espíritu Santo
Airport
Ferry route
Reef
Ruins
0 20 mi
0 20 km
UNITED STATES
Area of detail
MEXICO
Gulf of Mexico
Mexico City
PACIFIC OCEAN
BELIZE
GUATEMALA
EL SALVADOR
HONDURAS

PUERTO MORELOS

Puerto Morelos remains a quiet fishing village, perfect for lying on the white-sand beach and reading, with the occasional foray into snorkeling, diving, windsurfing, or kayaking. This was the coast's boomtown 100 years ago, when its port shipped hardwood and *chicle* to the U.S. and Europe. Today, the biggest attraction is its idyllic small-town atmosphere and easy pace.

Puerto Morelos' section of the Great Maya Reef has been protected as a national park. The reef is close to the surface and easy to snorkel, and it protects the coast from storm surges. The government-maintained beaches are great, and the water is shallow, calm, and clear, with sea grass growing on the bottom.

Puerto Morelos brims with foreign tourists at times during the high season, but low season is so low that many businesses close for the season, earning it the affectionate nickname, Muerto Morelos (*muerto* means "dead").

Essentials

GETTING THERE **By Car** Puerto Morelos is at Km 31, about a half-hour from Cancún. You'll need to exit the highway onto the frontage road, then turn left under the new overpass.

BY BUS Buses from Cancún to Tulum and Playa del Carmen usually stop here, but be sure to ask in Cancún if your bus makes the Puerto Morelos stop.

Exploring in & Around Puerto Morelos

The biggest draw is the **coral reef** ★★★ rising directly in front of the village to top out just a couple of feet below the water's surface. Divers have nothing over snorkelers here; everyone gets a close-up of the convoluted passages and large caverns burgeoning with fish and sea flora. Restrictions on fishing and boating make this the coast's most pristine patch of coral. Several dive shops in town offer snorkeling tours and gear rentals, but my choice is the local **fishing cooperative** ★ (✆ **998/121-1524**) at the foot of the pier. Its 22 member fishing families are national park–certified guides who rotate tour gigs to supplement their income. The fixed fee is 300 pesos for a 2-hour trip that visits two snorkeling sites. Tours leave approximately every half-hour, Monday through Saturday from 9am to 3pm. During whale shark season, the manager, Paco González, also runs tours to Isla Holbox (p. 646) on his day off.

Dive shops around town charge $45 to $50 for one-tank dives; PADI certification costs $350 to $400. One of the best is **Almost Heaven Adventures** (✆/fax **998/871-0230;** www.almostheavenadventures.com), on Javier Rojo Gómez a block north of the plaza. Enrique Juárez, in business for 15 years, holds groups to five divers and is known for thorough briefings and attentive boat crews. Also recommended: **Dive In Puerto Morelos** (✆ **998/206/9084;** www.diveinpuertomorelos.com) and **Wet Set Diving Adventure** (✆ **998/871-0198;** www.wetset.com).

The small, modern **central plaza** is less beguiling than the adjacent sea walk, but it is the fulcrum of local life (and the site of many restaurants). On the south side, **Alma Libre** (✆ **998/871-0713;** www.almalibrebooks.com) sells more English-language books than any other bookstore in the Yucatán. The owners, Canadians Joanne and Rob Birce, stock everything from beach reads to English classics, cookbooks to volumes on Maya culture, as well as regional maps. The store also serves as a book exchange, tourist information center, and vacation rental agency. This year it expanded its hours to 7 days a week, 10am to 3pm and 6 to 9pm.

About a block south of the plaza on Javier Rojo Gómez, the local artisans' cooperative runs **Hunab Kú market,** a collection of *palapa* stands selling hammocks, hand-embroidered

clothes, jewelry, blankets, ceramics, and other handicrafts. The wares are high quality, and there are some bargains. Vendors don't hustle you, so it's worth a stroll just for the parklike setting. The market is open daily from 9am to 8pm.

On Wednesday and Friday, you can get a good massage and other treatments at the **Jungle Spa** ★★ (✆ **998/208-9148;** www.mayaecho.com), a short distance west of Hwy. 307. This is a cooperative endeavor by Maya women who have been trained in spa techniques. Massages cost $40 for 1 hour, $60 for 1½ hours—a fraction of what nearby spa hotels charge—and the money directly supports local Maya families. The same group holds a Sunday Jungle Market to sell unique handicrafts.

Selvática (✆ **866/552-8825** in the U.S., or 998/847-4581; www.selvatica.com.mx), operating out of offices in Cancún, offers guests a little jungle adventure, with 2.5km (1½ miles) of zip lines strung up in the forest canopy 19km (12 miles) west of Puerto Morelos. The program also includes biking and swimming in cenotes. In high season, you should make reservations a month in advance. The cost ($90–$120) includes transportation, activities, a light lunch, locker, and all equipment.

Where to Stay

For condo rentals, see the website of Alma Libre books (see above).

Club Marviya ★ Guest rooms in the original Club Marviya occupy the second floor of a converted mansion on the town's main street, where small terraces offer terrific views and refreshing breezes. Mexican style and color infuse the airy contemporary rooms, which have firm beds and ceramic tile floors. A large communal kitchen and lounge encourage socializing, and the hospitable Canadian and Mexican owners often schmooze with guests in the covered courtyard during the evening. Around the corner, the same owners offer nine newly renovated studios geared toward longer stays (but available by the night). Neither property has air-conditioning, but sea breezes suffice most of the year. They are 3 blocks from the main square, but only a block from the best beach in town.

Av. Javier Rojo Gómez (at Ejército), SM2, 77580 Puerto Morelos, Q. Roo. ✆ **998/871-0049.** www.marviya.com. 15 units. High season $110; low season $60–$75. High-season rates include breakfast. Studios $80–$110 a night (no breakfast). Weekly/monthly rates available. MC, V. **Amenities:** Communal kitchen/lounge; bikes; massage; sailboard and kayak rentals; Wi-Fi (in lobby). *In room:* Ceiling fans, fridge.

Hotel Ojo de Agua (Kids) This family-run hotel's perch on the town's best stretch of beach, 2 long blocks from the main square, would be enough to recommend it, but it also has a good dive shop, watersports, and a popular beach restaurant. Utilitarian rooms are brightened by rattan furniture and bold paint. Studios with kitchenettes and small yards come with one king-size bed or a double and two twins—they have ceiling fans but no air-conditioning—and are well suited for families. The beach's excellent snorkeling includes the undersea cenote for which the hotel is named.

Av. Javier Rojo Gómez 16, SM2, M 2, 77580 Puerto Morelos, Q. Roo. ✆ **998/840-3942.** www.ojo-de-agua.com. 36 units. High season $70–$80 double, $90 studio; low season $60–$70 double, $80 studio. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; dive shop; outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C (in some), kitchen (in some).

Posada El Moro ★★★ (Kids) One of the town's most appealing hotels also happens to be a great deal. Renting a room is akin to ordering dim sum: Add $5 a night for air-conditioning, $5 more for TV, and another $5 for a kitchenette. French-paned sliding doors and windows flood the rooms with natural light, and the tile bathrooms are new and sparkling clean. Simple, cheery furnishings include queen-size beds with nearly perfect mattresses, plus a futon. Junior suites have a single bed as well; full suites have two double beds, a futon, and a kitchenette. Guests have use of the kitchen off the lobby. The

pretty, compact garden has a small pool perfect for kids, and the amiable family that runs the place creates a homey atmosphere. The hotel is about a half-block off the town square.

Av. Rojo Gómez, SM2, M 5, Lote 17 (north of José Morelos), 77580 Puerto Morelos, Q. Roo. ✆/fax **998/871-0159.** www.posadaelmoro.com. 31 units. High season $60–$80 double, $90 suite; low season $50–$70 double, $80 suite. Rates include ample continental breakfast. MC, V. Limited free parking. **Amenities:** Small outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C (in some), TV (in some), Wi-Fi.

Where to Dine

Most of Puerto Morelos' restaurants are on or around the main square. These include **Doña Triny's** for Mexican and Yucatecan standards; **Los Pelícanos** for seafood; **David Lau's** for Asian food; enduring local favorite **Hola Asia** for Chinese, Japanese, and Thai; **El Pirata** if you have kids (for its large menu); and **Le Café d'Amancia** for coffee, pastries, and downright addictive smoothies.

John Gray's Kitchen ★★★ SEAFOOD If I could splurge only once on my entire Riviera Maya stay, this would be the place. After chef John Gray left the Ritz-Carlton Cancún, where he elevated the Club Grill to iconic status, he cooked his way around the world before settling in Puerto Morelos in 2002. He's since opened restaurants in Playa del Carmen and Cancún, but this is where it all began, and where he still captains the kitchen most nights. The menu changes with Gray's mood and what's fresh in the market; the first time I ate there, he burst out of the kitchen to scribble swordfish and fresh clams on menus that diners were already studying. Pick out three of the appetizers, such as crab cakes with a Mexican twist or ambrosial baked red chile cauliflower, and split them among two people for a very *haute* meal at a bargain price. Newcomer **La Suegra,** just north of the square near the lighthouse, is owned by Gray's mother-in-law. The food is good, if a bit expensive, and it has a full bar, but its greatest virtue is the two-level deck overlooking the ocean.

Av. Niños Heroes Lote 6 (north of Av. José Morelos). ✆ **998/871-0665.** Reservations recommended. Main courses $12–$29. MC, V. Mon–Sat 6–10pm.

Posada Amor ★ BREAKFAST/YUCATECAN Puerto Morelos' oldest restaurant, now run by the founder's son, has patrons who have been eating here for nearly 30 years. The *palapa*-roofed dining room, a half-block south of the plaza, is a great place for a complete breakfast or the bargain-priced Sunday breakfast buffet. A few sidewalk tables are perfect for nighttime. The dinner menu focuses on fresh seafood and Yucatecan-influenced dishes.

Avs. Javier Rojo Gómez and Tulum. ✆ **998/871-0033.** Main courses 48–200 pesos; breakfast 45–70 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 7am–10pm.

SOUTH OF PUERTO MORELOS

The beaches, bays, mangrove lagoons, and jungles between Puerto Morelos and Playa del Carmen are constantly undergoing transformation. Punta Maroma, home to the coast's first exclusive hideaway, is being carved into several resort and residential compounds. Massive all-inclusive resorts rise on beaches where campgrounds once thrived. Mayakobá, a master-planned resort just north of Playa del Carmen, is a fine example of an ecologically responsible development, though many other resorts are just using the land as they wish without much thought to conservation. This area is packed with adventures and attractions, and new playtime projects open frequently.

Grand Velas ★★★ All-inclusive resorts, some with nearly 1,000 rooms, claim much of the Riviera Maya's coastline. I've ignored them, for the most part. But I couldn't resist checking out the Grand Velas just south of Mayakobá. From afar, it looks massive and

imposing. But I quickly learned that this small hotel chain has merged all-inclusive with all the luxuries of the area's finest hotels. Suites are clustered in three categories—the adults-only Grand Class, an Ambassador Family Ambience, and Jungle Suite Ambience. The first two all have ocean views; jungle suites are located beside the spa and convention center and have the most amenities for business travelers, including large desks facing canals and jungle. Sleek, dark brown furnishings and cream walls, ceiling, and floors give all suites an open-air feeling. The restaurants are top-notch: the Cocina de Autor has won numerous accolades thanks to its creative Spanish chefs, as has the French restaurant Piaf. I could easily spend hours in the spa's hydrotherapy area ($50 for a full day or free with spa treatment), with its bubbling jets, gushing water spouts, "experience showers," saunas, and cushy lounge chairs. Everything is over the top, in a good way—it's no wonder guests spend multiple nights and hold destination weddings here.

Carretera 307 Km 62, Playa del Carmen, 77710 Q. Roo. ✆ **866/335-4640** in the U.S. and Canada, or 984/877-4414. http://rivieramaya.grandvelas.com. 481 suites. From $450 double. Rates include meals (1 at each of the 3 gourmet restaurants, unlimited at others), drinks, and gratuities. AE, MC, V. Free valet parking. **Amenities:** 8 restaurants; 3 bars; butler service; children's programs; concierge; fitness center; 2 outdoor pools; room service; spa; watersports. *In room:* A/C, TV/CD/DVD, fan, hair dryer, Internet (for a fee), MP3 dock.

Maroma ★★ This resort has been around the longest, owns a large inland parcel that somewhat protects it from development, and has a gorgeous beach and beautifully manicured grounds. Two- and three-story buildings house the large guest rooms; most have king-size beds. The grounds are lovely, and the beach is fine white sand. The hotel has also spent a lot of effort and money upgrading the rooms. Nine new suites are outrageously extravagant. The beach bar is an enjoyable place to pass the evening. A replica of the pyramid at Uxmal rises above the entrance to the stylish spa.

Carretera 307 Km 51, Riviera Maya (Solidaridad), 77710 Q. Roo. ✆ **866/454-9351** in the U.S., or 998/872-8200. www.maromahotel.com. 65 units. $765 and up double and junior suite, $1,520 master suite. Rates include ground transfer, full breakfast, and snorkeling tour. AE, MC, V. Free valet parking. No children 15 and under. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 3 bars; concierge; fitness center; Jacuzzi; 3 outdoor spring-fed pools; room service; spa; steam bath; watersports. *In room:* A/C, hair dryer, Internet.

Petit Lafitte Hotel ★ One kilometer (a half-mile) south of the original Posada Lafitte, this new property has the same easygoing attitude that characterized the old one. In relative isolation, you still get all the amenities of a relaxing vacation. The three-story building, with 30 rooms, is surrounded by 13 bungalows. Spacious, attractive rooms are larger than those in the original property but have a similar beach-hotel simplicity. The staff came from the old property, so service is still personal and attentive.

Carretera Cancún–Tulum Km 63 (Punta Bete), 77710 Playa del Carmen, Q. Roo. ✆ **800/538-6802** in the U.S. and Canada, or 984/877-4000. www.petitlafitte.com. 43 units. High season $200–$375 double; low season $175–$350 double. Minimum 2–4 nights. Rates include breakfast and dinner. MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar, Wi-Fi.

The Tides Riviera Maya ★★ The smallest resort in this area once held sway over a seemingly endless white beach. New hotels and neighborhoods are rising all around it these days, but the Tides (formerly Ikal del Mar) is still all about privacy and tranquillity. Thirty well-separated bungalows—each with its own piece of jungle, a little pool, and an outdoor shower—are connected by sparsely lit pathways through the vegetation. The bungalows are large and designed to blend with the setting, using louvered shutters, crocheted hammocks, and minimal decorations in a modern, spare style. The bathrooms have two showers (though the private pools are perfect for long soaks). Major-domos are on call for some villas, and service at all levels is understated and professional. The bar

and restaurant, overlooking an inviting pool, make for an attractive common area. And, of course, there's the eco-spa surrounded by jungle.

Playa Xcalacoco, Carretera Cancún–Tulum (Playa Xcalacoco), 77710 Q. Roo. ✆ **800/578-0281** in the U.S. and Canada, or 984/877-3000. Fax 713/528-3697. www.tidesrivieramaya.com. 30 units. High season $700 and up double; low season $585 and up double. Rates include full breakfast. AE, MC, V. Free secure parking. No children 17 and under except during some holidays. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 bars; concierge; 2 Jacuzzis; large outdoor pool; room service; courtesy shuttle to Playa; spa; steam bath; watersports. *In room:* A/C, TV/DVD, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

MAYAKOBA RESIDENTIAL GOLF & SPA RESORT

One of the most impressive ecologically sensitive developments I've seen, **Mayakobá** (www.mayakoba.com) incorporates three upscale hotels, including Banyan Tree's first foray into Mexico, and a championship golf course into more than 607 hectares (1,500 acres) of healthy mangroves, lagoons, cenotes, and beaches. Less than 243 hectares (600 acres) have been developed thus far, all on the ocean side of Hwy. 307. The compound's concept is unusual—it's a beach resort with precious few oceanview rooms. Instead, the hotels line a series of freshwater canals. It takes some getting used to, but the idea works.

Guests travel about in electric boats and golf carts and may use the restaurants, spas, and other facilities in all three hotels. Some guests have trouble with the jungle setting—bug repellent is a must, especially at dusk, and swimming is forbidden in the canals. I've spotted small crocodiles in the canals and have been assured they're removed to more suitable homes on Mayakobá's wild side. The **El Camaleón** golf course, designed by Greg Norman, is an Audubon-certified bird reserve—and a challenge for the pros competing in Mexico's only PGA tournament, usually scheduled for late February/early March. The first fairway sits beside a large cenote. The development is extremely private, and you must have a reservation or appointment to get past the gates. Consider booking a meal or spa treatment at one of the superb restaurants or spas and take a look around.

Fairmont Mayakobá Kids Families, groups, and recluses are all happy with the thoughtful layout and facilities at Mayakobá's first resort. Active types head for the beach, pool island (with a 929-sq.-m/10,000-sq.-ft. free-form pool), 24-hour gym, or El Camaleón golf course. Sybarites spend hours at the Willow Stream Spa, alternating between treatments and lazy laps in a peaceful rooftop pool. Dining choices range from a gourmet deli to lagoon-side breakfast buffets to two excellent formal restaurants. Rooms come in 13 categories, including a suite on its own island. All open out to gardens, lagoons, or the Caribbean Sea. Wooden shutter doors close off the bathing and sleeping areas or can be open to nature. In keeping with the eco setting, rooms have trash cans for recyclable materials and the spa uses soaps and lotions made at a local community co-op.

Carretera Cancún–Tulum Km 298, 77710 Playa del Carmen, Q. Roo. ✆ **800/435-2600** in the U.S. and Canada, or 984/206-3000. www.fairmont.com/mayakoba. 401 units. High season $409–$659 casitas, $809 and up signature casitas; low season $219–$469 casitas, $299 and up signature casistas. AE, MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 3 bars; fitness center; 5 outdoor pools; spa; watersports. *In room:* A/C, fan, TV/CD, hair dryer, Internet, minibar.

Rosewood Mayakobá ★★★ Privacy is the hallmark of this pricey resort designed with sail-like roofs on open-air spaces that take full advantage of the natural setting. Classy two-story suites face various mangrove-backed lagoons and have awe-inspiring sea views from rooftop pools and sun decks—starlit nights are pretty perfect as well. Over-water decks and plunge pools are almost totally hidden, though motorized boats sometimes pass by when ferrying new guests around the property. Beachfront suites are a bit less secluded—you can't keep folks from strolling the mile-long stretch of soft sand. Interiors have a fresh,

airy look, with sliding shuttered doors connecting bedrooms, spacious closet areas, and outdoor showers and tubs buried in foliage. Private butlers and housekeepers anticipate your needs. Guests linger over newspapers during leisurely breakfasts at Casa del Lago, tequila tastings and ceviches at the Agua Azul bar, and Mexican cuisine at Punta Bonita.

Carretera Cancún–Tulum Km 298, 77710 Playa del Carmen, Q. Roo. ✆ **800/435-2600** in the U.S. and Canada, or 984/875-8000. www.rosewoodmayakoba.com. 128 suites. High season $790 and up lagoon-view suites; $1,350 and up oceanview suites; low season $590–$850 lagoon-view suites, $1,050 and up oceanview suites. AE, MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** 3 restaurants; 3 bars; fitness center; 3 outdoor pools; spa; watersports. *In room:* A/C, fan, TV/CD/DVD, hair dryer, Internet, minibar.

2 PLAYA DEL CARMEN ★★★

32km (20 miles) S of Puerto Morelos; 70km (43 miles) S of Cancún; 10km (6½ miles) N of Xcaret; 13km (8 miles) N of Puerto Calica

Though it no longer has the feel of a village, Playa still provides a combination of simplicity (at its core, still primarily a beach town) and variety (unique hotels, restaurants, and stores). The local architecture has adopted such elements of native building as rustic clapboard walls, stucco, thatched roofs, rough-hewn wood, and in many structures, a ramshackle, unplanned look. Cheap-looking commercial architecture has intruded, and chain restaurants and stores detract from the individuality, but Playa retains the feel of a cosmopolitan getaway with a counterculture ethos.

A strong European influence has made topless sunbathing (nominally against the law in Mexico) an accepted practice at beaches north and south of town (away from families). The beach grows and shrinks, from broad and sandy to narrower with rocks, depending on currents and wind. When this happens, head to the beaches in north Playa.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There & Departing

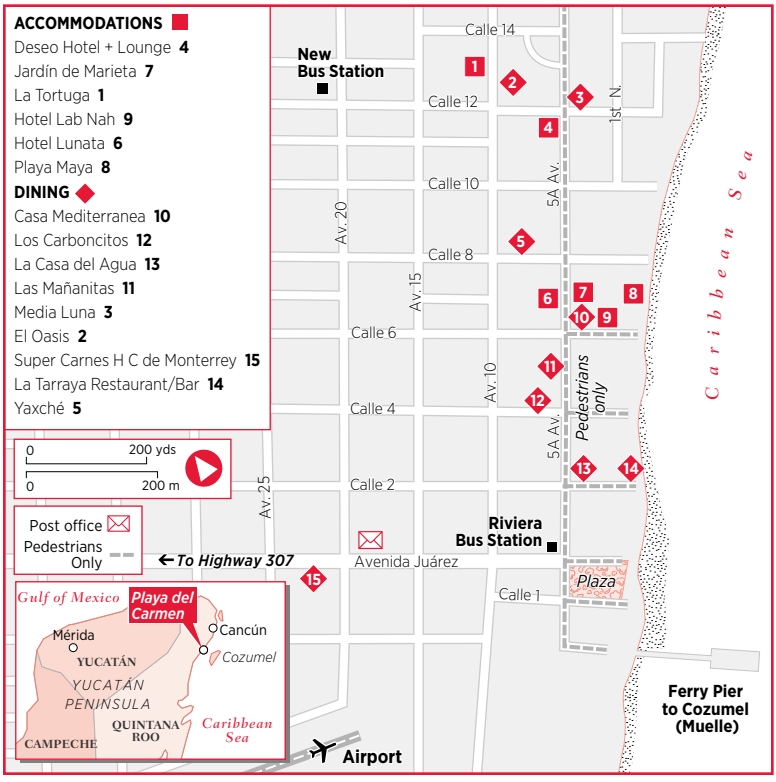
BY AIR Fly into Cancún and take a bus directly from the airport (see "By Bus," below), or fly into Cozumel and take the passenger ferry.

BY CAR **Hwy. 307** is the only highway that passes through Playa. The highway divides as you approach from Cancún. The two main arteries into town are Avenida Constituyentes, which works well for destinations in northern Playa, and Avenida Juárez, which leads to the town's main square. Keep to the inside lanes to permit turning left at any of the traffic lights; otherwise you will have to continue past Playa until you get to the turnaround, then double-back, staying to your right.

BY FERRY Air-conditioned passenger ferries to Cozumel leave from the pier, 1 block from the main square. There is also a car ferry to Cozumel from the Calica pier just south of Playacar. The schedule for passenger ferries changes with demand. You can usually count on hourly departures in the morning and late afternoon—just like rush hour on land. Ferries typically depart every 2 hours around midday. For more information about both ferries, see "Getting There & Departing" in the Cozumel section of chapter 15.

BY TAXI Taxi fares from the Cancún airport are about 650 to 750 pesos one-way.

BY BUS **Autobuses Riviera** offers service from the Cancún airport about 10 times a day between 8:10am and 8pm. Cost is 106 pesos one-way. If you arrive at Terminal 2, you'll see a ticket counter in the corridor to your right as you approach the doors out of the terminal. The buses leave from the end of the parking lot all the way to the right after



you exit. From Terminal 3, go outside after you depart Customs/Immigrations, and the bus is to the right. At either terminal, you can also pay the driver, in either pesos or U.S. dollars. For a higher fee ($10 to Playa, $4 to Cancún) you can also reserve your seat online at www.cancun-airport.com/public-buses.htm; an airport representative will meet you outside the terminal and escort you to the bus. From the downtown Cancún bus station, buses depart almost every 30 minutes and cost 40 pesos.

Orientation

ARRIVING Playa has two **bus** stations. Buses from Cancún and places along the coast, such as Tulum, arrive at the Riviera bus station, at the corner of Juárez and Avenida Quinta, by the town square. Buses from interior destinations arrive at the new ADO station on Avenida 20 between calles 12 and 14.

A word of caution: Most "information" stands along Avenida Quinta are associated with timeshare and vacation ownership properties. The salespeople are usually generous with information, hoping you'll agree to a sales tour of the properties they represent. Some tourists are wise to this and willingly give up a morning in exchange for free car rental, tours, or other perks. If your time is tight, however, steer clear.

CITY LAYOUT The main street, **Avenida Juárez,** leads to the town square from Hwy. 307. On the way, it crosses several numbered avenues running parallel to the beach, all of which are multiples of 5. The east-west streets parallel to Juárez are in multiples of two. A wonderful bike path along Avenida 10 provides fairly safe passage for *tricilcos* (bike taxis) and cyclists.

Avenida Quinta (Fifth Avenue), often simply "La Quinta," runs 1 to 2 blocks inland from the beach and is the most popular street in the Riviera Maya. It's closed to traffic from Avenida Juárez to Calle 12 (and some blocks beyond, in the evening). However, taxis and drivers are allowed to access hotels on side streets. Hotels, restaurants, shops, clubs, and chains like Starbucks and Dairy Queen line Fifth Avenue and its side streets. **Avenida Constituyentes** delineates the newest part of rapidly growing Playa. Several hip restaurants and pricey condo developments are located here.

Playacar, a golf-course development with private residences and several resort hotels, is located just south of Avenida Juárez.

Fast Facts Playa del Carmen

Area Code The telephone area code is **984.**

ATMs & Banks Playa has several banks and ATMs.

Consular Office A **U.S. Consular Agency** is at Calle 1 Sur, between avenidas 15 and 20 (✆ **984/873-0303;** Mon, Wed, Fri 10am–1pm). A **Canadian office** is at Avenida 10 Sur, between calles 3 and 5 Sur (✆ **984/803-2411;** Mon–Fri 9am–3:30pm).

Currency Exchange Many *casas de cambio* or currency-exchange houses are close to the pier or along Avenida Quinta at Calle 8.

Doctor For serious medical attention, go to **Hospiten** (✆ **984/803-1002**), on Hwy. 307 at the second Playacar exit, just south of Sam's Club. **Dr. G. Ambriz** speaks English and was trained in the U.S. and Europe. His office is at the corner of Avenida 30 and Calle 14 (✆ **984/109-1245**).

Drugstore The **Farmacía del Carmen,** Avenida Juárez between avenidas 5 and 10 (✆ **984/873-2330**), is open 24 hours.

Internet Access Internet cafes are all over town; most have fast connections. Most hotels have Wi-Fi, at least in public areas.

Parking Parking on the street in Playa is tough, as spots are hard to come by and police are quick to ticket violators. The **Estacionamiento México,** at avenidas Juárez and 10 (where the entrance is located) is open daily 24 hours and charges 20 pesos per hour, 120 pesos per day. There's also a **24-hour lot** a few blocks from the pier on Avenida 10 and Calle 3 Sur. Very few hotels have on-site parking, but some can get you reduced rates at nearby lots.

Post Office The *correo,* on Avenida Juárez, 3 blocks from the plaza, is on the right past the Hotel Playa del Carmen and the launderette.

Seasons The main high season is from mid-December to Easter. A mini–high season is in August and around Thanksgiving. Low season is all other months, though many hotels further divide these into several micro seasons.

EXPLORING PLAYA DEL CARMEN

Playa del Carmen is best enjoyed from a lounge chair on the sand or over an evening strolling **Avenida Quinta** ★★, paralleling the beach for 20 blocks from the ferry pier to the north. The area around the ferry terminal, predictably, is rife with trinket emporiums, hawkers, and chain eateries, but the avenue mellows into bistros, cool bars, sweet clothing shops, and sophisticated restaurants as you go north.

Playa's most active pursuits revolve around simply enjoying the good life. The best **sandy beaches** for swimming and sunning are north of Avenida Constituyentes; for the most part, central Playa's beach is pocked with sharp limestone and is best for dining, partying, and watersports. The best stretch of sand in this area, offering a breather from encroaching hotels, is Playa El Faro, between calles 8 and 10. A decent patch also lies between the dock and Las Ruinas Beach Club at Calle 2. The most beautiful beach, though—and unfortunately the most crowded—extends from Constituyentes north for 5 blocks to Las Mamitas and Kool beach clubs, between calles 28 and 30. Its gradually deepening waters and breaking waves farther out provide ample fodder for water play. The sublime sands farther north are increasingly being squeezed by condo developments.

Playa's offshore reef offers decent **diving,** though it doesn't compare to Cozumel (p. 503) or Puerto Morelos (p. 546). Its primary virtue, which has earned it scores of dive shops, is access to Cozumel and a chain of inland cenotes. Reef dives generally cost $45 to $50 for one tank and $70 to $75 for two; two-tank cenote trips are around $110 to $120. Prices for Cozumel trips vary more and are noted below. (Cozumel dives almost always require you to take the ferry on your own and board the dive boat on the island.) Dedicated divers should look for the discounted multi-dive deals and dive/hotel packages offered by many shops. **Buceo Cyan Ha** (✆ **984/803-2517;** www.cyanha.com), the first shop in Playa and still one of the most respected, recently opened a second site at the Petit Lafitte Hotel (p. 549). **Tank-Ha Dive Center** (✆ **984/873-0302;** www.tankha.com) is the only operator that takes divers to Cozumel directly from Playa. **Yucatek Divers** (✆ **984/803-2836;** www.yucatek-divers.com) specializes in cenote diving and in dives for people with disabilities. The **Abyss Dive Center** (✆ **984/873-2164;** www.abyssdiveshop.com) has its own hotel. You won't go wrong with any of these.

The best **snorkeling** spots are not along Playa's shore but at Moché reef to the north and Inna reef to the south. Most dive shops offer guided snorkeling tours for $35 to $45, or $55 to $65 for cenote snorkeling. Before you book, ask whether gear is included, the size of your group, how long the trip will last, and how many reefs or cenotes you'll visit. Small boats docked up and down the beach also offer snorkeling tours for a little less than dive-shop prices, and they'll launch as soon as you show up.

Countless **watersports** outfitters line the beach and La Quinta, offering excursions inland to cenotes, ruins, and adventure parks. Banana boating, tubing, and jet-skiing are just a few of the (pricey) watersports you can enjoy in Playa's calm waters.

Playa makes a great base for excursions up and down the Riviera Maya. It's easy to shoot out to Cozumel on the ferry, drive south to the nature parks and the ruins at Tulum and Cobá, or drive north to Cancún. Directly south of town is the Playacar development, which has a golf course, several large all-inclusive resorts, and a residential development. My favorite outfitter for unusual trips is **Alltournative** (✆ **800/507-1092** in the U.S., or 984/803-9999; www.alltournative.com; p. 575), on La Quinta between calles 12 and 14.

SHOPPING

Playa is the Caribbean coast's retail heart, and meandering Avenida Quinta and its side streets to ferret out the latest boutiques and shops makes a fine late-afternoon diversion.

Once you get past the ferry terminal area, low-key, locally owned shops vie for your vacation dollar with high-end clothing, Cuban cigars, specialty tequila, handicrafts, jewelry, and beachwear. Credit cards are widely accepted. The best folk art and boutiques are concentrated between calles 4 and 10; Calle Corazón, a leafy pedestrian area between calles 12 and 14, has art galleries, restaurants, a spa, and still more boutiques.

Some favorite shops along La Quinta, south to north: **Colors Collection Boutique,** Calle 2, west of Avenida Quinta (✆ **984/879-3272**), an unsung little side-street shop selling locally designed *manta* (Mexican cotton) clothes for women, and some for men (also available in the larger but less tranquil De Beatriz Boutique at the beach); **Caracol,** between calles 6 and 8 (✆ **984/803-1504**), with tasteful and unique textiles, crafts, and clothing from throughout Mexico; **La Calaca,** between calles 12 and 14 (✆ **984/873-0174**), for its wondrous variety of wooden masks, quirky carvings of angels, devils, and skeletons, and *alebrijes* (the famous Oaxacan carved, whimsically painted animals); **Casa Tequila,** at Calle 16 (✆ **984/873-0195**), for its impressive selection of fine silver jewelry as well as 100 types of specialty tequila (you sample before you buy); and **Ah Cacao,** at Constituyentes (✆ **984/803-5748;** www.ahcacao.com), for its intense and rare criollo chocolate, the Maya's "food of the gods," in bars, cocoa, or roasted beans—the cafe's fudgy mochas, frappes, and chocolate shots will ruin you for Starbucks.

Paseo del Carmen, at the south end of Avenida Quinta, has distinguished itself from Playa's plethora of generic shopping malls by acquiring a collection of interesting shops, galleries, and restaurants. **InArt** (✆ **984/803-3968;** www.inartmexico.com), a jewelry gallery that also sells gorgeous, unique silver pieces embedded with Mexican semiprecious gems and stones, is worth the trip in itself.

WHERE TO STAY

Playa has a lot of affordable small hotels that give you a better feel for the town than staying in one of the resorts in Playacar. Don't hesitate to book a place that's not on the beach. Town life here is much of the fun, and staying on the beach in Playa has its disadvantages—in particular, the noise from a couple of beach bars. Beaches are public property in Mexico, and you can lay out your towel anywhere you like. There are some beach clubs in north Playa where, for a small sum or the price of a meal, you have use of lounge chairs, towels, and food and drink.

When tourism is slow you can score some great walk-in offers. Promotional rates and packages pop up online as well. Reservations are essential around holidays, however. Rates listed below include the 12% hotel tax. I don't include rates for Christmas to New Year's, which are even higher than standard high-season rates.

Expensive

Deseo Hotel + Lounge ★★ The lounge serves as lobby, restaurant, bar, and pool area all at once. It's a raised open-air platform with bar, pool, self-serve kitchen, and daybeds for sunning or sipping an evening drink when the action is in full swing. It's filled with a hip Mexico City clientele during national holidays and is popular with the 20-to-50 set. Guest rooms are comfortable, original, and striking, but they don't tempt one to stay indoors—no TV, no cushy armchair. Their simplicity gives them an almost Asian feel, heightened by nice touches like sliding wood-and-frosted-glass doors. The bottom of each bed has a little drawer that slides out with a night kit containing incense, earplugs, and condoms.

The owners also operate the cleverly styled **Hotel Básico** (✆ **984/879-4448;** www.hotelbasico.com). It's a fun mix of industrial and '50s styles, built with concrete, plywood, and plastics. As with Deseo, the common areas are not wasted space.

Av. 5 (at Calle 12), 77710 Playa del Carmen, Q. Roo. ✆ **984/879-3620.** Fax 984/879-3621. www.hoteldeseo.com. 15 units. $199–$233 lounge view; $222–$255 balcony; $278–$311 suite. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, MC, V. No parking. No children 17 and under. **Amenities:** Bar; Jacuzzi; small rooftop pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, hair dryer (on request), minibar.

Moderate

Hotel Lunata ★★ (Value) In the middle of Playa, there isn't a more comfortable or more attractive place to stay than this small hotel on Avenida Quinta. Rooms offer character and polished good looks. The few standard rooms are midsize and come with a queen-size or a double bed. Large deluxe rooms come with a king-size bed and small fridge; junior suites come with two doubles. The well-designed bathrooms have good showers. I stayed in a room facing the street, with double-glazed glass doors opening to a balcony. I enjoyed looking out over La Quinta, and, with the doors shut, the noise was not bothersome. Still, light sleepers should ask for a room facing the garden.

Av. 5 (btw. calles 6 and 8), 77710 Playa del Carmen, Q. Roo. ✆ **984/873-0884.** Fax 984/873-1240. www.lunata.com. 10 units. High season $129 double, $159–$179 deluxe and junior suite; low season $110 double, $125–$145 deluxe and junior suite. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, MC, V. Secure parking $5. No children 12 and under. **Amenities:** Bikes; smoke-free rooms; watersports. *In room:* A/C, fan, TV, fridge (in some), hair dryer (on request), Wi-Fi (in some).

La Tortuga ★★★ You'll have a hard time staying anywhere else when you can get amiable service, a variety of rooms, and all the amenities you need at these digs. The word's out, and travelers fill the rooms—though there's usually a good choice for returning guests. Some rooms edge the sinuous pool; others have tiny balconies overlooking rooftops. Suites have whirlpool tubs, balconies, and extras like irons and robes. All rooms have plenty of shelves and tables for stowing your belongings, coffee machines, and alarm clocks (blessings for business travelers). The cozy living room space by the pool has a bar, a book exchange, and comfy couches, and the restaurant is always improving. Guests have a private entrance to the Zen Eco Spa next door.

Avenida 10 (btw. calles 12 and 14), 77710 Playa del Carmen, Q. Roo. ✆ **984/873-1484.** www.hotellatortuga.com. 51 units. $160–$269 double, $266–$306 suite. Rates include reduced-rate parking at an indoor lot, breakfast, and beach passes. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, fan, TV, Jacuzzi (in suite), minibar, MP3 dock (in suite).

Playa Maya ★ (Value) There are plenty of reasons to choose this over other beach hotels in downtown Playa—good location, good price, comfortable rooms, and friendly, helpful management, to name a few. But what really sets it apart is that you enter the hotel from the beach. This seemingly inconsequential detail sets the mood and creates a little separation from the busy street. What's more, the design blocks out noise from nearby bars and neighboring hotels. Rooms are large, with midsize bathrooms. A couple have private garden terraces with Jacuzzis; others have balconies facing the beach. High-season rates here extend from Christmas through August, and minimum stays are required.

Zona FMT (btw. calles 6 and 8 Norte), 77710 Playa del Carmen, Q. Roo. ✆ **984/803-2022.** www.playa-maya.com. 20 units. High season $145–$195 double; low season $112–$180 double. Rates include continental breakfast. MC, V. Limited street parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; Jacuzzi; outdoor pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Inexpensive

Hotel Lab Nah (Value) Good rooms in a central location for a good price are the main attraction at this economy hotel in the heart of Playa. The cheapest rooms have windows facing Avenida Quinta, allowing in some noise—mostly late-night bar hoppers. It didn't bother me much, but I think it's worth the money to get one of the partial-oceanview

standards with balcony on the third floor, which are quieter and larger. Garden-view rooms directly below the oceanviews are just as large and quiet, but not quite as fixed up. And the difference in price is little. The largest unit, a rooftop *palapa,* is good for three or four people.

Calle 6 (and Av. 5), 77710 Playa del Carmen, Q. Roo. ✆ **984/873-2099.** www.labnah.com. 33 units. High season 550–750 pesos double, 1,050 pesos rooftop *palapa;* low season 490–650 pesos double, 860 pesos rooftop *palapa.* Rates include continental breakfast. MC, V. Limited street parking. **Amenities:** Small outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, hair dryers (in some), no phone.

Jardín de Marieta Finds Besides the reasonable rates, I like this pleasant, quirky place for its central, yet half-hidden location in a small, quiet interior property without any street frontage on La Quinta. Rooms vary a good bit, but most are large, bright, and cheerful. Four rooms have kitchenettes, adequate for simple meals. Most rooms encircle a tree-shaded patio with a few shops and a restaurant.

Av. 5 Norte 173 (btw. calles 6 and 8), 77710 Playa del Carmen, Q. Roo. ✆ **984/873-0224.** www.jardinde marieta.com. 10 units. High season $60–$100 double; low season $50–$90 double. No credit cards. Limited street parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge, kitchenette (in some), no phone, Wi-Fi.

WHERE TO DINE

For a delicious Veracruz-style breakfast in pleasant, breezy surroundings, try the upstairs terrace restaurant of the **Hotel Básico,** at Avenida Quinta and Calle 10 Norte. For fish tacos and inexpensive seafood, try **El Oasis,** on Calle 12, between avenidas 5 and 10 (no phone). For *arrachera* (fajita) tacos, the place to go is **Super Carnes H C de Monterrey** (✆ **984/803-0488**), on Calle 1 Sur between avenidas 20 and 25.

Expensive

La Casa del Agua ★★ EUROPEAN/MEXICAN Excellent food in inviting surroundings. Instead of obtrusive background music, you hear the sound of falling water. The German owners present what they like best about the old and new worlds. They do a good job with seafood—try the grilled seafood for two. For a mild dish, try chicken in a scented sauce of fine herbs accompanied by fettuccine; for something heartier, there's a tortilla soup listed as "Mexican soup." A number of cool and light dishes are appetizing for lunch or an afternoon meal, such as avocado stuffed with shrimp and flavored with a subtle horseradish sauce on a bed of alfalfa sprouts and julienne carrots—a good mix of tastes and textures. For dessert, try the chocolate mousse. This is an upstairs restaurant under a large and airy *palapa* roof.

Av. 5 (at Calle 2). ✆ **984/803-0232.** Reservations recommended in high season. Main courses 165–280 pesos. MC, V. Daily 10am–midnight.

Yaxché ★★★ YUCATECAN The menu here employs many native foods and spices to present a more elaborate regional cooking than the usual offerings at Yucatecan restaurants. Excellent examples are a cream of *chaya* (a native leafy vegetable) and an *xcatic* chile stuffed with *cochinita pibil.* I also like the classic Mexican-style fruit salad with lime juice and dried powdered chile. Seafood dishes are fresh and well prepared.

Calle 8 (btw. avenidas 5 and 10). ✆ **984/873-2502.** Reservations recommended in high season. Main courses 119–230 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily noon–midnight.

Moderate

Casa Mediterránea ★ ITALIAN Tucked away on a quiet little patio off Avenida Quinta, this small, homey restaurant serves excellent Italian cuisine. Maurizio Gabrielli and Mary Michelon make it a habit to greet customers and make recommendations. Maurizio came to Mexico to enjoy the simple life, and it shows in the restaurant's welcoming, unhurried

Choosing an All-Inclusive in the Riviera Maya

All-inclusive resort rooms far outnumber those in regular hotels in the Riviera Maya. And the trend continues to dominate new construction, along with vacation-ownership developments. Most folks are familiar with the AI (short for all-inclusive) concept—large hotels that work with economies of scale to offer lodging, food, and drink all for a single rate. Some AIs offer convenience and economy, especially for families with many mouths to feed. Because they are enclosed areas, they make it easy for parents to watch their children. The system makes it easy to hold multiple-generation family reunions and group meetings, and seasonal deals offer amazingly cheap getaways.

A certain sameness pervades these hotels. Colored bracelets designate various AI plans, which usually include all buffet meals, drinks of varying quality, specialty restaurants (some with an additional charge), elaborate pool areas with activities, evening entertainment, and so on. Some charge extra for use of golf courses, spas, and fitness centers. Choose a resort whose amenities suit your desires. This type of all-inclusive is best booked through a vacation packager or travel agent. Their air and AI packages usually beat anything you can get by booking your own flight and room, even if you have frequent-flier miles to burn.

I came to understand and appreciate this type of vacation while staying at the **Iberostar** (www.iberostar.com) complex on Paraíso Beach north of Playa del Carmen. The enormous compound includes five hotels in all price ranges, a golf course, shopping center, nightclubs, spacious beach, and terrific spa. A tram travels between the resorts. Despite the size, I never felt overwhelmed and enjoyed watching families play together and apart.

With several resorts of varying quality and style, **Palace Resorts** (www.palaceresorts.com) also merits attention, though their vacation ownership salespeople can be very pushy. Wyndham hotels has taken over management of some Palace properties, which could mean some changes are in store.

A new all-inclusive concept swings totally in the other direction, with beyond-luxurious resorts offering fabulous suites, spas, pools, and beaches along with exceptional gourmet dining. Daily rates can soar beyond $1,000 per person per day. But more and more resort companies are moving in this direction, and big spenders have outstanding options. The **Grand Velas** (p. 548) excels in this category. The pricey **Royal Hideaway Playacar** (www.royalhideaway.com) is acclaimed as an idyllic wedding and honeymoon setting. The exclusive resorts sometimes have some odd rules. For example, my husband and I weren't able to enjoy the specialty restaurants at one resort because men were required to wear closed-toe dress shoes—even dressy leather sandals were *verboten*. Be sure you know such things before you go.

atmosphere. The menu is mostly northern Italian, with several dishes from other parts of Italy. The lobster is prepared beautifully. There are daily specials, too. Pastas (except penne and spaghetti) are made in-house, and none is precooked. Try fish and shrimp ravioli or penne alla Veneta. There are several wines, mostly Italian, to choose from.

Av. 5 (btw. calles 6 and 8; look for the Hotel Marieta sign). ✆ **984/876-3926.** Reservations recommended in high season. Main courses 120–220 pesos. No credit cards. Wed–Mon 2–11pm.

La Cueva del Chango ★★ MEXICAN HEALTH FOOD Good food in original surroundings with a relaxed attitude makes this quirky place enduringly popular (expect a wait on weekend mornings). True to its name (the Monkey's Cave), the place is cavelike and has little waterways meandering through it, with wicker and fabric monkeys hanging about. You'll enjoy great juices, blended fruit drinks, salads, soups, Mexican specialties with a natural twist, and handmade tortillas. The fish is fresh and delicious, and the warm panella cheese with tortillas is divine. Mosquitoes can sometimes be a problem at night, but the management has bug spray for the guests.

Calle 38 (btw. Av. 5 and the beach). ✆ **984/116-3179.** Main courses 80–140 pesos. No credit cards. Mon–Sat 8am–11pm; Sun 8am–2pm.

La Vagabunda Value ITALIAN/MEXICAN This place has the charm of old-style Playa. A large *palapa* shelters several simple wood tables sitting on a gravel floor. It's low-key and quiet—a good place for breakfast, with many options, including delicious blended fruit drinks, waffles, and omelets. The specials are a good value. In the afternoon and evening, they serve light fare such as panini, pastas, and ceviche.

Av. 5 (btw. calles 24 and 26). ✆ **984/873-3753.** Reservations not accepted. Breakfast 40–60 pesos; main courses 70–120 pesos. MC, V. High season daily 7am–11:30pm; low season daily 7am–3:30pm.

Media Luna ★★ FUSION The inventive menu here favors grilled seafood, sautés, and pasta dishes. Everything is fresh and prepared beautifully. Try the tasty pan-fried fish cakes with mango and honeyed hoisin sauce, or the black pepper–crusted fish. And keep an eye on the daily specials. For lunch, you can get sandwiches and salads, as well as black-bean quesadillas and crepes.

Av. 5 (btw. calles 12 and 14). ✆ **984/873-0526.** Breakfast 40–60 pesos; sandwich with salad 50–70 pesos; main courses 80–150 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 8am–11:30pm.

Inexpensive

Las Mañanitas Value MEXICAN The set price breakfast is a steal here—around $5 for eggs scrambled with tomatoes, chiles, and onions, with toast, coffee, and OJ. Tables fill with hotel and shop workers in early morning. Travelers wander in around 9am and continue claiming tables under the piñatas through lunch. In the evening, diners observe the action from sidewalk tables as they feast on fresh fish, a bountiful chilled seafood platter, pasta, and meats. The vibe is low-key and the waiters friendly.

Av. 5 btw. calles 4 and 6. ✆ **984/873-0114.** Main courses 50–120 pesos. MC, V. Daily 7am–10pm.

La Tarraya Restaurant/Bar Value SEAFOOD/YUCATECAN THE RESTAURANT THAT WAS BORN WITH THE TOWN, proclaims the sign. It's right on the beach, and the owners are fishermen. The catch of the day is so fresh it's still practically wiggling. The wood hut doesn't look like much, but they also have tables right on the beach. You can have your fish prepared in several ways. If you haven't tried the Yucatecan specialty *tik-in-xic*—fish with achiote and bitter-orange sauce, cooked in a banana leaf—this is a good place to start. I also recommend the ceviche and the beer.

Calle 2 Norte. ✆ **984/873-2040.** Reservations not accepted. Main courses 50–100 pesos; whole fish 100 pesos per kilo (2.2 lb.). No credit cards. Daily noon–9pm.

Los Carboncitos ★ MEXICAN The menu is simple, but there's hardly anything to steer clear of. One of the top choices is the tacos, which are mainly grilled meat, such as

fajitas *(arrachera)* or *al pastor.* These are served with a great collection of salsas. I also recommend the soups, especially the Mexican-style chicken soup *(caldo xochitl)* and the traditional *pozole.* For the seafood, try the shrimp al chipotle or the shrimp kabobs. The great lineup of sides includes fried crispy cheese *(chicharrón de queso)* and guacamole.

Calle 4 (btw. avenidas 5 and 10). ✆ **984/873-1382.** Reservations not accepted. Main courses 60–110 pesos; order of tacos 40–60 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 9am–1am.

PLAYA DEL CARMEN AFTER DARK

It seems as if everyone in town is out strolling La Quinta until midnight; there's pleasant browsing, dining, and drinking available at any number of establishments. Here's a quick rundown of the bars that you won't find on Avenida Quinta. The beach bar that is an institution in Playa is the **Blue Parrot** (✆ **984/873-0083**). It gets live acts, mostly rock, and attracts a mixed crowd. It's between calles 12 and 14. Just to the south is **Om** (no phone), which gets a younger crowd with louder musical acts.

Alux (✆ **984/110-5050**) is a one-of-a-kind club occupying a large cave with two dramatically lit chambers and several nooks and sitting areas. The local conservancy group approved all the work. The club books music acts and usually charges no cover. The bar is cash only and is open Tuesday to Sunday from 7pm to 2am. Take Avenida Juárez across to the other side of the highway—2 blocks down on your left.

Though they technically close around sunset, several beach clubs north of Avenida Constituyentes book live acts occasionally. Look for action at the foot of calles 30 to 36.

3 SOUTH OF PLAYA DEL CARMEN

A succession of small communities, resorts, and nature parks flank a 56km (35-mile) stretch of highway leading south from Playa del Carmen. This section covers them from north to south.

Renting a car is the best way to move around down here. The best buses might do is get you close to your destination; from the highway, it can be a hot walk to the coast. Another option is to hire a car and driver.

Beyond Paamul, you'll see signs for this or that cenote or cave. The Yucatán has thousands of cenotes, and each is slightly different (p. 562). These turnoffs are less visited than the major attractions and can make for a pleasant visit.

PUNTA VENADO: HORSEBACK RIDING

A few places along the highway offer horseback rides. The best of these, **Rancho Punta Venado,** is just south of Playa, past the Calica Pier. This ranch is the least touristy, and the owner takes good care of his horses. It has a nice stretch of coast with a sheltered bay and offers kayaking and snorkeling outings. Make arrangements in advance so that they can schedule you on a day when they have fewer customers. E-mail (ptavenado@yahoo.com) is the best way to reach them; sometimes they don't answer their office number, ✆ **984/803-5224.** Another option is to call the ranch's cellphone from Mexico (✆ **984/116-3213**); there is a charge for the call. Talk to Gabriela or Francisco; both speak English. Or try dropping by. The turnoff for the ranch is 2km (1¼ miles) south of the Calica overpass near Km 279.

RIO SECRETO: WONDROUS CAVERN

More spiritual than commercial, this community-based eco-park teaches visitors about Maya beliefs regarding the "underworld" as they explore a 600m-long (less than ½-mile)

cavern hidden from view for centuries. As the story goes, a local *campesino* was chasing a meaty lizard into the brush and under a rock pile. The *campesino* followed, digging through rocks, until he heard a splash. The lizard, it seemed, had discovered a hiding place. Digging a bit farther, the man found the entrance to a cave filled with stalactites and stalagmites. Local naturalists heard about the find and discovered a dazzling series of chambers with rock formations dating back 2.5 million years. The area was declared a nature reserve and opened to the public in April 2008.

Visitors must be accompanied by guides and wear short wet suits and helmets as they walk and swim through the cavern. At times, it is so dark you feel like you're totally blind (if you turn off your handy flashlight). Other times, sunshine streams through holes in the roof, illuminating the green trees aboveground and the blue and pink striations caused by mineral-rich water dripping over earth-toned stone. An occasional swim through an emerald green pool adds to the fun, as does the guide's banter and knowledge. From donning your wet suit to downing a filling lunch after the 90-minute underground tour, it will take about 3 hours. Hot showers and lockers are available. The basic tour without transportation costs $49. Call ahead for reservations. Río Secreto is located off Hwy. 307, 5 minutes south of Playa del Carmen (btw. Xcaret and the Calica Port). For more info, call ✆ **800/985-2664** in the U.S. or 984/877-2377, or go to www.riosecretotours.com.

XCARET: TRIBUTE TO THE YUCATAN

A billboard in distant Guadalajara's airport reads in Spanish, "And when visiting Xcaret, don't forget to enjoy the pleasures of the Riviera Maya, too." An exaggeration, yes, but a point well taken: Xcaret ("eesh-ca-*ret*") is the biggest attraction in these parts and even has its own resort. Thousands visit every week; stay away if you like solitude. Xcaret samples everything the Yucatán—and the rest of Mexico—has to offer, and action junkies take full advantage of the pricey admission fee.

The myriad activities include scuba and snorkeling; cavern diving; hiking through tropical forest; horseback riding; an underwater river ride; swinging in a hammock under palms; and meeting native Maya people. Exhibits include the best folk art museum outside Mexico City; a bat cave; a butterfly pavilion; mushroom and orchid nurseries; and a petting aquarium. Native jaguars, manatees, sea turtles, monkeys, macaws, and flamingos are also on display. The evening show celebrates Mexico in music and dance, and the costumes and choreography are unequaled anywhere in Mexico. I'm not Xcaret's biggest fan, preferring my adventures in the wild, but this show is a genuinely mesmerizing spectacle. It presents so many aspects of the Mexican nation that you feel like you've toured the whole country by the time the performers take their last bow.

Xcaret is 10km (6¼ miles) south of Playa del Carmen; you'll know when you get to the turnoff. It's open daily from 8:30am to 9pm. Basic admission prices are $69 for adults, $34 for children 5 to 12; many activities and facilities cost extra. The Xcaret at Night rate is a good deal at $49 for adults and $30 for children. You enter the park after 3pm and have plenty of time to play and explore before the night show. For more info, call ✆ **998/883-0470** or visit www.xcaret.net.

The people who created Xcaret recently opened **Xplor** (✆ **998/849-5275;** www.xplor.travel) next door. The adventure park has a zip line, four-wheel-drive track, and an underground river ride. Admission is $109 for adults, $55 for children (8 or over); you get a 10% discount for booking online 3 days in advance.

Four kilometers (2½ miles) south of the entrance to Xcaret is the turnoff for **Puerto Calica,** the cruise-ship pier. Passengers disembark here for tours of Playa, Xcaret, the ruins, and other attractions on the coast.

Moments **Underground Adventures**

The Yucatán Peninsula's land surface is a thin limestone shelf jutting out like a footprint between the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea. Rainwater seeps through the surface into cenotes, freshwater sinkholes that dot the underground world. Some cenotes are like small wells. Others are like giant green ponds with high rock walls—tempting sights to would-be Tarzans. Cenotes often provide access to magical caves where sunlight from holes in the land's surface glimmers on icicle-like stalactites and stalagmites. The Riviera Maya is filled with these formations, and it seems every farmer and landowner has posted a sign offering access to their pools and caverns for a few pesos. More elaborate parks include underground rivers and cenotes among their many attractions. Several, including Xcaret, Hidden Worlds, Río Secreto, and Aktun Chen are described in this chapter. Dozens of smaller cenotes and caves deserve your attention as well, and entry costs much less than at the big parks. Adventuresome types should seek out newly opened sites marked with rustic wooden signs. Below are a few cenotes accessible from Hwy. 307. Most have bathrooms, are open daily from about 8 or 9am until 5 or 6pm, and charge about 30 to 50 pesos.

Cenote Azul (approx. 2km/1 mile south of Puerto Aventuras, just south of Ecopark Kantun Chi): Situated close to the highway with several large pools, Cenote Azul has a fun jump-off point on a section of overhanging rock, and a wooden lounging deck jutting over the water. Walkways along the edge make it easier to get in and swim with the abundant catfish.

Gran Cenote (about 3km/1½ miles west of Tulum on the road to Cobá): Divers are especially fond of this aptly named bottomless, crystal-clear cenote leading to caverns that seem to have no end. Snorkelers can follow the dive lights into caves close to the surface and see fantastic rock formations. Since it's off the main highway, this fabulous cenote is less popular with groups and feels like it's buried in jungle.

PAAMUL: SEASIDE GETAWAY ★

About 15km (9¼ miles) beyond Xcaret and 25km (16 miles) from Playa del Carmen is Paamul (also written Pamul), which in Mayan means "a destroyed ruin." The exit is clearly marked. You can enjoy the Caribbean in relative quiet here. The water at the out-of-the-way beach is wonderful, but the shoreline is rocky. There are four rooms for rent, a restaurant, and many trailer and RV spaces with hookups, available by the day or month.

Scuba-Mex (✆ **984/875-1066;** fax 984/874-1729; www.scubamex.com) is a fully equipped PADI- and SSI-certified dive shop next to the cabañas. Using two boats, the staff takes guests on dives 8km (5 miles) in either direction. If it's too choppy, the reefs in front of the hotel are also good. The cost for a one-tank dive with rental gear is $39. They also have multi-dive packages and certification instruction.

Cabañas Paamul ★ Paamul works mostly with the trailer crowd, but there are also 12 modern "junior suites" on or near the water's edge. They are spacious and comfortable, and

Jardín del Edén (1.6km/1 mile north of Xpu-Há, just south of Cenote Azul): "El Edén" is one of my favorite cenotes because it's run by an accommodating family and has lots of rocky outcroppings where you can lounge in the warm sun after the freezing water leaves you covered in goose bumps. There's plenty of room along the edges of the cenote, which looks like a huge swimming pool. Shrieks fill the air as daredevils attempt swan dives from a high jump-off point. Snorkelers and divers find plenty of tropical fish and eels.

Manatí (Tankhah, east of the highway 10km/6 miles north of Tulum): The large, open lagoon near Casa Cenote restaurant is part of a long underwater cave system that ends at the sea. Fresh water bubbling up into ocean waters creates significant but not dangerous currents that attract a great variety of saltwater and freshwater fish. The cenote was named for the manatees that used to show up occasionally; the shy creatures have disappeared as the region has gained popularity.

Xunaan ha (outside of Chemuyil, 12km/7½ miles south of Akumal): Gaining popularity because of its sense of authenticity, this one is reached by winding through a Maya village and growing town that is home to locals who work in and around Akumal. Signs point to the small cenote nearly hidden in the jungle, where you can swim, float, or snorkel with schools of fish and the occasional freshwater turtle. Be prepared: no bathrooms here.

Most dive shops along the Riviera Maya offer cenote diving as well as reef dives. Recommended outfitters that specialize in cenote dives include **Yukatek Divers** (✆ **984/803-2836;** www.yucatek-divers.com) and **Go Cenotes** (✆ **984/803-3924;** www.gocenotes.com), both in Playa del Carmen, and **Cenote Dive Center** (✆ **984/871-2232;** www.cenotedive.com) and **Xibalba Dive Center** (✆ **984/871-2953;** www.xibalbadivecenter.com) in Tulum. All charge $120 for two-tank cavern dives, which take place in open cenotes where you are always within reach of air and natural light; cave diving requires advanced technical training and specialized gear, and is more expensive.

come with a kitchenette and two queen-size beds. Slightly cheaper, but more limited in size and amenities, are the "eco-cabañas." Trailer guests have access to 12 showers and separate bathrooms for men and women. Laundry service is available nearby. The large, breezy *palapa* restaurant is open to the public, and customers are welcome to use the beach, which is rocky along this stretch of the coast. Prices vary according to season.

Carretera Cancún–Tulum Km 85. ✆ **984/875-1051.** www.paamul.com. 22 units; 190 trailer spaces (all with full hookups). $100–$150 junior suite; $80–$120 cabaña. RV space with hookups $30 per day, $600 per month. No credit cards. Ask about discounts for stays longer than 1 week. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; dive shop; outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, TV, kitchenette.

PUERTO AVENTURAS: DOLPHINS & SHIPWRECKS

Five kilometers (3 miles) south of Paamul and 104km (64 miles) from Cancún, Puerto Aventuras is a glitzy condo/marina development with a 9-hole golf course on Chakalal Bay. At its center is a collection of restaurants, bordering a dolphin pool, and they offer Mexican

and Italian food, steaks, and pub grub. The major attraction is swimming with the dolphins in a highly interactive program; make reservations well in advance with **Dolphin Discovery** (✆ **998/849-4757;** www.dolphindiscovery.com). The surest way is through the website.

Puerto Aventuras has the region's only maritime museum, **Museo Sub-Acuatico CEDAM** ★ (✆ **984/873-5000;** www.puertoaventuras.com/services.html). This is a compelling display of coins, weapons, gold dentures, clay dishes, and other items from Colonial-Era shipwrecks. All were recovered by members of the "Explorations and Water Sports Club of Mexico" (CEDAM), a group of former World War II frogmen. Most of the artifacts came from a Cuban ship that foundered near Akumal in 1741. Other displays include Maya offerings dredged from the peninsula's cenotes, finds from local archaeological sites, vintage diving equipment, and early photos of cenote explorations. The museum is on the second floor of a pink building near the entrance.

Puerto Aventuras is also popular for boating and deep-sea fishing. **Capt. Rick's Sportfishing Center** (✆ **888/449-3562** in the U.S., or 984/873-5195; www.fishyucatan.com) will combine a fishing trip with some snorkeling, which makes for a leisurely day. The best fishing on this coast is from March to August.

Despite the reasons to visit Puerto Aventuras, I've never been tempted to stay there. It has a few hotels, but most residential development is upscale condos and vacation homes. The most prominent hotel, the **Omni Puerto Aventuras** (✆ **800/843-6664** in the U.S., or 984/873-5101), is nice, but even with recession-induced specials knocking the starting price back to $200, this color-coordinated, self-contained enclave isn't interesting enough to compel me to spend that much to stay there.

XPU-HA: SUBLIME BEACH

Three kilometers (1¾ miles) beyond Puerto Aventuras is **Xpu-Ha** (eesh-poo-*hah*) ★★★, a wide bay lined by a broad, beautiful sandy beach. Much of the shore is filled with private houses and condos, along with a few all-inclusive resorts. The beach is one of the best on the coast and is long enough to accommodate hotel guests, residents, and day-trippers without feeling crowded.

Besides the hotels reviewed below, a few others offer basic lodging—a couple of beds, cement floors, and a small private bathroom. They rent on a first-come, first-served basis for 500 to 800 pesos a night, depending on how busy they are. Nearby Akumal has better choices; if you're renting a car, you can come to the beach for a day.

Al Cielo ★ (Moments) This is a good choice if you want a small hotel on the beach where you can go native. The four rooms (two upstairs, two down) occupy a large thatched building right on the beach. The restaurant is popular, but the rooms are rustic and simple, which sometimes draws guests into the beach experience as an escape from the modern world. If you're looking for more amenities, this won't be for you.

Carretera Cancún-Tulum Km 118, 77710 Xpu-Ha, Q. Roo. No phone. www.alcielohotel.com. 4 units. $212–$258 double. MC, V. Rates include full breakfast. Free secure parking. No children. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; Hobie cat; room service. *In room:* Fan, hair dryer, no phone, Wi-Fi.

(Tips) Avoiding the Cruise-Ship Crowds

Fewer ships arrive on weekends than on weekdays, which makes the weekend a good time for visiting the coast's major attractions.

Tips In Case of Emergency

The Riviera Maya, south of Puerto Aventuras, is susceptible to power failures that can last for hours. Gas pumps and cash machines shut down when this happens, and once the power returns, they attract long lines. It's a good idea to keep a reserve of gas and cash.

Esencia ★★★ Moments No other property on this coast epitomizes leisure and escape more than Esencia. Originally built as a private villa for an Italian duchess, the hotel now includes a few rooms in the original villa and guesthouse. I'd be thrilled to spend a few romantic nights in the villa's beach-view rooms—one of those lottery dreams. Families spread out in the two-story cottages surrounded by lush plants and gardens. Every room throughout the property has lots of space, lots of beauty, lots of privacy, and an air of serenity (decorations are tastefully minimalist, like three oranges on a driftwood tray). Of course, the magnificent beach includes private daybeds under A-framed thatch shades. Service is personal and understated (a service fee is added to the room rate) and the food is outstanding. If the spa were any more relaxing, it would be an out-of-body experience. The hotel offers 2 hours of complimentary babysitting per day for guests using the spa or restaurant.

Predio Rústico Xpu-Ha, Fracc. 16 y 18, L. 18, 19 (exit Xpu-Ha-2), 77710 Xpu-Ha, Q. Roo. ✆ **877/528-3490** in the U.S. or Canada, or 984/873-4830. www.hotelesencia.com. 29 units. High season $569 and up double or suite; low season $479 and up double or suite. Rates include full breakfast. Internet specials sometimes available. AE, MC, V. Free valet parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 bars; babysitting; concierge; Jacuzzi; 2 outdoor pools; room service; smoke-free rooms; spa. *In room:* A/C, TV/DVD, hair dryer, Internet, minibar.

AKUMAL: BEAUTIFUL BAYS & CAVERN DIVING

Continuing south on Hwy. 307 for 2km (1¼ miles), the turnoff for Akumal ("Place of the Turtles") is marked by a traffic light. The ecologically oriented tourism community is spread among four bays, with two entrances off the frontage road that runs parallel to the highway. The main entrance, labeled AKUMAL, leads to hotels, rental condos, and vacation homes. Take the Akumal Aventuras entrance to the Grand Oasis all-inclusive hotel and more condos and homes. No waterside road connects the two, so you'll need to know which exit to take. A white arch delineates the main entrance to the tourism community (years ago, the original residents were moved across the highway to a separate, fast-growing town where many workers and business owners reside). Just before the arch are a couple of grocery stores and a laundry service. Just inside the arch, to the right, is the Hotel Akumal Caribe. If you follow the road to the left and keep to the left, you'll reach Half Moon Bay, lined with two- and three-story condos, and eventually Yal-ku Lagoon, a snorkeling park. To rent a condo, contact **Akumal Vacations** (✆ **800/448-7137** in the U.S.; www.akumalvacations.com). or **Loco Gringo** (www.locogringo.com).

Both bays have sandy beaches with rocky or silt bottoms. This is a popular diving area and home to Mexico's original diving club. Three dive shops are in town and at least 30 dive sites are offshore. The **Akumal Dive Shop** (✆ **984/875-9032;** www.akumal.com), one of the oldest and best dive shops on the coast, offers cavern-diving trips and courses in technical diving. The friendly owner and dive masters know all the secret spots in the area and can offer all sorts of insider tips. It and **Akumal Dive Adventures** (✆ **888/425-8625** in the U.S., or 984/875-9157), at the Vista del Mar hotel on Half Moon Bay, offer resort courses as well as full open-water certification.

Yal-ku Lagoon snorkeling park is like a miniature Xel-Ha without all the pricey amusements. Modern sculptures punctuate gardens beside the clear lagoon, which is about 700m (2,296 ft.) long and 200m (656 ft.) at its widest. You can paddle around comfortably in sheltered water and see fish and a few other creatures. It's a perfect place to learn how to snorkel and let kids swim about safely. Of course, there are many spots along the bays where you can snorkel for free, but this little park is an easy, relaxing outing. It's open daily from 8am to 5:30pm. Admission is 80 pesos for adults, 45 pesos for children 3 to 14.

The gentle crescent of **Akumal Bay,** washing a wide, soft beach shaded by coconut palms, is one of the few places where you'll often be surprised by a sea turtle swimming along with you. During nesting season (May–July), visit **Centro Ecológico Akumal** ★★★ (✆ **984/875-9005;** www.ceakumal.org) in the morning to sign up for that evening's 9pm turtle walk (Mon–Fri). You'll help staff search for new nests, protect exhausted mothers making their way back to sea, and remove eggs to hatcheries where they can incubate safely.

Where to Stay

Rates below are for two people and include taxes. During the holidays, most hotels and condo rentals charge higher rates than those listed.

Hotel Akumal Caribe ★★ (Kids) The first accommodations on Akumal Bay were simple thatch-roofed cabañas beside a gorgeous beach. When I stayed here in the 1980s I felt like I had discovered the best hideaway on the coast. Since then, the property has morphed into a large resort with 40 tile-roofed bungalows spread about dense gardens. Simply and comfortably furnished, with kitchenettes, spacious showers, and jugs of purified water, the bungalows are still a great place to stay for a night or a week (as many families do). The 21 rooms in the three-story beachside hotel have one king- or two queen-size beds, kitchenettes, and fancier furnishings than in the bungalows. The hotel also has a freshwater pool (open to all guests), but I still prefer the homey bungalows. The hotel also books condos and attractive villas on Half Moon Bay. The four villas, which share a pool, have two or three bedrooms and large living, dining, and kitchen areas, as well as lovely furnished patios just steps from the beach. The property's best asset is its placement at the edge of beautiful Akumal Bay. Visiting its restaurants and shops will get you past the guards who turn nonguests away.

Carretera Cancún–Tulum (Hwy. 307) Km 104. ✆ **984/206-3500.** www.hotelakumalcaribe.com. (Reservations: P.O. Box 13326, El Paso, TX 79913; ✆ **800/351-1622** in the U.S., 800/343-1440 in Canada, or 915/584-3552.) 70 units. High season $110–$119 bungalow, $139–$149 double, $255–$375 villa or condo; low season $89 bungalow, $109 double, $137–$190 villa or condo. Reservations with prepayment by check only. Low-season packages available. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; babysitting; seasonal children's activities; dive shop; large outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, Internet (in some), kitchenette (in some), no phone (in some).

Vista del Mar Hotel and Condos ★ (Value) This beachside property rents hotel rooms at good prices and large, fully equipped condos that you can rent by the day or week. The lovely, well-tended beach in front of the hotel has chairs and umbrellas. The on-site dive shop eliminates the hassle of organizing dive trips. Hotel rooms are small and contain either a queen-size or a double and a twin bed. They consist of a well-equipped kitchen, a living area, two or three bedrooms, and up to three bathrooms. All have balconies or terraces facing the sea and are furnished with hammocks. Several rooms come with whirlpool tubs.

Half Moon Bay, 77760 Akumal, Q. Roo. ✆ **877/425-8625** in the U.S. Fax 505/988-3882. www.akumalinfo.com. 27 units. High season $102 double, $207–$325 condo; low season $84 double, $124–$196 condo. MC, V. Limited free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; dive shop; small outdoor pool; watersports. *In room:* A/C, TV, CD player, fridge, kitchenette, no phone.

Where to Dine

Akumal has about 10 places to eat, and there's a convenient grocery store, **Super Chomak** (with an ATM), by the arch. Just inside the arch a collection of businesses includes a bakery and coffeehouse. At the Hotel Akumal Caribe, **Lol-Ha** serves good breakfasts and dinners and has free Wi-Fi, and the **Palapa Snack** bar dishes out everything from ice cream cones to burgers with poblano chiles and avocado. Tell the guards at the hotel's entrance that you're there for a meal and they'll direct you to special parking areas—and they don't notice if you take some time to wander along the hotel's beautiful beach.

La Buena Vida SEAFOOD/REGIONAL This beach restaurant is just plain fun. Where else can you scale a *mirador* (crow's nest) to dine while under the influence of the coast's best view of Half Moon Bay? The menu is varied and the fare excellent, especially the Maya chicken, *tik-in-xic* fish (grilled after marinating in achiote and sour orange), and other regional specialties. Afterward, belly up to swings at the sand-floored bar, which blends its own unique cocktails in addition to serving a barrage of special tequilas.

Half Moon Bay beach (btw. Akumal and Yal-ku Lagoon). ✆ **984/875-9061.** www.akumalinfo.com/restaurant.htm. Main courses 80–285 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 11am–1am.

Turtle Bay Cafe & Bakery ★ AMERICAN Yummy pancakes with pecan maple syrup, fried eggs with hash browns, and eggs Benedict with Canadian bacon satisfy the expats dining beneath the palms. More adventuresome eaters go for huevos rancheros or a breakfast burrito with eggs, corn, and mushrooms. Lunches are equally tempting—you can even get a lentil burger—and cool smoothies and pastries are served throughout the day. Dinner might start with coconut shrimp and move on to crab cakes over mashed potatoes or a bodacious steak sandwich with caramelized onions. There's free Wi-Fi and plenty of friendly folks conversing with travelers.

Plaza Ukana. ✆ **984/875-9138.** Main courses 88–180 pesos. MC, V. Daily 7am–3pm; Tues–Fri 6–9pm.

XEL-HA: SNORKELING & SWIMMING ★★

Two miles south of Akumal you'll see the turnoff for **Aktun Chen** ★★ (✆ **984/109-2061;** www.aktunchen.com). This is one of the Yucatán's best caverns, with lots of geological features, good lighting, several underground pools, and large chambers, all carefully preserved. And it has thrived under management by the local community rather than outside tour companies. The cavern tour takes about 90 minutes and requires a lot of walking, but the footing is good. It costs $25 for adults and $13 for children. You can also snorkel in a cenote ($20 adults and children), or soar above the jungle on zip lines ($36 adults and children). There is also a zoo with spider monkeys and other local fauna; some critters are allowed to run about freely. Aktun Chen is open from 9am to 4pm daily (closed Christmas and New Year's days). The turnoff is to the right, and the cave is about 4km (2½ miles) from the road.

Thirteen kilometers (8 miles) south of Akumal is **Xel-Ha** (✆ **998/884-9422** in Cancún, 984/873-3588 in Playa, or 875-6000 at the park; www.xelha.com.mx). The centerpiece is a large, beautiful lagoon where fresh water and salt water meet. You can swim, float, and snorkel in beautifully clear water surrounded by jungle. A small train takes you to a drop-off point upriver, and you float back down on water moving calmly toward the sea. With no waves or currents to pull you around, snorkeling here is more comfortable than in the open sea, and the water has several species of fish, including rays.

Inside the park, you can rent snorkeling equipment and an underwater camera. Platforms allow nonsnorkelers to view the fish. Even better, use the park's Snuba gear—a contraption that allows you to breathe through 6m (20-ft.) tubes connected to scuba tanks floating on the surface. It rents for about $45 for an hour. Like Snuba but more

involved is sea-trek, an elaborate plastic helmet with air hoses that allows you to walk around on the bottom, breathing normally, and perhaps help to feed the stingrays.

The dolphin area offers several interactive programs. A 1-hour swim costs $134 plus park admission; a shorter program costs $100. Make reservations at least 24 hours in advance by calling ✆ **998/883-0524.**

Other attractions include a plant nursery; an apiary for the local stingerless bees; and a lovely path through the tropical forest bordering the lagoon. Admission includes use of inner tubes, life vest, shuttle train to the river, and changing rooms and showers. (Though not listed on the website, the park often discounts admission on weekends.) Xel-Ha is open daily from 8:30am to 6pm. Parking is free. Admission is $40 adults and $30 children ages 5 to 11; children 4 and younger enter free. An all-inclusive option includes all rentals plus food and beverages: $79 adults, $39 children. (These prices are not discounted.) The park has five restaurants, two ice-cream shops, a store, and an ATM. Bring biodegradable sunblock.

Signs clearly mark the turnoff to Xel-Ha, close to the ruins of Tulum. A popular day tour from Cancún or Playa combines the two. If you're traveling on your own, the best time to enjoy Xel-Ha without the crowds is during the weekend from 9am to 2pm.

About 2km (1¼ miles) south of Xel-Ha is **Hidden Worlds Cenotes** ★★★ (✆ **984/877-8535;** www.hiddenworlds.com.mx), which offers an excellent opportunity to snorkel or dive in a couple of nearby caverns. The caverns are part of a vast network that makes up a single underground river system. The water is crystalline (and cold), and the rock formations impressive. These caverns were filmed for the IMAX production *Journey into Amazing Caves.* The snorkel tour costs $30 and takes you to two different caverns (a half-tour costs $20). The main form of transportation is "jungle mobile," with a guide tossing out information and lore about the jungle plant life you see. You'll be walking some, so take shoes or sandals. I've toured several caverns, but floating through one gave me an entirely different perspective. For divers, a one-tank dive is $60, two tanks $100. The owners have also installed a 180m (590-ft.) zip line on the property.

TANKAH BAY: BUBBLING CENOTE

Tankah Bay (about 3km/2 miles from Hidden World Cenotes) has a handful of private villas and some rental houses and condos. The most interesting hotel is **Casa Cenote** (✆ **998/874-5170;** www.casacenote.com). Its underground river surfaces at a cenote in the back of the property, then goes underground and bubbles up into the sea just a few feet offshore. Casa Cenote has seven beach bungalows. The double rate runs from $125 to $175, depending on the season (excluding holidays) and includes breakfast. The American owner provides kayaks and snorkeling gear and can arrange dives, fishing trips, and sailing charters.

4 TULUM ★★★

Tulum (130km/80 miles from Cancún) is best known for its archaeological site, a walled Maya city of the post-Classic age perched dramatically on a rocky cliff overlooking the Caribbean. The coastline south of the site is packed with *palapa* hotels and upscale retreats for a well-heeled crowd seeking a "rustic" hideaway.

This stretch of incredible white beaches has become the unofficial center of the Tulum Hotel Zone—a collection of about 30 *palapa* hotels stretching from the Tulum ruins south to the entrance to the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve. Hotels here rely on freshwater deliveries and rain tanks, and must generate their own electricity to provide power for a

few hours after sundown (though someone with the right connections managed to build a larger property and connect it to the town's electrical grid). Plugs in the main office are usually open for guests' chargers, and Wi-Fi is sometimes available in public areas. The slow arrival of technology hasn't deterred entrepreneurs; new hotels are crammed in among the coast's old-timers, and traffic can be frustrating. Meanwhile, various federal agencies are randomly closing hotels that may not have all the proper papers.

The official town of Tulum is bisected by Hwy. 307, where it intersects the road to Cobá. The commercial center sprawls along both sides of Hwy. 307 for about 20 blocks jam-packed with gas stations, auto repair shops, *farmacias,* banks, markets, tour offices, and eateries. Two *glorietas* (traffic circles) slow the traffic through town; frontage roads allow access to parking spaces and driveways. Restaurants and hotels pop up along side streets around the municipal building and concrete plaza. Anyone who thinks of Tulum as a charming pueblo hasn't been here for a few years. The growth is astounding and shows no sign of slowing.

ORIENTATION To visit the Tulum area, get a rental car; it will make everything much easier. From the north, you pass the entrance to the ruins before you enter town. When you come to an intersection with a traffic light, the highway to the right leads to the ruins of Cobá (p. 573); to the left is Tulum's beach Hotel Zone, beginning about 2km (1¼ miles) away. The road sign reads BOCA PAILA. When you come to a T junction, there will be hotels in both directions. If you turn left (north), you'll be heading toward the back entrance to the ruins. If you take a right, you'll pass a long line of more *palapa* hotels until you reach the entrance to Sian Ka'an.

In the town of Tulum, Hwy. 307 widens and is called Avenida Tulum. One place that I find handy is a travel agency/communications/package center called **Savana** (✆ **984/871-2081**), on the east side of Avenida Tulum between calles Orion and Beta. Most of the staff speaks English and can answer questions about tours and calling home.

EXPLORING THE TULUM RUINS

Thirteen kilometers (8 miles) south of Xel-Ha are the ruins of Tulum, a Maya fortress-city on a cliff above the sea. They are open daily from 7am to 5pm in winter, 8am to 6pm in summer. It's best to go early, before the crowds start showing up (around 9:30am). At the entrance, you'll find artisans' stands, a bookstore, a museum, a restaurant, several large bathrooms, and a ticket booth. It's about a 5-minute walk from the entrance to the archaeological site. Admission is 51 pesos. If you want to ride the shuttle from the visitor center to the ruins, it's another 15 pesos. Parking is 30 pesos. A video camera permit costs 45 pesos. Licensed guides at the stand next to the path to the ruins charge 200 pesos for a 45-minute tour in English, French, or Spanish for up to four people. In some ways, they are performers who will tailor their presentation to the responses they get from you. Some will try to draw connections between the Maya and Western theology, and they will point out architectural details that you might otherwise miss.

By A.D. 900, the end of the Classic period, Maya civilization had begun its decline, and the large cities to the south were abandoned. Tulum is one of the small city-states that rose to fill the void. It came to prominence in the 13th century as a seaport, controlling maritime commerce along this section of the coast, and remained inhabited well after the arrival of the Spanish. The primary god here was the diving god, depicted on several buildings as an upside-down figure above doorways. Seen at the Palace at Sayil and Cobá, this curious, almost comical figure is also known as the bee god.

The most imposing building in Tulum is a large stone structure above the cliff called the **Castillo** (castle). A temple as well as a fortress, it was once covered with stucco and paint.

Tips Getting to the Beach

If you're staying elsewhere but want some beach time in Tulum, the easiest way is to drive to El Paraíso Beach Club, about 1km (a half-mile) south of the ruins (take a left at the T junction). This is a great place—there's a long, broad beach that is pure sand, and access is free. The owners make money by selling food and drink, so they ask you not to bring your own. If you want isolation, drive down the dirt road toward Punta Allen. After you pass the last of the beach hotels, there are a couple of places where the beach comes into view. You can pull over and spread out your beach towel.

In front of the Castillo are several unrestored palacelike buildings partially covered with stucco. Tourists swim and sunbathe on the **beach** below, where the Maya once came ashore.

The **Temple of the Frescoes,** directly in front of the Castillo, contains interesting 13th-century wall paintings, though entrance is no longer permitted. Distinctly Maya, they represent Chaac, the rain god, and Ixchel, goddess of weaving, women, the moon, and medicine. The cornice of this temple has a relief of Chaac's head; from a slight distance, you can make out the eyes, nose, mouth, and chin. Notice the remains of the red-painted stucco—at one time all of Tulum's buildings were painted bright red.

Much of what we know of Tulum at the time of the Spanish Conquest comes from the writings of Diego de Landa, third bishop of the Yucatán. He wrote that Tulum was a small city inhabited by about 600 people who lived in platform dwellings along a street and supervised the trade traffic from Honduras to the Yucatán. Though it was a walled city, most inhabitants probably lived outside the walls, leaving the interior for the ceremonial structures and residences of governors and priests. Tulum survived for about 70 years after the conquest before finally being abandoned. Because of the great number of visitors this site receives, it is no longer possible to climb all of the ruins. In some cases, visitors are asked to remain behind roped-off areas.

WHERE TO STAY

If you can afford to stay at one of the small beach hotels in Tulum, it's an enjoyable and relaxing experience. But the beach's popularity among moneyed yet eco-conscious travelers has pushed beachside prices inexorably into the stratosphere. The last bastion for budget travelers, a collection of unabashedly basic concrete bungalows beloved for their prime location on the same gorgeous beach that commands $300 a night at Ana y Jose next door, has changed owners and joined the upscale ranks. We can still recommend **Cabañas Tulum,** Carretera Punta Allen Km 7 (✆ **984/115-9912;** www.hotelstulum.com), but if you return after staying there last year for $60 to $70 a night, be prepared now to pay upwards of $157 to $218, depending on location and season, for 16 colorfully redecorated rooms (half of the original rooms have been closed), new beds, and a new restaurant and beach club.

Even at such prices, beach hotels offer few amenities. Most don't accept credit cards (though there's now an ATM on the beach road), and air-conditioning is still a rarity. Demand is high, supply is limited, and the hotels must generate their own electricity (bring a flashlight). With the under-$100-a-night room on the beach approaching extinction, budget travelers are better off staying in town and making day trips to the beach. The good news is that the town's supply of comfortable and increasingly sophisticated hotels has been steadily growing.

On the Beach

Very Expensive

Ana y José ★★ This *palapa* hotel has gone "boutique," with a spa, suites, and serious remodeling of rooms. It's a far cry from what it used to be—a simple collection of cabins and a restaurant on the beach. Now there are marble countertops, marble tile floors, and wood terraces with a table and chairs. Rooms range from garden- and pool- view doubles with soaring *palapa* ceilings to pricey oceanfront suites with private pools. All have hammocks swinging near the door. Accouterments include a spa and wedding planners (ceremonies on the excellent white-sand beach are very popular). Ana y José is 6.5km (4 miles) south of the Tulum ruins.

Carretera Punta Allen Km 7 (Apdo. Postal 15), 77780 Tulum, Q. Roo. ✆ **998/880-5629.** Fax 998/880-6021. www.anayjose.com. 23 units. $303–$447 double. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; outdoor pool; spa. *In room:* A/C, fan.

Moderate

Posada Dos Ceibas ★ Of all the places along this coast, this is closest to the way hotels in Tulum used to be: simple, quiet, and ecological without being pretentious. This is a good choice for a no-fuss beach vacation. Bright yellow, blue, and pink one- and two-story cottages are spread out through dense vegetation. Simply furnished rooms come with ceiling fans, and most have private patios or porches with hammocks. Prices vary with room size, and are high for what you get. The grounds are well tended. The solar-generated electricity kicks in at 6pm. The hotel is near the entrance to Sian Ka'an and is more private than those bunched together to the north.

Carretera Tulum-Boca Paila Km 10, 77780 Tulum, Q. Roo. ✆ **984/877-6024.** www.dosceibas.com. 8 units. High season $90–$220 double; low season $70–$100 double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; Wi-Fi (in restaurant); yoga. *In room:* No phone.

Zamas ★★ A couple from San Francisco has made this rustic getaway most enjoyable by concentrating on the essentials: comfort, privacy, and good food. The cabañas are simple, attractive, and well situated for catching the breeze. Rooms right on the beach were once simple huts, but storms and high tides kept knocking them down. They're solid concrete now, with *palapa* roofs and hammocks swinging over sand. Most rooms are in individual structures; the suites and oversize rooms are in two-story buildings. Some are by the beach, while others are nestled in dense jungle across the street. For the money, I like the garden *palapas,* which are attractive, spacious, and comfortable, with a queen-size bed and a twin or a king- and queen-size bed. The most expensive rooms are the upstairs oceanview units, which enjoy a large terrace and lots of sea breezes. They come with a king- and a queen-size bed or two queen-size beds. The restaurant serves the freshest seafood, often right off the boat. A white-sand beach curves in a scenic cove between rocky areas.

Carretera Punta Allen Km 5, 77780 Tulum, Q. Roo. ✆ **415/387-9806** in the U.S. www.zamas.com. 20 units. High season $165 beachfront double, $135–$165 garden double, $200 oceanview double; low season $125–$150 beachfront double, $100–$125 garden double, $155 oceanview double. No credit cards. Limited parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant. *In room:* Fan, no phone.

Inexpensive

Don Diego de la Playa ★ An offshoot of the hugely popular Don Diego de la Selva in town, this simple little ecohotel is buried in palms beside a quiet swath of sand. The least expensive accommodations are in Bedouin tents with wooden floors. Their small net windows catch some breeze, but not enough to keep you cool on sweltering summer nights. Two cement cabañas with thatch roofs are more comfortable. All rooms share common bathrooms with hot water showers.

Carretera Punta Allen Km 4.5, 77780 Tulum, Q. Roo. ✆ **984/114-9744** in town. www.dtulum.com. High season $75–$95 tent, $95–$125 cabaña; low season $60–$75 tent, $76–$95 cabaña. No credit cards. Limited parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant. *In room:* Fan, no phone.

In Town

Don Diego de la Selva ★★ The combination of a wild garden setting and easy town and beach accessibility keeps guests coming back to this stylish hotel and restaurant. It feels like you're in the jungle with all the benefits of civilization—24/7 electricity; immaculate rooms; a large, clear swimming pool; and a huge *palapa* restaurant that attracts diners from town and the beach. The gregarious French owners serve drinks and mingle with guests each night, and the concierge dotes on you like a loving nanny. Eight spacious, air-conditioned rooms open to garden patios with chairs and hammocks. Rooms have one king-size or two double beds with orthopedic mattresses, hot showers with skylights, thick towels, and simple, elegant furnishings. Two large bungalows come with queen-size beds and are cooled by ceiling fans. Room rates include a filling breakfast with fresh fruit and a different cake baked every morning.

Av. Tulum, Mza. 24 Lote 3 (1km/half-mile south of ADO bus station), 77780 Tulum, Q. Roo. ✆ **984/114-9744.** www.dtulum.com. 10 rooms. High season $95–$145 with A/C, $75–$120 with fan; low season $76–$195 with A/C, $60–$75 with fan. Rates include breakfast. MC, V. Parking lot. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; common fridge; outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C (in some), fan, Wi-Fi.

Posada Luna del Sur ★★ (Value) Guests have been known to linger days beyond their planned departure date at this convenient, comfortable inn. Jugs of purified water, coffeepots, utensils, and refrigerators make each room feel like home. Guests pick up eats and treats at produce stands and grocery stores along Avenida Tulum and prepare inexpensive meals in their rooms or share goodies on the rooftop terrace. Rooms open to gardens, bougainvillea bushes, and banana trees; those on the second story have balconies. The owners are gradually remodeling the perfectly adequate rooms, combining modern sinks and furnishings with Mexican tiles and folk art. Dozens of restaurants are within walking distance, and the beach is a 10-minute drive away.

Calle Luna Sur 5, 77780 Tulum, Q. Roo. ✆ **984/871-2984.** www.posadalunadelsur.com. High season $80 double; low season $70 double. Rates include continental breakfast. No credit cards. Covered parking. No children 15 and under. **Amenities:** Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, fan, TV, kitchenette.

WHERE TO DINE

Tulum's dining scene is surprisingly sophisticated, given its laid-back beach vibe. The variety is best in town, where classy restaurants, rowdy bars, and bare-bones taco stands crowd together along Avenida Tulum and side streets. Many beach hotels have great food as well, though the prices are sometimes appallingly high. Several markets and grocery stores provide do-it-yourself supplies.

Cetli ★★★ (Finds) MEXICAN You'd think Chef Claudia Pérez Rívas would be a culinary star in Mexico City or New York, but she's applying her considerable talents to create *alta cocina mexicana* (gourmet Mexican cuisine) in a gorgeous old home in downtown Tulum. She grinds spices and herbs in stone *metates* for authentic *moles* (sauces with multitudinous ingredients), places grilled shrimp atop a bed of *huitlacoche* (a savory corn mushroom), and stuffs chicken breasts with *chaya* (similar to spinach). Linen-covered tables are spaced far enough apart for quiet conversation, though diners tend to share opinions and recommend favorites. Dining here is both a pleasure and a culinary adventure.

Calle Polar Poniente at Calle Orion Norte, downtown Tulum. ✆ **984/108-0681.** Main courses 170–210 pesos. No credit cards. Thurs–Tues 5–10pm.

Dolci Sapori ★★ ITALIAN Lasagna doesn't get much better than the 3-inch-high servings at this tiny cafe with a half-dozen outdoor tables and, indoors, an open kitchen with glass cases displaying irresistible tiramisu and pastries. Homemade pastas, tender calamari, and crunchy focaccia go well with the imported chiantis, and owner Roberto Deligios is happy to help diners choose between the linguine with pesto and shrimp or the awesome lasagna. Fresh croissants, orange juice, and espresso hit the spot in the morning—all meals are a treat here.

Calle Centauro Sur btw. Av. Tulum and Andromeda Oriente, downtown Tulum. ✆ **984/111-3147.** Main courses 75–130 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 8am–11pm.

Don Cafeto's ★ MEXICAN The first place I head for home-style huevos rancheros or *camarones mojo de ajo* (grilled shrimp with oil and garlic) is this sometimes noisy, always interesting cafe. The coffee's strong, the margaritas are perfectly mixed, and the salsas range from mild to *muy picante.* Background music varies from marimbas to mariachis to romantic guitars, and the waiters are always friendly and patient with non-Spanish speakers. It's like a dependable diner, but with far more interesting cuisine.

Av. Tulum btw. calles Centauro and Orion, downtown Tulum. ✆ **984/871-2207.** Main courses $8–$15. MC, V. Daily 7am–11pm.

¡Que Fresco! ★★ AMERICAN/MEXICAN Start the day with fragrant coffee from Chiapas, homemade bread and marmalade, and yogurt with papaya, all served at a bright yellow table on the sand beside a gorgeous beach. Snack on crisp chips and salsas with midday margaritas, and dine on grilled shrimp or filet mignon after dark. Why leave? Well-deserved rave reviews cover the walls at the Zamas hotel's barefoot cafe, and I've yet to see an unhappy diner even when the place is packed.

Carretera Punta Allen Km 5 on the beach. ✆ **415/387-9806** in the U.S. Main courses $7–$15. No credit cards. Daily 7am–10pm.

5 COBA RUINS ★★★

168km (104 miles) SW of Cancún

Older than most of Chichén Itzá and much larger than Tulum, Cobá was the eastern Yucatán's dominant city before A.D. 1000. The site is widely spread out, with thick forest growing between the temple groups. Rising high above the forest canopy are tall, steep pyramids of the Classic Maya style. Of the major sites, this one is the least reconstructed, with mounds that are sure to be additional structures still covered in vines and roots. Since they have been left in the condition in which they were found, most of the stone sculptures are worn down and impossible to make out. But the structures themselves, the surrounding jungle, and the twin lakes are impressive and enjoyable. The forest canopy is higher than in the northern part of the peninsula, and the town of Cobá is much like those in Yucatán's interior.

Cobá is my favorite easy escape from the action on the coast. Spending a night here gives you a chance to roam through the archaeological site in early morning when birds chatter, butterflies hover over flowers, and trees shade solitary trails. In the evening, you can easily spot turtles and crocodiles in the lake and graceful white egrets fishing for their dinners. Locals walk along the lakeside and gather outside their simple homes, chatting and watching children run about. I often wish I could spend several nights in this peaceful enclave.

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING

By Car The road to Cobá begins in Tulum and continues for 65km (40 miles). Watch out for *topes* (speed bumps) and potholes. The road has been widened and repaved and should be in good condition. Close to the village of Cobá, you will come to a triangle; be sure to follow the road to Cobá and not Nuevo Xcan or Valladolid. The entrance to the ruins is a short distance down the road past some small restaurants and the large lake.

By Bus Several buses a day leave Tulum and Playa del Carmen for Cobá. Several companies offer bus tours.

EXPLORING THE COBA RUINS

The Maya built many intriguing cities in the Yucatán, but few as grand as Cobá ("water stirred by wind"). Much of the 67-sq.-km (26-sq.-mile) site remains unexcavated. Scholars believe Cobá was an important trade link between the Caribbean coast and inland cities. A 100km (62-mile) *sacbé* (raised road) through the jungle linked it to Yaxuná, once an important Maya center 50km (31 miles) south of Chichén Itzá. This is the Maya's longest-known *sacbé,* and at least 50 shorter ones lead from here. An important city-state, Cobá flourished from A.D. 632 (the oldest carved date found here) until after the rise of Chichén Itzá, around 800. Then Cobá faded in importance and population until it was finally abandoned.

Once at the site, keep your bearings—you can get turned around in the maze of dirt roads in the jungle. Branching off from every labeled path, you'll see unofficial narrow paths into the jungle, used as shortcuts by locals. These are good for birding, but be careful to remember the way back.

The **Grupo Cobá** holds an impressive pyramid, **La Iglesia (the Church).** Take the path bearing right after the entrance. Resist the urge to climb the temple; the view is better from El Castillo in the Nohoch Mul group farther back.

Return to the main path and turn right, passing a sign pointing to the restored ***juego de pelota* (ball court).** Continuing for 5 to 10 minutes, you'll come to a fork in the road, where you'll notice jungle-covered, unexcavated pyramids to the left and right. At one point, a raised portion of the *sacbé* to Yaxuná is visible as it crosses the pathway. Throughout the area, carved stelae stand by pathways or lie forlornly in the underbrush. Although protected by crude thatched roofs, most are weatherworn enough to be indiscernible.

The left fork leads to the **Nohoch Mul Group,** which contains **El Castillo.** Except for Structure 2 in Calakmul, this is the tallest pyramid in the Yucatán, outreaching El Castillo at Chichén Itzá and the Pyramid of the Magician at Uxmal. From the top, you can see unexcavated, jungle-cloaked pyramids poking through the forest canopy all around. Climbing the Castillo was forbidden for a short time as archaeologists determined that all the traffic wasn't disturbing the pyramid's inner temples. Climbing had resumed in late 2009.

The right fork (more or less straight on) goes to the **Conjunto Las Pinturas,** whose main attraction is the **Pyramid of the Painted Lintel,** a small structure with traces of its original bright colors above the door. You can climb up for a close look.

Admission is 51 pesos, free for children 11 and younger. Parking is 50 pesos, and video camera permits 35 pesos. The site is open daily from 8am to 5pm, sometimes longer. ***Note:*** Visit Cobá in the morning or after the heat of the day has passed. Mosquito repellent, drinking water, and comfortable shoes are imperative. Bicycles are available for rent for $3 per hour at a stand just past the entrance. You can also hire a *triciclo* with driver to carry you around the site; rates start at $10. Clever *triciclo* drivers also park at Nohuch Mul to carry hot, tired passengers back to the entrance.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE

Cobá offers a few hotels, restaurants, and markets, and food choices abound at stands near the entrance when the archaeological site is open. Prices are refreshingly realistic, and the locals enjoy chatting with travelers. A few truly rustic hostelries offer hard mattresses and cold-water showers for budget travelers, and a couple of hotels are on the road to Tulum. Making reservations is difficult, as phone and Internet service is spotty, but it's a good idea to give it a shot during high season.

El Bocadito (Value) Cobá's longtime family-run hotel is always changing as the owners add air-conditioning and TVs to some rooms while keeping others bare-bones basic. The adjacent large restaurant (popular with groups at lunch) sits on the main road through town, right where buses to Playa del Carmen depart. Bathrooms in the cheapest rooms are so small that the seatless toilet is practically in the cold-water shower, and the single beds take up nearly all the space. Size and comfort levels gradually increase with the rates, up to the four rooms with TVs and one with air-conditioning. Guests gather at picnic tables beneath banana and orange trees in a narrow courtyard or in the Internet cafe with several communal computers. It's hard to make reservations, since phone and Internet service is unreliable.

On main road through Cobá town. ✆ **985/852-0052** or 984/876-3738. www.cancunsouth.com/bocadito; bocadito@hotmail.com. 9 units. 100–350 pesos double. MC, V (10% charge). **Amenities:** Restaurant. *In room:* A/C (in 1), fan (in some), Internet (for a fee).

Villas Arqueológicas Cobá ★★ (Finds) Lovingly maintained for several decades, this peaceful compound facing the lake is removed from town on a private road. Its cool blue pool, good restaurant, attentive service from faithful local workers, and a superb library make it the best choice in the area. The rooms have a double and a single bed in semiprivate niches, a small bathroom with hot-water shower, a sink outside the bathroom door, and dreadful lighting. Bougainvillea, palms, and ferns flourish in the central courtyard, shading

(Moments) A Day in the Life of a Maya Village

In the tropical forest near Cobá, a village of 27 families exists much as their long-ago ancestors did, living in round thatch huts with no electricity, indoor plumbing or paved roads, gathering plants in the jungle for medicinal and other uses on their way to dip into a hidden cenote, appealing to the gods for successful crops. And every day, the people of Pac Chen open their homes to as many as 80 tourists who want to know what Maya village life is in the 21st century.

The only way to visit Pac Chen is on trips with **Alltournative** (✆ **800/507-1092** in the U.S., or 984/803-9999; www.alltournative.com), an ecotour company that works with villagers to help them become self-sustaining. Farming continues, but tourism income allows them to survive without burning their land to squeeze out the last remaining nutrients.

The arrangement is a boon to tourists, too. On your own, it would be pretty well impossible to walk into a Maya village and be ushered through the jungle and lowered into a cenote or to glide through the forest canopy on a zip line, kayak a lagoon full of howler monkeys, eat lunch cooked by village women and receive a copal-incense blessing from a village elder for a safe trip home.

The Maya Encounter tour costs $119 for adults and $95 for children.

the pool and dining terraces. The restaurant's Mexican/Continental food is very good, if a bit overpriced (bring water or pay 10 pesos for each tiny bottle). An excellent library contains tomes on the Maya, archaeology, and Mexican art—and a pool table for guests bored by the lack of activities after dark.

West of the ruins beside the lake. ✆ **984/206-7001.** www.villasarqueologicas.com.mx. 43 units. $65–$125 double. MC, V. Parking lot. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; room service; tennis court; Wi-Fi (in public areas). *In room:* A/C, hair dryer.

6 SIAN KA'AN & THE PUNTA ALLEN PENINSULA ★★★

Just past Tulum's last cabaña hotel is the entrance arch to the vast (526-hectare/1.3 million-acre) **Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve.** This inexpressibly beautiful tract of wild land is the domain of howler monkeys, ocelots, crocodiles, jaguars, tapirs, sea turtles, and thousands of species of plants. The Mexican government created this reserve in 1986; the following year, the United Nations declared it a World Heritage Site. Sian Ka'an protects 10% of Quintana Roo's landmass, including almost one-third of the Caribbean coastline, from development.

The entrance to the Punta Allen Peninsula, a small portion of the reserve, is one of two main entrances to the reserve; the other entrance is from the community of Muyil off Hwy. 307 south of Tulum (you take a boat down canals, built by the Maya, that connect to the Boca Paila lagoon).

Legends still swirl about the 4 hours it takes to drive the 50km (31 miles) over potholes, ruts, and rivulets to the town of Punta Allen at road's end. In fact, the road has been much improved, though it is still dirt, still pockmarked to varying degrees, and subject to weather-related conditions. Guards at the entrance gate are fond of declaring it's now a 1-hour trip, and no doubt that's true for the locals who sailed past me in my rented compact sedan. Driving cautiously after a stretch of rainy weather, it took me a little less than 2 hours. Those driving 4-wheelers or other robust vehicles should plan to spend about 1½ hours on the road.

If you don't fancy yourself a road warrior, you can drive through the entrance arch in Tulum (entry 25 pesos per person) and take a path at the guard station to the clear, cool Ben-Ha cenote for a swim—or continue south a short way to one of several places where the beach comes into view, pull over and spread out your beach towel.

THE PUNTA ALLEN PENINSULA

As you drive the skinny peninsula, which separates the Boca Paila Lagoon from the sea, you'll find no trails leading into the jungle, but you can swim or snorkel off the beaches that come into view. Guided tours are the only way to see most of the reserve. Otherwise, there is no practical way to visit Sian Ka'an except by car.

The Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve ★★★

Maya life in ancient times remains essentially a mystery, but there's no wondering why they named this land Sian Ka'an (see-*an* caan), Mayan for "where the sky is born." Sunrise here truly is like witnessing the birth of a day.

The reserve encompasses most of the ecosystems that exist on the entire Yucatán Peninsula: medium- and low-growth jungles, beaches, savannas, marshes, freshwater and brackish lagoons, cenotes, underground rivers, and untouched coral reef. Numerous archaeological sites have also been found within its borders

More than 2,000 people, most of them Maya, live in Sian Ka'an. All are original residents of the area, or their descendants. Tours to the reserve are often led by locals, who grew up nearby in homes occupied for countless generations. They'll almost never consult a field guide; their knowledge about the birds, the plants, the water, and the ruins is simply a part of their lives.

To access the reserve beyond the road, arrange for a tour in Tulum. Two organizations in particular keep their groups small and work only through the local people.

The **Centro Ecológico Sian Ka'an,** or CESiaK, Hwy. 307 just south of Tulum ruins turnoff (✆ **984/871-2499;** www.cesiak.org), which runs the Sian Ka'an Visitor Center, is a nonprofit group supporting the reserve with education and community development programs. Its popular all-day canal tour ($77 per person, including lunch and tax), includes a guided walk through coastal dunes and jungle, continuing with a boat trip across two brackish lagoons where freshwater cenotes well up from under the ground. Boats follow a narrow channel through mangroves and grass savanna to a small temple where Maya traders stopped to make offerings and ask for successful negotiations. You'll don life jackets and float part of the way in the currents of a freshwater lagoon and snorkel in a cenote before the day is over. Other tours include a sunset bird-watching trip and single- and multiday fly-fishing packages.

Community Tours Sian Ka'an, Avenida Tulum between calles Centauro and Orión (✆ **984/114-0750;** www.siankaantours.org) is a local guides' cooperative that runs snorkeling, birding, and adventure tours into the biosphere. Their "Forest and Float" canal tours ($99 per adult, $70 child) begin with a visit to the Muyil archaeological site and enter the reserve from that side.

The Road to Punta Allen

About 11km (6¾ miles) past the arch, you'll come to the **Boca Paila Fishing Lodge** (www.bocapaila.com). Not for the general traveler, it specializes in weeklong, all-inclusive packages for fly fishers. The peninsula is so narrow here that you see the Boca Paila lagoon on one side and the sea on the other. In another 3km (2 miles), you will be flooded by false hope when you reach a smooth, concrete roadway—this is the foot of the Boca Paila Bridge, which spans the inlet between the ocean and the lagoon, and the pavement disappears as quickly as it appeared. You'll often see people fishing off the sides. This is a good place to stop and stretch your legs while taking in ethereal water views from either side.

Anatomy of a Biosphere Reserve

Unlike its national parks, which focus on historical and aesthetic features, Mexico's biosphere reserves were created purely to protect its last natural ecosystems. Recognition by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), requires that the biosphere contain at least 10,000 hectares (about 39 sq. miles), at least one pristine area of biological diversity, and threatened or endangered endemic species.

Mexico pioneered the zoning system that allows some carefully managed tourism. The core area—the heart of the reserve—is limited to scientific research and is surrounded by a buffer zone that allows only conservation-related activity. On the periphery, a transition zone permits sustainable use of natural resources to benefit local communities, as CESiaK's tours do. Biosphere reserves allow original residents to remain; local people, in fact, are recruited to research, monitor, and manage the ecosystem while developing sustainable activities such as ecotourism.

Moments Sleeping Where the Sky Is Born

To see the sun rise in Sian Ka'an as the Maya did, you can stay in CESiaK's **Boca Paila Camps** ★★, 4km/2½ miles past the entrance arch. The eco-lodge's tent cabins are tucked into the edge of the jungle on a clean, white beach, raised on platforms to avoid interfering with the sand's natural processes. The fine linens and solid wood furniture make it feel less like camping, but when night falls and you're stumbling around by candlelight, it feels plenty rustic. Guests share scrupulously clean bathrooms equipped with composting toilets, housed in buildings whose rooftop lookouts grant views of the sea and lagoon that give "panoramic" new meaning—you'll actually see the curvature of the earth. Cabins with one double and one single bed rent for $65, while deluxe cabins with one queen and ocean or lagoon views are $80. Meals are extra. The camp has no electricity—guests get battery-powered lamps—but wind and solar power provide hot water. Things do not always run perfectly smoothly: The restaurant, which is reasonably priced and turns out better meals than it has any right to in this remote location, sometimes runs out of ingredients for a popular menu item, and one time I was assigned to a tent that was already occupied (and quickly reassigned). But this place makes Tulum's vaunted sands look like Panama City Beach in springtime—and its staff knows the reserve's plants, animals, and local culture backward and forward.

After the bridge, it's mostly deserted coastline until you get to Punta Allen. About 8km (5 miles) before you do, you'll come to **Rancho Sol Caribe** (www.solcaribe-mexico.com), with four comfortable cabañas and a stunning beach it has all to itself.

PUNTA ALLEN

Punta Allen, the peninsula's only town, is a lobster fishing village on a palm-studded beach perched between Ascension Bay and the Caribbean Sea. About 100 families survive by lobster fishing and, increasingly, tourism; many of the young men now are expert fly-fishing guides.

Isolated and rustic, this is very much the end of the road. The town has a lobster cooperative, a few sand streets with modest homes, and a lighthouse. The generator, when it's working, comes on for a few hours in the morning and a few more at night. Your cellphone won't work here, and no one takes credit cards. Without the help of a friendly local, it's a challenge to figure out when any of the businesses are open.

This is slowly beginning to change. The few lodges that bravely set up shop here 10 or 15 years ago have acquired some upstart young neighbors, and 80 more guest rooms have been approved (no telling how long it will take for those to materialize). For now, unless you're a fishing enthusiast, there's not a lot to do in Punta Allen except kick back, snorkel a little, and eat your fill of fresh seafood.

Casa de Ascención ★ Of the newer places in town, this home run by a Swiss/Argentine couple is the most impressive in town. Positioned between the beach in one direction and the bay in the other—100m (less than 400 ft.) either way—it offers three cool, tidy rooms whose furniture and decor take cues from Mexican design. They surround a shared living room with a book exchange, Internet computer, and satellite TV. Solar power cranks out electricity 24 hours a day. The helpful owners live upstairs behind

the restaurant, which turns out an impressive array of international dishes, pizza, and fresh fish specials. All-inclusive fly-fishing packages are available, too.

1 block west of entrance to town. ✆ **984/801-0034.** www.casadeascension.com. 3 units. High season $65–$85 double; low season $60–$80 double. No credit cards. *In room:* No phone.

Cuzan Guesthouse One of the town's original fishing lodges, this collection of basic, *palapa*-roofed wood cabañas on a sandy beach also has one of the town's best restaurants and a full bar. Despite the increasing competition, it has a loyal following. Cuzan's bread and butter is its all-inclusive fishing packages, but it will rent a cabaña to anyone interested in passing some time in Punta Allen. The guesthouse also offers a variety of birding, snorkeling, and other boat tours.

Apartado 24, Felipe Carrillo Puerto, 77200 Q. Roo. ✆ **983/834-0358.** www.flyfishmx.com. 12 units. $50–$110 cabañas. No credit cards. *In room:* No phone.

Serenidad Shardon This retreat on the coastal road just south of town—we're talking about the equivalent of 3 or 4 blocks—can put you in a three-bedroom beach house or one of two sweet, private cabañas, all with private bathrooms, contemporary decoration, and views of the Caribbean from decks or windows. In high season, owner Niki Allen puts up four sturdy tent cabins, equipped with lights and fans, to accommodate more guests. She'll also set you up with tours if you want them, and think of a dozen other ways to make sure you are happy.

Beach road south of town square. ✆ **616/827-0204** in the U.S., or 984/876-1827. www.shardon.com. 3 units (7 in high season). $150–$200 cabañas; $350 beach house ($250 lower floor only); 200 pesos per person tent cabins. No credit cards. *In room:* No phone.

EN ROUTE TO THE LOWER CARIBBEAN COAST

About 25km (16 miles) south of Tulum on Hwy. 307, a sign points to the small but interesting ruins of **Muyil** (take bug spray), on the western edge of Sian Ka'an. The principal ruins are a small group of buildings and a plaza dominated by the Castillo. It's one of the Caribbean coast's taller structures but is more interesting for the unique, solid round masonry turret at the top. From here, a canal dug by the Maya enters the biosphere reserve and empties into a lake, with other canals going from there to the saltwater estuary of Boca Paila. The local community offers a boat ride through these canals and lakes. The 3½-hour tour includes viewing some otherwise inaccessible ruins, snorkeling the canal, and floating in its current.

Felipe Carrillo Puerto (pop. 60,000) is the first large town on the road to Ciudad Chetumal. The town was a rebel stronghold during the War of the Castes and home to the millenarian cult of the "Talking Cross." A sizable community of cult believers still practices its own brand of religion and is respected by the entire town. Of primary interest to travelers, however, are Carrillo Puerto's two gas stations, a market, a bus terminal, and a bank next to the gas station in the center of town, which has an ATM. From Carrillo Puerto, Hwy. 184 goes into the peninsula's interior and eventually to Mérida, making it a turning point on the "short circuit" of the Yucatán Peninsula.

7 MAHAHUAL, XCALAK & THE CHINCHORRO REEF

Tourism has been late to arrive on the quiet southern half of the Caribbean coast. The recently dubbed Costa Maya is tucked under the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve on a wide peninsula jutting out from the mainland. It remained largely unnoticed—except by fly fishers—while resorts gobbled up the beaches of Cancún and the Riviera Maya over the past few decades.

Lying 354km (220 miles) from Cancún's airport and more than 48km (30 miles) from the highway, the Costa Maya's beaches might never see Riviera Maya–scale development, but changes have already come since Carnival Cruise Line and government tourism officials brought a huge cruise port to the tiny fishing village of Mahahual (sometimes spelled Majahual) in 2001. New roads built to smooth the way for cruise passenger bus tours have cut the trip to the even smaller and more remote village of Xcalak (eesh-kah-*lahk*)—the Mexican Caribbean's southernmost settlement—from 4 hours to less than 1. Luxury developments are rumored to be on the drawing boards, but tourism officials vow to abandon the Cancún/Riviera Maya model, integrating the local population into restrained development of small, eco-friendly hotels and nature tours.

So far, the Costa Maya remains a landscape of mangrove marshes, low jungle, and long stretches of palm-fringed, white-sand beaches. Affordable bungalows and small restaurants serving fresh-caught fish await visitors drawn to the region's cenotes, ancient villages, Maya ruins, and incomparable snorkeling and diving.

ORIENTATION About 45 minutes south of Felipe Carrillo Puerto, a few kilometers past the town of Limones at a place called El Cafetal (there's a gas station before the turnoff), you reach the clearly marked turnoff for Mahahual and Xcalak. It's 50km (31 miles) on a good paved road to the coast at Mahahual. The turnoff for the new road to Xcalak comes 2km (1¼ miles) before you reach Mahahual, at a military checkpoint. Xcalak is 55km (34 miles) to the south, less than an hour's drive.

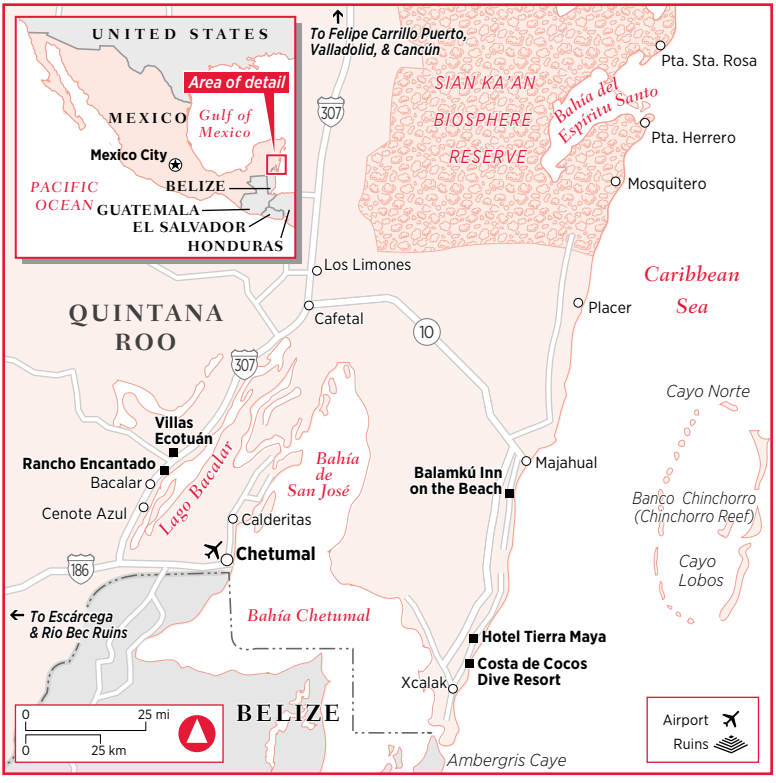
MAHAHUAL

The cruise ship pier (north of the road entering town) has given Mahahual a split personality. The port has expanded into a small tourist zone with a beach club, shopping mall, and tour companies offering dozens of excursions, and a miniature city with its own suburb of homes and apartments has sprouted nearby. On port days, the town's packed-sand main street brims with tipsy, sunburned passengers who elect beach time over bus tours, only to empty at night and return to somnolence.

Your best bet is to keep your distance from the pier and stay in the lower Mahahual area (or repair to Xcalak). Even when devoid of cruise passengers, I don't find Mahahual a particularly appealing town, though its new *malecón* (seafront promenade) makes for a pleasant walk along a fine white beach. Beach areas north and south of town, though, are the stuff of dreams. Most of its hotels and services are on the sand road running through town and south along the coast.

Balamkú Inn on the Beach ★★★ This comfortable, friendly place on the coast road south of town rents rooms in stylish, one- and two-story thatched bungalows distributed across 110m (361 ft.) of dazzling white beach. They are large and breezy, with comfortable mattresses, large attractive bathrooms, and louvered windows to let you control the amount of breeze. All have terraces facing the beach. The friendly Canadian owners are environmentally minded to the extreme. All the inn's energy comes from wind and sun—enough to provide 24-hour power without using a diesel generator. Even more impressive, they rely on a large rainwater collection system and route shower and sink wastewater to nourish the wetlands, and use a composting waste system instead of polluting septic tanks—they not only allow but urge guests to flush paper down the toilet. For travelers with any ecological leanings at all, it adds yet another layer of relaxation to the supremely comfortable and beautiful surroundings.

Carretera Costera Km 5.7, Mahahual, Q. Roo. ✆ **983/839-5332.** www.balamku.com. 10 units. High season $90 double, midseason $85 double; low season $80 double. Rates include full breakfast. AE, MC, V for deposits; no credit cards at hotel. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant (breakfast and lunch); bar (afternoons); airport transfer; smoke-free rooms; watersports. *In room:* No phone, Wi-Fi.



XCALAK

Quintana Roo's last stand before the channel marking Mexico's border with Belize, **Xcalak** (eesh-kah-*lahk*) is a depopulated, weather-beaten fishing village with a few comfortable places to stay and a couple of restaurants. A former military outpost, it once had a population as large as 1,200 before the 1958 hurricane washed most of the town away; now it has about 600 permanent residents. Fly fishers started coming in the 1980s and are still pulling prizes out of the water. The town has a certain shabby charm, but the real lure is the inns just beyond town that offer a little patch of paradise safe from anything resembling a crowd.

Costa de Cocos Dive & Fly-Fishing Resort ★★ Free-standing cabañas sit around a large, attractive sandy beach graced with coconut palms. Co-owner Ilana Randal epitomizes a "life is too short" philosophy that makes you feel all is right with the world. The comfortable cabañas come with one king- or queen-size bed or two doubles; one cabaña is a two-bedroom unit with two bathrooms. They have been recently remodeled and have plenty of cross ventilation, ceiling fans, hot water, and comfortable mattresses. Wind and solar power provides 24-hour electricity. Activities include kayaking, snorkeling, scuba diving, and fly-fishing. The resort has experienced English-speaking fishing guides and a dive instructor. The casual restaurant/bar, which offers good home-style cooking, is open late.

Moments Diving the Chinchorro Reef

The **Chinchorro Reef Underwater National Park,** about 30km (20 miles) off this coastline, is by most accounts the largest coral atoll in the Northern Hemisphere, at 38km (24 miles) long and 13km (8 miles) wide. Its coral formations, massive sponges, and abundant sea life are certainly among the most spectacular. Locals claim this is the last virgin reef system in the Caribbean. The oval reef is as shallow as 1m (3¼ ft.) at its interior and as deep as 900m (2,952 ft.) at its exterior. It's invisible from the ocean side and has doomed scores of ships. Contrary to popular misconception, the 30 or so **shipwrecks** that decorate the underwater landscape cannot be dived—they are protected by the Banco Chinchorro Biosphere. However, the reef offers at least a dozen stellar dive sites. And most wrecks, including the famous **40 Cannons** on the northwest side, are quite shallow and can be explored by snorkeling. The west side of the reef is a wonderland of walls and coral gardens.

The number of divers who have tried to dive Chinchorro Reef and never got there is kind of a running joke along the Costa Maya. It can be a challenge to get to the reef, partly because of fickle sea conditions and partly because of the strict limit on permits. **XTC Dive Center** (✆ **983/839-8865;** www.xtcdivecenter.com) in Xcalak specializes in trips to Chinchorro—the company's name stands for "Xcalak to Chinchorro." XTC also offers a lineup of dives to local reefs and cenotes.

Carretera Mahahual–Xcalak Km 52, Q. Roo. ✆ **983/839-8537.** www.costadecocos.com. 16 cabañas. High season $90 double; low season $85 double. Dive and fly-fishing packages available by e-mail request. Rates include breakfast buffet. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; dive shop; watersports. *In room:* Wi-Fi, no phone.

Hotel Tierra Maya ★ This is a comfortable, modern-style hotel on the beach. Rooms in the two-story building are spacious and designed for good cross ventilation. They come with ceiling fans. Each has a private balcony or terrace that looks out to the sea, hammocks, and bottled purified water. Solar generators provide 24-hour electricity. Bathrooms are large, and beds are either twins or queen-size. The owners arrange diving, fishing, and snorkeling trips for guests. Guests have use of kayaks and bikes.

Carretera Mahahual–Xcalak Km 54, Q. Roo. ✆ **800/216-1902** in the U.S. Fax 941/627-0089. www.tierramaya.net. 7 units. High season $85–$150 double; low season $75–$135 double. Rates include continental breakfast. MC, V for advance payments; cash only at hotel. Limited free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; bikes; kayaks. *In room:* No phone, Wi-Fi.

8 LAGUNA BACALAR ★★★

104km (64 miles) SW of Felipe Carrillo Puerto; 37km (23 miles) NW of Chetumal

On a sunny day, you will see why Laguna Bacalar is nicknamed *Lago de los Siete Colores* (Lake of the Seven Colors): The white-sandy bottom makes the crystalline water pale turquoise in shallow areas, morphing to vivid turquoise and through a spectrum to deep indigo in the deeper center. The colors shift with the passing of the day, making a mesmerizing backdrop for a day or two of exploring.

Considered Mexico's second-largest lake, Bacalar is actually a lagoon, with a series of waterways leading eventually to the ocean. Fed not by surface runoff but by underground cenotes, it is almost 50km (31 miles) long. You'll glimpse the jewel-toned water long before you reach the town of Bacalar, about two-thirds of the way down, where you must go for swimming or kayaking.

The town of Bacalar is quiet and traditional, though it seems every year brings a new cadre of expats looking for a different kind of life. There's not a lot of action in town, but you shouldn't miss the **Fuerte San Felipe Bacalar,** built in 1733 to protect the Spanish from the pirates and Maya rebels who regularly raided the area. Admission is 52 pesos. Overlooking the lake on the eastern edge of the central plaza, the fort houses an excellent museum devoted to regional history, with a focus on the pirates who repeatedly descended upon these shores.

As if to prove the water gods smile upon Bacalar, Mexico's biggest and deepest cenote is about a mile south of town, at Km 15. Measuring 185m (607 ft.) across, **Cenote Azul** is surrounded by lush flowers and trees, and filled with water so clear that you can see 60m (200 ft.) down into its nearly 91m (300-ft.) depth.

Some lovely inns dot the lagoon's western shore, which makes Bacalar an appealing alternative base to Chetumal for exploring the Maya ruins in the nearby Río Bec area.

ORIENTATION Driving south on Hwy. 307, the town of Bacalar is 1½ hours beyond Felipe Carrillo Puerto, clearly marked by signs. If you're driving north from Chetumal, it takes about a half-hour. Buses going south from Cancún and Playa del Carmen stop here, and there are frequent buses from Chetumal. There are now a couple of gas stations on the highway in town.

WHERE TO STAY

You can stay quite comfortably in Bacalar for very little money. My favorite inn is **Amigos B&B Laguna Bacalar** ★★ (✆ **987/872-3868;** www.bacalar.net), with five rooms of various sizes and configurations overlooking the water on Avenida Costera, about a mile south of the plaza. Doubles run 600 to 700 pesos including breakfast, 500 to 600 pesos without. A little closer to the center of town on the same road, I also quite like the quirky and endearing **Casita Carolina** (✆ **983/834-2334;** www.casitacarolina.com), with three units in a converted family home that share a common living room and kitchen, and three separate casitas scattered through a large, grassy garden sloping to the lake's shore. The owner, who lives on-site, hosts an artist's retreat every February. Prices range from 300 to 600 pesos, making this a great value. If you want to really get away from it all, **Villas Ecotucán** (✆ **983/834-2516;** www.villasecotucan.info) commands about 40 hectares (99 acres) of largely undeveloped land and focuses on the outdoors; its five spacious *palapa*-roofed cabañas (made out of native materials from the property) and two suites have separate sitting rooms and rent for 550 pesos; for 850 pesos you can have your own houseboat on the lake. They also offer more jungle walks, swimming, and kayaking tours than you could go through in a week. Ecotucán is 5km (3 miles) north of town and 1km (less than a mile) off Hwy. 307; look for the tall, rainbow-colored tree, flags, and welcome sign.

Climbing the price scale just a bit gets you all-out luxury. The all-suites **Villas Bakalar** ★ (✆ **983/835-1400;** www.villasbakalar.com) on Avenida 3, a couple of blocks north of the plaza, has 15 new and modern one- and two-bedroom suites for 1,130 pesos and 1,780 pesos, respectively, set in a veritable botanical garden of native flora—a passionate interest of the owner. It's a block from the shore but has sweeping lake views. And the well-known **Rancho Encantado** ★ (✆/fax **983/101-3358;** www.encantado.com) near Hwy. 307 north of town, rents 13 large white stucco cottages scattered over a shady

lawn beside the lake, surrounded by native trees, orchids, and bromeliads. It charges $130 to $150 in high season, $65 to $85 in low season.

WHERE TO DINE

I've had good, simple meals at **Laguna de Bacalar** on the town square, and great dinners at the more upscale **Los Aluxes** on Avenida Costera, south of Amigos B&B. And **Restaurante Cenote Azul** (✆ **983/834-2460;** www.cenoteazul.com.mx), with its vantage point overlooking the cenote, wouldn't even have to serve decent food to attract a following, but it does all the same. While you're there, you can take a dip in the cenote, as long as you aren't wearing lotions or deodorant.

9 CHETUMAL

251km (156 miles) S of Tulum; 37km (23 miles) S of Lago Bacalar

Quintana Roo's capital and second-largest city (after Cancún), Chetumal (pop. 210,000), is a tourist destination only in the sense that it's the gateway to Belize, Tikal (Guatemala), and the Río Bec ruins (p. 586). It has little to offer a tourist, with the one huge exception of its museum devoted to Maya culture, perhaps the best outside of Mexico City. The old part of town down by the Río Hondo has an intriguing Caribbean atmosphere, but otherwise there's not much to hold you here.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There & Departing

BY PLANE Mexicana's regional carrier, **Click** (✆ **01-800/112-5425** or 983/832-6675; www.mexicana.com), flies between Chetumal (Airport code CTM) and Mexico City. The airport is west of town, just north of the entrance from the highway.

BY CAR Chetumal is just over 3 hours from Tulum. If you're heading to Belize, be aware that rental companies don't allow you to take their cars across the border. To get to the ruins of Tikal in Guatemala, you must go through Belize to the border crossing at Ciudad Melchor de Mencos.

BY BUS The main bus station (✆ **983/832-5110**) is 20 blocks from the town center on Insurgentes at Avenida Héroes. Buses go to Cancún, Tulum, Playa del Carmen, Puerto Morelos, Mérida, Campeche, Villahermosa, and Tikal, Guatemala.

To Belize: Buses depart from the Lázaro Cárdenas market, most often called Mercado Nuevo (Héroes and Circuito). Ask for **Autobuses Novelo,** which has local service every 45 minutes (140 pesos) and four express buses per day (185 pesos).

Visitor Information

The **State Tourism Office** (✆ **983/835-0860,** ext. 1811) is at Calzada del Centenario 622, between Comonfort and Ciricote. It's open Monday to Friday from 9am to 6pm.

Orientation

The telephone **area code** is **983.**

Traffic enters the city from the west on Hwy. 186 and feeds onto Avenida Obregón into town. Stay on Obregón and don't take the exit veering left for Avenida Insurgentes. You'll cross Avenida Héroes, the main north-south street.

A MUSEUM NOT TO MISS

Museo de la Cultura Maya ★★★ This sophisticated museum unlocks the complex world of the Maya through interactive exhibits and genuine artifacts. Push a button, and an illustrated description appears, explaining medicinal and domestic uses of plants with their Mayan and scientific names; another exhibit describes the social classes of the Maya by their manners of dress. One of the most fascinating exhibits describes the Maya's ideal of personal beauty, which prompted them to deform craniums, scar the face and body, and induce cross-eyed vision.

An enormous screen flashes aerial images of more than a dozen Maya sites from Mexico to Honduras. Another large television shows the architectural variety of Maya pyramids and how they were probably built. Then a walk on a glass floor takes you over representative ruins in the Maya world. In the center of the museum is the three-story, stylized, sacred Ceiba tree, which the Maya believed connected Xibalba (the underworld), Earth, and the heavens. Try to see the museum before you tour the Río Bec ruins. The museum now closes at 2pm because of budget cutbacks.

Av. Héroes s/n (btw. Colón and Gandhi, 8 blocks from Av. Obregón, just past the Holiday Inn). ✆ **983/832-6838.** Admission 52 pesos. Tues–Sun 9am–2pm.

WHERE TO STAY

I prefer Bacalar (see above), only about 30 minutes away, as a base for exploring this region. If you do need to stay over in the capital, a couple of hotels stand above the rest.

Hotel Holiday Inn Chetumal Puerta Maya This modern hotel is a reliable if not inspiring option. It has the best air-conditioning in town and is only a block from the Museo de la Cultura Maya. Most rooms are midsize and come with one king-size or two double beds. Bathrooms are roomy and well lit.

Av. Héroes 171, 77000 Chetumal, Q. Roo. ✆ **800/465-4329** in the U.S., or 983/835-0400. Fax 983/832-1676. 85 units. 865 pesos double. AE, MC, V. Free secure parking. From Av. Obregón, turn left on Av. Héroes, go 6 blocks, and look for the hotel on the right. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; fitness room; midsize outdoor pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV, Wi-Fi.

Hotel Los Cocos Renovated rooms are positively sleek, bathrooms are scrupulously clean, and the small but inviting pool is in the middle of a lush garden. Ask for a room facing the courtyard—the view is better. The open-air restaurant, popular with museum visitors, does a good job with Mexican favorites. This three-story hotel is 2 blocks south of the museum.

Av. Héroes 134 (corner of Chapultepec), 77000 Chetumal, Q. Roo. ✆ **983/832-3232.** 176 units. 900 pesos double. AE, MC, V. Off-street parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; Internet terminal; 2 outdoor pools; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge.

WHERE TO DINE

For an economical meal with some local atmosphere, try **Restaurante Pantoja,** on the corner of calles Ghandi and 16 de Septiembre (✆ **983/832-3957**), 2 blocks east of the Museum of Maya Culture. It offers a cheap daily special, good green enchiladas, and Yucatecan specialties. It's open Monday to Saturday from 7am to 7pm. To sample excellent *antojitos,* the local supper food, try **El Buen Gusto,** on Calzada Veracruz across from the market (no phone). A Chetumal institution, it serves excellent *salbutes* and *panuchos,* tacos, and sandwiches. It's open from the morning until 2pm and again from about 7pm to midnight. Another alternative is next door at **La Ideal,** which many locals hold to be the better of the two supper joints. It has delicious *tacos de pierna* (soft tacos with thinly

sliced pork shoulder) and *agua de horchata* (water flavored with rice, vanilla, and toasted pumpkinseed).

ONWARD FROM CHETUMAL

The Maya ruins of Lamanai, in Belize, are an easy day trip if you have transportation (not a rental car). You can explore the Río Bec route (see below) directly west of the city by taking Hwy. 186.

10 SIDE TRIPS TO MAYA RUINS FROM CHETUMAL

A few miles west of Bacalar and Chetumal begins an area of Maya settlement known to archaeologists as the Río Bec region. A number of ruins stretch from close to Bacalar well into the state of Campeche. They are intriguing for their heavily stylized, lavishly decorated architecture. Excavation has brought restoration, but these cities have not been rebuilt to the same degree as those at Uxmal and Chichén Itzá. Often, buildings were in such great shape that reconstruction was unnecessary.

Opening Hours

The archaeological sites along the Río Bec (except for Calakmul, which has its own opening days and hours) are open daily, 8am to 5pm.

Nor have these sites been cleared of jungle growth like the marquee ruins mentioned earlier. Trees and vines grow in profusion around the buildings, giving the sites the feel of lost cities. In visiting them, you can imagine what John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood must have felt when they traipsed through the Yucatán in the 19th century. And watch for wildlife; fauna along the entire route is especially rich. You might see a toucan, a grand curassow, or a macaw hanging about, and orioles, egrets, and several birds of prey are extremely common. Gray fox, wild turkey, *tesquintle* (a bushy-tailed, plant-eating rodent), the coatimundi (raccoon kin with long tapered snout and tail), and armadillos inhabit the area in abundance. Several bands of spider and howler monkeys circulate Calakmul and the surrounding jungle.

THE ROUTE Halfway between Bacalar and Chetumal is the well-marked turnoff for Hwy. 186 to Escárcega (about 20km/12 miles from either town). This same road leads to Campeche, Palenque, and Villahermosa. A couple of gas stations are en route, including one in the town of Xpujil. Keep plenty of cash with you, as credit cards are rarely accepted in the area.

The Río Bec sites are at varying distances off this highway. You pass through a guard station at the border with Campeche State. The guards might ask you to present your travel papers, or they might just ask you where you've been and where you are going, then wave you on. You can divide your sightseeing into several day trips from Bacalar or Chetumal, or you can spend the night in this area and see more the next day. If you get an early start, you can easily visit a few of the sites mentioned here in a day.

Evidence, especially from Becán, shows that these ruins were part of the **trade route** linking the Caribbean coast at Cobá to Edzná and the Gulf Coast, and to Lamanai in Belize and beyond. At one time, a great number of cities thrived here; much of the land was dedicated to cultivation of maize. Today everything lies hidden under a dense jungle, which blankets the land from horizon to horizon.

The following sites are listed in east-to-west order, the way you would see them driving from the Caribbean coast. If you decide to tour these ruins, take the time to visit the Museo de la Cultura Maya (p. 585) in Chetumal first. It will lend context to what you see. If you want a guide to show you the area, you can't do better than **Luis Téllez** (✆ **983/832-3496;** www.mayaruinsandbirds.com) in Chetumal. He's knowledgeable, speaks English, and drives safely and well. Most important, he's acquainted with most of the archaeologists excavating these ruins and stays current with their discoveries. He also knows the local wildlife and guides many tours for birders.

Entry to each site is 31 to 49 pesos. Informational signs at each building are in Mayan, Spanish, and English. Few if any refreshments are available at the ruins, so bring your own water and food. All the principal sites have toilets.

FOOD & LODGING The only town in the Río Bec region offering basic tourist services is Xpujil, which doesn't have much else going for it. Of the basic affordable hotels in town, the best food and lodging is at **Restaurant y Hotel Calakmul** (✆ **983/871-6029**), which rents air-conditioned doubles with TV for 550 to 600 pesos. They have tile floors, private bathrooms with hot water, and good beds. The restaurant is reliable and is open daily from 6am to midnight. Main courses cost 45 to 120 pesos.

If you have a rental car, I'd suggest staying outside of town. Just beyond Xpujil, across from the ruins of the same name, is **Chicanná Eco Village** at Carretera Escárcega Km 296 (✆ **981/811-9191** in Campeche for reservations; www.hoteldelmar.com.mx). Its 42 comfortable, nicely furnished rooms are distributed among several two-story thatched bungalows. They offer doubles or a king-size bed, ceiling fans, a large bathroom, and screened windows. The manicured lawns and flower beds are lovely, with pathways linking the bungalows to one another and to the restaurant and swimming pool. Double rooms go for 1,200 pesos.

Río Bec Dreams ★★ (✆ **983/871-6057;** www.riobecdreams.com), 11km (7 miles) west of Xpujil right after you pass through Becán, rents "jungalows"—small, wooden cabins on stilts—scattered through a tropical forest. The cabins have good screens and such niceties as curtains, tile counters, hand-painted sinks, porches, and very comfortable beds with mosquito netting (which I didn't need), for 500 pesos a night. Each cabin has a wash basin, but guests share spotless bathrooms (the one unit with its own bathroom, the larger Orchida, costs 575 pesos). Nicer still are the cabañas, which have screened-in porches and private bathrooms; these cabañas rent for 878 to 990 pesos, with a 2-night minimum stay. In the coming year, more of the jungalows will be enlarged and equipped with their own toilets. For all its rusticity, the hotel provides wireless Internet. The Canadian owners have lived in the area a long time and are devoted students of Río Bec

Tips Recommended Reading

For a bit of background reading to help you make the most of your visit, try *A Forest of Kings: The Untold Story of the Ancient Maya,* by Linda Schele and David Freidel; *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art,* by Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller; and *The Maya Cosmos,* by David Freidel and Linda Schele. The best companion book to have is Joyce Kelly's *An Archaeological Guide to Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula,* even though it lacks historical and cultural information, and many sites have expanded since it was written.

architecture who guide tours of the ruins; tours run from short excursions to smaller ruins for 250 pesos to all-day treks through Calakmul for 1,500 pesos. The owners are a wonderful resource for their guests, and good companions around the open-air bar. The restaurant is the best in this region.

DZIBANCHE & KINICHNA

The turnoff, 37km (23 miles) from the highway intersection, is well marked; another 23km (14 miles) brings you to the ruins. Ask about the condition of the road before setting out. These unpaved roads can go from good to bad pretty quickly, but this is an important enough site that road repair is generally kept up. Dzibanché (or Tzibanché) means "place where they write on wood"—obviously not the original name, which remains unknown. It dates from the Classic period (A.D. 300–900) and was occupied for around 700 years. Exploration began here in 1993, and the site opened to the public in late 1994. Scattered over 42 sq. km (16 sq. miles) are several groupings of buildings and plazas; only a small portion is excavated.

TEMPLES & PLAZAS Two large adjoining plazas have been cleared. The most important structure yet excavated is the **Temple of the Owl** in the main plaza, Plaza Xibalba. Archaeologists found a stairway descending from the top of the structure and deep into the pyramid to a burial chamber (not open to visitors), where they uncovered some beautiful polychromatic lidded vessels, one of which has an owl painted on the top handle with its wings spreading onto the lid. White owls were messengers of the underworld gods of the Maya religion. Also found here were the remains of a sacrificial victim and what appear to be the remains of a Maya queen, which is unique in Maya archaeology.

Opposite the Temple of the Owl is the **Temple of the Cormorant,** named after the bird depicted on a polychromed drinking vessel found here. Archaeologists also found evidence here of an interior tomb similar to the one in the Temple of the Owl, but excavations have not yet begun. Other magnificently preserved pottery pieces found during excavations include an incense burner with an almost three-dimensional figure of the diving god attached to the outside, and another incense burner with an elaborately dressed representation of the god Itzamná attached.

Situated all by itself is **Structure VI,** a miniature rendition of Teotihuacán's style of *tablero* and *talud* architecture. Each step of the pyramid is made of a *talud* (sloping surface) crowned by a *tablero* (vertical stone facing). Teotihuacán was near present-day Mexico City, but its influence stretched as far as Guatemala. At the top of the pyramid, a doorway with a wooden lintel is still intact after centuries of weathering. This detail gave the site its name. Date glyphs for the year A.D. 733 are carved into the wood.

Another nearby city, **Kinichná** (Kee-neech-*nah*) is about 2.5km (1½ miles) north. The road leading there becomes questionable during the rainy season, but an Olmec-style jade figure was found there. It has a large acropolis with five buildings on three levels, which have been restored and are in good condition. Fragments of the original stucco are visible.

KOHUNLICH ★

Kohunlich (Koh-*hoon*-leech), 42km (26 miles) from the turnoff for Hwy. 186, dates from around A.D. 100 to 900. Turn left off the road, and the entrance is 9km (5½ miles) farther. Enter the grand, parklike site, cross a large, shady ceremonial area flanked by four large, conserved pyramids, and continue walking straight ahead.

Just beyond this grouping you'll come to Kohunlich's famous **Pyramid of the Masks** under a thatched covering. These enormous plaster faces on the facade date from around A.D. 500. Each elongated face wears a headdress with a mask on its crest and a mask on

the chin piece—essentially masks within masks. The carving on the pupils suggests a solar connection, possibly with the night sun that illuminated the underworld. This may mean that the person had shamanic vision. It's speculated that masks covered much of the facade of this building, which was built in the Río Bec style with rounded corners, a false stairway, and a false temple on the top. At least one theory holds that the masks are a composite of several rulers at Kohunlich.

In the buildings immediately to the left after you enter the site, recent excavations uncovered two intact pre-Hispanic skeletons and five decapitated heads that were probably used in a ceremonial ritual. To the right, follow the shady path through the jungle to another recently excavated plaza. The fine architecture of the rooms and the high quality of pottery found there suggests this complex housed priests or rulers. Scholars believe overpopulation led to the decline of Kohunlich.

XPUJIL

Xpujil (Eesh-poo-*heel;* also spelled Xpuhil), meaning either "cattail" or "forest of kapok trees," flourished between A.D. 400 and 900. This small, well-preserved site is easy to get to; look for a blue sign on the highway pointing to the right. The entrance is just off the highway. After buying a ticket, you have to walk 180m (590 ft.) to the main structure. Along the path are some *chechén* trees, recognizable by their blotchy bark. Don't touch; they are poisonous and a stick from one will provoke blisters. On the right, you'll see a platform supporting a restored two-story building with a central staircase on the eastern side. Remnants of a decorative molding and two galleries are connected by a doorway. About 90m (295 ft.) farther you come to **Structure I,** the site's main structure—a rectangular ceremonial platform 2m (6½ ft.) high and 50m (164 ft.) long supporting the palace, decorated with three tall towers shaped like miniature versions of the pyramids in Tikal, Guatemala. These towers are purely decorative, with false stairways and temples that are too small to serve as such. The effect is beautiful. The main body of the building holds 12 rooms, which are now in ruins.

BECAN ★★★

Becán (Beh-*kahn*) is about 7km (4½ miles) beyond Xpujil, visible on the right side of the highway. Becán means "moat filled by water," and, in fact, it was protected by a moat spanned by seven bridges. The extensive site dates from the early Classic to the late post-Classic (600 B.C.–A.D. 1200) period. Although it was abandoned by A.D. 850, ceramic remains indicate that there may have been a population resurgence between 900 and 1000, and it was still used as a ceremonial site as late as 1200. Becán was an administrative and ceremonial center with political sway over at least seven other cities in the area, including Chicanná, Hormiguero, and Payán.

The first plaza group you see after you enter was the center for grand ceremonies. From the highway, you can see the back of **Structure I,** a pyramid with two temples on top. Beyond and in between the two temples you can see the Temple atop **Structure IV,** which is opposite Structure I. When the high priest appeared exiting the mouth of the earth monster in the center of this temple (which he reached by way of a hidden side stairway that's now partially exposed), he would have been visible from well beyond the immediate plaza. It's thought that commoners had to watch ceremonies from outside the plaza—thus the site's position was for good viewing purposes. The back of Structure IV is believed to have been a civic plaza where rulers sat on stone benches. The second plaza group dates from around A.D. 850 and has perfect twin towers on top. Under the platform supporting the towers are 10 rooms that are thought to be related to Xibalba (Shee-*bahl*-bah), the underworld. Hurricane Isidore damaged them, and they are still closed.

Earth-monster faces probably covered this building (and appeared on other buildings as well). Remains of at least one ball court have been unearthed. Next to the ball court is a well-preserved figure in an elaborate headdress behind glass. He was excavated not far from where he is now displayed. The markings are well defined, displaying a host of details.

CHICANNA

Slightly over 1.5km (1 mile) beyond Becán, on the left side of the highway, is Chicanná, which means "house of the mouth of snakes." Trees loaded with bromeliads shade the central square surrounded by five buildings. **Structure II,** the site's outstanding building, features a monster-mouth doorway and an ornate stone facade with more superimposed masks. As you enter the mouth of the earth monster, note that you are walking on a platform configured as the open jaw of the monster with stone teeth on both sides. Again you find a lovely example of an elongated building with ornamental miniature pyramids on each end.

CALAKMUL ★★★

This area is both a massive Maya archaeological zone, with at least 60 sites, and a 70,000-hectare (172,900-acre) rainforest designated in 1989 as the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve, including territory in both Mexico and Guatemala. The best way to see Calakmul is to spend the night at Xpujil or Chicanná and leave early in the morning for Calakmul. If you're the first to drive down the narrow access road to the ruins (1½ hr. from the highway), you'll probably see plenty of wildlife. On my last trip to the ruins, I saw two groups of spider monkeys swinging through the trees on the outskirts of the city and a group of howler monkeys sleeping in the trees in front of Structure II. I also saw a couple of animals that I couldn't identify, and heard the growl of a jungle cat that I wasn't able to see.

The site is open Tuesday to Sunday from 7am to 5pm, but it gets so wet during the rainy season from June to October that it's best not to go during that time.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL ZONE Since 1982, archaeologists have been excavating the ruins of Calakmul, which date from 100 B.C. to A.D. 900. It's the largest of the area's 60 known sites. Nearly 7,000 buildings have been discovered and mapped. At its zenith, at least 60,000 people may have lived around the site, but by the time of the Spanish Conquest in 1519, there were fewer than 1,000 inhabitants. Visitors arrive at a large plaza filled with a forest of trees. You immediately see several stelae; Calakmul contains more of these than any other site, but they are much more weathered and indistinguishable than the stelae of Palenque or Copán in Honduras. On one of them you can see the work of looters who carefully used some sort of stonecutting saw to slice off the face of the monument. By Structure XIII is a stele of a woman, thought to have been a ruler, that dates from A.D. 652.

Some structures here are built in the Petén style and others in the Río Bec style. **Structure III** must have been the residence of a noble family. Its design is unique and quite lovely; it managed to retain its original form and was never remodeled. Offerings of shells, beads, and polychromed tripod pottery were found inside. **Structure II** is the tallest pyramid in the Yucatán, at 54m (177 ft.). From the top, you can see the outline of the ruins of El Mirador, 50km (31 miles) across the forest in Guatemala. Notice the two stairways that ascend along the sides of the principal face of the pyramid in the upper levels, and how the masks break up the space of the front face.

Temple IV charts the line of the sun from June 21, when it falls on the left (north) corner; to September 21 and March 21, when it lines up in the east behind the middle temple on the top of the building; to December 21, when it falls on the right (south) corner. Numerous jade pieces, including spectacular masks, were uncovered here, most of which are on display in the Museum of Mayan Culture in Campeche (p. 631). **Structure VII** is largely unexcavated except for the top, where, in 1984, the most outstanding jade mask yet to be found at Calakmul was uncovered. In their book *A Forest of Kings,* Linda Schele and David Freidel tell of wars among the Calakmul, Tikal, and Naranjo (the latter two in Guatemala), and how Ah-Cacaw, king of Tikal (120km/74 miles south of Calakmul), captured King Jaguar-Paw in A.D. 695 and later Lord Ox-Ha-Te Ixil Ahau, both of Calakmul.

CALAKMUL BIOSPHERE RESERVE Set aside in 1989, this is the peninsula's only high forest, a rainforest that annually records as much as 5m (16 ft.) of rain. The canopy of the trees is higher here than in the forest of Quintana Roo. It lies very close to the border with Guatemala, but, of course, there is no way to get there. Among the plants are cactus, epiphytes, and orchids. Endangered animals include the white-lipped peccary, jaguar, and puma. So far, more than 250 species of birds have been recorded. At present, no overnight stay or camping is permitted. If you want a tour of a small part of the forest and you speak Spanish, you can inquire for a guide at one of the two nearby *ejidos* (cooperatives). Some old local *chicleros* (the men who tap sapodilla trees for their gum) have expert knowledge of flora and fauna and can take you on a couple of trails.

A Driving Caution

Numerous curves in the road obscure oncoming traffic (what little there is).

The turnoff on the left for Calakmul is located 53km (33 miles) from Xpujil, just before the village of Conhuas. There's a guard station there where you pay 40 pesos per car. From the turnoff, it's an hour's drive on a paved one-lane-road. Admission to the site is 41 pesos.

It's advisable to take with you some food and drink and, of course, bug spray.

BALAMKU ★★

Balamkú (Bah-lahm-*koo*) is easy to reach and worth the visit. A couple of buildings in the complex were so well preserved that they required almost no reconstruction. Inside are three impressive figures of men sitting in the gaping maws of crocodiles and toads as they descend into the underworld. The concept behind this building, with its molded stucco facade, is life and death. On the head of each stucco figure are the eyes, nose, and mouth of a jaguar figure, followed by the full face of the human figure, then a neck formed by the eyes and nose of another jaguar, and an Olmec-like face on the stomach, with its neck ringed by a necklace. These figures were saved from looters who managed to get away with a fourth one. Now they're under the protection of a caretaker, who keeps the room under lock and key. If you speak Spanish, you can get the caretaker to explain something of the figures and their complex symbolism. A beautiful courtyard and another set of buildings are adjacent to the main group.

17

Mérida, the Maya Interior & Chichén Itzá

by Christine Delsol

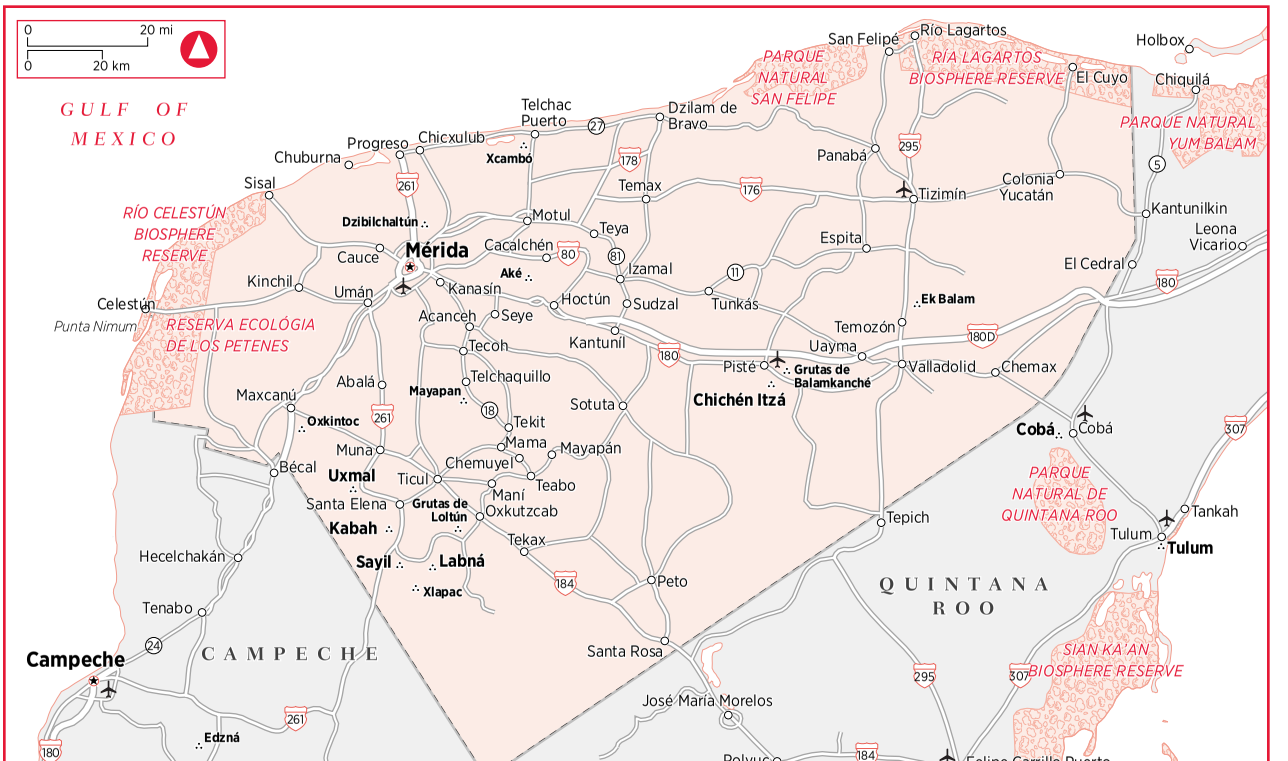
Long before Cancún was a glimmer in some computer programmer's eye, all roads led to **Mérida.** The great "White City"—still the region's cultural heart and soul—presided over a peninsula rich with legacies of colliding civilizations. The trove of ancient cities left behind by that cataclysm has enticed visitors ever since New York writer John Lloyd Stephens and illustrator Frederick Catherwood ventured south to investigate rumors of lost cities in the jungle.

The splendors of the ancient Maya world are still the Yucatán's biggest draw beyond the Caribbean coast. **Chichén Itzá,** every bit as wondrous as its coronation as a "new" Wonder of the World suggests, has many worthy companions. **Uxmal, Edzná, Cobá, Calakmul** and several smaller ancient cities are all infused with an ancient spirit that only tenuously survives Chichén Itzá's celebrity status.

The thoughtful visitor, though, will soon learn the Maya heartland is far more than a living museum revealing an extraordinary culture—it is the evolution of that civilization. Whether you stay in a restored hacienda and indulge in a massage from the granddaughter of a Maya shaman, attend Mérida's weekly *Vaquería* with traditional Yucatecan cowboy music and dancing, or visit a village whose people live in thatch-roof huts and still speak the Yucatec Mayan language, you'll find past and present converging as they do nowhere else.

The best way to see the Yucatán is by car. The terrain is flat, highways are well-maintained and hypnotically straight, and traffic beyond the cities is light. Secondary roads are narrow and sometimes rough, though a flurry of road projects has improved a good percentage of them in the past couple of years. Add about 30% to the time you think any particular trip should take—not only will you miss a lot by speeding through, you will also run afoul of innumerable *topes* (*toh*-pehs), or speed bumps. These might be a rope across the road, a concrete island, or they might be a row of metal half spheres that will eat your undercarriage for breakfast (if they don't flip your car over). Most have warning signs, but sometimes they appear out of nowhere—or the signs might appear but the *topes* do not. You *will* slow down, either to ease over the *topes* or to ask around for a repair shop.

Renting a car (p. 55) isn't cheap, but some promotional deals are available, especially in low season. And some of your most memorable experiences will be in places not easily reached by bus. Plenty of buses serve major towns and ruins, but service to smaller towns and ruins, and the haciendas, is sparse. Autobuses del Oriente (ADO) controls most of the first-class bus service and does a good job with the major destinations. Second-class buses go to some out-of-the-way places, but they make countless stops and often aren't air-conditioned; they are best for short distances. If you don't want to rent a car, a few tour operators transport small groups to more remote ruins, cenotes, and villages. Alternatively, hiring a taxi for a half or full day can be less expensive than renting a car.



17 MÉRIDA, THE MAYA INTERIOR & CHICHÉN ITZÁ

Tips The Best Websites for Mérida, Chichén Itzá & the Maya Interior

- **Yucatán Today: www.yucatantoday.com** One of the least commercial privately run sites, with cultural notes, detailed maps, transportation advice, history, and lists of hotels, restaurants, and events in Yucatán state and beyond, by the editors of an enormously helpful monthly tourist magazine.
- **Yucatán Living: www.yucatanliving.com** Destination and cultural articles, and in-depth reviews of restaurants and attractions, are written by and for expatriates but also give visitors an inside view on life in the Yucatán, with an emphasis on Mérida.
- **TravelYucatan.com:** Loaded with practical tips and detailed articles by travelers and residents, quarterly news roundups, with such useful graphics as authorized taxicabs and dive-site maps rather than just glamour shots. You might not notice that it's also a booking site until you go to the "accommodations" link.
- **Yucatán Travel Guide: www.mayayucatan.com** Yucatán's Ministry of Tourism site, which has an update section and good general information on the state's destinations.

The Yucatán is ***tierra caliente*** (the hot lands); always travel with a hat, sunblock, mosquito repellent, and water. November to February are the coolest months, April to June the hottest. Thunderstorms moderate temperatures from July to October. More tourists visit the interior in winter, but the high season/low season distinction is far less pronounced than on the Caribbean coast.

Between tramping through ruins, swimming in the cool, clear waters of a cenote (natural underground pools), staking out your own private beach, or spotting flamingos in an estuary, you won't lack for diversions. But the greatest pleasure of all is slowing down, lazing in the town square, eating regional food prepared with centuries-old techniques, and making conversation with the proud, gentle people whose ancestors created the ancient empires we admire today.

1 MERIDA: GATEWAY TO THE MAYA HEARTLAND ★★★

1,440km (893 miles) E of Mexico City; 320km (198 miles) W of Cancún

Mérida, capital of the state of Yucatán, has been the peninsula's lodestar since the Spanish Conquest, yet many visitors treat it merely as a base camp for forays to the surrounding ruins. Though "The White City" (named after its limestone buildings) endures the traffic and noise common to many of Mexico's colonial cities, its vibrancy, its eye-popping architecture, and its kind, dignified people are what you remember. The heady brew of ancient and modern is at its most piquant in the bustling, genial historic center, and the Meridanos' celebratory proclivities are infectious. This is also the best place to shop for regional specialties,

such as hammocks, Panama hats, *guayabera* shirts, and embroidered *huipiles,* the colorful native blouses. Expatriates have been flocking to the city in recent years, not only retirees but young couples with boundless energy to explore and show off their adopted home. It all adds up to a cultural explosion; you never have to look far to find a festival, concert, theater production, or art exhibition. It also has produced a remarkable bounty of bed-and-breakfasts and beautifully restored colonial homes, many of which are rented out for part of the year.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There & Departing

BY PLANE **Aeroméxico** (✆ **800/237-6639** in the U.S. or 01-800/021-4000 in Mexico) flies nonstop to and from Miami and Mexico City. **Mexicana** (✆ **01-800/801-2010** in Mexico, or 877/801-2010) flies nonstop to and from Mexico City. **Continental** (✆ **999/946-1888,** -1900) flies nonstop to and from Houston. (American, Delta, and Alaska also serve Mérida through code shares, usually at significantly higher fares.) **Click** (✆ **01-800/112-5425**), Mexicana's budget airline, provides nonstop service to and from Mexico City and Veracruz. Aeroméxico's regional carrier, **Aerolitoral** (✆ **800/237-6639** in the U.S. or 01-800/021-400 in Mexico), flies to and from Mexico City and Villahermosa. **Volaris** (✆ **01-800/122-8000** in Mexico) is a discount domestic air carrier that flies to and from Toluca. In 2009, the airline added connecting flights from San Francisco and Los Angeles. Another Mexican budget line, **VivaAerobus** (✆ **01-81/8215-0150**), flies between Monterrey and Mérida and offers connecting flights from Austin and Las Vegas.

BY CAR **Hwy. 180** is the old *carretera federal* (federal highway) between Mérida and Cancún. The trip takes about 6 hours on a good road that passes through many Maya villages. A four-lane divided *cuota,* or *autopista* (toll road) parallels Hwy. 180 and begins at the town of Kantunil, 56km (35 miles) east of Mérida. For a toll of 338 pesos each way, you avoid the tiny villages and their not-so-tiny speed bumps. Coming from the direction of Cancún, Hwy. 180 feeds into Mérida's Calle 65, which passes 1 block south of the main square.

Coming from the south (Campeche or Uxmal), you enter the city on Avenida Itzáes. To get to the town center, turn right on Calle 59 (the first street after the zoo).

A *periférico* (loop road) circles Mérida, making it possible to skirt the city. Directional signs into the city are generally good, but lapping the city on the loop requires vigilance.

BY BUS Mérida is the Yucatán's transportation hub. Of its five bus stations, two offer first-class buses and the other three provide local service to nearby destinations. The larger first-class station, **CAME,** is on Calle 70, between calles 69 and 71 (see "City Layout," below). The ADO bus line and its affiliates operate the station, which is also used by Clase Elite and other long-distance lines. In the row of ticket windows that greets you, all but the last couple to the right sell first-class tickets. The last two sell tickets for ADO's deluxe services. ADO-GL is a small step up from first class, while UNO has superwide seats with lots of legroom. Unless it's a long trip, I go for the bus with the most convenient departure time. Tickets can be purchased in advance; ask the agent for ticket options and departure times for the route you need.

To and from Cancún: You can pick up a bus almost every hour at the Came for the 3- to 4-hour trip. Some lines also collect passengers at the Fiesta Americana Hotel on Calle 60 at Avenida Colón, across from the Hyatt; you can buy a ticket in the hotel's shopping arcade at the **Ticket Bus** agency (which also takes reservations at www.ticketbus.com.mx) or at the Elite ticket agency. Cancún is 4 hours away; a few buses stop in **Valladolid.** If you're downtown, you can purchase tickets from the agency in Pasaje Picheta, a mall next to the Palacio de Gobierno on the main square.

To and from Chichén Itzá: Three buses per day (2½-hr. trip) depart from the CAME. Tour operators in Mérida hotels also offer day trips.

To and from Playa del Carmen, Tulum, and Chetumal: From the CAME, there are at least 10 departures per day for Playa del Carmen (5 hr. away), six for Tulum (6 hr.), and eight for Chetumal (7 hr.).

To and from Campeche: The CAME station has about 40 departures per day. It's a 2½-hour trip.

To and from Palenque and San Cristóbal de las Casas: There are three departures a day from the Came to San Cristóbal and four to Palenque. Minor thefts have been reported on buses to Palenque, so don't take second-class buses; check your luggage so that it's stowed in the cargo bay; and put your carry-on in the overhead rack, not on the floor.

The main **second-class terminal** is around the corner from the CAME on Calle 69, between calles 68 and 70.

To and from Uxmal: There are four buses per day. (You can also pick up a tour through most hotels or any travel agent or tour operator in town.) ATS offers one daily round-trip Ruta Puuc bus, combining Uxmal with the other sites to the south (Kabah, Sayil, Labná, and Xlapak). It takes all day, stopping for 2 hours at Uxmal and 30 minutes at each of the other sites.

To and from Progreso and Dzibilchaltún: Transportes AutoProgreso offers service to and from its downtown station at Calle 62 no. 524, between calles 65 and 67. The trip to Progreso takes an hour by second-class bus.

To and from Celestún: Buses depart 10 times a day from the Noreste second-class station on Calle 50 between calles 65 and 67. The trip takes 1½ to 2 hours, depending on how many stops the bus makes. Other destinations include **Izamal** (20 buses a day), Río Lagartos, and Chiquilá (ferry terminal for Isla Holbox).

Orientation

ARRIVING BY PLANE Mérida's airport is 13km (8 miles) from the city center on the southwestern outskirts of town, near the entrance to Hwy. 180. The airport has desks for rental cars, hotel reservations, and tourist information. Taxi tickets to town (150 pesos) are sold outside the airport doors, under the covered walkway.

VISITOR INFORMATION The city tourism offices and state tourism offices have different resources; if you can't get the information you're looking for at one, go to the other. I have better luck with the city's **visitor information office** (✆ **999/942-0000,** ext. 80119), which is on the ground floor of the Ayuntamiento building, facing the main square on Calle 62. Look for a glass door under the arcade. Hours are Monday to Saturday from 8am to 8pm, and Sunday from 8am to 2pm. The staff offers a free walking tour of the area around the main square at 9:30am, Monday through Saturday. The state operates two downtown tourism offices: One in the **Teatro Peón Contreras,** facing Parque de la Madre (✆ **999/924-9290**), and the other on the main plaza, in the **Palacio de Gobierno** (✆ **999/930-3101,** ext. 10001), immediately to the left as you enter. These offices are open daily from 8am to 9pm. It also has information booths at the airport and the CAME bus station.

Keep your eye out for the free monthly magazine *Yucatán Today;* it's packed with information about Mérida and the rest of the region.

CITY LAYOUT Downtown Mérida's grid layout is typical of the Yucatán: Even-numbered streets run north and south; odd-numbered streets run east and west. The numbering begins on the north and the east sides of town, so if you're walking on an odd-numbered

Tips House Hunting

Address numbers bear little relation to a building's physical location, so addresses almost always include cross streets. In "Calle 60 no. 549 × 71 y 73," for example, the "×" is shorthand for the word *por* (meaning "by"), and *y* means "and." So this address is on Calle 60 between calles 71 and 73. This tidy system disappears outside of downtown, where street numbering gets erratic (to say the least). It's important to know the name of the *colonia* (neighborhood) where you're going. This is the first thing taxi drivers will ask you.

street and the even numbers of the cross streets are increasing, you are heading west; likewise, if you are on an even-numbered street and the odd-numbered cross streets are increasing, you are going south. Most downtown streets are one-way.

Mérida's main square is the busy **Plaza Grande,** bordered by calles 60, 61, 62, and 63. Calle 60, the *centro's* (downtown's) central artery, runs in front of the cathedral and connects the main square with several smaller plazas, some theaters and churches, and the University of Yucatán, just to the north. Handicraft shops, restaurants, and hotels are concentrated here. Around Plaza Mayor are the cathedral, the Palacio de Gobierno (state government building), the Ayuntamiento (town hall), and the Palacio Montejo. The plaza always has a crowd, and it overflows on Sundays, when the surrounding streets are closed for an enormous street fair. (See "Daily Festivals & Special Events in Mérida," below.) Within a few blocks are several smaller plazas and the bustling market district.

Mérida's most fashionable district is the wide, tree-lined boulevard **Paseo de Montejo** and its surrounding neighborhood. The Paseo de Montejo parallels Calle 60 and begins 7 blocks north and a little east of the main square. Though it has trendy restaurants, modern hotels, bank and airline offices, and a few clubs, the boulevard is mostly known for its stately mansions built during the boom times of the henequén industry. Near the Paseo's intersection with Avenida Colón, you'll find the Hyatt and the Fiesta Americana hotels.

GETTING AROUND **By Car** In general, reserve your car in advance from home to get the best weekly rates during high season (Nov–Feb); in low season, renting a car after you reach Mérida usually yields better deals. Local rental companies are competitive and have promotional deals that you can get only if you are there. Make sure you compare apples to apples; ask if the price quote includes the IVA tax and insurance coverage. Practically everybody offers free mileage. For tips on saving money on car rentals, see "Getting There & Getting Around," in chapter 3. Rental cars are generally a little more expensive (unless you find a promotional rate) than similar rentals in the U.S., though less than in Cancún. If your visit will be primarily in Mérida except for a couple of day trips you'll do better to rent for just a day or two, which also spares you the high cost of Mérida's parking lots. These *estacionamentos* often charge one price for the night and double that if you leave your car for the following day. Many hotels offer free parking, but make sure that includes daytime hours.

By Taxi Taxis are easy to come by and much cheaper than in Cancún, usually 30 to 60 pesos around town.

By Bus City buses are a little tricky to figure out but aren't needed often because almost everything of interest is within walking distance of the main plaza. The most useful buses run between downtown and Paseo de Montejo, which is a bit of a hike from the plaza.

Catch an "Itzimná" bus on Calle 59, between calles 56 and 58, to visit points along the boulevard. You can also take a minibus, or *colectivo* that is heading north on Calle 60. Most take you within a couple of blocks of Paseo de Montejo. The *colectivos* or *combis* (usually painted white) line up along the side streets next to the plaza and fan out in several directions from the main plaza along simple routes.

Fast Facts Mérida

Area Code The telephone area code is **999.**

Business Hours Generally, businesses are open Monday to Saturday from 10am to 2pm and 4 to 8pm.

Consulates The **American Consulate** is at Calle 60 no. 338-K between calles 29 and 31 (✆ **999/942-5700**), 1 block north of the Hyatt hotel (Col. Alcalá Martín). Office hours are Monday to Friday from 9am to 1pm.

Currency Exchange I prefer *casas de cambio* (currency exchange offices) over banks. Mérida has plenty; one called **Cambios Portales,** Calle 61 no. 500 (✆ **999/923-8709**), is on the north side of the main plaza in the middle of the block. It's open daily from 8:30am to 8:30pm. There are also many ATMs; one is on the south side of the same plaza.

Drugstore **Farmacía Yza,** Calle 63 no. 502-A, between calles 60 and 62 (✆ **999/924-9510**), on the south side of the plaza, is open 24 hours.

Hospitals The best hospital is **Centro Médico de las Américas,** Calle 54 no. 365 between 33-A and Avenida Pérez Ponce. The main phone number is ✆ **999/926-2611;** for emergencies, call ✆ **999/927-3199.** You can also call the **Cruz Roja (Red Cross)** at ✆ **999/924-9813.**

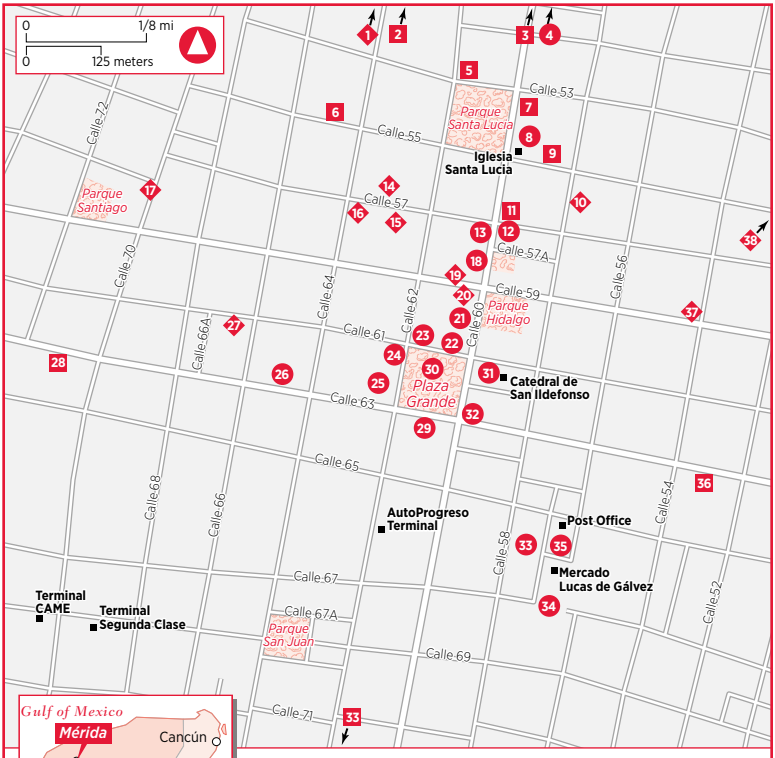
Internet Access You hardly have to walk more than a couple of blocks to find an Internet access provider; rates hover around 15 pesos per hour. Most hotels provide free Wi-Fi, and since 2007, the city has been installing free Wi-Fi in city parks. The Plaza Grande, Parque San Juan, Parque de las Américas, and Parque Zoológico del Centenario are among the parks currently connected.

Police Mérida has a special body of English-speaking police to assist tourists. They patrol the downtown area and Paseo de Montejo, wearing white shirts with a POLICIA TURISTICA patch on the sleeve. Their phone number is ✆ **999/942-0060.**

Post Office The *correo* is near the market at the corner of calles 65 and 56, with its own entrance separate from the new city museum. It's open Monday to Friday from 8am to 7pm, Saturday from 9am to 1pm.

Seasons Mérida has two high seasons, but they aren't as pronounced as on the Caribbean coast. One is in July and August, when Mexicans take their vacations, and the other is between November 15 and Easter Sunday, when Canadians and Americans flock to the Yucatán to escape winter weather.

Weather From November to February, the weather can be pleasantly cool and windy. In other months, it's just hot, especially during the day. Rain can occur any time of year, especially during the rainy season (July–Oct), and usually comes in the form of afternoon tropical showers.



ACCOMMODATIONS

Casa Álvarez **5**
Casa del Balam **11**
Casa Santiago **28**
Fiesta Americana Mérida **3**
Hotel Dolores Alba **36**
Hotel Maison Lafitte **7**
Hotel Marionetas **2**
Hotel MedioMundo **6**
Luz en Yucatán **9**

DINING

Alberto's Continental **16**
Amaro **19**
Café Alameda **10**
Casa de Frida **27**
Eladio's **37**
El Portico del Peregrino **14**
La Chaya Maya **15**
La Flor de Santiago **17**
Restaurante Kantún **1**
Restaurante Los Almendros **38**
Vito Corleone **20**

ATTRACTIONS

Bazaar de Artesanías **34**
Casa del Alguacil **23**
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Cathedral **31**
Centro Cultural Olimpo **24**
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Iglesia de Santa Lucía **8**
Museo de Arte Contemporáneo **32**
Museo de la Ciudad **35**
Palacio Cantón/Museo Regional de Antropología **4**
Palacio de Gobierno **22**
Palacio Montejo **29**
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Plaza Mayor Grande **30**
Portal de Granos **33**
Teatro Ayala **21**
Teatro Peón Contreras **12**
Universidad de Yucatán **13**

Moments Daily Festivals & Special Events in Mérida

Many Mexican cities offer weekend concerts in parks and plazas, but Mérida surpasses them all by offering performances every day of the week. Unless otherwise indicated, admission is free.

Sunday From 9am to 9pm, the *centro* stages a fair called *Mérida en Domingo* (Mérida on Sunday). The plaza and a section of Calle 60 extending to Parque Santa Lucía close to traffic. Parents stroll with their children, taking in the food and drink booths, the lively little flea market and used-book fair, children's art classes, and educational booths. At 11am, musicians play everything from jazz to classical and folk music in front of the Palacio del Gobierno, while the police orchestra performs Yucatecan tunes in Santa Lucía park. At 11:30am, you'll find bawdy comedy acts at Parque Hidalgo, on Calle 60 at Calle 59. After a midafternoon lull, the plaza fills up again as people walk around and visit with friends. Around 7pm in front of the Ayuntamiento, a large band starts playing mambos, rumbas, and cha-chas with great enthusiasm; you may see 1,000 people dancing in the street. Afterward, folk ballet dancers reenact a typical Yucatecan wedding inside.

Monday At 9pm in front of the *Palacio Municipal,* performers dance and play *Vaquería regional* (traditional cowboy music) to celebrate the Vaquerías feast, which was associated originally with the branding of cattle on the haciendas. Performers include dancers with trays of bottles or filled glasses balanced on their heads—a sight to see.

Tuesday At 9pm in Parque Santiago, Calle 59 at Calle 72, the Municipal Orchestra plays Latin and American big-band music from the 1940s.

Wednesday At 9pm in the Teatro Peón Contreras, Calle 60 at Calle 57, the University of Yucatán Ballet Folklórico presents *Yucatán and Its Roots.* Admission is 50 pesos. Auditorio Olimpio, on the Calle 62 side of the plaza, hosts guitar *trovas* (boleros or ballads) and other live music and theater performances, free of charge.

Thursday At 9pm in Parque Santa Lucía, the Serenata Yucateca presents regional music, dance, and spoken-word performances.

Friday At 9pm in the courtyard of the University of Yucatán, Calle 60 at Calle 57, the University of Yucatán Ballet Folklórico performs typical regional dances from the Yucatán.

Saturday At 8pm in the park at Paseo de Montejo and Calle 47, Noche Mexicana features traditional Mexican music and dance performances with crafts booths and food stands selling great antojitos (finger foods), drinks, and ice cream. At 9pm, Calle 60 closes between Plaza Grande and Calle 53 for En El Corazón de Mérida, a festival featuring several live bands joined by stilt walkers, mariachis, and crafts and food stands.

WHERE TO STAY

Mérida soothes the budget, especially if you've come from the Caribbean resorts. Though winter is the most popular time, the stream of visitors is steadier than on the coast, so

many hotels don't bother with high- and low-season rates. That said, promotional rates are more plentiful during low season. Large trade shows in Mérida's convention center can fill the hotels, so reservations are a good idea. Rates quoted here include the 17% tax (when inquiring, always ask if the price includes tax). Most hotels in Mérida offer at least a few air-conditioned rooms, and some also have pools. But many inexpensive places haven't figured out how to provide a comfortable bed; either the mattresses are hard or the bottom sheet is too small to stay tucked in. One last note: Without exception, every hotel in Mérida that doesn't have its own parking has an arrangement with a nearby garage, letting you park for a fee. If you can find a parking space on the street, cars are generally safe from vandalism. Some hotels offer free parking, but sometimes it's free only at night, with a charge incurred during the day.

Very Expensive

Hacienda Xcanatún ★★★ This magnificent example of the Yucatán's converted haciendas was built in the mid–18th century at the edge of present-day Mérida and later became one of the region's most important henequén (sisal) plantations. Restoration with handcrafted local hardwood, wrought iron, marble, and stone has resuscitated its original luster and then some: The *hacendados* likely did not have capacious bathrooms with double-size, carved-stone waterfall tubs, and they certainly didn't have Casa de Piedra, one of Mexico's top-rated restaurants, in the machinery house. Fountains and a bridged stream grace the extensive, junglelike gardens, and the spa's ancient Maya healing techniques use local plants and flowers. The hacienda recently began a program of private guided cultural tours.

Km 12 Carretera Mérida-Progreso, Mérida, Yuc. ✆ **888/883-3633** in the U.S. and Canada, or 999/930-2140. Fax 999/941-0319. www.xcanatun.com. 18 units. $317–$340 double; $346–$382 deluxe suites; $382–$417 master suites. Rates include breakfast. Ask about Best Available Rate promotion. AE, MC, V. Free parking. No children 11 and under without prior arrangement. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 bars; concierge; garden; golf privileges at nearby Jack Nicklaus course; 2 outdoor pools; private day-trip program; spa; Wi-Fi (on patios, in restaurant, and lobby). *In room:* A/C, hair dryer, minibar, outdoor whirlpool tubs (in suites).

Hotel Indigo Mérida Hacienda Misné ★★ Finds The latest addition to the region's corps of hacienda hotels is a rarity: A country estate located in Mérida itself, operated by the family who bought it for a summer home years before it became a hotel in 2007. It's a beauty, with long red-tiled colonnades stretching along vast gardens peppered with ponds and fountains. The family has worked hard to preserve the hacienda's original character while creating luxurious modern rooms behind the traditional exteriors. Some even have private sitting pools. It's about a 15-minute drive from downtown, just off Calle 65 (the road to and from Cancún) about a half kilometer (less than half a mile) from the *periférico.* The neighborhood's confounding street numbering system makes it tricky to find the first time, but it's easy enough after that—especially since Calle 6B has a tree in the middle of the road at Calle 65.

Calle 19 no. 172 (at Calle 6B), Fracc. Misné 1, 97173 Mérida, Yuc. ✆ **877/846-3446** in the U.S. and Canada, or 999/940-7150. Fax 999/940-7160. www.haciendamisne.com.mx. 50 units. $240 double; $273 executive; $316 junior suite; $343 deluxe. See website for promotional rates. AE, DC, DISC, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; concierge; library; 2 outdoor pools; room service; spa. *In room:* A/C, TV, CD and MP3 players, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Expensive

Casa del Balam ★★★ Moments I could happily spend all my nights in Mérida at this one-time colonial mansion, converted in 1968. Even with a king-size bed and massive wooden furniture, suites in the original owners' bedrooms have space enough to do cartwheels. My favorite overlooks Calle 60, with heavy cedar doors opening onto the

Haciendas & Hotels

During the colonial period, **haciendas** in the Yucatán were isolated, self-sufficient fiefdoms. Mostly they produced foodstuffs—enough for the needs of the owners and peasants, plus a little extra that the owners could sell for a small sum in the city. The owners, though sometimes politically powerful, were never rich.

This changed in the 19th century, when the expanding world market created high demand for henequén—more commonly known in the U.S. as sisal—an agave cactus fiber that was used to bale hay. Haciendas shifted to henequén production en masse, and the owners became wealthy as prices and profits kept climbing through the end of the century and into the 20th. Then came the bust. Throughout the 1920s, prices and demand fell, and no other commodity could replace sisal. The haciendas entered a long decline, but by then, henequén cultivation and processing had become part of local culture.

Visiting a hacienda is a way to see and understand what the golden age was like. **Sotuta de Peón** (p. 615) has been refurbished and operates much as in the old days—a living museum involving an entire community. At another, **Yaxcopoil** (p. 619), you can wander about the shell of a once-bustling estate and take in the faded splendor.

Today another boom of sorts has brought haciendas back, this time as hotels, retreats, and country residences. The hotels convey an air of the past—elegant gateways, thick walls, open arches, and high ceilings—and extravagant suites and personal service genuinely make a guest feel like lord and master. What I find most striking when visiting haciendas is the contrast between their domains and the world outside. They are little islands of order and tranquillity in a sea of chaos.

Six of the region's hacienda hotels are pure luxury. The most opulent is **La Hacienda Xcanatún** ★★★ (p. 601) on the outskirts of Mérida, off the highway to Progreso.

street and windows onto the lush courtyard dining room, where piano strains waft up at times. These rooms still feel more like a colonial mansion than a hotel, but with the added comforts of air-conditioning and double-paned windows. Standard rooms in the newer annex are more modest but supremely comfortable, with tile floors and wrought-iron headboards honoring the colonial atmosphere. The plaza is just 2 blocks away, and staff members treat you like their favorite niece or nephew.

Calle 60 no. 488 at Calle 57, 97000 Mérida, Yuc. ✆ **800/624-8451** in the U.S. and Canada, or 999/924-8844. www.casadelbalam.com. 51 units. $85–$117 double; $95–$146 honeymoon; $110–$187 master suites. AE, DISC, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; concierge; golf club access; outdoor pool; room service; spa services; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar.

Fiesta Americana Mérida This six-story hotel on Paseo de Montejo, built in the *fin de siècle* style of the old mansions along the boulevard, is the grand dame of Mérida's luxury chain hotels. Guest rooms around the soaring lobby face outward and have views of one of the avenues. Rooms are comfortable and large, with innocuous modern furnishings and decorations in light, tropical colors. The floors are tile and the bathrooms

Four more luxury hotels are owned by Roberto Hernández, one of Mexico's richest men, and are affiliated with Starwood Hotels (✆ **800/325-3589** in the U.S. and Canada; www.luxurycollection.com). The owner has taken great pains to restore all four haciendas to their original condition, and they are quite beautiful. **Temozón** (p. 605), off the highway to Uxmal, is the most magnificent. **Uayamón** ★★★, located between the colonial city of Campeche and the ruins of Edzná, is perhaps the most romantic, with its exterior preserved in a state of arrested decay. **Hacienda San José Cholul** ★ is east of Mérida toward Izamal, and picturesque **Santa Rosa** lies southwest of Mérida, near the town of Maxcanú. Packages are available for staying at more than one of these haciendas. All offer personal service, activities, and spas.

The newest luxury hotel, **Hacienda Misné** ★★ (p. 601), is within Mérida city limits and is run by the family who once used it as a summer home.

Several haciendas offer more affordable lodging. Between Mérida and Campeche, just off the highway, **Hacienda Blanca Flor** (✆ **999/925-8042;** www.blancaflor.com.mx), is the only converted hotel that still operates as a hacienda, producing most of the food served there. On the western outskirts of Mérida on the highway to Cancún is **Hacienda San Pedro Nohpat** (✆ **999/988-0542;** www.haciendaholidays.com). It retains only the land immediately surrounding the residence, but its large, comfortable rooms, attractive garden, and pool area are a bargain. Just outside of Izamal, one of the great pleasures at **Hacienda San Antonio Chalanté** ★ (p. 616), which has been restored only enough for comfort, is riding by horseback through the vast acreage and visiting other haciendas.

Two more haciendas can be leased by small groups for retreats and vacations: **Hacienda Petac** (✆ **800/225-4255** in the U.S.; www.haciendapetac.com) and **Hacienda San Antonio** (✆ **999/910-6144;** www.haciendasanantonio.com.mx). Both have beautiful rooms, common areas, and grounds.

large and well equipped. Except for the pool area's noisy air conditioners, common areas are stunning, from the stained-glass ceiling in the lobby to the luxurious spa and the tony ground-floor shopping center. The hotel was built with local materials and at least a nod to Mexican design. I prefer it to the cookie-cutter Hyatt across the street—the service is more attentive, too.

Av. Colón 451, corner of Paseo Montejo, 92127 Mérida, Yuc. ✆ **800/343-7821** in the U.S. and Canada, or 999/942-1111. Fax 999/942-1112. www.fiestaamericana.com.mx. 350 units. $120–$135 double; $163 executive level; $227 junior suite. AE, DC, MC, V. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; babysitting; children's programs; concierge; executive-level rooms; health club w/saunas, men's steam room; midsize outdoor pool; unisex whirlpool; room service; tennis court. *In room:* A/C, TV w/pay movies, hair dryer, Internet, minibar.

Hotel Marionetas ★ This quiet, attractive B&B, 6 blocks north of the main square, has a comforting feel. Sofi (Macedonian) and Daniel (Argentine) are engaging, interesting people and attentive innkeepers who have created a lovely space with common areas in front, rooms in back, and a lush garden/pool area in between. Each room is different,

but all have handmade tile floors, liberal use of bold but not overbearing color, and large, colonial-style windows and doors.

Calle 49 no. 516 (btw. calles 62 and 64), 97000 Mérida, Yuc. ✆ **999/928-3377.** www.hotelmarionetas.com. 8 units. $100–$120 double; $130–$170 suite. Rates include full breakfast. 2-night minimum stay. MC, V. Free secure parking for compact cars. No children 9 and under. **Amenities:** Small outdoor pool; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Moderate

Casa Santiago ★★★ Value This B&B, whose four recently remodeled guest rooms open off the wide central corridor of a lovely colonial home, is an absolute pleasure. With the gregarious manager, Dante, living on-site, it offers an ideal blend of comfort and privacy, traditional detail, and modern style. Casa Santiago is part of a compound that includes Casa Feliz, whose two large, newly restored rooms are available individually when the entire house isn't rented, and Casa Navidad, with one more room. Each room has its own distinct theme, and guests in one house may use either pool or garden. All have the original pasta tile floors (made in Mérida for centuries with a technology brought over from Spain), handmade furniture, and some of the most comfortable mattresses in Mexico or anywhere else. Its Parque Santiago neighborhood is 5 easy blocks from the main plaza. Guests have use of the house's immaculate, modern kitchen.

Calle 63 no. 562 (btw. calles 70 and 72), 97000 Mérida, Yuc. ✆ **314/266-1888** in the U.S. and Canada, or 999/162-9528. www.casasantiago.net. 7 units. $59–$125 double. Rates include full breakfast. No credit cards (Paypal for deposits). Limited free parking. No children 13 and under. **Amenities:** 2 outdoor pools; common kitchen; phone for local calls. *In room:* A/C, Wi-Fi.

Hotel Maison Lafitte ★ This newish three-story hotel has modern, attractive rooms with good air-conditioning, and tropical touches such as wooden window louvers and light furniture with caned backs and seats. Rooms are medium to large, with midsize bathrooms that have great showers and good lighting. Most come with either two doubles or a king-size bed. Rooms are quiet and overlook a pretty little garden with a fountain, though a few don't have windows. The location is excellent.

Calle 60 no. 472 (btw. calles 53 and 55), 97000 Mérida, Yuc. ✆ **800/538-6802** in the U.S. and Canada, or 999/928-1243. Fax 999/923-9159. www.maisonlafitte.com.mx. 30 units. 896 pesos double. Rates include full breakfast. AE, MC, V. Free limited secure parking for compact cars. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; small outdoor pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Hotel MedioMundo ★ Finds Bright colors and lush gardens distinguish this quiet courtyard hotel, well located 3 blocks north of the main plaza. The simple, beautiful rooms have their original tile floors. The English-speaking owners, Nicole and Nelson, have invested their money in the right places, going for pillow-top mattresses, good lighting, quiet air-conditioning, lots of space, and good bathrooms with strong showers. What they didn't invest in were TVs, which adds to the serenity. The eight rooms with air-conditioning cost $10 more, but all units have windows with good screens and get ample ventilation. A generous breakfast is served in one of the two attractive courtyards.

Calle 55 no. 533 (btw. calles 64 and 66), 97000 Mérida, Yuc. ✆/fax **999/924-5472.** www.hotelmediomundo.com. 12 units. $75–$90 double. MC, V. Limited street parking. No children 7 and under. **Amenities:** Small outdoor pool; smoke-free rooms; Wi-Fi (in public areas). *In room:* A/C (in some), no phone.

Luz en Yucatán ★★★ Finds Behind a deceptively plain wall next to Santa Lucia Church, this inn offers a dizzying variety of rooms, suites, studios, and apartments in the main building (rumored to have been Santa Lucia's convent) and tucked into the garden around the pool. Every unit is different, thoughtfully decorated with Mexican arts and

crafts, and the place is full of nooks and crannies for visiting or lounging. A large kitchen and dining room that seats 12 at a beautiful wooden table is available for guests in rooms without kitchens. The beds are among the best in Yucatán. The amiable and knowledgeable manager, who lives on-site, delights in taking guests under his wing. Oh, and did we mention the free bar cart?

Calle 55 no. 499 (btw. calles 60 and 58), 97000 Mérida, Yuc. ✆/fax **999/924-0035.** www.luzenyucatan.com. 15 units. $50–$75 double; $60–$70 studio with kitchen; $70–$90 apartment. Weekly and monthly discounts. No credit cards. Discounted parking in secure lot $5 a day. **Amenities:** Outdoor pool; communal kitchen and dining room; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge.

Inexpensive

Casa Alvarez Guest House ★ Finds Kids Many guests come to this inn, 4 blocks from the plaza, for extended stays with the kind and hospitable Enrique and Miriam Álvarez. Each spacious room is different, all featuring light but vivid colors and a variety of wooden, iron, and painted headboards. Larger rooms have air-conditioning and command the higher prices. The large eat-in kitchen where guests may prepare their own meals is stocked with coffee, tea, spices, and sometimes breakfast food and invariably becomes a social center. The owners go out of their way to keep children happy.

Calle 62 no. 448 at Calle 53, 97000 Mérida, Yuc. ✆ **999/924-3060.** www.casaalvarezguesthouse.com. 8 units. 400–550 pesos. No credit cards. Free parking. **Amenities:** Kitchen for guests' use; Wi-Fi (in public areas and some rooms).

Hotel Dolores Alba Value Cheerful, comfortable rooms offer respite from a busy and not particularly pleasant street 3½ blocks from the main square. It's a good deal for an inviting swimming pool, good air-conditioning, and free parking. The newer three-story section (with elevator) surrounding the courtyard offers spacious, more stylish rooms with good-size bathrooms. Beds (two doubles or one double and one twin) have supportive mattresses, usually in a combination of one medium-firm and one medium-soft. All rooms have windows or balconies looking over the pool. An old mango tree shades the front courtyard. The older rooms in this section are decorated with local crafts and have small bathrooms. The family that owns the Hotel Dolores Alba outside Chichén Itzá manages this hotel; you can make reservations at one hotel for the other.

Calle 63 no. 464 (btw. calles 52 and 54), 97000 Mérida, Yuc. ✆ **999/928-5650.** Fax 999/928-3163. www.doloresalba.com. 100 units. 475 pesos double. Internet specials available. MC, V (with 8% surcharge). Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV.

WHERE TO STAY OUTSIDE OF MERIDA

Hacienda Temozón ★★★ This magnificent 17-century *estancia* presides over 37 hectares (91 acres) of subtropical gardens and cenotes, 39km (24 miles) from Mérida. Built in 1655 by Don Diego de Mendoza, Temozón was the region's most productive livestock *estancia* in the early 18th century, then the top sisal producer in the late 1800s. Meticulously restored in 1997, it's now a Starwood property employing local workers and using organic produce from nearby farms in the restaurant. Spacious Spanish colonial–style rooms have 5.5m (18-ft.) ceilings with exposed rafters, fans, and thick whitewashed walls; Spanish-tile floors and bathrooms; hammocks positioned to catch natural breezes; dark, tropical hardwood furniture; and large, plush beds with white linens adorned daily with fresh flowers. Suites have tubs, private terraces, and plunge pools. The Casa del Patrón suite has accommodated many global heads of state.

Km 182 Carretera Mérida-Uxmal, 97825 Temozon Sur, Yuc. ✆ **888/625-5144** or 999/923-8089. www.haciendasmexico.com/temozon. Fax 999/923-7963. 28 units. $325 double; $405 junior suite; $480 deluxe

 suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; free airport transfers; bikes; concierge; health club; horseback riding; outdoor pool; room service; smoke-free rooms; spa; outdoor tennis court. *In room:* A/C, fan, CD and MP3, Internet.

WHERE TO DINE

The people of Mérida have strong ideas and traditions about food. Certain dishes are always associated with a particular day of the week. In households across the city, Sunday would feel incomplete without *puchero* (a kind of stew). On Monday, at any restaurant that caters to locals, you are sure to find *frijol con puerco* (pork and beans). Likewise, you'll find *potaje* (potage) on Thursday; fish, of course, on Friday; and *chocolomo* (a beef dish) on Saturday. These dishes are heavy and slow to digest; they are for the midday meal and not suitable for supper. What's more, Meridanos don't believe seafood is a healthy supper food. Seafood restaurants in Mérida close by 6pm unless they cater to tourists. The preferred supper food is turkey, and it's best served in the traditional *antojitos—salbutes* (small, thin rounds of *masa* fried and topped with meat, onions, tomatoes, and lettuce) and *panuchos* (*salbutes* with the addition of bean paste)—and turkey soup.

Mérida also has a remarkable number of Middle Eastern restaurants. A large influx of Lebanese immigrants around 1900 has strongly influenced local society; Meridanos think of kibbe almost the way Americans think of pizza. Speaking of pizza, if you want to get some to take back to your hotel room, try **Vito Corleone,** on Calle 59 between calles 60 and 62. Its pizzas have a thin crust with a slightly smoky taste from the wood-burning oven.

Downtown Mérida is well endowed with good midrange and budget restaurants, but the best upscale restaurants are in outlying districts. For something special, I recommend dining at **Hacienda Xcanatún** (p. 601), whose French-trained chef excels at a fusion of French, Caribbean, and Yucatecan dishes.

Expensive

Alberto's Continental ★ LEBANESE/YUCATECAN There's nothing quite like dining here at night in a softly lit room or on the wonderful old patio framed in Moorish arches. Elegant *mudejar*-patterned tile floors, simple furniture, and a gurgling fountain create a romantic mood, though prices are on the expensive side. For supper, you can choose a sampler plate of four Lebanese favorites, or traditional Yucatecan specialties, such as *pollo pibil* or fish Celestún (bass stuffed with shrimp), and finish with Turkish coffee.

Calle 64 no. 482 (at Calle 57). ✆ **999/928-5367.** Reservations recommended. Main courses 80–220 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 1–11pm.

Casa de Frida ★★ MEXICAN If you're longing for classic Mexican food from the central highlands, try this place. It serves fresh, healthful versions of some of Mexico's best-known dishes, such as *mole poblano* and *chiles en nogada.* The *mole* was good when I was last there, as was an interesting *flan de berenjena* (a kind of eggplant timbale). This is a comfortable, no-nonsense sort of place with fuchsia pink walls and peacock blue trim, a la Frida. The menu's breadth will satisfy any appetite.

Calle 61 no. 526 (at Calle 66). ✆ **999/928-2311.** Reservations recommended. Main courses 100–130 pesos. No credit cards. Mon–Fri 6–10pm; Sat noon–5pm and 6–10pm; Sun noon–5pm.

El Pórtico del Peregrino Overrated INTERNATIONAL When I first ate here 10 years ago, I swooned over the *berenjenas al horno,* layers of eggplant, chicken, and cheese baked in tomato sauce—kind of a hybrid of lasagna and moussaka that seems to personify Mérida's Italian and Lebanese influences. I stand by my recommendation for this unassuming entree, and the small, vine-covered patio is one of the sweetest dining areas

in Mérida. The higher-priced meat and fish dishes, though—even the traditional specialties—no longer seem to have the zip that I've come to expect in the Yucatán.

Calle 57 no. 501 (btw. calles 60 and 62). ✆ **999/928-6163.** Main courses 70–175 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily noon–midnight.

Moderate

Amaro VEGETARIAN/YUCATECAN This peaceful courtyard restaurant, with its walls providing gallery space for local art, lists some interesting vegetarian dishes, such as *crema de calabacitas* (cream of squash soup), apple salad, and avocado pizza. It also offers a few fish and chicken dishes; you might want to try the Yucatecan chicken. The *agua de chaya* (chaya is a spinach-like vegetable prominent in the Maya diet) is refreshing on a hot afternoon. All desserts are made in-house.

Calle 59 no. 507 Interior 6 (btw. calles 60 and 62). ✆ **999/928-2451.** Main courses 50–90 pesos. MC, V. Daily 11am–2am.

El Príncipe Tutul Xiú ★★ Finds YUCATECAN Authentic Yucatecan specialties from a limited menu are served here in a Yucatecan village atmosphere by staff in traditional Maya dress. The owner of the original restaurant in the town of Maní opened this location in response to persistent pressure from Meridanos. This is a great place to try the famous *sopa de lima* and one of the six typical main courses, such as *pavo escabeche,* served with great handmade tortillas. Meat is cooked over a charcoal grill. The flavored waters, such as *horchata* or *tamarindo,* are especially good here. It's a short taxi ride from downtown, and to return you can pick up a local bus that passes by the restaurant.

Calle 123 no. 216 (btw. calles 46 and 46b), Colonia Serapio Rendón. ✆ **999/929-7721.** Reservations not accepted. Main courses 58 pesos. MC, V. Daily 11am–7pm.

El Templo ★★ MEXICAN NUEVA COCINA The odd layout of this place and the decor, which plays loosely with Mexican popular culture and iconography, are amusing. The menu, with traditional Yucatecan and Mexican dishes as well as the restaurant's original creations (Yucatecan-style *osso buco* with salsa and risotto, for example), offers a lot of uncommon choices, plus a couple of daily specials. Sample dishes include Cornish game hen in guava-lime glaze and salmon in a tamarind and black sesame sauce. Good stuff, and it has won over Mérida's notoriously conservative tastes. The daily *plato* is more expensive than the typical *cocina economica* but is still a great deal for the generous portions and variety.

Calle 59 no. 438 (btw. calles 50 and 52). ✆ **999/930-9303.** Reservations accepted. Main courses 70–100 pesos. MC, V. Mon–Sat 6pm–1am.

Restaurante Kantún ★★ Value SEAFOOD This modest restaurant serves up the freshest seafood for incredibly low prices. The owner-chef is always on the premises taking care of details. The menu includes excellent ceviche and seafood cocktails, and fish cooked to order with delicate seasonings and sauces, including such specials as the *especial Kantún,* lightly battered and stuffed with lobster, crab, and shrimp. The dining room is air-conditioned, the furniture comfortable, and the service attentive.

Calle 45 no. 525-G (btw. calles 64 and 66). ✆ **999/923-4493.** Reservations recommended. Main courses 60–120 pesos. MC, V. Daily noon–8pm (occasionally closed on Mon).

Restaurante Los Almendros YUCATECAN As the first place to offer tourists such Yucatecan specialties as *salbutes, panuchos* and *papadzules, cochinita pibil,* and *poc chuc,* this place is an institution. That doesn't mean it produces the best of these dishes, but the food is good and reliable—and photographs on the menu make it a good place

to try Yucatecan food for the first time. It's 5 blocks east of Calle 60, facing the Parque de la Mejorada. A new branch in the Fiesta Americana offers a less traditional but more inspiring setting, and the service is better.

Calle 50A no. 493. ✆ **999/928-5459.** Reservations recommended on Sun. Main courses 60–100 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 10am–11pm.

Inexpensive

Café Alameda MIDDLE EASTERN/VEGETARIAN The trappings here are simple and informal (metal tables, plastic chairs), and it's a good place for catching a light meal. The trick is figuring out the Spanish names for popular Middle Eastern dishes. Kibbe is *quebbe bola* (not *quebbe cruda*), hummus is *garbanza,* and shish kabob is *alambre.* I leave it to you to figure out what a spinach pie is called (and it's excellent). Café Alameda is a treat for vegetarians, and the umbrella-shaded tables on the patio are perfect for morning coffee and *mamules* (walnut-filled pastries).

Calle 58 no. 474 (btw. calles 55 and 57). ✆ **999/928-3635.** Main courses 22–58 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 8am–5pm.

Eladio's ★ YUCATECAN Locals have come to this open-air restaurant since 1952 to relax, drink very cold beer, and snack on Yucatecan specialties. Five of these restaurants are now scattered about the city; this one is the closest to the historic center. You can order a beer and enjoy *una botana* (a small portion that accompanies a drink—in this case, usually a Yucatecan dish), or order from the menu. *Cochinita, poc chuc,* and *relleno negro* (turkey flavored with burned chiles) are all good. You'll often be treated to live music. The restaurant is 3 blocks east of Parque de la Mejorada.

Calle 59 (at Calle 44). ✆ **999/923-1087.** Main courses 40–85 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily noon–9pm.

La Flor de Santiago YUCATECAN This is an atmospheric place with a loyal clientele. The dining area is classic—fans spinning under a high ceiling, dark-wood furniture, one wall lined by bakery cases for fresh treats from a wood-fired stove. The service, though friendly, can be classically slow, too. It's especially popular for breakfast, but I like to stop in for one of its Yucatecan specialties on the way to the weekly big-band dancing in Parque Santiago across the street.

Calle 70 no. 478 (btw. calles 57 and 59). ✆ **999/928-5591.** *Comida corrida* 40 pesos; main courses 40–75 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 7am–11pm.

EXPLORING MERIDA

Most of Mérida's attractions are within walking distance from downtown. One easy way to see more of the city is on the popular, open-air **Carnavalito City Tour Bus.** It leaves Santa Lucia Park (calles 60 and 55) at 10am and 1, 4, and 7pm (no 7pm tour on Sun). The guided tour costs 75 pesos per person and lasts 2 hours. A national company, **Turibus** (www.turibus.com.mx), operates modern, bright-red, double-decker buses that provide earphones with a recorded narrative in English and five other languages. You can ride the entire circuit in less than 2 hours, or hop off at any stop to explore at will and grab the next bus to continue. Pick them up in front of the cathedral, or at any scheduled stop, every half-hour. The tour costs 100 pesos. Another sightseeing option is a ***calesa*** (horse-drawn carriage), best at night or on Sunday morning when traffic is light. A 45-minute ride around central Mérida costs 250 pesos. You can usually find *calesas* beside the cathedral on Calle 61.

PLAZA GRANDE ★★★ Downtown Mérida has a casual, relaxed feel. Buildings lack the severe baroque and neoclassical features that characterize central Mexico; most are finished in stucco and painted light colors. Mérida's many gardens add to the languid

tropical atmosphere. Rather than trying to control nature, gardeners strive for natural exuberance, allowing plants to grow in wild profusion. The city's plazas are a slightly different version of this aesthetic: Unlike the highland plazas with their carefully sculpted trees, Mérida's squares are typically built around large trees that are left to grow as tall as possible.

The natural starting point to explore Mérida, the plaza is a comfortable and informal place to gather with friends. Even when no orchestrated event is in progress, the park is full of people strolling or sitting on benches and talking. Big as Mérida is, the plaza bestows a personal feel and sense of community. Mérida's oldest buildings, beautiful in their scale and composition, surround the square.

The most prominent, the fortresslike **cathedral**—which was in fact designed as a fortress as much as a place of worship—is the oldest on the continent, built between 1561 and 1598. Much of the stone in its walls came from the ruined buildings of the Maya city of T'hó (sometimes Tiho). The original finish was stucco, and you can see some remnants still clinging to the bare rock. The two top levels of the bell towers are built off-center from their bases, revealing them as later additions. Inside, decoration is sparse, all smooth white stone, with a conspicuous absence of gold adornments seen in many of Mexico's cathedrals. The most notable item is a picture of Ah Kukum Tutul Xiú, chief of the Xiú people, visiting the Montejo camp to make peace; it hangs over the side door on the right.

To the left of the main altar is a small shrine with a curious figure of Christ that replicates one recovered from a burned-out church in the town of Ichmul. In the 1500s a local artist carved the original figure from a miraculous tree that was hit by lightning and burst into flames—but did not char. The statue later became blistered in the church fire at Ichmul, but it survived. In 1645, it was moved to Mérida, where the locals attached great powers to the figure, naming it *Cristo de las Ampollas* (Christ of the Blisters). It did not, however, survive the sacking of the cathedral in 1915 by revolutionary forces, so a new figure was modeled after the original. Take a look in the side chapel (daily 8–11am and 4:30–7pm), which contains a life-size diorama of the Last Supper. The Mexican Jesus is covered with prayer crosses brought by supplicants asking for intercession.

Next door to the cathedral is the old bishop's palace, now converted into the city's contemporary art museum, **Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Ateneo de Yucatán** ★ (✆ **999/928-3258;** www.macay.org), or MACAY. The palace was confiscated and rebuilt during the Mexican Revolution in 1915. The museum entrance faces the cathedral from the reconstructed walkway between the two buildings called the Pasaje de la Revolución. The 17 exhibition rooms display work by contemporary artists, mostly from the Yucatán. (The best known are Fernando García Ponce and Fernando Castro Pacheco, whose works also hang in the government palace described below.) Nine rooms hold the museum's permanent collection; the rest are for temporary exhibits. It's open Wednesday to Monday from 10am to 6pm, until 8pm Friday and Saturday. Admission is free.

As you move clockwise around the plaza, **Palacio Montejo** is on the south side. The heavy, elaborate decoration around the doorway and windows is carved in the Spanish *plateresque* architectural style, but the content is very much a New World creation. Conquering the Yucatán was the Montejo family business, begun by the original Francisco Montejo and continued by his son and nephew, both also named Francisco Montejo. Francisco Montejo El Mozo ("The Younger") started construction of the house in 1542. Bordering the entrance, figures of conquistadors stand on the heads of vanquished Indians—borrowed, perhaps, from the pre-Hispanic custom of portraying victorious Maya kings treading on their defeated foes. The conquistadors' quixotic posture and somewhat cartoonish expressions make them less imposing than the Montejos might have intended. A bank now occupies the building, but you can enter the courtyard, view the garden, and

imagine what home must have been like for the Montejos and their descendants, who lived here as recently as the 1970s. (Mérida society keeps track of Montejo's descendants, as well as those of the last Maya king, Tutul Xiú.)

In stark contrast to the severity of the cathedral and Casa Montejo is the light, unimposing **Ayuntamiento** or **Palacio Municipal (city hall).** The exterior dates from the mid–19th century, an era when a tropical aesthetic tinged with romanticism began asserting itself across coastal Latin America. On the second floor, you can see the city council's meeting hall and enjoy a view of the plaza from the balcony. Next door to the Ayuntamiento is the recently completed **Centro Cultural de Mérida Olimpo.** It follows the lines of the historic building it replaced, but inside it is a large, modern space that hosts art exhibits, films, and lectures. It houses the **Arcadio Poveda Ricalde Planetarium** on the lower level and also holds concert and gallery space, a bookstore, and a lovely courtyard. A comfortable cafe is under the arches.

Cater-cornered from the Olimpo is the old **Casa del Alguacil (Magistrate's House).** Under its arcades is something of an institution in Mérida: the **Dulcería y Sorbetería Colón,** an ice-cream and sweet shop that will appeal to those who prefer less-rich ice creams. A spectacular side doorway on Calle 62 bears viewing, and across the street is the **Cine Mérida,** with two movie screens showing art films and one stage for live performances. Returning to the main plaza, down from the ice-cream store, is a **shopping center** of boutiques and convenience food vendors called **Pasaje Picheta.**

At the end of the arcade is the **Palacio de Gobierno (state government building),** ★ dating from 1892. Large murals by Yucatecan artist Fernando Castro Pacheco, completed between 1971 and 1973, decorate the courtyard walls with scenes from Maya and Mexican history. The painting over the stairway depicts the Maya spirit with ears of sacred corn, the "sunbeams of the gods." Nearby is a painting of mustachioed President Lázaro Cárdenas, who, in 1938, expropriated 17 foreign oil companies and was hailed as a Mexican liberator. The long, wide upstairs gallery holds more of Pacheco's paintings, which have an almost photographic double-exposure effect. The palace is open Monday to Saturday from 8am to 8pm, Sunday from 9am to 5pm (and often later). A small tourism office is to the left of the entrance.

A few blocks from Plaza Mayor, on Calle 56 between 65 and 65A, the **Museo de la Ciudad (City Museum)** ★ has moved into the grand old post office building. An exhibit outlining Mérida's history includes explanatory text in English. Hours are Tuesday to Friday from 8am to 8pm, Saturday and Sunday from 8am to 2pm. Admission is free.

CALLE 60 Heading north from Plaza Mayor up Calle 60, you'll see many of Mérida's old churches and squares, as well as stores selling gold-filigree jewelry, pottery, clothing, and folk art. A stroll along this street leads to the Parque Santa Ana and continues to the fashionable boulevard Paseo de Montejo and its **Museo Regional de Antropología (Anthropology Museum).**

The **Teatro Daniel Ayala Pérez,** on the left between calles 61 and 59, is of interest because it sometimes schedules interesting performances. On the right side is the small Parque Cepeda Peraza, more often called **Parque Hidalgo,** named for 19th-century Gen. Manuel Cepeda Peraza, part of Montejo's original city plan. Small outdoor restaurants front hotels on the park, making it a popular stopping place at any time of day—for locals, tourists, and hammock vendors alike. Across Calle 59 is the **Iglesia de Jesús,** or El Tercer Orden (the Third Order). Built by the Jesuits in 1618, it has the richest interior of any church in Mérida, making it a favorite spot for weddings. If you look at the

church's west wall carefully, you'll find stones that still bear Mayan inscriptions from their previous life. The entire block on which the church stands belonged to the Jesuits, who are known for being great educators. The school they left behind after their expulsion became the Universidad de Yucatán.

On the other side of the church is the **Parque de la Madre,** with a copy of Renoir's statue of the *Madonna and Child.* Beyond the park is the **Teatro Peón Contreras,** an opulent theater designed by Italian architect Enrico Deserti a century ago. The theater is noted for its Carrara marble staircase and frescoed dome. National and international performers appear here often; duck inside and check the schedule for performances taking place during your stay. In the southwest corner of the theater, facing the Parque de la Madre, is a **tourist information office.** Across Calle 60 is the main building of the **Universidad de Yucatán.** The *ballet folklórico* performs in its flagstone courtyard on Friday nights.

A block farther north, across from **Iglesia de Santa Lucía** (1575), is **Parque Santa Lucía.** Bordered by an arcade on the north and west sides, this square was where early visitors first alighted from the stagecoach. The park holds a used-book market on Sundays and hosts popular entertainment several evenings a week, including a performance of Yucatecan songs and poems on Thursday nights.

Four blocks farther up Calle 60 is **Parque Santa Ana;** turn right to get to the beginning of Paseo de Montejo in 2 blocks.

PASEO DE MONTEJO The Paseo de Montejo, a broad, tree-lined boulevard modeled after Paris' Champs Elysées, runs north-south starting at Calle 47, 7 blocks north and 2 blocks east of the main square. In the late 19th century, Mérida's upper crust (mostly plantation owners) decided the city needed something grander than its traditional narrow streets lined by wall-to-wall town houses. They built this monumentally proportioned boulevard and lined it with mansions. It came to a halt when the henequén industry went bust, but numerous mansions survive—some in private hands, others as offices, restaurants, or consulates. Today this is the fashionable part of town, home to restaurants, trendy dance clubs, and expensive hotels.

Of the surviving mansions, the most notable is the Palacio Cantón, a Beaux Arts confection that houses the **Museo Regional de Antropología** (**Anthropology Museum;** ✆ **999/923-0557**) ★★, Mérida's most impressive museum. Enrico Deserti, the architect of the Teatro Peón Contreras, designed and built this between 1909 and 1911, during the last years of the Porfiriato. It was the home of Gen. Francisco Cantón Rosado, who enjoyed his palace for only 6 years before his death. For a time, the mansion served as the governor's official residence.

A visit to the museum offers the irony of one of Mérida's most extravagant examples of European architecture housing a tribute to the ancient civilization the Europeans did their best to extinguish. The exhibition of pre-Columbian cultures covers the Yucatán's cosmology, history, and culture, with a special focus on the inhabitants' daily life. Displays illustrate such strange Maya customs as tying boards to babies' heads to create the oblong shape that they considered beautiful, and filing or perforating teeth to inset jewels. Drawings and enlarged photos of several archaeological sites illustrate various styles of Maya dwellings. Captions for the permanent displays are mostly in Spanish, but it's a worthwhile stop even if you barely know the language for the background it provides for explorations of Maya sites. The museum is open Tuesday to Saturday from 8am to 8pm, Sunday from 8am to 2pm. Admission is 41 pesos.

¿Hablas Español?

Maya scholars, Spanish teachers, and archaeologists from the United States are among the students at the **Centro de Idiomas del Sureste,** Calle 52 no. 455 (btw. calles 49 and 51; ✆ **999/923-0954;** www.cisyucatan.com.mx). The school has two other locations: the Norte campus in Colonia México and the Poniente campus in Colonia García Ginerés. Students live with local families or in hotels; sessions running 2 weeks or longer are available for all levels of proficiency and areas of interest.

The older **Benjamin Franklin Institute** (✆ **999/928-6005;** www.benjaminfranklin.com.mx), which claims Mérida's longest-running Spanish program for English speakers, also has many satisfied customers with its somewhat more formal and structured program. The choice depends on what kind of a student you are.

ECOTOURS & ADVENTURE TRIPS

The Yucatán Peninsula has been enjoying a recent explosion of companies that organize nature and adventure tours. One well-established outfit with a great track record is **Ecoturismo Yucatán,** Calle 3 no. 235, Col. Pensiones (✆ **999/920-2772;** fax 999/925-9047; www.ecoyuc.com). Alfonso and Roberta Escobedo create itineraries to meet your special or general interest in the Yucatán or southern Mexico. Alfonso has been creating adventure and nature tours for more than a dozen years. Specialties include archaeology, birding, natural history, and kayaking. The company also offers day trips that explore contemporary Maya culture and life in villages in the Yucatán. Package and customized tours are available.

Mayan Ecotours, Calle 80 no. 561 × 13-1, Col. Pensiones 6a Etapa (✆ **999/987-3710;** www.mayanecotours.com) also comes highly recommended. The young company specializes in low-impact visits to unspoiled natural areas and pueblos absent from tourist maps. A new Mayan Life tour combines swimming in a cenote, weaving jipijapa (palm leaves that Panama hats are made of) the traditional way—in a cave—and a home-cooking lesson in a Maya village. Custom tours are also available.

SHOPPING

Mérida is known for hammocks, *guayaberas* (lightweight men's shirts worn untucked), and Panama hats. Local baskets and pottery are sold in the central market. Mérida is also the place to pick up prepared *adobo,* a pastelike mixture of ground achiote seeds (annatto), oregano, garlic, and other spices used as a marinade for such dishes as *cochinita pibil* (pit-baked pork).

Hordes of people come to Mérida's bustling **market district,** a few blocks southeast of the Plaza Grande, to shop and work. It is by far the most crowded part of town. Behind the former post office (at calles 65 and 56, now the city museum) the oldest part of the market is the **Portal de Granos (Grains Arcade),** a row of maroon arches where grain merchants once sold their goods. Just east, between calles 56 and 54, is the market building, **Mercado Lucas de Gálvez.** The city built a new municipal market on the south side of this building, but has had difficulty persuading the market vendors to move. When they do, the city plans to tear down the Lucas de Gálvez and replace it with a plaza. If you can abide the chaos, you can find anything inside from fresh fish to flowers to leather and other locally made goods. A secondary market is on Calle 56, labeled **Bazaar de**

Artesanías (crafts market) in big letters. Still another crafts market, **Bazaar García Rejón,** lies a block west of the main market on Calle 65 between calles 58 and 60.

The English-language bookstore **Amate Books** (✆ **999/924-2222**) is at Calle 60 453-A, by Calle 51. It stocks a large selection of books and is open Tuesday through Sunday from 10:30am to 8:30pm. The **Librería Dante,** Calle 59 between calles 60 and 62 (✆ **999/928-3674**), has a small selection of English-language cultural-history books on Mexico.

Crafts

Casa de las Artesanías ★ This state-run store, occupying the front of a restored monastery, sells a wide selection of crafts, 90% of which come from the Yucatán. The quality of work is higher than elsewhere, but so are the prices. The monastery's back courtyard is used as a gallery, with rotating exhibits on folk and fine arts. It's open Monday to Saturday from 10am to 8pm, Sunday from 10am to 2pm. Calle 63 no. 513 (btw. calles 64 and 66). ✆ **999/928-6676.**

Miniaturas This fun little store is packed to the rafters with miniatures, a traditional Mexican folk art form that has been evolving into social and political satire, pop art, and bawdy humor. The owner collects these handcrafted items from around Mexico and offers plenty of variety, from traditional miniatures such as dollhouse furniture and *arboles de vida* (trees of life), to popular cartoon characters and old movie posters. Hours are Monday to Saturday from 10am to 8pm. Calle 59 no. 507A-4 (btw. calles 60 and 62). ✆ **999/928-6503.**

Guayaberas

Instead of sweltering in business suits in Mérida, businessmen, bankers, and bus drivers alike wear the *guayabera,* a loosefitting shirt decorated with narrow tucks, pockets, and sometimes embroidery, worn over the pants rather than tucked in. Mérida is famous as the best place to buy *guayaberas,* which can go for less than 150 pesos at the market or for more than 650 pesos custom-made; a linen *guayabera* can cost about 800 pesos. Most are made of cotton, although other materials are available. The traditional color is white.

Most shops display ready-to-wear shirts in several price ranges. *Guayabera* makers strive to outdo one another with their own updated versions of the shirt. When shopping, here are a few things to keep in mind: When Yucatecans say *seda,* they mean polyester; *lino* is linen or a linen/polyester combination. Look closely at the stitching and such details as the way the tucks line up over the pockets; with *guayaberas,* details are everything.

Guayaberas Jack The craftsmanship here is good, the place has a reputation to maintain, and some of the salespeople speak English. Prices are as marked. This will give you a good basis of comparison if you want to hunt for a bargain elsewhere. If the staff does not have the style and color of shirt you want, they will make it for you in about 3 hours. This shop also sells regular shirts and women's blouses. Hours are Monday to Saturday from 10am to 8pm, Sunday from 10am to 2pm. Calle 59 no. 507A (btw. calles 60 and 62). ✆ **999/928-6002.**

Hammocks

Natives across tropical America used hammocks long before Europeans reached the New World, and they are still in use throughout Latin America. They come in many forms, but none is so comfortable as the Yucatecan hammock, which is woven with cotton string in a fine mesh. While we might think of a hammock as garden furniture to laze in for an hour or two, they are beds for the majority of Yucatecans, who generally eschew mattresses. Hotels that cater to Yucatecans always provide hammock hooks in the walls because many guests travel with their own hammock.

A good shop will gladly hang a hammock for you to test-drive. Look to see that there are no untied strings. The woven part should be cotton, it should be made with fine string, and the strings should be so numerous that when you get in it and stretch out diagonally (the way you're meant to sleep in them), the gaps between the strings remain small. Don't pay attention to descriptions of a hammock's size; they have become practically meaningless. Good hammocks don't cost a lot of money (250–350 pesos). Superior hammocks are made with fine crochet thread—*hilo de crochet*—and be prepared to pay as much as 1,200 pesos.

You can also see what street vendors are offering, but you have to know what to look for, or they are likely to take advantage of you.

Hamacas El Aguacate El Aguacate sells hammocks wholesale and retail. It has the greatest variety and is the place to go for a really fancy or extra-large hammock. A good hammock is the no. 6 in cotton; it runs around 340 pesos. The store is open Monday to Friday from 8:30am to 7:30pm, Saturday from 8am to 5pm. It's 6 blocks south of the main square. Calle 58 no. 604 (at Calle 73). ✆ **999/923-0152.**

Tejidos y Cordeles Nacionales This place near the municipal market sells only cotton hammocks, priced by weight—a pretty good practice because hammock lengths are fairly standardized. The prices are better than at El Aguacate, but quality control isn't as good. My idea of a good hammock is one that weighs about 1.5 kilograms (3½ lb.) and runs about 270 pesos. Calle 56 no. 516-B (btw. calles 63 and 65). ✆ **999/928-5561.**

Panama Hats

Another useful and popular item is this soft, pliable hat made from the fibers of the jipijapa palm in several towns south of Mérida along Hwy. 180, especially Becal, in the neighboring state of Campeche. Hat makers in these towns work inside caves so that the moist air keeps the palm fibers pliant.

Jipi hats come in various grades determined by the pliability, softness, and fineness of the fibers and closeness of the weave. A fine weave gives the hat more body and helps it to retain its shape. You'll find Panama hats for sale in several places, but often without much selection. One of the market buildings has a hat store: Walk south down Calle 56 past the post office; just before the street ends in the marketplace, turn left into a passage with hardware stores at the entrance. The fourth or fifth shop is **Casa de los Jipis.**

MERIDA AFTER DARK

For nighttime entertainment, see the box, "Daily Festivals & Special Events in Mérida," p. 600, or check out the theaters noted here.

Teatro Peón Contreras, Calle 60 at Calle 57, and **Teatro Ayala,** Calle 60 at Calle 61, feature a wide range of performing artists from Mexico and around the world. **Centro Cultural de Mérida Olimpo,** on the main square, schedules frequent concerts; and **Cine Mérida,** a half-block north of the Olimpo, has two screens for showing classic and art films, and one live stage.

Mérida's club scene offers everything from ubiquitous rock/dance music to some one-of-a-kind spots. Most of the dance clubs are in the big hotels or on trendy Paseo de Montejo, such as the ever-so-cool **El Cielo Lounge** at Prolongación Montejo and Calle 25. For dancing, a small cluster of clubs on Calle 60, around the corner from Santa Lucía, offer live rock and Latin music. For salsa, go to **Mambo Café** in the Plaza las Américas shopping center.

2 SIDE TRIPS FROM MERIDA

HACIENDA SOTUTA DE PEON ★

What started out as one man's hobby has grown into one of the best living museums you'll ever see. If you've passed one of the Yucatán's elegantly decaying haciendas and wondered what it was like during its heyday, here's your chance to find out. The owner didn't just restore the buildings, he put the entire hacienda into working order and is now turning out 10 to 15 tons of henequén per month.

You can arrange transportation from any of Mérida's hotels by calling Hacienda Sotuta de Peón at ✆ **999/941-8639** or going to **www.haciendatour.com**. Be sure to get precise directions if you plan to take your own car. After a welcome drink and a tour of the beautiful main house, you'll visit the henequén fields via mule-drawn "trucks," or carts. You get to see harvesting and, later, processing at the *casa de máquinas,* and learn how to spin the fiber into twine. You'll also learn about the culture surrounding henequén production, visiting one of the workers in his traditional Maya home. Bring your bathing suit because you'll have time for a swim in a cenote on the property. You can also sample fine regional cooking in a restaurant on the premises. Admission is 300 pesos per adult, 150 pesos per child; transportation is 200 pesos extra. Packages are available that combine entrance fee, transportation from Mérida, and a meal. The hacienda is open from Monday to Saturday, with tours at 10am and 1pm.

IZAMAL ★★

Izamal, about 80km (50 miles) east of Mérida, presents one of Mexico's most vivid juxtapositions of three cultures: Ancient pyramids surround one of the largest monasteries the Spanish ever built in Mexico, while contemporary Maya artisans do a brisk trade in their traditional crafts.

The entire city center glows with ocher-yellow paint—the market, all the colonial buildings, and the massive Franciscan convent of **San Antonio de Padua** ★★ for which Izamal is best known. Walking along the colonnades high over the plaza, you know why priests believed they were close to God. The porticoed atrium, reputedly second in size only to the Vatican's, presents a sound-and-light show on Tuesday, and Thursday to Saturday at 8:30pm. Admission is 48 pesos; headphones with English narration cost another 30 pesos. Bishop Fray Diego de Landa, who was to became infamous for his brutal *auto-da-fé* at Maní, leveled a Maya pyramid here to build the monastery and church. Inside is a beautifully restored altarpiece and, among many statues, the Nuestra Señora de Izamal, brought from Guatemala in 1652 and still drawing pilgrims every August who climb the staircase on their knees to plead for miracles.

The new **Centro Cultural y Artesanal** ★ (20 pesos) across the square from the convent provides an excellent introduction to Izamal's proliferation of handicrafts. The shop sells fine-quality hammocks, clothing, and other work of local artists. Follow up with a self-guided tour, available at the center, of folk art workshops in town. A good way to reach them is by *victoria,* the horse-drawn buggies that serve as taxis here.

Of the four pyramids overlooking the town center, **Kinich Kakmó** on Calle 28 at Calle 25 (daily 8am–8pm; free admission), is the Yucatán's largest pre-Hispanic building. Impressing with sheer size rather than fine architecture, it looks like a strangely symmetrical hill, but you can climb the restored stairways on its south face for grand views and a fresh breeze.

The easiest way to get to Izamal from Mérida is to take Hwy. 180 toward Cancún. At Km 68, follow the signs for the *cuota* (toll road) until just past the Kantunil turnoff.

Before you reach the toll plaza, the exit for Izamal will be on the left. You'll head north, passing through the villages of Xanaba and Sudzal, for 7.7km (4¾ miles) to Izamal.

Izamal, which had meager lodging options only a few years ago, is enjoying a bit of a boom. Long-standing favorite **Macan ché Bed and Breakfast,** in the middle of town at Calle 22 no. 305 between calles 33 and 35 (✆ **988/954-0287;** www.macanche.com), recently opened a second house suited for families and long-term stays as well as a new building with four quirky, highly designed rooms. Rates range from $40 to $55 for rooms, $90 to $135 for a house. East of the city center, on Calle 18 between calles 33 and 35, an Austrian entrepreneur has turned a ranch into **Rancho Santo Domingo** (✆ **988/967-6136;** www.izamalhotel.com). Bungalows in a tropical garden have bright, modern rooms for $55 to $65, including breakfast. I visited just before the first two bungalows opened, and it looks like a great value. The hotel was aiming for 15 bungalows by fall 2010.

Where to Stay

Hacienda San Antonio Chalanté ★★★ Finds Kids My favorite place to stay in Izamal—or practically anywhere—isn't actually in Izamal but 6km (4 miles) south, in the village of Sudzal. The secluded hotel occupies a colonial hacienda built on the site of an ancient Maya ceremonial center. There's nothing posh about this hacienda hotel—Chalanté remains much as owner Diane Dutton de Tuyub found it in the 1990s. She has made the guest rooms, occupying two manor houses and some former workers' cottages, modern and comfortable without altering their character. Each is unique, though all have antique furniture and modern bathrooms. Some open onto the dreamy garden veranda, and some have private patios. The grounds, part of a 356-hectare (880-acre) nature preserve, offer seven distinct gardens, miles of hiking and horseback trails, Maya ruins, a cenote, and an 18th-century church that once anchored a hacienda community of 600 people. The stables, managed by her Maya husband, were part of the original hacienda. This is a wonderland for children.

2km/1½ miles east of Sudzal. ✆ **988/954-0287.** www.haciendachalante.com. 10 units. $50–$80 double. Rates for most rooms include breakfast. No credit cards. Free parking. **Amenities:** Dinner (w/advance notice; extra charge); horseback rides; communal living room and library; outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, TV (1 room), some private gardens and patios.

CELESTUN NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE: FLAMINGOS & OTHER WATERFOWL

On the Gulf Coast west of Mérida, Celestún is the gateway to a wildlife reserve harboring one of North America's only two flamingo breeding colonies (the other is Ría Lagartos, p. 645). The long, shallow estuary, where salty Gulf waters mix with fresh water from about 80 cenotes, is sheltered from the open sea by a skinny strip of land, creating ideal habitat for flamingos and other waterfowl. This *ría* (estuary) is shallow (.3–1m/1–3¼ ft. deep) and thick with mangroves. You can ride a launch through an open channel just .5km (a quarter-mile) wide and 50km (31 miles) long to see flamingos dredging the shallows for a species of small crustacean and a favorite insect that form the bulk of their diet. You may also see frigate birds, pelicans, spoonbills, egrets, sandpipers, and other waterfowl. At least 15 duck species have been counted. Nonbreeding flamingos remain year-round; breeding birds take off around April to nest in Ría Lagartos, returning to Celestún in October.

The old days of approaching a fisherman under the bridge to negotiate a trip to the flamingos are over; immediately to the left after you cross the bridge into town is a modern visitor center with a small museum, snack bar, clean bathrooms, and a ticket window.

Tour prices are fixed at about 750 pesos for a 75-minute tour for up to six people. You can join others or hire a boat by yourself. In addition to flamingos, you'll see mangroves close-up, and you might stop for a swim in a cenote. It's a pleasant ride through calm waters on wide, flat-bottom skiffs with canopies for shade. *Don't ask boatmen to get closer to the flamingos than they are allowed to.* If pestered too much, the birds will abandon the area for another, less-fitting habitat.

Celestún is an easy 90-minute drive from Mérida. (For bus info, see "By Bus" under "Getting There & Departing," p. 595.) Leave downtown on Calle 57, which ends just past Santiago Church and doglegs onto Calle 59-A. After crossing Avenida Itzáes, it becomes Jacinto Canek; continue until you see signs for Celestún Hwy. 178. After Hunucmá, the road joins Hwy. 281. Continue to the bridge, and you are in Celestún.

Where to Stay

Casa de Celeste Vida ★★ (Value) This newish guesthouse, 1.5km north of town on a quiet, unspoiled beach that stretches for miles, hits the perfect balance between comfort and economy, seclusion and convenience. Two studios and a one-bedroom apartment have ocean views, kitchens stocked with utensils and food staples, and use of bikes, kayaks, and outdoor grills. The amiable Canadian owners, who live on-site, gladly arrange tours and sometimes even accompany guests on errands in town. They are highly tuned in to local culture and provide enormous insights into the lives of local fishermen and their families.

49-E Calle 12, Celestún, Yuc. ✆ **988/916-2536.** www.hotelcelestevida.com. 3 units. $75 studios; $100 apartment. Weekly/monthly rates available. AE, DISC, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Kitchen; bikes; kayaks; Wi-Fi.

Hotel Eco Paraíso Xixim (Overrated) This resort has drawn accolades for its ecological practices. Composting, reusing treated wastewater, and developing barely more than 1% of its 25 hectares (62 acres) is certainly laudable, and the 5km (3 miles) of pristine beach are sublime. The *palapa*-roof bungalows are exquisitely private and generally comfortable. For its five-star rating and its rates, though, I expect more consistent cleaning standards and restaurant service. And if you don't relish bouncing over 11km (7 miles) of potholes whenever you want to explore, you are captive to the resort's services. This hotel is best for well-off travelers looking to cosset themselves away for a week.

Antigua Carretera a Sisal Km 10, 97367 Celestún, Yuc. ✆ **988/916-2100.** Fax 988/916-2111. www.ecoparaiso.com. 15 units. High season $270 double; low season $250 double. Rates include breakfast. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; midsize outdoor pool. *In room:* Hair dryer.

DZIBILCHALTUN: MAYA RUINS & MUSEUM

This small archaeological site can be a quick day trip or part of a longer trip to the Yucatán's Gulf coast. It stands 14km (8¾ miles) north of Mérida along the Progreso road, 4km (2½ miles) east of the highway. Take Calle 60 out of town and follow signs for Progreso and Hwy. 261. Turn right at the sign for Dzibilchaltún, which also reads UNIVERSIDAD DEL MAYAB; the entrance is a few miles farther. If you don't want to drive, take one of the *colectivos* lined up at Parque San Juan.

Dzibilchaltún was founded about 500 B.C., flourished around A.D. 750, and began its decline long before the conquistadors arrived. Since their discovery in 1941, more than 8,000 buildings have been mapped, but only about a half-dozen have been excavated. The site covers almost 15 sq. km (5¾ sq. miles); of greatest interest are the buildings surrounding two plazas next to the cenote and a third connected by a *sacbé* (causeway). At least 25 stelae have been found in Dzibilchaltún, which means "place of the stone writing."

Start with the **Museo del Pueblo Maya,** which exhibits artifacts from sites around the Yucatán and provides fairly thorough bilingual explanations. Displays include a beautiful plumed serpent from Chichén Itzá and a finely designed incense vessel from Palenque. The museum moves on to artifacts specifically at Dzibilchaltún, including the curious dolls that gave the site's main attraction its name. Another exhibit covers Maya culture through history, including a collection of *huipiles,* the woven blouses worn by Indian women. From here, a door leads out to the site.

You first encounter the *sacbé.* To the left is the **Temple of the Seven Dolls,** whose doorways and the *sacbé* line up with the rising sun at the spring and autumnal equinoxes. To the right are the buildings grouped around the Cenote Xlacah, the sacred well, and a complex of buildings around **Structure 38,** the **Central Group** of temples. Yucatán's State Department of Ecology has added nature trails and published a booklet (in Spanish) of birds and plants seen along the mapped trail.

The site is open daily from 8am to 5pm (museum closes at 4pm). Admission is 79 pesos, including the museum; children 12 and under free.

PROGRESO, UAYMITUN & XCAMBO: GULF COAST CITY, FLAMINGO LOOKOUT & MORE MAYA RUINS

Puerto Progreso is Mérida's refuge when the weight of summer heat descends on the city. And though it doesn't occur to most U.S. travelers, it is also a gateway to the trove of undiscovered white sands and mangrove-lined estuaries. Except for the vacation homes within easy reach of Mérida, most of the Yucatán's 378 seafront kilometers (235 miles)—stretching from near Isla Holbox to Celestún—belongs to some scattered fishing villages, a lot of flamingos, and an increasing number of American and Canadian expats and snowbirds.

Progreso has been the Yucatán's main port of entry since the 1870s, when henequén shipped all over the world. Today, it's a major stop for cruise ships. The cruise business has allowed the city to spruce up the Malecón, its 16-block seaside promenade that skims past well-groomed, white-sand beaches. Though the water is green and murky compared with the Caribbean, it's clean, and good for swimming. Fancy restaurants have been added (many sell good seafood), and vendors now ply their wares on the beach, but it's still pretty quiet most of the time. The 7km (4½-mile) pier, which seems to disappear in the distance, became the world's longest when a new section was added to accommodate cruise ships, which dock twice a week. The sea is so shallow here that large ships cannot get any closer to shore.

From Mérida, buses to Progreso leave from the AutoProgreso terminal (p. 596) every 15 minutes or so, taking almost an hour and costing 35 pesos. If you drive, take Paseo Montejo or Calle 60 north; either funnels you onto Hwy. 261 leading to Progreso.

If you have time, a drive east on the coastal road toward Telchac Puerto will reveal the other side of the Yucatán's coast. The shoreline along Hwy. 27 from Chuburna to the village of Dzilam de Bravo is dubbed La Costa Esmeralda (the Emerald Coast), after the clear, green Gulf waters. First up: the sleepy beach town of **Chicxulub,** about 8km (5 miles) east of Progreso. To winter-phobic Northerners, it's a bit of paradise. To scientists, it's the site of a buried impact crater, about 161km (100 miles) in diameter, left by a meteor that smashed into the earth 65 million years ago; it is blamed for extinguishing the dinosaurs and probably created the Yucatán's cenotes. Less than 10km (6 miles) farther, in **Uaymitun,** a large wooden tower looming on the right is an observation post for viewing a new colony of flamingos that migrated from Celestún in recent years. Binoculars are provided free of charge. You might also spot some of the rosy birds about 20 minutes down near the turnoff for the road to Dzemul.

The road to Dzemul also leads to the small but intriguing Maya site of **Xcambó,** which was (and still is) a salt production center. Archaeologists have reconstructed the small ceremonial center, including several platforms and temples. A rough-hewn Catholic church, complete with altar, flowers, and statues, rises from some of the ruins. Admission is free.

You can continue on the same road through the small town of Dzemul to Baca, where you can pick up Hwy. 176 back to Mérida or Progreso, or you can return to the coast road and continue east until it ends in **Dzilam de Bravo,** final resting place of "gentleman pirate" Jean Lafitte. On the way, you'll pass through **Telchac Puerto,** which holds little interest unless you're hungry for some decent seafood, and the appealing village of **San Crisanto,** where a group of fishermen will paddle you through shallow canals in the mangroves to an array of newly accessible cenotes.

Where to Stay

Hotel Yakunah ★★ Kids This beautiful former colonial home is owned by a generous, outgoing Dutch family who have turned it into an expat gathering place as well as an exemplary B&B. The quiet location is a 10-minute walk from the Progreso city center but right across the street from the beach. Spacious rooms have a romantic air, with large beds, pasta tile, and armoires. Gleaming tiled bathrooms have large showers. A two-bedroom garden apartment with fully equipped kitchen and private terrace is also available. Co-owner Gerben Hartskeerl is a talented chef who turns out breakfasts and dinners (extra charge) that will spare you the tribulations of finding a restaurant.

Calle 23 no. 64 (btw. calles 48 and 50), Col. Ismael García, Progreso, Yuc. ✆ **969/935-5600.** www.hotelyakunah.com.mx. 7 units. 750 pesos double; 1,400 pesos 2-bedroom casita. Rates include light breakfast; extra charge for full breakfast. Minimum stay 2 nights. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; library; outdoor pool; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, Wi-Fi.

EN ROUTE TO UXMAL

Two routes go to Uxmal, about 80km (50 miles) south of Mérida. The most direct is Hwy. 261, via Umán and Muna. Hwy. 18 is a longer, more scenic road sometimes called the Convent Route. You might also make the trip to Uxmal into a loop by going one way and coming back the other, with an overnight stay at Uxmal. Arriving at Uxmal in late afternoon, you could attend the evening sound-and-light show, and see the ruins the next morning while it is cool and uncrowded.

Both of these roads will lead you to the central square in one small village after another, and many lack signs to point you in the right direction. Get used to poking your head out the window and saying, *"Buenos días. ¿Dónde está el camino para . . . ?"* ("Good day. Where is the road to . . . ?") I've usually had the best luck asking a policeman, if I can find one. Sometimes you have to ask more than one person before you get back on track. Streets in these villages are full of children, bicycles, and animals, so drive carefully, and learn to recognize unmarked *topes* from a distance.

Churches on these routes are open daily from 10am to 1pm and 4 to 6pm; ruins are open daily from 8am to 5pm.

HWY. 261: YAXCOPOIL & MUNA From downtown Mérida, take Calle 65 or 69 west and then turn left on Avenida Itzáes, which feeds onto the highway. To save some time by looping around the busy market town of Umán, take the exit for Hwy. 180 toward Cancún and Campeche, and follow signs toward Campeche. Keep going south on Hwy. 180 until it intersects with Hwy. 261 and take the Uxmal exit.

You'll soon come to the town and **Hacienda Yaxcopoil** (yash-koh-po-*eel;* ✆ **999/900-1193;** www.yaxcopoil.com), 32km/20 miles south of Mérida. The ruined hacienda,

immediately identifiable by its double Moorish arches, has been preserved but not restored, making for an eerie but particularly vivid trip back in time. Tours take in the *casa principa,* with its large lounges and drawing rooms, the extensive gardens, a small Maya museum, and the henequén factory. It's open Monday to Saturday from 8am to 6pm, and Sunday 9am to 5pm. Admission is 50 pesos.

The hacienda is no secret, but few travelers seem to know you can stay overnight in the ***Casa de Visitas*** ★★★, a guesthouse behind the manor house that is not open to the public. It is roomy, with a sitting and dining room, and charming, with a patterned tile floor and colonial-style furniture. After 6pm, it's just you, the entire empty hacienda, the deep starry sky, and the utter silence. It's a unique experience that I look forward to repeating, but it's not for travelers whose comfort level requires a front desk ready to snap to attention at any hour of the day or night. The guesthouse rents for $60 a night; another $20 per person gets you a homemade tamale dinner and a hearty breakfast, delivered and served by a local woman in town.

South of Yaxcopoil, the little market town of **Muna** (65km/40 miles from Mérida) sells excellent **reproductions of Maya ceramics,** created by artisan Rodrigo Martín Morales, who has worked 25 years to replicate the ancient Maya's style and methods. As you enter Muna, watch for two large Ceiba trees on the right side of the road, with handicraft and food stalls in a small plaza under the branches. Turn right, and in about 45m (148 ft.) the **Taller de Artesanía Los Ceibos** (✆ **997/971-0036**) will be on your left. The family works in the back, and Spanish only is spoken. The store is open from 9am to 6pm daily. Uxmal is 15km (9¼ miles) beyond Muna.

HWY. 18: THE CONVENT ROUTE From downtown Mérida, take Calle 63 east to Circuito Colonias and turn right, then look for a traffic circle with a small fountain and turn left. This feeds onto Hwy. 18 to Kanasín (kah-nah-*seen*) and then Acanceh (ah-kahn-*keh*). In **Kanasín,** the highway divides into two; go to the right, and the road curves to flow into the next parallel street. Pass the market, church, and main square on your left, and then stay to the right when you get to a fork.

Shortly after Kanasín, the upgraded road now bypasses a lot of villages. Follow the sign pointing left to **Acanceh.** Across the street from and overlooking Acanceh's church is a restored pyramid. On top, under a makeshift roof, are some stucco figures of Maya deities. The caretaker will guide you up to see them and give you a little explanation (in Spanish). Admission is 25 pesos. A few blocks away, at some other ruins called **El Palace de los Stuccoes,** a stucco mural was found in mint condition there in 1908. Exposure deteriorated it somewhat, but it is sheltered now. You can still distinguish the painted figures in their original colors. To leave Acanceh, head back to the highway on the street that passes between the church and the plaza.

The next turnoff will be for **Tecoh,** on the right side. Its ornate and crumbling parish church and convent sit on the base of a massive pre-Columbian ceremonial complex that was sacrificed to build the church. The three carved *retablos* (altarpieces) inside are covered in gold leaf and unmistakably Indian in style. About 9km (6 miles) farther on, you come to the ruins of Mayapán, the last of the great city-states.

Mayapán ★

Founded, according to Maya lore, by the man-god Kukulkán (Quetzalcóatl in central Mexico) in about A.D. 1007, Mayapán quickly established itself as northern Yucatán's most important city. For almost 2 centuries, it was the capital of a Maya confederation of city-states that included Chichén Itzá and Uxmal. Sometime before 1200, Mayapán

attacked and subjugated the other two cities, leading to a revolt that eventually toppled Mayapán. It was abandoned during the mid-1400s.

The city extended out at least 4 sq. km (1½ sq. miles), but the ceremonial center is quite compact. Several buildings bordering the principal plaza have been reconstructed, including one that is similar to Chichén Itzá's El Castillo. Excavation has uncovered murals and stucco figures that provide more grist for the mill of conjecture: atlantes (supporting columns in the form of a human figure), skeletal soldiers, macaws, entwined snakes, and a stucco jaguar. This place is definitely worth a stop.

The site is open daily from 8am to 5pm. Admission is 35 pesos. Use of a personal video camera is 45 pesos.

FROM MAYAPÁN TO TICUL About 20km (12 miles) after Mayapán, take the highway for **Mama** on your right, and the narrow road quickly enters town. Some parts of this village are quite pretty. The main attraction is the church and former convent, with several fascinating *retablos* sculpted in a native form of baroque. Colonial-age murals and designs were uncovered and restored during the restoration of these buildings. You can peek at them in the sacristy. From Mama, continue on about 20km (12 miles) to Ticul, a large (for this area) market town with a couple of simple hotels.

Ticul

Best known for the cottage industry of *huipil* (native blouse) embroidery and the manufacture of women's dress shoes, Ticul is an especially exciting stop and a convenient place to wash up and spend the night. It's also a center for large-scale pottery production—most of the widely sold sienna-colored pottery painted with Maya designs is made here. If it's a cloudy, humid day, potters may not be working (part of the process requires sun drying). They still welcome visitors to purchase finished pieces.

Ticul is only 20km (12 miles) northeast of Uxmal, making a good alternative to the expensive hotels at the ruins, especially if you want to do the Puuc Route one day and the Convent Route the next. On the main square is the **Hotel Plaza,** Calle 23 no. 202, near Calle 26 (✆ **997/972-0484**). It's a modest but comfortable hotel. A double room with air-conditioning costs 340 pesos. A 5% charge applies to payments made by credit card (MasterCard and Visa accepted). Get an interior room to avoid noise from Ticul's lively plaza. From Ticul, you can head straight for Uxmal via Santa Elena, or loop around the Puuc Route (p. 621) the long way to Santa Elena.

FROM TICUL TO UXMAL Follow the main street (Calle 23) west through town. Turn left on Calle 34 and drive 15km (9¼ miles) to Santa Elena; it will be another 15km (9¼ miles) to Uxmal. In Santa Elena, by the side of Hwy. 261, is a clean restaurant with good food, **El Chaac Mool,** and on the opposite side of the road the **Flycatcher Inn B&B** (see listing, below).

3 THE RUINS OF UXMAL ★★★

80km (50 miles) SW of Mérida; 19km (12 miles) W of Ticul; 19km (12 miles) S of Muna

The ceremonial complex of Uxmal ("oosh-*mahl*") is one of the masterworks of Maya civilization. It is strikingly different from all other Maya cities for its expansive and intricate facades of carved stone. Unlike other sites in northern Yucatán, such as Chichén Itzá and Mayapán, Uxmal isn't built on a flat plane, but incorporates the varied elevations of the hilly landscape. And then there is the strange and beautiful oval-shaped Pyramid of

the Magician, unique among the Maya. The great building period took place between A.D. 700 and 1000, when the population probably reached 25,000. After 1000, Uxmal fell under the sway of the Xiú princes (who may have come from central Mexico). In the 1440s, the Xiú conquered Mayapán, and not long afterward, the age of the Maya ended with the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors.

Close to Uxmal, four smaller sites—**Sayil, Kabah, Xlapak,** and **Labná**—can be visited in quick succession. With Uxmal, these ruins (p. 625) are collectively known as the **Puuc route.**

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING

By Car The two main routes to Uxmal from Mérida are described in "En Route to Uxmal," above. ***Note:*** There's no gasoline at Uxmal.

By Bus See "Mérida: Getting There & Departing" (p. 595) for information about bus service between Mérida and Uxmal. To return, wait for the bus on the highway at the entrance to the ruins. To see the sound-and-light show, sign up with a tour operator from Mérida.

ORIENTATION

Entrance to the ruins is through the visitor center where you buy tickets (two per person; hold on to both). It has a restaurant; toilets; a first-aid station; shops selling soft drinks, ice cream, film, batteries, and books; a state-run Casa de Artesanía (crafts house); and a small museum, which isn't very informative. The site is open daily from 8am to 5pm. Admission to the archaeological site is 51 pesos, and you'll pay 40 pesos more for the evening sound-and-light show. Bringing in a video camera costs 45 pesos and parking is 10 pesos. If you're staying the night in Uxmal, it is possible (and I think preferable) to get to the site late in the day and buy a ticket that combines the sound-and-light show that evening with entry to the ruins the next morning to explore them before it gets hot. Make sure the ticket vendor knows what you intend to do, and keep the ticket.

Guides at the entrance of Uxmal give tours in several languages, charging $40 for a single person or a group. The guides frown on it, but you can ask other English speakers if they'd like to join you in a tour and split the cost. As at other sites, the guides vary in quality but will point out areas and architectural details you might otherwise miss. Think of these guided tours as performances—the guides try to be as entertaining and adjust their presentations according to the group's interests.

Included in the price of admission is a 45-minute **sound-and-light show** each evening at 7pm. It's in Spanish, but you can rent headsets for 25 pesos that narrate the program in several languages. It's part Hollywood, part high school, but the lighting of the buildings is worth making the effort to see it. After the show, the chant *"Chaaac, Chaaac"* will echo in your mind for weeks.

A TOUR OF THE RUINS

THE PYRAMID OF THE MAGICIAN ★★

As you enter the ruins, note a *chultún,* or cistern, where Uxmal stored its water. Unlike most of the major Maya sites, Uxmal stands about 30m (100 ft.) above sea level, so it has no cenotes to supply fresh water from the subterranean rivers. The city's inhabitants depended on rainwater, and consequently venerated the rain god Chaac with unusual devotion.

Rising in front of you is the Pirámide del Adivino, the city's tallest structure at 38m (125 ft.). The name comes from a myth about a magician-dwarf who reached adulthood in a single day after being hatched from an egg and built this pyramid in 1 night. It is built over five earlier structures. The pyramid has an oval base and rounded sides. You

are looking at the east side. Walk around the left, or south, side to see the main face on the west side. The pyramid was designed so that the east side rises less steeply than the west side, which shifts the crowning temples to the west of the central axis of the building, causing them to loom above the plaza below. The temple doorway is heavily ornamented, characteristic of the Chenes style, with 12 stylized masks representing Chaac.

THE NUNNERY QUADRANGLE To get from the plaza to the large Nunnery Quadrangle, walk out the way you walked into the plaza, turn right, and follow the wall of this long stone building until you get to the building's main door—a corbeled arch that leads into the quadrangle. You'll be in another plaza, bordered on each side by stone buildings with elaborate facades. The 16th-century Spanish historian Fray Diego López de Cogullado gave the quadrangle its name when he decided its layout resembled a Spanish convent.

The quadrangle does have a lot of small rooms, about the size of a nun's cell. Poke your head into one to see the shape and size, but don't bother trying to explore them all. These rooms were long ago abandoned to the swallows that fly above the city. No interior murals or stucco work have been found here, at least not yet. The richness of Uxmal lies in the stonework on its exterior walls.

The Nunnery is a great example. The first building that catches your eye when you enter the plaza is the north building in front of you. It is the tallest, and the view from the top includes all the city's major buildings, making it useful for the sound-and-light show. The central stairway is bordered by doorways supported by rounded columns, a common element in Puuc architecture. Remnants of the facade on the second level show elements used in the other three buildings and elsewhere in the city: a crosshatch pattern and a pattern of square curlicues, called a step-and-fret design, and the vertical repetitions of the long-nosed god masks—found so often on the corners of Uxmal's buildings that they have acquired the nickname "Chaac stacks." Though the facades of these buildings share these and other common elements, their composition varies. On the west building, long, feathered serpents are intertwined at head and tail. A human head stares out from a serpent's open mouth. There are many interpretations of this motif, repeated elsewhere in Maya art, and that's the trouble with symbols: They are usually the condensed expression of multiple meanings, so any one interpretation could be true, but only partially true.

THE BALL COURT Leaving the Nunnery the same way you entered, you will see a ball court straight ahead. What Maya city would be without a ball court? This one is a particularly good representative of the hundreds found elsewhere in the Maya world. It even has a replica of one of the stone rings the players aimed at, using their knees, hips, and maybe their arms to strike a solid rubber ball (the Maya knew about natural rubber and extracted latex from a couple of species of rubber trees). Spectators are thought to have observed the game from atop the two structures.

THE GOVERNOR'S PALACE Continuing south, you come to the large raised plaza supporting the Governor's Palace, which runs north and south. The surface area of the raised plaza measures 140×170m (459×558 ft.), and it is raised about 10m (33 ft.) above the ground—quite a bit of earth moving. Most of this surface is used as a ceremonial space facing the front (east side) of the palace. In the center is a double-headed jaguar throne, which is seen elsewhere in the Maya world. From here, you get the best view of the building's remarkable facade. Like the other palaces here, the first level is smooth and the second is ornate. A series of Chaac masks moves diagonally across a crosshatch pattern. Crowning the building is an elegant cornice projecting slightly outward from above a double border, which could be an architectural reference to the original crested

thatched roofs of the Maya. Human figures adorned the main doors, though only the headdress of the central figure survives.

THE GREAT PYRAMID Behind the palace, the platform descends in terraces to another plaza with a large temple, known as the Great (or Grand) Pyramid, on its south side. On top is the Temple of the Macaws, for the repeated image of macaws on the face of the temple, and the ruins of three other temples. The view from the top is extraordinary.

THE DOVECOTE This building is remarkable, in that roof combs weren't a common feature of temples in the Puuc hills, although Sayil's El Mirador has one of a very different style.

WHERE TO STAY

Flycatcher Inn B&B ★★ Value This pleasant bed-and-breakfast is 15 minutes southeast of Uxmal in the village of Santa Elena, just off Hwy. 261. Spacious rooms are attractive and quiet, and they come with pillow-top orthopedic mattresses and decorative ironwork made by one of the owners, Santiago Domínguez. The other owner, his wife, is Kristine Ellingson, an American from the Northwest who has lived in Santa Elena for years and has voluminous information on travel and local culture to share with guests. The large, attractive grounds include a recently discovered little Maya ruin along the nature trail that runs through the property. The inn's new Owl's Cottage, a secluded house with a small kitchen and large living/dining room, is designed for longer stays.

Carretera Uxmal–Kabah, 97840 Santa Elena, Yuc. ✆ **997/102 0865.** www.flycatcherinn.com. 8 units. $55–$75 double; $75 suite; $50–$85 cottage (3-night minimum). Rates include full breakfast. No credit cards. Free secure parking. Not set up to accommodate young children. *In room:* A/C.

Hacienda Uxmal ★★ The Hacienda is the oldest hotel in Uxmal. Located just up the road from the ruins, it was built for the archaeology staff. Large, airy rooms exude a feel of days gone by, with patterned tile floors, heavy furniture, and louvered windows. Room nos. 202 through 214 and 302 through 305 are the nicest of the superiors. Larger corner rooms are labeled A through F and come with Jacuzzi tubs. A handsome garden courtyard with towering royal palms, a bar, and a pool adds to the air of tranquillity. A guitar trio usually plays on the open patio in the evenings.

Carretera Mérida–Uxmal Km 80, 97844 Uxmal, Yuc. ✆ **800/235-4079** in the U.S., or 997/976-2012. Fax 987/976-2011. www.mayaland.com. 82 units. High season $164–$185 double, $238–$249 superior; low season $110–$140 double, $144–$196 superior. AE, MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; 2 outdoor pools; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer (upon request), minibar.

Villas Arqueológicas Uxmal ★★ Still the best value among the hotels clustered around the ruins' entrance, the Villas and its sister properties have new owners that have added some polish, though the food seems blander than before. A basic two-story quadrangle around a garden patio and pool is admirably prettied up by lush vegetation, Maya statues, and a paint job with a semblance of traditional style. At guests' disposal are a tennis court, a library, and an audiovisual show on the ruins in English, French, and Spanish. Each of the modern, medium-size rooms has a double and a twin bed fit into spaces that are walled on three sides (very tall people should look elsewhere). Ask about rates for half- (breakfast plus lunch or dinner) or full (three meals) board.

Ruinas Uxmal, 97844 Uxmal, Yuc. ✆ **987/872-9300,** ext. 8101. www.islandercollection.com. 48 units. 989 pesos double Sun–Thurs; 1,106 pesos double Fri–Sat. AE, MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; tennis court; Wi-Fi (in public areas). *In room:* A/C, hair dryer.

WHERE TO DINE

You can eat well at the hotel restaurant of the **Lodge at Uxmal** if you order the Yucatecan specialties, which are fresh and well prepared. In Santa Elena, the **Pickled Onion** offers a menu of mostly Mexican dishes with a few international twists; the food is good, and the owner's hospitality is legendary. The *palapa* restaurants by the highway as you approach the ruins from Mérida are a mixed bag. They do a lot of business with bus tours, so the best time to try them is early afternoon.

4 THE PUUC MAYA ROUTE

South and east of Uxmal are several other ancient Maya cities, small and largely unexcavated but worth visiting for their unique architecture.

Kabah is 28km (17 miles) southeast of Uxmal via Hwy. 261 through Santa Elena, and only a couple kilometers farther to Sayil. Xlapak is almost walking distance (through the jungle) from Sayil, and Labná is just a bit farther east. A short drive beyond Labná brings you to the caves of Loltún. Oxkutzcab is at the road's intersection with Hwy. 184, which you can follow west to Ticul or east all the way to Felipe Carrillo Puerto. If you aren't driving, a daily bus from Mérida (p. 595) goes to all these sites, with the exception of Loltún.

PUUC MAYA SITES

KABAH ★ From Uxmal, head southwest on Hwy. 261 to Santa Elena (1km/½ mile), then south to Kabah (13km/8 miles). The ancient city lies along both sides of the highway. Turn right into the parking lot.

The outstanding building at Kabah, to the right as you enter, is the **Palace of Masks,** or Codz Poop ("rolled-up mat"), named for its decorative motif. Its Chenes-style facade is completely covered in a repeated pattern of 250 masks of Chaac, each with curling remnants of the god's elephant trunk–like nose. It is unique in all of Maya architecture. For years, parts of this building lay lined up in the weeds like pieces of a puzzle awaiting assembly. Sculptures from this building are in the anthropology museums of Mérida and Mexico City.

Just behind and to the left of the Codz Poop is the **Palace Group** (also called the East Group), with a fine Puuc-style colonnaded facade. Originally, it had 32 rooms. On the front are seven doors, two divided by columns—a common feature of Puuc architecture. Across the highway is what was once the **Great Temple,** and beyond that is a **great arch.**

Tips Seeing the Puuc Maya Sites

These sites are undergoing excavation and reconstruction, and some buildings may be roped off when you visit. The sites are open daily from 8am to 5pm. Admission is 37 pesos for each city and 50 pesos for Loltún. Loltún has tours at 9:30 and 11am, and 12:30, 2, 3, and 4pm. Even if you're the only person there when a tour is scheduled, the guide must give you a tour, and he can't charge you as if you were contracting his services for an individual tour (though sometimes they try). Use of a video camera at any time costs 45 pesos; if you visit Uxmal the same day, you pay only once for video permission and present your receipt as proof at each ruin.

It was much wider at one time and may have been a monumental gate into the city. A *sacbé* linked this arch to Uxmal. Compare this corbeled arch to the one at Labná (see below), which is in much better shape.

SAYIL About 4km (2½ miles) south of Kabah is the turnoff (left, or east) to Sayil, Xlapak, Labná, Loltún, and Oxkutzcab. The ruins of **Sayil** ("place of the ants") are 4km (2½ miles) along this road.

Sayil is famous for **El Palacio** ★★. With more than 90 rooms, the palace is impressive for its size alone. Climbing is not permitted, but the facade that makes this a masterpiece of Maya architecture is best appreciated from the ground. It stretches across three terraced levels, and its rows of columns give it a Minoan appearance. The upside-down stone figure known to archaeologists as the Diving God, or Descending God, over the doorway on the second level is the same motif used at Tulum a couple of centuries later. The large circular basin on the ground below the palace is an artificial catch basin for a *chultún* (cistern); this region has no natural cenotes (wells) for irrigation.

In the jungle beyond El Palacio is **El Mirador,** a small temple with an oddly slotted roof comb. Beyond El Mirador, a crude stele (tall, carved stone) is carved with a fertility god burdened with a phallus of monstrous proportions. Another building group, the Southern Group, is a short distance down a trail that branches off from the one heading to El Mirador.

XLAPAK Xlapak (*shla*-pahk) is a small site with one building; it's 5.5km (3½ miles) down the road from Sayil. The Palace at Xlapak bears the masks of the rain god Chaac. If you're running out of steam, this is the one to skip.

LABNÁ Labná, dating from between A.D. 600 and 900, is 30km (19 miles) from Uxmal and only 3km (1¾ miles) past Xlapak. The entrance has a snack stand and toilets. Descriptive placards fronting the main buildings are in Spanish, English, and German.

As soon as you enter you'll see **El Palacio,** a magnificent Puuc-style building on your left that is much like the one at Sayil, but in poorer condition. Over one doorway is a large, well-conserved mask of Chaac with eyes, a huge snout nose, and jagged teeth around a small mouth that seems on the verge of speaking. Jutting out on one corner is a highly stylized serpent's mouth from which pops a human head with an unexpectedly serene expression. From the front, you can gaze out to the enormous grassy interior grounds flanked by vestiges of unrestored buildings and jungle.

From El Palacio, you can walk on a reconstructed *sacbé* leading to Labná's **corbeled arch.** At one time, there were probably several such arches through the region. This one has been extensively restored, although only remnants of the roof comb are visible. It was once part of a more elaborate structure now lost to history. Chaac's face occupies the corners of one facade, and stylized Maya huts are fashioned in stone above the two small doorways. You can pass through the arch to reach **El Mirador** or El Castillo. Towering above a large pile of rubble, the remains of a pyramid, is a singular room crowned with a roof comb piercing the sky.

LOLTÚN The caverns of Loltún are 31km (19 miles) past Labná on the way to Oxkutzcab, on the left side of the road. One of the Yucatán's largest and most fascinating cave systems, they were home to the ancient Maya and were used as a refuge during the War of the Castes (1847–1901). Inside are statues, wall carvings, and paintings, *chultunes* (cisterns), and other signs of Maya habitation. Guides will explain much of what you see, though their English isn't always easy to understand.

The admission price includes a 90-minute tour. These begin daily at 9:30 and 11am, and 12:30, 2, 3, and 4pm. The floor of the cavern can be slippery in places; take a flashlight if you have one.

To return to Mérida from Loltún, drive the 7km (4¼ miles) to Oxkutzcab. From there, you can take the slow route through Maní and Teabo, which will allow you to see some convents and return by Hwy. 18, known as the "Convent Route" (p. 619). The other option is to head toward Muna to hook up with Hwy. 261 (p. 619).

OXKUTZCAB

Oxkutzcab (ohsh-kootz-*kahb*), 11km (6¾ miles) from Loltún, is the center of the Yucatán's fruit-growing region. Oranges abound. The tidy village of 21,000 centers on a beautiful 16th-century church and the market. **Su Cabaña Suiza** (no phone) is a dependable restaurant in town. The last week of October and first week of November is the **Orange Festival,** when the village turns exuberant, with a carnival and orange displays in and around the central plaza.

EN ROUTE TO CAMPECHE

From Oxkutzcab, head back 43km (27 miles) to Sayil, and then drive south on Hwy. 261 to Campeche (126km/78 miles). After crossing the state line, you'll pass through the towns of Bolonchén and Hopelchén, both of which have gas stations. The drive is pleasant, and there's little traffic. Watch carefully for directional traffic signs in these towns to stay on the highway. From Hopelchén, Hwy. 261 heads west. After 42km (26 miles), you'll find yourself at Cayal and the well-marked turnoff for the ruins of the city of Edzná (p. 628), 18km (11 miles) farther south. If you're taking this route to Campeche, this could be the time to see this tranquil, underappreciated ancient city.

5 CAMPECHE ★★

251km (156 miles) SW of Mérida; 376km (233 miles) NE of Villahermosa

Campeche, the capital of the state of the same name, is a splendidly restored colonial city that is woefully overlooked by travelers. All the historic center's facades have been repaired and painted, electrical and telephone cables moved underground, and the streets paved to resemble cobblestone. Several period films have been shot here, including *Che,* Steven Soderbergh's epic two-part biography of Che Guevara.

Those who do come to Campeche often are on their way to the ruins at Palenque (chapter 18) or the Río Bec region (chapter 16), or they are accidental wanderers by nature. It must be said that Campeche is not geared to foreign tourism the way Mérida is—though it is catching up—so expect less English translation at museums, ruins, and services. Also, expect less in the way of nightlife, except on weekend nights when the main square becomes one huge street party.

Campeche's history is laden with drama. The conquistadors arrived in 1517, when Francisco de Córdoba landed here while exploring the coast and stayed just long enough to celebrate Mass. Native resistance thwarted attempts to settle here until Montejo the Younger managed to secure a settlement in 1540.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, pirates repeatedly sacked the city. The list of attackers reads like a who's who of pirating. On one occasion, several outfits banded together under the famous Dutch pirate Peg Leg (the likely inspiration for many a fictional one-legged sailor) and managed to capture the city. The Campechanos grew tired of hosting pirate parties and erected walls around the city, with *baluartes* (bastions) at critical points. For added security, they built two forts, complete with moats and drawbridges, on the hills flanking Campeche. There were four gates through the wall, two of which still stand:

the Puerta de Mar (Sea Gate) and the Puerta de Tierra (Land Gate). The pirates never cared to return, but in Mexico's stormy political history, the city did withstand a couple of sieges by different armies. Eventually, in the early 1900s, the wall was razed, but the bastions and main gates remain, along with the two hilltop fortresses. Most of the bastions and both forts now house museums.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING **By Plane** **Aeroméxico** (✆ **800/237-6399** in the U.S., 01-800/021-4000 in Mexico or 981/816-6656) flies once daily to and from Mexico City. Campeche's **airport** is several kilometers northeast of the town center, and you'll have to take a taxi into town (about 100 pesos).

By Car Hwy. 180 goes south from Mérida, passing near the basket-making village of Halacho and near Becal, known for its Panama-hat weavers. The trip takes 2½ hours. The longer way from Mérida is along Hwy. 261 past Uxmal.

When driving from Campeche to Mérida via Hwy. 180, go north on Avenida Ruiz Cortines, bearing left to follow the water (this becomes Av. Pedro Sainz de Baranda, but there's no sign). Follow the road as it turns inland to Hwy. 180, where you turn left (there's a gas station at the intersection).

To go from Campeche to Edzná and Uxmal, drive north on either Ruiz Cortines or Gobernadores and turn right on Madero, which feeds onto Hwy. 281. To go south to Villahermosa, take Ruiz Cortines south.

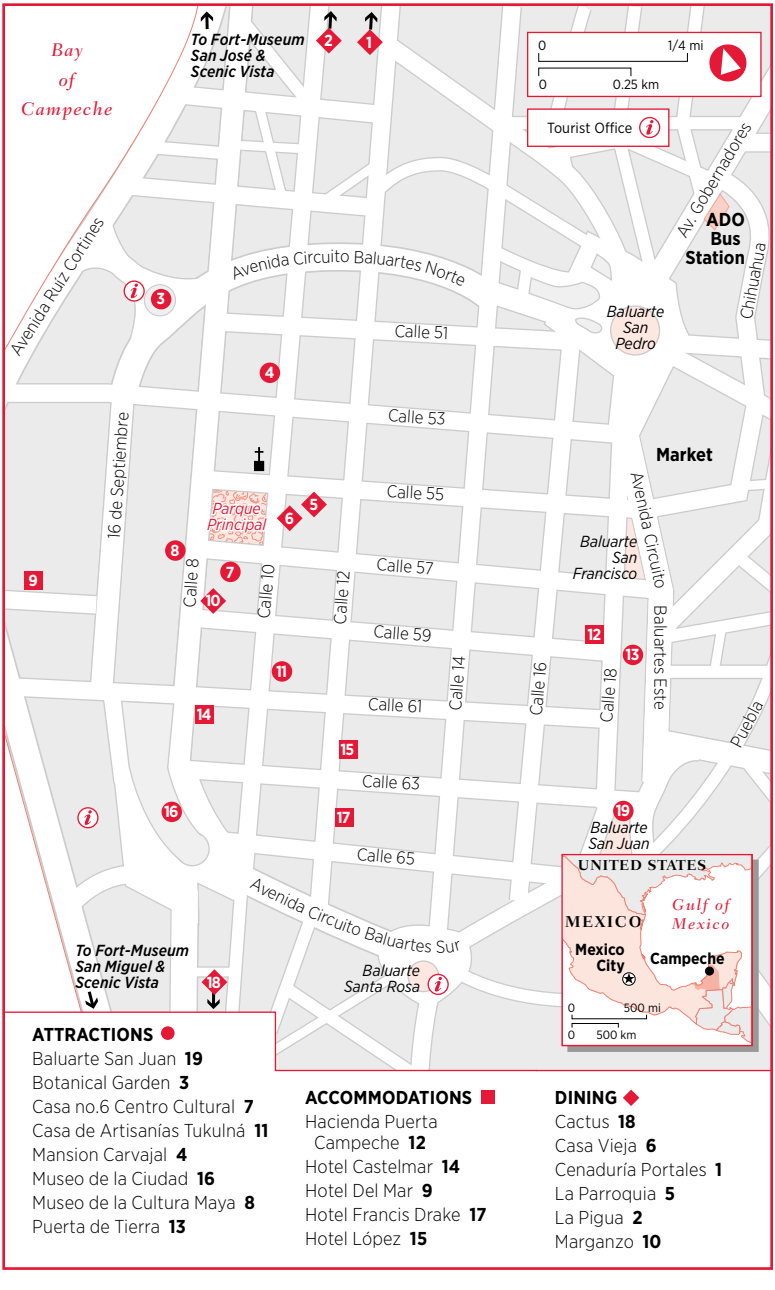
By Bus **ADO** (✆ **981/816-2802**) offers a first-class *de paso* (passing through) bus to Palenque (6 hr.; 254 pesos) four times a day and buses to Mérida (2½ hr.; 144 pesos) every hour from 5:30am to midnight. The ADO **bus station** is on Avenida Patricio Trueba at Avenida Casa de Justicia, almost 2km (1¼ miles) from the Puerta de Tierra. The second-class bus station, with service to nearby cities and to Mérida, is at Avenida Gobernadores and Calle 45 (also called Calle Chile on the east side of Gobernadores).

INFORMATION The **State of Campeche Office of Tourism** (✆ **981/811-9229;** fax 981/816-6767; http://campeche.travel) is in Plaza Moch-Couoh, Avenida Ruiz Cortines s/n (btw. calles 63 and 65). Hours are daily 8am to 4pm and 6 to 9pm. This is one of the state buildings between the historic center and the shore. Tourist information offices are also in the bastions of Baluarte San Pedro (daily 9am–1pm and 5–9pm) and in Casa 6 (daily 9am–9pm). The city's **Tourism and Culture Office** (✆ **981/811-3989**) is on Calle 55 between calles 10 and 8; open daily 9am to 9pm.

CITY LAYOUT By far the most interesting feature of the city is the restored old part, most of which once lay within the walls. Originally, the seaward wall was at the water's edge, but land has been gained from the sea between the old walls and the coastline. This is where you'll find most of the state government buildings, which were built in a glaringly modernist style around **Plaza Moch-Couoh:** buildings such as the office tower **Edificio de los Poderes (Judicial Building)** or **Palacio de Gobierno (headquarters for the state of Campeche),** and the futuristic **Cámara de Diputados (Chamber of Deputies),** which looks like a cubist clam.

Campeche's street numbering system is typical of the Yucatán, except that numbers of the north-south streets increase as you go east instead of the reverse.

GETTING AROUND Most recommended sights, restaurants, and hotels are within walking distance of the old city, except for the two fort-museums. Campeche isn't easy to negotiate by bus, so take taxis for sights beyond walking distance—they are inexpensive.



ATTRACTIONS ●
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Cactus **18**
Casa Vieja **6**
Cenaduría Portales **1**
La Parroquia **5**
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Marganzo **10**

Fast Facts Campeche

Area Code The telephone area code is **981.**

ATMs More than 10 cash machines are around the downtown area.

Internet Access Plenty of places to check e-mail are in town—just look for signs with the words INTERNET or CYBERCAFE.

Post Office The *correo* is in the Edificio Federal, at Avenida 16 de Septiembre and Calle 53 (✆ **981/816-2134**), near the Baluarte de Santiago; it's open Monday to Saturday from 7:30am to 8pm.

EXPLORING CAMPECHE

With beautiful surroundings, friendly people, and an easy pace of life, Campeche is made for walking. Its more than 1,000 refurbished facades and renovations, grand mansions, monumental buildings, and ornate churches can be sampled in half a day or savored, along with a few day trips, over a week.

Inside the City Walls

The natural starting point is the modest but exceedingly pretty *zócalo,* or **Parque Principal** ★, bounded by calles 55 and 57 running east and west, and calles 8 and 10 running north and south. On Saturday nights and Sundays, the streets are closed and bands set up in the gazebo. People set up tables in the streets, and an exuberant street party ensues. Construction of the **cathedral** on the north side, whose crown-shaped bell towers dominate the square, began in 1650 and was finally completed 150 years later. A pleasant way to see the city is to take the *tranvía* (trolley) tour leaving the plaza approximately every hour between 9am and 1pm and 5 to 9pm. The cost is 70 pesos for a 45-minute tour.

Baluarte San Juan The city's smallest bastion holds an exhibition on the history of the baluartes and an old underground dungeon. The only remaining chunk of the old city wall connects San Juan with the Puerta de Tierra. The short walk between the two offers incomparable views of the new as well as the old city.

Calle 18, btw. calles 8 and 10. No phone. Free admission. Tues–Sun 8am–7:30pm.

Botanical Garden The Jardín Botánico Xmuch'haltun is a riot of some 250 species of exotic and common plants, including an enormous *ceiba* tree, in a tiny courtyard surrounded by the stone walls of the last bastion Campeche built (Baluarte de Santiago).

Av. 16 de Septiembre and Calle 49. No phone. Free admission. Mon–Fri 9am–8pm; Sat–Sun 9am–1pm.

Casa 6 Centro Cultural ★★ Some rooms in this remodeled colonial house are decorated with period furniture and accessories. The traditional stucco-and-terra-cotta kitchen is arranged just as many Campechanos use them today. The patio of mixtilinear arches supported by simple Doric columns is striking. The front of the house is now a cultural center with a patio restaurant and a bookstore focusing on Campeche's history. One bedroom has been turned over to exhibition space.

Calle 57 no. 6. No phone. Free admission. Daily 9am–9pm.

Mansion Carvajal ★ Another remarkable colonial mansion, built by one of the Yucatán's wealthiest *hacendados* in the early 19th century, has been put to more prosaic

contemporary use for state offices but is open to the public on weekdays. It is most famous for its massive Carrara marble stairway, curving to the open, light-filled second story as if ascending to the heavens. Surrounded by pale mint-green walls punctuated by white columns and sinuous Moorish arches, you feel like you're standing on a colossal tiered wedding cake. Art Nouveau curlicues in the iron railings and black-and-white checkerboard floors are, well, the icing on the cake.

Calle 10 btw. calles 51 and 53. No phone. Free admission. Mon–Fri 8am–2:45pm.

Museo de la Ciudad The Museo de la Ciudad, or city museum, with the Baluarte de San Carlos, deals primarily with the design and construction of the fortifications. A model of the city shows how it looked in its glory days and provides a good overview for touring within the city walls. There are several excellent ship models as well. All text is in Spanish.

Circuito Baluartes and Av. Justo Sierra. No phone. Admission 25 pesos. Tues–Sat 9am–8pm; Sun 9am–1pm.

Museo de la Cultura Maya The Baluarte de la Soledad, next to the sea gate, houses the Museo de la Cultura Maya. Four rooms of Maya artifacts recovered from throughout the state, including columns from Edzná, provide an excellent overview of Maya writing, sculpture, and architecture. Many of the stelae are badly worn, but line drawings beside the stones allow you to appreciate their former design.

Calle 57 and Calle 8, opposite Plaza Principal. No phone. Admission 25 pesos. Tues–Sat 9am–8pm; Sun 9am–1pm.

Puerta de Tierra (Kids) The Land Gate, unlike the reconstructed Sea Gate at the opposite end of Calle 59, is the original, and is connected to the last remaining patch of the old city wall. A small museum displays portraits of pirates and the city founders. The 1732 French 5-ton cannon in the entryway was discovered in 1990. On Tuesday, Friday, and Saturday at 8pm, it holds a light-and-sound show, as long as enough people buy tickets. A variation on the popular shows at the archaeological sites, this reenacts pirate tales with blazing cannons and flashing lights. A little over-the-top, but fun, and kids are enthralled.

Calle 59 at Circuito Baluartes/Av. Gobernadores. No phone. Free admission to museum; show 52 pesos adults, 15 pesos children 10 and younger. Daily 9am–9pm.

Outside the Walls: Scenic Vistas

Fuerte–Museo San José el Alto This fort is higher and has a more sweeping city and coastline views than Fuerte San Miguel—its sloping lawns are a popular picnic spot—but it houses only a small exhibit of 16th- and 17th-century weapons and scale miniatures of sailing vessels. The rogues' gallery of pirates is irresistible. Take a cab; you will pass an impressive statue of Juárez on the way.

Av. Morazán s/n. No phone. Admission 27 pesos. Tues–Sun 9:30am–5:30pm.

Fuerte–Museo San Miguel ★★ For a good view of the city and a great little museum, take a cab up to Fuerte–Museo San Miguel, a small fort with a moat and a drawbridge. Built in 1771, it was the most important of the city's defenses. General Santa Anna captured it when he attacked Campeche in 1842. The **Museum of Mayan Culture** was renovated in 2000 and is worth seeing. Artifacts are organized around central issues in Maya culture. The room devoted to Maya concepts of the afterlife displays a captivating *in situ* burial scene with jade masks and jewelry from Maya tombs at Calakmul. Another room explains Maya cosmology, one depicts war, and another explains the gods. The history of the fort has its own exhibits.

Ruta Escénica s/n. No phone. Admission 34 pesos. Tues–Sat 9am–8pm; Sun 8am–noon.

Malecón ★★ Not everything Campeche has to offer is lodged in the past. The flurry of renovation also lined about 3km (2 miles) of the waterfront with this broad, palm-lined sea walk, encompassing fountains, cannons, exercise stations, gardens, and monuments. The jogging and bike path bustles with energetic locals in the cool of early morning and late-night hours. Join them as the day's heat breaks for a sunset you won't soon forget.

SHOPPING

Casa de Artesanías Tukulná This store, run by a government family-assistance agency, occupies a restored mansion and sells top-quality examples of everything that is produced in the state, from textiles to clothing to furniture. An elaborate display of regional arts and crafts in the back includes a hammock in the making and a replica of a mud-walled Maya house.

Calle 10 no. 333 (btw. calles 59 and 61). ✆ **981/816-9088.** Mon–Sat 10am–8pm.

WHERE TO STAY

Rates quoted include the 17% tax.

Very Expensive

Hacienda Puerta Campeche ★★★ This beautiful and original hotel was created from several adjoining colonial homes, just inside the Puerta de Tierra in Campeche's colonial center. There is a tropical garden in the center and a pool that runs through the ruined walls of one house. Rooms are colonial with flair—large with old tile floors, distinctive colors, and beamed ceilings. "Hacienda" is in the name to make it apparent that this is connected to the hacienda properties managed by Starwood hotels (p. 603).

Calle 59 no. 71 (btw. calles 16 and 18), 24000 Campeche, Camp. ✆ **800/325-3589** in the U.S. or Canada, or 981/816-7508. Fax 999/923-7963. www.luxurycollection.com. 15 units. High season $325–$445 superior, $405 and up suite; low season $245–$360 superior, $325 and up suite. AE, MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 bars; airport transfer; babysitting; concierge; outdoor pool; room service; spa. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge, hair dryer, Internet, minibar.

Expensive

Hotel Del Mar ★ It's your typical concrete rectangle, but rooms in this modern four-story hotel are large, bright, and comfortably furnished. All have balconies facing the Gulf of Mexico. The beds (two doubles or one king-size) are comfortable. The Del Mar is on the main oceanfront boulevard, between the coast and the city walls. You can make a reservation here to stay in the Río Bec area, or you can buy a package that includes guide and transportation.

Av. Ruiz Cortines 51 (at Calle 59), 24000 Campeche, Camp. ✆ **981/811-9192,** -9193. Fax 981/811-1618. www.delmarhotel.com.mx. 145 units. $90 double. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; babysitting; gym w/sauna; large outdoor pool; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer.

Moderate

Hotel Castelmar ★★ Kids This remarkable transformation of a one-time flophouse was restored in 2006. Pillars, archways, and tall wooden doors are reminiscent of Puerta de Campeche. The original floor plans and tiles (different patterns in each room) remain, and rooms are all shapes and sizes. But the bathrooms, swimming pool, and sun deck are new. I like the rooms with double doors opening onto a tiny balcony overlooking the street, though some people find them too noisy. It's a great *centro histórico* (historic district) location, 2 blocks from the *zócalo.*

Calle 61 no. 2, btw. calles 8 and 10, 24000 Campeche, Camp. ✆ **981/811-1204.** Fax 702/297-6826. www.castelmarhotel.com. 22 units. 850 pesos double; 950 pesos superior; 1,150 pesos junior suite. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Concierge; outdoor pool; sun deck. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer (on request), Wi-Fi.

Hotel Francis Drake ★ Value This three-story hotel in a quiet *centro histórico* location has comfortable, midsize rooms with upscale touches not often seen at the rates they charge. The rooms are attractive, with tile floors and one king-size bed, two doubles, or two twins. The modern marble bathrooms have large showers. Suites are larger and better furnished better than the standard rooms. Service is attentive, if not particularly warm by Campeche standards. The small restaurant, with a whimsical sky scene painted in the ceiling coves, serves fine examples of local dishes at very reasonable prices.

Calle 12 no. 207 (btw. calles 63 and 65), 24000 Campeche, Camp. ✆ **981/811-5626,** -5627. www.hotelfrancisdrake.com. 24 units. 795 pesos double; 905 pesos junior suite; 1,030 pesos suite. AE, MC, V. Limited free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; concierge; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar.

Inexpensive

Hotel López Value Unique among the historic center's hotels, the López is all Art Deco verve, with curlicued ironwork swooping around layers of curved walkways above an oval-shaped, open-air courtyard. The 1950 building was rehabilitated several years ago, now with gleaming tile bathrooms, a new waterfall pool, and a small cafe. Guest rooms are small and not nearly as stylish as the public areas, but they are comfortable enough and clean. It's the best hotel in its price range.

Calle 12 no. 189 (btw. calles 61 and 63), 24000 Campeche, Camp. ✆ **981/816-3344.** www.hotelllopezcampeche.com. MC, V. 48 units. 500 pesos. **Amenities:** Outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, TV.

WHERE TO DINE

Campeche is a fishing town, known for its fresh seafood, but restaurants also offer classic Yucatecan pork, chicken, turkey, and beef dishes. Campeche also has its own regional cuisine, fusing Spanish dishes, recipes brought by pirates from all over the world, and the region's own exotic fruit and vegetables. Make a point to try the number-one specialty, *pan de cazón* (baby shark casserole)—a stack of tortillas layered with baby shark and refried beans, then smothered with tomato sauce. For an inexpensive introduction to Campechano cuisine, sample the home-cooked food served in stalls around the *zócalo* on weekend evenings.

Moderate

Cactus STEAKS/MEXICAN If seafood isn't to your taste, or you've just had enough, this steakhouse is a favorite with the locals. The rib-eyes are good, as is everything but the *arrachera,* which is the same tough cut of meat used for fajitas.

Av. Malecón Justo Sierra. ✆ **981/811-1453.** Main courses 120–250 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 7am–2am.

Casa Vieja Overrated INTERNATIONAL/MEXICAN Casa Vieja has gotten a little, well, old. While the blend of Yucatecan and Cuban food still holds interest, there's been a drop in effort. But this is still the city's prettiest dining space, in an upstairs arcade overlooking the main square. Stick with simple regional dishes, and if you're lucky, they'll be on the upswing in that mysterious cycle of quality through which so many restaurants operate.

Calle 10 no. 319. ✆ **981/811-1311.** Reservations not accepted. Main courses 60–160 pesos. No credit cards. Tues–Sun 9am–2am; Mon 5:30pm–2am.

La Pigua ★★★ SEAFOOD The dining area is an air-conditioned version of a traditional Yucatecan cabin, but with walls of glass looking out on green vegetation. Sure to be on the menu is fish stuffed with shellfish, which I recommend. If you're lucky, you'll also find pompano in a green sauce seasoned with a peppery herb known as *hierba santa.* Other standouts are coconut-battered shrimp with applesauce and chiles rellenos with

shark. Service is excellent, and the accommodating owner can have your favorite seafood prepared in any style you want.

Av. Miguel Alemán no. 179A. ✆ **981/811-3365.** Reservations recommended. Main courses 120–260 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily noon–8pm. From Plaza Principal, walk north on Calle 8 for 3 blocks; cross Av. Circuito by the botanical garden where Calle 8 becomes Miguel Alemán; the restaurant is 1½ blocks farther, on the right.

Marganzo ★ SEAFOOD The menu veers toward the expensive side if you indulge in the seafood—its specialty—but if you stick to the Yucatecan dishes such as *poc chuc* and *pollo pibíl,* you'll eat quite well for 75 pesos or so. If you spring for seafood, whitefish filled with seafood is a local favorite. Either way, you'll leave satisfied; the kitchen knows what it's doing. Though it isn't the bargain it used to be, breakfast is still the most popular meal here.

Calle 8 no. 267 (in front of the Sea Gate). ✆ **981/816-3899.** www.marganzo.com. Main courses 82–228 pesos. MC, V. Daily 7am–11pm.

Inexpensive

Cenaduría los Portales ★ ANTOJITOS This is a traditional Campechano supper place, a small restaurant under the stone arches facing the Plaza San Francisco in the *barrio* (neighborhood) of San Francisco. This is the oldest part of town, but it lies just outside the walls to the north. Start with the *horchata* (a sweet, milky-white drink made, in this case, with coconut). Try the delicious turkey soup and the *sincronizadas* (tostadas) and *panuchos.*

Calle 10 no. 86, Portales San Francisco. ✆ **981/811-1491.** *Antojitos* 4–15 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 6pm–midnight.

La Parroquia MEXICAN This local hangout offers good, inexpensive fare. It's best for breakfasts and the afternoon *comida corrida,* which might offer pot roast, meatballs, pork, or fish, with rice or squash, beans, tortillas, and fresh fruit–flavored water.

Calle 55 no. 9. ✆ **981/816-8086.** Breakfast 50 pesos; main courses 50–130 pesos; *comida corrida* (served noon–3pm) 45–55 pesos. MC, V. Daily 24 hr.

SIDE TRIPS FROM CAMPECHE

Edzná ★★

Don't skip **Edzná** just because you've seen Chichén Itzá, Uxmal, or other famous ruins. There are several reasons to see this city. The area was populated as early as 600 B.C., with urban formation by 300 B.C. Edzná grew impressively, displaying considerable urban-planning skills. It has an ambitious and elaborate canal system that must have taken decades to complete, but would have allowed for a great expansion in agricultural production and therefore, concentration of population.

Another construction boom began around A.D. 500, during the Classic period—the city's most prominent feature, the **Great Acropolis,** was started then—and rose to its height as a grand regional capital between A.D. 600 and 900. This was a crossroads between cities in present-day Chiapas, Yucatán, and Guatemala, and influences from all those areas appear in the city's elegant architecture.

Sitting atop the Great Acropolis are five main pyramids, the largest being the much-photographed **Pyramid of Five Stories.** It combines the features of temple platform and palace. Maya architecture typically consists of palace buildings with many vaulted chambers or solid pyramidal platforms with a couple of interior temples or burial passages. The two types of construction are mutually exclusive—except here. Such a mix is found only in the Puuc and Río Bec areas, and in only a few examples there. None are similar to this, which makes this pyramid a bold architectural statement.

Each of the Acropolis' four lesser pyramids is each constructed in a different style, and each is a pure example of that style. It's as if the city's rulers were flaunting their cosmopolitanism, showing that they could build in any style they chose but preferred creating their own, superior architecture.

West of the Acropolis, across a large open plaza, is a long, raised building whose purpose isn't quite clear. But its size, as well as that of the plaza, makes you wonder just how many people this city actually held to necessitate such a large public space. Other major structures to explore include the **Platform of the Knives,** where flint knives were recovered, and the **Temple of the Big Masks,** flanked by twin sun-god faces with protruding crossed eyes (a sign of elite status).

To reach Edzná, take Hwy. 261 east from Campeche to Cayal, then Hwy. 188 south for 18km (11 miles). Buses from Campeche leave from a small station behind Parque Alameda, which is next to the market. Plan to spend an hour or two. The site is open daily from 8am to 5pm. Admission is 111 pesos, including the evening light-and-sound show, plus 45 pesos if you use a video camera.

Calakmul & Río Bec

If you're interested in seeing the ruins along the Río Bec route, see "Side Trips to Maya Ruins from Chetumal," in chapter 16. **Calakmul** ★★★ (p. 590) is an important site, with the tallest pyramid in the Yucatán peninsula; Balamkú and other Río Bec sites are well worth seeing while you're in the area. You can get information and book a tour in Campeche, or rent a car. Calakmul is too far away for a day trip.

From the Calakmul area, it's easy to cross over the peninsula to Yucatán's southern Caribbean coast. Then you can head up the coast and complete a loop of the peninsula.

6 THE RUINS OF CHICHEN ITZA ★★★

179km (111 miles) W of Cancún; 120km (74 miles) E of Mérida; 138km (86 miles) NW of Tulum

The fabled ruins of Chichén Itzá (chee-*chen* eet-*zah*) are by far the Yucatán's best-known ancient monuments. Sadly, its coronation as a "New World Wonder" has made the great city harder to appreciate. Still, walking among these stone temples, pyramids, and ball courts gives you a feel for this civilization that books cannot approach, and there's no other way to comprehend the city's sheer scale. The ceremonial center's plazas would have been filled with thousands of people during one of the mass rituals that occurred here a millennium ago—and that is the saving grace for hordes of tourists that now flow through every day.

Much of what is said about the Maya (especially by tour guides) is merely educated guessing. We do know the area was settled by farmers as far back as the 4th century A.D. The first signs of an urban society appear in the 7th century in construction of stone temples and palaces in the Puuc Maya style, found in the "Old Chichén" section of the city. In the 10th century (the post-Classic Era), Chichén Itzá came under the rule of the Itzáes, who arrived from central Mexico by way of the Gulf Coast. They may have been a mix of highland Toltec Indians, who built the city of Tula in central Mexico, and lowland Putún Maya, a thriving population of traders. Following centuries brought Chichén Itzá's greatest growth. The style of the grand architecture built during this age clearly reveals Toltec influence.

The new rulers might have been refugees from Tula. A pre-Columbian myth from central Mexico tells of a fight between the gods Quetzalcóatl and Tezcatlipoca that forced Quetzalcóatl to leave his homeland and venture east. In another mythic tale, the losers of a war between Tula's religious factions fled to the Yucatán, where they were welcomed

by the local Maya. Over time, the Itzáes adopted more and more the ways of the Maya. Sometime at the end of the 12th century, the city was captured by its rival, Mayapán.

Though it's possible to make a day trip from Cancún or Mérida, staying overnight here or in nearby Valladolid makes for a more relaxing trip. You can see the light show in the evening and return to see the ruins early the next morning when it is cool and before the tour buses start arriving.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING **By Car** Chichén Itzá is on old Hwy. 180 between Mérida and Cancún. The fastest way to get there from either city is to take the *autopista* (or *cuota*). The toll is 71 pesos from Mérida (1½ hr.), 267 pesos from Cancún (2½ hr.). From Tulum, take the highway leading to Cobá and Chemax, which connects to Hwy. 180 a bit east of Valladolid. Exiting the *autopista,* turn onto the road to Pisté. In the village, you'll reach a T junction at Hwy. 180 and turn left to the ruins; the entrance is well marked. On the same highway a few kilometers beyond, you'll come to the Hotel Zone exit at Km 121 (first, you'll pass the eastern entrance to the ruins, which is usually closed).

By Bus First-class buses run from Mérida's CAME station nearly every hour, and some first-class buses to Cancún and Playa also stop here. Cancún and Valladolid also have first-class service. Day trips to Chichén Itzá are also widely available from Mérida, Cancún, and Playa del Carmen (and almost any destination in the Yucatán).

AREA LAYOUT The village of **Pisté,** where most of the budget hotels and restaurants are located, is about 2.5km (1½ miles) west of the ruins. Public buses can drop you off here. Another budget hotel, the Dolores Alba (p. 605) is on the old highway 2.5km (1½ miles) east of the ruins. Three luxury hotels are situated right at Chichén Itzá's entrance.

EXPLORING THE RUINS

The site occupies 6.5 sq. km (2½ sq. miles), requiring most of a day to see it all. The ruins are open daily from 8am to 5pm, service areas from 8am to 10pm. Admission is 51 pesos, free for children 11 and younger. A video camera permit costs 45 pesos. Parking is extra. *You can use your ticket to reenter on the same day.* The **sound-and-light show** (worth seeing as you're being charged for it anyway), is held at 7pm or 8pm depending on the season, and is in Spanish, but headsets are available for rent in several languages. The narrative is okay, but the real reason for seeing the show is the lights, which show off the beautiful geometry of the city.

The large, modern visitor center at the main entrance consists of a museum, an auditorium, a restaurant, a bookstore, and bathrooms. Licensed guides who speak English or Spanish usually wait at the entrance and charge around 450 pesos for one to six people (there's nothing wrong with approaching a group of people who speak the same language and offering to share a guide). You can also see the site on your own, but the guides can point out architectural details you might miss on your own.

Chichén Itzá has two parts: the central (new) zone, which shows distinct Toltec influence, and the southern (old) zone, with mostly Puuc architecture. The most important structures are in New Chichén, but the older ones are also worth seeing.

EL CASTILLO As you enter from the tourist center, the icon of Yucatán tourism, the magnificent 25m (82-ft.) El Castillo (also called the Pyramid of Kukulkán) is straight ahead across a large, open grassy area. It was built with the Maya calendar in mind. The four stairways leading up to the central platform each have 91 steps, which, added to the platform, totals the 365 days of the solar year. The 18 terraces flanking the stairways on

each face of the pyramid add up to the number of months in the Maya religious calendar. The terraces contain a total of 52 panels, representing the 52-year cycle when the solar and religious calendars reconverge. The pyramid, now closed to climbers, is aligned so that the **spring** or **fall equinox** (Mar 21 or Sept 21), triggers an optical illusion: The setting sun casts the terraces' shadow onto the northern stairway, forming a diamond pattern suggestive of a snake's geometric designs. As it meets the giant serpent's head at the bottom, the shadow appears to slither down the pyramid as the sun sets, a phenomenon that brings hordes of visitors every year. (The effect is more conceptual than visual, and frankly, the ruins are much more enjoyable on other days when they are less crowded.)

Like most Maya pyramids, El Castillo was built over an earlier structure. A narrow stairway at the western edge of the north staircase leads inside to a sacrificial altar-throne—a red jaguar encrusted with jade. The stairway is open from 11am to 3pm and is cramped, usually crowded, humid, and uncomfortable. A visit early in the day is best. Photos of the jaguar figure are not allowed.

JUDGE DE PELOTA (MAIN BALL COURT) Northwest of El Castillo is Chichén's main ball court, the largest and best preserved anywhere, and only one of nine ball courts built in this city. Carved on both walls are scenes showing Maya figures dressed as ball players and decked out in heavy protective padding. A headless player kneels with blood shooting from his neck; another player holding the head looks on.

Players on two teams tried to knock a hard rubber ball through one of the two stone rings placed high on either wall, using only their elbows, knees, and hips. According to legend, losers paid for defeat with their lives. However, some experts say the victors were the only appropriate sacrifices for the gods. Either way, the game, called pok-ta-pok, must have been riveting, heightened by the ball court's wonderful acoustics.

THE NORTH TEMPLE Temples stand at both ends of the ball court. The North Temple has sculptured pillars and more sculptures inside, as well as badly ruined murals. The acoustics of the ball court are so good that from the North Temple, a person speaking can be heard clearly at the opposite end, about 135m (443 ft.) away.

TEMPLE OF JAGUARS Near the southeastern corner of the main ball court is a small temple with serpent columns and carved panels showing warriors and jaguars. Up the steps and inside the temple, a mural chronicles a battle in a Maya village.

TZOMPANTLI (TEMPLE OF THE SKULLS) To the right of the ball court, the Temple of the Skulls obviously borrows from the post-Classic cities of central Mexico. Notice the rows of skulls carved into the stone platform; when a sacrificial victim's head was cut off, it was impaled on a pole and displayed with others in a tidy row. Also carved into the stone are pictures of eagles tearing hearts from human victims. The word *Tzompantli* is not Mayan, but comes from central Mexico.

PLATFORM OF THE EAGLES Next to the Tzompantli, this small platform has reliefs showing eagles and jaguars clutching human hearts in their talons and claws, as well as a human head emerging from the mouth of a serpent.

PLATFORM OF VENUS East of the Tzompantli and north of El Castillo, near the road to the Sacred Cenote, is the Platform of Venus. In Maya and Toltec lore, a feathered monster or a feathered serpent with a human head in its mouth represented Venus. This is also called the tomb of Chaac-Mool, for the figure that was discovered "buried" within the structure.

SACRED CENOTE Follow the dirt road (actually an ancient *sacbé,* or causeway) leading north from the Platform of Venus for 5 minutes to get to the great natural well that may have given Chichén Itzá (the Well of the Itzáes) its name. This well was used for

ceremonial purposes, and the bones of both children and adult sacrificial victims were found at the bottom.

Edward Thompson, who was the American consul in Mérida and a Harvard professor, purchased the ruins of Chichén early in the 20th century and explored the cenote with dredges and divers. He uncovered a fortune in gold and jade, most of which ended up in Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology—a matter that disconcerts Mexican classicists to this day. Excavations in the 1960s yielded more treasure, and studies of the recovered objects show that the offerings came from throughout the Yucatán and even farther away.

TEMPLO DE LOS GUERREROS (TEMPLE OF THE WARRIORS) The Toltec influence is especially evident on the eastern edge of the plaza. Due east of El Castillo is one of Chichén Itzá's most impressive structures, the Temple of the Warriors, named for the carvings of warriors marching along its walls. The temple and the rows of almost Greco-Roman columns flanking it are also called the Group of the Thousand Columns, and it recalls the great Toltec site of Tula. A figure of Chaac-Mool sits at the top of the temple (visible only from a distance now that the temple is closed to climbers), surrounded by impressive columns carved in relief to look like enormous feathered serpents. South of the temple was a square building that archaeologists call **El Mercado (The Market);** a colonnade surrounds its central court.

The main Mérida-Cancún highway once ran straight through the ruins of Chichén, and though it has been diverted, you can still see the great swath it cut. South and west of the old highway's path are more impressive ruined buildings.

TUMBA DEL GRAN SACERDOTE (TOMB OF THE HIGH PRIEST) Past the refreshment stand to the right of the path, the Tomb of the High Priest shows both Toltec and Puuc influence. The 9m (30-ft.) pyramid, with stairways on each side depicting feathered serpents, bears a distinct resemblance to El Castillo. Beneath its foundation is an ossuary (a communal graveyard) in a natural limestone cave, where skeletons and offerings have been found.

CASA DE LOS METATES (TEMPLE OF THE GRINDING STONES) This building, the next one on your right, is named after the Maya's concave corn-grinding stones.

TEMPLO DEL VENADO (TEMPLE OF THE DEER) Past Casa de los Metates is this fairly tall, though ruined, building. The relief of a stag that gave the temple its name is long gone.

CHICHANCHOB (LITTLE HOLES) This temple has a roof comb with little holes, three masks of the rain god Chaac, three rooms, and a good view of surrounding structures. It's one of Chichén's oldest buildings, built in the Puuc style during the late Classic period.

EL CARACOL (THE OBSERVATORY) One of Chichén Itzá's most intriguing structures is in the old part of the city. From a distance, the rounded tower of El Caracol ("The Snail," for its shape), sometimes called the Observatory, looks like any modern observatory. Construction of this complex building with its circular tower was carried out over centuries, acquiring additions and modifications as the Maya's careful celestial observations required increasingly exact measurements. Quite unlike other Maya buildings, the entrances, staircases, and angles are not aligned with one another. Four doors lead into the tower and a circular chamber, where a spiral staircase leads to the upper level. The slits in the roof are aligned with the sun's equinoxes. Astronomers observed the cardinal directions and the approach of the all-important spring and autumn equinoxes, as well as the summer solstice.

On the east side of El Caracol, a path leads north into the bush to the **Cenote Xtoloc,** a natural limestone well that provided the city's daily water supply. If you see lizards sunning there, they may well be *xtoloc,* the species for which this cenote is named.

TEMPLO DE LOS TABLEROS (TEMPLE OF THE PANELS) Just south of El Caracol are the ruins of a *temazcalli* (a steam bath) and the Temple of Panels, named for the carved panels on top. A few traces remain of the much larger structure that once covered the temple.

EDIFICIO DE LAS MONJAS (EDIFICE OF THE NUNS) This enormous nunnery is reminiscent of the palaces at sites along the Puuc route. The new edifice was built in the late Classic period over an older one. To prove this, an early-20th-century archaeologist put dynamite between the two and blew away part of the exterior, revealing the older structures within. Indelicate, perhaps, but effective.

On the east side of the Edifice of the Nuns is **Anexo Este (annex),** constructed in highly ornate Chenes style with Chaac masks and serpents.

LA IGLESIA (THE CHURCH) Next to the annex is another of Chichén's oldest buildings, the Church. Masks of Chaac decorate two upper stories; a close look reveals armadillo, crab, snail, and tortoise symbols among the crowd of Chaacs. These represent the Maya gods, called *bacah,* whose job it was to hold up the sky.

AKAB DZIB (TEMPLE OF OBSCURE WRITING) Beloved of travel writers, this temple lies east of the Edifice of the Nuns. Above a door in one of the rooms are some Mayan glyphs, which gave the temple its name because the writings are hard to make out. In other rooms, traces of red handprints are still visible. Reconstructed and expanded over the centuries, Akab Dzib might be the oldest building on the site.

CHICHÉN VIEJO (OLD CHICHÉN) For a look at more of Chichén's oldest buildings, constructed well before the time of Toltec influence, follow signs from the Edifice of the Nuns southwest into the bush to Old Chichén, about 1km (a half-mile) away. Be prepared for this trek with long trousers, insect repellent, and a local guide. Attractions here include the **Templo de los Inscripciones Iniciales (Temple of the First Inscriptions),** with the oldest inscriptions discovered at Chichén, and the restored **Templo de los Dinteles (Temple of the Lintels),** a fine Puuc building. Some of these buildings are being restored.

WHERE TO STAY

The expensive hotels in Chichén all occupy beautiful grounds, are close to the ruins, serve decent food, and have toll-free reservations numbers. They do a brisk business with tour operators—they can be empty one day and full the next. From these hotels, you can easily walk to the back entrance of the ruins, next to the Hotel Mayaland. Several inexpensive hotels are just to the west of the ruins in the village of Pisté, which has little else to recommend it. Another option is to stay in the colonial town of Valladolid (p. 641), 40 minutes away.

Expensive

Hacienda Chichén Resort ★★ The smallest and most private of the hotels at the ruins' entrance is also the quietest. A one-time hacienda that served as headquarters for the Carnegie Institute's excavations in 1923, the bungalows built for institute staff residences now house one or two units with a dehumidifier, a ceiling fan, and good air-conditioning. The floors are ceramic tile, ceilings are stucco with wood beams, and walls are adorned with carved stone. Trees and tropical plants fill manicured gardens that you can enjoy from your private porch or from the terrace restaurant, which occupies part of the original main house. Standard rooms come with a queen-size, two twin, or two double beds; suites have king-size beds.

Zona Arqueológica, 97751 Chichén Itzá, Yuc. ✆/fax **985/851-0045.** www.haciendachichen.com. (Reservations office in Mérida: 877/631-4005 in the U.S., or 999/920-8407.) 28 units. High season $165–$180 double, $200–$280 suite; low season $120 double, $135–$180 suite. Promotional rates available. AE, MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 bars; large outdoor pool; smoke-free rooms; spa. *In room:* A/C, hair dryer, minibar, no phone.

Moderate

Villas Arqueológicas Chichén Itzá ★ (Kids) Similar to its sister property at Uxmal, this hotel is built around a courtyard and pool and is a happy compromise between low-budget lodging and the more lavish hotels nearby. It's by far the best deal if you want to stay near the entrance to the ruins (a 5- to 10-min. walk on a peaceful road). The grounds are lush with two massive royal Poinciana trees and bougainvillea-draped walls. Rooms are modern, clean, and quite comfortable, unless you're 1.9m (6 ft., 2 in.) or taller—each bed is in a niche, with walls at the head and foot. Most rooms have one double bed and a twin bed, and Islander has added a few suites. You can also book a half- or full-board plan.

Zona Arqueológica, Km 120 Carratera Mérida Valladolid, 97751 Chichén Itzá, Yuc. ✆ **985/856-6000.** Fax 985/856-6008. www.islandercollection.com. 45 units. $58–$83 double; $121–$173 suite. Rates include continental breakfast. Half-board (breakfast plus lunch or dinner) $20 per person; full board (3 meals) $35 per person. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; large outdoor pool; tennis court; Wi-Fi (in public areas). *In room:* A/C, hair dryer.

Inexpensive

Hotel Dolores Alba (Value) This longtime budget favorite is of the motel variety, and it is a bargain for what you get: two pools (one fed by a natural spring), hammocks hanging under *palapas,* and large, comfortable rooms with some colorful hacienda-style accents that come with two double beds. The restaurant serves good meals at moderate prices. The hotel provides free transportation to the ruins and the Caves of Balankanché during visiting hours, though you will have to take a taxi back. It is located on the highway 2.5km (1½ miles) east of the ruins (toward Valladolid).

Carretera Mérida–Valladolid Km 122, Yuc. ✆ **985/858-1555.** www.doloresalba.com. (Reservations: Hotel Dolores Alba, Calle 63 no. 464, 97000 Mérida, Yuc.; ✆ 999/928-5650; fax 999/928-3163.) 40 units. 550 pesos double. MC, V (8% service charge). Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; 2 outdoor pools; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV, no phone.

WHERE TO DINE

This area has no great food, but it has plenty of decent food; simple choices are the best. The restaurant at the ruins' visitor center serves decent snack food. The hotel restaurants mostly do a fair job, though they are more expensive than they should be. In the village of Pisté, you can try one of the restaurants along the highway that cater to the bus tours, such as **Fiesta** (✆ **985/851-0111**). The best time to go is during early lunch or regular supper hours, when the buses are gone.

OTHER ATTRACTIONS IN THE AREA

Ik-Kil is a large, deep cenote on the highway across from the Hotel Dolores Alba, 2.5km (1½ miles) east of the main entrance to the ruins. Getting down to the water's edge requires navigating many steps, but they are easier to manage than those at Dzitnup. The view from both the top and the bottom is dramatic, with lots of tropical vegetation and curtains of hanging tree roots stretching all the way to the water's surface. The best swimming is before 11:30am, when bus tours begin to arrive. These tours are the main business of Ik-Kil, which also has a restaurant and souvenir shops. The cenote is open from 8am to 5pm daily. Admission is 60 pesos per adult, 30 pesos per child 7 to 12 years old.

The **Cave of Balankanché** is 5.5km (3½ miles) from Chichén Itzá on the road to Valladolid and Cancún. Taxis will make the trip and wait. The entire excursion takes about a half-hour, but the walk inside is hot and humid. This is the tamest of the Yucatán's cave tours, with good footing and the least amount of walking and climbing. It includes a cheesy and uninformative recorded tour. The highlight is a round chamber with a central column that resembles a large tree. The cave became a hide-out during the War of the Castes, and you can still see traces of carving and incense burning, as well as an underground stream that supplied water to the refugees. Outside, meander through the botanical gardens, where nearly everything is labeled with common and botanical names.

Admission is 48 pesos, free for children 6 to 12 (5 and younger not admitted). Use of a video camera costs 45 pesos (free if you bought a video permit in Chichén earlier in the day). Tours in English are at 11am and 1 and 3pm, and, in Spanish, at 9am, noon, and 2 and 4pm. Double-check these hours at the main entrance to the Chichén ruins.

7 VALLADOLID

40km (25 miles) E of Chichén Itzá; 160km (99 miles) SW of Cancún; 98km (61 miles) NW of Tulum

Valladolid (pronounced "bah-yah-doh-leed") is a small colonial city halfway between Mérida and Cancún. One of the first Spanish strongholds and crucible of the War of the Castes (p. 626), the city still has handsome colonial buildings and 19th-century structures that make it a pleasant place to bask in the real Yucatán. People are friendly and informal, and the only real challenge is the heat. The city's economy is based on commerce and small-scale manufacturing. It's close to a couple of famous cenotes, the intriguing ruins of Ek Balam, Ría Lagartos' nesting flamingos, and the sandy beaches of Isla Holbox (p. 645). It's closer to Chichén Itzá than Mérida is, making it a good alternative base for exploring.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING **By Car** From Mérida or Cancún, you can take either the Hwy. 180 *cuota* (toll road) or Hwy. 180 *libre* (free). The toll is 214 pesos from Cancún and 124 pesos from Mérida. The ***cuota*** passes 2km (1¼ miles) north of the city; the exit is at the crossing of Hwy. 295 to Tizimín. **Hwy. 180 *libre,*** passing through a number of villages (with their requisite *topes*) takes significantly longer. Both 180 and 295 lead straight to downtown. Leaving is just as easy: From the main square, Calle 41 turns into 180 East to Cancún; Calle 39 heads to 180 West to Chichén Itzá and Mérida. To take the *cuota* to Mérida or Cancún, take Calle 40 (see "City Layout," below).

By Bus Buses leave throughout the day for Mérida (134 pesos) and Cancún (82 pesos). You can also get several buses a day to Playa del Carmen (96 pesos) and Tulum (64 pesos). To get to Chichén Itzá, take a second-class bus, which leaves at least every hour. The recently remodeled bus station is at the corner of calles 39 and 46.

VISITOR INFORMATION The small **tourism office** is in the Palacio Municipal, open Monday to Friday from 8am to 9pm, Saturday and Sunday 9am to 9pm.

CITY LAYOUT Valladolid's layout is the standard for towns in the Yucatán: Streets running north-south are even numbers; those running east-west are odd numbers. The main plaza is bordered by Calle 39 on the north, 41 on the south, 40 on the east, and 42 on the west. The plaza is named Parque Francisco Cantón Rosado, but everyone calls it **El Centro.** Taxis are easy to come by.

EXPLORING VALLADOLID

Before it became Valladolid, the city was a Maya settlement called Zací (zah-*kee*), which means "white hawk." The old name lives on in the cenote in a small park at the intersection of calles 39 and 36. The long but easily navigable stepped trail at **Cenote Zací** ★ leads past caves, stalactites, and hanging vines that give the place a prehistoric feel, but the cenote's partially open roof lightens the atmosphere. It's a fine place to cool off, whether you jump in for a swim, dangle your feet in the water and let the fish nibble your toes, or just walk down to escape city heat and noise. After several trips to both, I find Zací more peaceful and just as pretty as the famous cenotes outside of town (p. 36). The park, which has a large *palapa* restaurant overlooking the cenote, is free; entry to the cenote is 15 pesos.

Ten blocks southwest of the main square is the Franciscan monastery of **San Bernardino de Siena** ★★, dating from 1552. The monastery complex was sacked during the War of the Castes but a fine baroque altarpiece and some striking 17th- century paintings remain. Most of the compound was built in the early 1600s; a large underground river is believed to pass under the convent and surrounding neighborhood, which is called Barrio Sisal. ("Sisal," in this case, is a corruption of the Mayan phrase *sis-ha,* meaning "cold water.") The *barrio* has been extensively restored and is a delight. For a real treat, walk there along the **Calzada de los Frailes (Walkway of the Friars)** ★. From the corner of calles 41 and 46, follow Calle 41A, the cobblestone street running diagonally to the southwest, about 1km (½ mile) to the monastery. The road is lined by huge clay planters and passes elegantly painted colonial homes.

Valladolid's **main plaza** is the town's social center and a thriving market for Yucatecan dresses. In the winter of 2009–2010, it closed for restoration and was razed to the ground, but I was heartened to see all the lush old shade trees standing tall above the rubble; perhaps the renovated plaza will be the leafy, Old-World haven the old one was. If only they will bring back the *confidenciales* (S-shaped chairs inviting friends or lovers to have tête-à-têtes facing one another), all will be right with the world.

On the plaza's south side is the imposing cathedral, **Iglesia de San Gervasio** (sometimes called Parroquia de San Servacio). Its thick stone walls weren't enough to stop the Maya rebels who sacked it in 1847, touching off the War of the Castes. Vallesoletanos, as the locals are known, believe most all cathedrals in Mexico point east, and they cherish a local legend to explain why theirs points north—but don't believe a word of it. On the east side, the municipal building, **El Ayuntamiento,** is the repository for dramatic paintings outlining the peninsula's history, including a wonderful depiction of a horrified Maya priest foreseeing the arrival of Spanish galleons. On Sunday nights, beneath the stone arches of the Ayuntamiento, the municipal band plays *jaranas* and other traditional music of the region.

For an overview of arts and crafts from surrounding Maya villages, find the pink, fortresslike building that houses **Museo San Roque** on Calle 41 between calles 38 and 40. Signs are in Spanish, but the displays mostly speak for themselves. Ancient stone masks, pottery, and bones unearthed at nearby Ek Balam (p. 644) are also on exhibit. The museum is open Monday through Saturday, 9am to 9pm. Entry is free.

SHOPPING

The **Mercado de Artesanías de Valladolid (crafts market),** at the corner of calles 39 and 44, gives you an overview of the local merchandise. Perhaps the town's primary handicraft is embroidered Maya dresses, which you can buy here or from women around the main square. **Yalat,** on Calle 39 at Calle 40, looks like a gallery but sells unique folk art from throughout Mexico, specializing in the Yucatán.

Valladolid is in cattle country, making it a good place to buy inexpensive, locally made leather goods such as *huaraches* (sandals) and bags. On the main plaza is a small shop above the municipal bazaar. A good sandal maker has a shop called **Elios,** Calle 37 no. 202, between calles 42 and 44 (no phone). An Indian named **Juan Mac** makes *alpargatas,* the traditional Maya sandal, in his shop on Calle 39, 1 block from the main plaza near Calle 38 (across from the Bar La Joya). There's no sign, but the doorjamb is painted yellow. Juan Mac is working there most mornings. Most of his output is for locals, but he's happy to knock out a pair for visitors.

WHERE TO STAY

Aside from lodging listed below, Valladolid's best budget hotels are **Hotel San Clemente,** on Calle 42 between calles 41 and 43 (✆ **985/856-3161;** www.hotelsanclemente.com.mx, 448 pesos per night; MasterCard, Visa) and **Hotel Zací,** Calle 44 between calles 37 and 39 (✆ **985/856-2167;** www.hotelzaci.com; 468 pesos; no credit cards).

For something a bit different, you can stay in a small ecohotel in the nearby village of Ek Balam, close to the ruins, at **Genesis Retreat Ek Balam** (✆ **985/858-9375;** www.genesisretreat.com). The Canadian owner, Lee Christie, takes guests on village tours that unveil daily life for the contemporary Maya. She rents simple cabañas (with shared or private bathrooms) surrounding a lovely pool and a restaurant.

Casa Quetzal ★ The landlady, Judith Fernández, is a gracious Mexican woman who moved to Valladolid to slow down. She has created airy, attractive lodging in the refurbished Barrio Sisal, within easy walking distance of the main square. Emphasis is on comfort and service—good linens and mattresses, quiet air-conditioning, and a large and inviting central courtyard. English is spoken, and Sra. Fernández has lined up a good guide you can contract to take you to outlying areas.

Calle 51 no. 218, Barrio Sisal, 97780 Valladolid, Yuc. ✆/fax **985/856-4796.** www.casa-quetzal.com. 8 units. $60–$75 double; $80 junior suite; $90 casita. Rates include full breakfast. No credit cards. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** Babysitting; small outdoor pool; room service; spa. *In room:* A/C, TV, no phone, Wi-Fi.

El Mesón del Marqués ★★ Originally an early-17th-century house, the doyen of Valladolid's plaza has grown by adding new construction in back. All the rooms (most with two double beds) are quite comfortable, though the new buildings don't have the wow factor of the original porticoed courtyard, which drips with bougainvillea and hanging plants and is mostly occupied by the restaurant (see "Where to Dine," below). The pretty, fairly large pool is another modern addition. The hotel is on the north side of the plaza, opposite the church.

Calle 39 no. 203 (btw. calles 40 and 42), 97780 Valladolid, Yuc. ✆ **985/856-2073.** Fax 985/856-2280. www.mesondelmarques.com. 90 units. 700–770 pesos double; 865–950 pesos superior; 1,330–1,460 pesos junior suite. AE, MC, V. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV, Wi-Fi.

WHERE TO DINE

Valladolid is not a hotbed of haute cuisine, but the regional specialties are reliably good. **Hostería El Marqués ★★** at the Hotel El Mesón del Marqués, turns out the best food in town—Yucatecan classics and international dishes—in an achingly romantic setting. Also on the main square, friendly, informal **Las Campanas** serves tasty food for reasonable prices. Locals like to visit over a meal at the stalls in the **Bazar Municipal,** next door to the Mesón del Marqués; I like them for a quick, cheap breakfast or a huge tumbler of fresh-squeezed orange juice when the heat gets to me (you can also take it to go in a plastic bag with a straw).

Cenotes Dzitnup & Sammulá

The **Cenote Dzitnup** (also known as Cenote Xkekén) is 4km (2½ miles) west of Valladolid off Hwy. 180 toward Chichén Itzá. It's said to be the most photographed cenote in the Yucatán, and it's easy to see why. The deep, glassy, blue water, beneath a thicket of stalactites and ropey tree roots straining for a drink, is a spectacle to behold. The beautiful pictures, however, don't reveal the treacherous stone steps, the unrelenting humidity even on an otherwise comfortable day (wear contacts instead of glasses, which will be constantly fogged), and the somewhat claustrophobic feeling if you're there with a crowd (which is most of the time). It's an awesome sight, to be sure, and you should see it at least once. Bring a suit and take a swim; it will revive you for the climb back out.

The cenote is open daily from 7am to 7pm; admission is 25 pesos. If it's crowded, you can go for a swim about 90m (295 ft.) down the road on the opposite side in a smaller, less developed but also beautiful cenote, **Sammulá.**

Ek Balam: Dark Jaguar ★★★

About 18km (11 miles) north of Valladolid, off the highway to Río Lagartos, are the spectacular ruins of **Ek Balam,** which, owing to a certain ambiguity in Mayan, may mean "black jaguar," "dark jaguar," or "star jaguar." Though tourists have yet to catch on, these ruins could prove to be a more important discovery than Chichén Itzá. Archaeologists began work only in 1997, and their findings have Maya scholars all aquiver. Built between 100 B.C. and A.D. 1200, the smaller buildings are architecturally unique—especially the large, perfectly restored **Oval Palace** (also sometimes called La Redonda or Caracol).

The imposing central pyramid, known as **El Torre** ★★ or the Acropolis, is about 160m (525 ft.) long and 60m (197 ft.) wide. At more than 30m (98 ft.) high, it easily surpasses El Castillo in Chichén Itzá. To the left of the main stairway, archaeologists have uncovered a large ceremonial doorway of perfectly preserved stucco work. Designed in the Chenes style associated with Campeche, it forms an astonishingly elaborate representation of the gaping mouth of the underworld god. Around it are several beautifully detailed human figures, including what appear to be winged warriors. Known as Mayan Angels, they are unique in Maya architecture. Excavation inside the pyramid revealed a long chamber (so far closed to the public) filled with hieroglyphic writing that suggests the scribes probably came from Guatemala. The script revealed the name of one of the city's principal kings—Ukit Kan Le'k Tok', whose tomb was uncovered about two-thirds of the way up the pyramid. Climb to the top and you see untouched ruins masquerading as overgrown hills to the north, and the tallest structures of **Cobá,** 50km (31 miles) to the southeast.

Also visible are the Maya's ***sacbeob,*** or raised causeways, appearing as raised lines in the forest. More than any of the better-known sites, Ek Balam inspires a sense of mystery and awe at the scale of Maya civilization and the utter ruin to which it fell.

Tips Cenote Etiquette

If you swim in a cenote, be sure you don't have creams or other chemicals on your skin—including deodorant. They damage the habitat of the small fish and other organisms living in the water. No alcohol, food, or smoking is allowed.

Tips A Matter of Timing

You'll see some flamingos any time of year (and probably ducks, hawks, cranes, cormorants, and osprey as well). But to see great rosy masses of them, go between April and October. After the birds complete their courtship rituals in Celestún, they fly to Ría Lagartos to nest, lay their eggs, and prepare their young for the return journey in October.

A new road runs from the highway to the ruins. Take Calle 40 north out of Valladolid to Hwy. 295 and go 20km (12 miles) to a large marked turnoff. Ek Balam is 13km (8 miles) from the highway; admission is 31 pesos, 45 pesos per video camera. The site is open daily from 8am to 5pm.

Ría Lagartos Nature Reserve ★

About 80km (50 miles) north of Valladolid (40km/25 miles north of Tizimín) on Hwy. 295, Ría Lagartos is a 50,000-hectare (123,500-acre) refuge established in 1979 to protect the largest nesting flamingo population in North America. The nesting area is off-limits, but you can see plenty of flamingos, as well as many other species of waterfowl, on an enjoyable boat ride around the estuary.

Río Lagartos, at west end of the estuary, is the place to get boats to the flamingos. Misnamed by Spaniards who mistook the long, narrow *ría* (estuary) for a *río* (river), it's a small fishing village of about 3,000 people who make their living from the sea and from the occasional tourist who shows up to see the flamingos. Colorful houses face the *malecón* (oceanfront street), and brightly painted boats dock here and there.

When you drive into town, keep going straight until you get to the shore. Where Calle 10 intersects with the *malecón,* near a modern church, is a little kiosk where the guides can be found (no phone). You can book a 2-hour tour, which costs about 750 pesos for two to three people. The guides also like to show you the evaporation pools used by the local salt producer at Las Coloradas (a good source of employment for the locals until it was mechanized) and a freshwater spring bubbling out from below the saltwater estuary.

The best time to see flamingos is in the early morning, so you might want to stay overnight in town. Río Lagartos has a few simple hotels charging about 250 pesos a night, including **Posada Leyli** (✆ **986/862-0106**) and **Posada Lucy** (no phone). Another option is **Hotel San Felipe** (✆ **986/862-2067**) in the pleasant fishing village of San Felipe, 9km (5½ miles) to the west. Still another is **Hotel 49** (✆ **986/863-2136**) near the main square in Tizimín, which you pass through on the way from Valladolid.

Isla Holbox ★

A sandy strip of an island off the northeastern corner of the Yucatán Peninsula, Isla Holbox (pronounced "hohl-bosh") is in Quintana Roo, and is actually closer to Cancún than Valladolid. But, unless Cancún tourists take a boat tour, they have to drive almost to the Yucatán border to get to the road north. Given the challenges of driving in Cancún, it makes sense to visit Holbox from the Yucatán side.

Holbox was a half-deserted fishing village in a remote corner of the world before tourists started showing up for the beach. Now it's a semiprosperous little community that makes its livelihood from tourist services, employment at the beach hotels, and tours. It's

Tips Visiting the Whale Sharks of Isla Holbox

In 2002, Mexico's whale sharks were designated an endangered species. The government, along with environmental groups, closely monitors their activity and the tours that visit them off Isla Holbox. Several restrictions apply to how tours are run, and all tour operators must abide by them. See details of the restrictions, and learn more about the whale sharks, at www.domino.conanp.gob.mx/rules.htm.

Whale shark tours are kept small; just two people at a time are allowed to snorkel with the sharks. Tours typically cost around $80 to $100 per person and last 4 to 6 hours. Many hotels or outfitters on the island can arrange a tour.

most popular with visitors from May to September, when more than a hundred **whale sharks** ★★★ congregate in nearby waters to feed on the plankton and krill churned up by the collision of Gulf and Caribbean waters. Whale sharks are much larger than other sharks, reaching as much as 18m (59 ft.), and they filter their food much as baleen whales do. These peaceable giants swim slowly along the surface of the water and don't seem to mind the boat tours and snorkelers that come for the thrill of swimming alongside them. That said, they can do some mischief if you annoy them.

Besides swimming with whale sharks, most tourists come to Holbox to laze on the broad beach of fine-textured sand. The water, though, is not the amazing blue of the Caribbean but a murkier green. Diving, snorkeling, sportfishing, and nature tours of **Laguna Yalahu,** the shallow lagoon separating Holbox from the mainland, are the primary other diversions. It's not a place for Type-A types.

Posada Mawimbi (✆ **984/875-2003;** www.mawimbi.net), starting at $75 to $90 a night depending on season, hits the best balance between price and comfort among the beach hotels in town. **Casa Sandra** (✆ **984/875-2171;** www.casasandra.com) charges $220 and (way) up in low season, $290 and up in high season, but travelers who want only the best will find it here, along with air-conditioning, a rarity in Holbox. Just beyond town, **Villas Delfines,** which has an office in Cancún (✆ **998/884-8606;** www.villasdelfines.com), is an ecohotel charging $90 to $150 in low season, $120 to $180 high season, for thatched-roof beach bungalows.

From Valladolid, take Hwy. 180 east for about 90km (56 miles) toward Cancún; turn north after Nuevo Xcan at the tiny crossroads of El Ideal. Drive nearly 100km (62 miles) north on a state highway to the tiny port of Chiquilá, where you can park your car in a secure parking lot; walk 180m (590 ft.) to the pier, and catch the ferry to the island. It runs 10 times per day and costs 70 pesos per person. When you arrive in the village, you can contract with one of the golf-cart taxis for a ride to your hotel.

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Tabasco & Chiapas

by David Baird

The states of Tabasco and Chiapas, in southernmost Mexico, are largely covered in jungle and rainforest. In pre-Classic times (before A.D. 300) a large part of this area was homeland to Mexico's "mother culture," the Olmec, who in many ways gave form to the cultural development of the civilizations that would come afterward. And in both pre-Classic and Classic times (A.D. 300–900) this was the homeland of the Maya, whose descendants still populate the region. The ruins that these people left behind, as well as the villages of the present-day Maya, attract many visitors to this region: The giant stone heads of the Olmec, the ancient ceremonial centers of the Maya, such as Palenque and Toniná, and the living Maya cultures of both highland and lowland Chiapas.

There is also great natural beauty. The lowland jungle with its high canopy offers a tremendous variety of flora and fauna. Placid lakes dot the land and provide the only open vistas in this densely packed landscape. The mountainous central highlands of Chiapas are also thickly forested and often shrouded in mist. Rivers, including Mexico's two largest, the Grijalva and the Usumacinta, cut their way down to the lowlands, through rugged canyons and tumbling waterfalls. And the cool mountain air feels refreshing after you've experienced the heat and humidity of the Yucatán lowlands.

Tabasco is a small, oil-rich state along the Gulf Coast. The capital, **Villahermosa,** is the main port of entry into this region. It has a boomtown feel and an intriguing history. But the large state of **Chiapas** holds the greatest attractions. In its eastern lowland jungle is the ancient ceremonial center of **Palenque.** Near the border with Guatemala are the smaller but dramatic sites of **Yaxchilán** and **Bonampak.** Between these lowlands and the central highlands are many waterfalls and rapids as well as the ruins of **Toniná.** Located high in the mountains and surrounded by Indian communities is the colonial city of **San Cristóbal de las Casas,** with its beautiful old town and market center.

1 VILLAHERMOSA

142km (88 miles) NW of Palenque; 469km (291 miles) SW of Campeche; 160km (99 miles) N of San Cristóbal de las Casas

Villahermosa (pop. 600,000) is the capital of the state of Tabasco and its largest city. It lies in a shallow depression about an hour's drive from the Gulf Coast, at the confluence of two rivers: the Grijalva and the Carrizal. This location makes the city susceptible to flooding. The land is marshy, with shallow lakes scattered here and there. For most of the year it's hot and humid.

Oil has brought money to this town and raised prices. Villahermosa is one of the most expensive cities in the country and contrasts sharply with inexpensive Chiapas. Though there's a lot of money, it's all being pulled to the modern western sections surrounding a

development called Tabasco 2000. This area, especially the neighborhoods around the **Parque–Museo La Venta,** is the most attractive part of town, doted by small lakes. The historic center has been left to decay. It's gritty, crowded, and unpleasant. The main reason to be downtown is for the cheap hotels.

Two names that you will likely see and hear are Carlos Pellicer Cámara and Tomás Garrido Canabal; both were interesting people. The first was a mid-20th-century Tabascan poet and intellectual. The best known of Mexico's *modernista* poets, he was a fiercely independent thinker. Garrido Canabal, socialist governor of Tabasco in the 1920s and 1930s, was even more fiercely independent. He wanted to turn the conservative, backwater state of Tabasco into a model of socialism and fought for many socialist causes. But his enmity for Mexico's Catholic Church is what he is most remembered for today. He went so far as to name his son Lucifer and his farm animals Jesus and the Virgin Mary.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There & Departing

BY PLANE Villahermosa's airport (airport code: VSA) is the main port of entry into this region. **Continental ExpressJet** (✆ **800/525-0280** in the U.S., or 01-800/900-5000 in Mexico) has direct service to/from Houston on a regional jet. **Mexicana** (✆ **800/531-7921** in the U.S., or 01-800/800-2010 in Mexico) and **Aeroméxico** (✆ **800/237-6639** in the U.S., or 01-800/021-4000 in Mexico) and their subsidiaries have direct flights to and from Mexico City, Monterrey, Mérida, and Veracruz. Mexican discount carrier **VivaAerobus** (✆ **01-81/8215-0150** in Mexico) has a direct flight to/from Monterrey.

BY CAR Hwy. 180 connects Villahermosa to Campeche (6 hr.). Hwy. 186, which passes by the airport, joins Hwy. 199 to Palenque and San Cristóbal de las Casas. The road to Palenque is a good one, and the drive takes 2 hours. Between Palenque and San Cristóbal, the road enters the mountains and takes 4 to 5 hours. On any of the mountain roads, conditions are apt to get worse during the rainy season from May to October.

BY BUS The **bus station** is at Mina and Merino (✆ **993/312-8900;** www.ticketbus.com.mx), 3 blocks off Hwy. 180. There are eight nonstop buses per day to/from Palenque (2½ hr.). There are seven nonstop buses per day to Mexico City (10 hr.), six deluxe services on **ADO-GL,** and two superdeluxe on **UNO.** To Campeche, there are seven buses nonstop per day (7 hr.); some of these go on to Mérida.

Orientation

ARRIVING Villahermosa's **airport** is 16km (8 miles) east of town. The trip takes between 20 and 30 minutes. Once you cross the bridge over the Río Grijalva, turn left to reach downtown. Taxis to the downtown area cost 150 pesos.

Parking downtown can be difficult; it's best to find a parking lot. Use one that's guarded round-the-clock.

VISITOR INFORMATION The **State Tourism Office** (✆ **993/316-5122,** ext. 229) has two information booths: The one at the **airport** is staffed daily from 10am to 5pm; the one at **Parque–Museo La Venta** (next to the ticket counter for the park) is staffed Monday to Friday from 9am to 1pm.

CITY LAYOUT The downtown area, including the pedestrian-only **Zona Luz,** is on the west bank of the Grijalva River. About 1.5km (1 mile) upstream (south) is **CICOM,** an academic organization with the large archaeology museum named for the poet Carlos Pellicer Cámara. The **airport** is on the east side of the river. Hwy. 180 passes the airport

and crosses the river just north of downtown, becoming **Bulevar Ruiz Cortines.** To get to the downtown area, turn left onto **Madero** or **Pino Suárez.** By staying on Ruiz Cortines you can reach the city's biggest attraction, the Parque–Museo la Venta. It's well marked. Just beyond that is the intersection with **Paseo Tabasco,** the heart of the modern hotel and shopping district.

GETTING AROUND **Taxis** are your best way to get around town. Villahermosa is rare for being a Mexican city without a capable public transportation system.

FAST FACTS The telephone **area code** is **993.** There aren't a lot of *casas de cambio,* but you can exchange money at the airport, the hotels, and downtown banks on calles Juárez and Madero. ATMs are plentiful.

EXPLORING VILLAHERMOSA

Villahermosa is not a pleasant city; the downtown area is poor and gritty, the modern western part of the city is largely without character. You'll probably want to get in and out as fast as you can. The two major attractions, the **Parque–Museo La Venta** and the **Museo Regional de Antropología Carlos Pellicer Cámara** (when it opens in summer of 2010) can be seen in a day.

If you're bound and determined to get to know the city, take a stroll about the pedestrian-only Zona Luz in the old city center, and you'll see signs that investment might be returning to the downtown area. Outside the Zona Luz, things get more unpleasant, with lots of traffic and crowds of pedestrians. You can walk south along the banks of the Grijalva until you come to a pedestrian bridge with an observation tower. That's the highlight. You won't miss much by keeping away.

Museo Regional de Antropología Carlos Pellicer Cámara This museum on the west bank of the river about 1.5km (1 mile) south of the town center was damaged in the flood of 2007. It has remained closed ever since, while it awaits the completion of its new home. The new museum is on the same site and will be larger. It should open in the second half of 2010. The permanent collection of pre-Columbian sculpture and pottery is well worth a visit. It focuses on the cultures of the region—Olmec and Zapotec—but also includes pieces from other parts of Mexico and Central America.

CICOM Center, Av. Carlos Pellicer Cámara 511. ✆ **993/312-6344.** Admission 45 pesos. Tues–Sun 9am–5pm.

Parque–Museo La Venta ★★ The Olmec created the first civilization in Mexico and developed several cultural traits that later would be adopted by all subsequent civilizations throughout Mesoamerica. In addition to their monumental works, they carved small, exquisite figurines in jade and serpentine, which can be seen in the Museo Regional de Antropología (see above). This *parque-museo* occupies a portion of a larger park named after Tomás Garrido Canabal, which includes a serene lake, a zoo, a natural history museum, and a lot of green space with several walkways frequented by joggers. Once inside the *parque-museo,* a trail leads you from one sculpture to the next. Most of the pieces are massive heads or altars. These can be as tall as 2m (6½ ft.) and weigh as much as 40 tons. The faces seem to be half adult, half infant. Most have highly stylized mouths with thick fleshy lips that turn down (known as the "jaguar mouth," this is one of the identifying characteristics of Olmec art). At least 17 heads have been found: 4 at La Venta, 10 at San Lorenzo, and 3 at Tres Zapotes—all Olmec cities on Mexico's east coast. The pieces in this park were taken from La Venta, a major city during the pre-Classic period (2000 B.C.–A.D. 300). Most were sculpted around 1000 B.C. without the use of metal chisels. The basalt rock used for these heads and altars was transported to

La Venta from more than 113km (70 miles) away. It is thought that the rock was transported most of the distance by raft. Most of these pieces were first discovered in 1938. Now all that remains at La Venta are some grass-covered mounds that were once earthen pyramids. An exhibition area at the entrance to the park does a good job of illustrating how La Venta was laid out and what archaeologists think the Olmec were like.

As you stroll along, you will see labels identifying many species of local trees, including a grand ceiba tree of special significance to the Olmec and, later, the Maya. A few varieties of local critters scurry about, seemingly unconcerned with the presence of humans or with escaping from the park. Allow at least 2 hours for wandering through the jungly sanctuary and examining the 3,000-year-old sculpture. ***Note:*** Don't forget the mosquito repellent.

Bulevar Ruiz Cortines s/n. ✆ **993/314-1652.** Admission 40 pesos. Tues–Sun 8am–4pm.

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel rooms in Villahermosa are a little pricier than in other Mexican cities. Rates listed below include the 18% tax. Rates can go up during conventions, but there is no high-season/low-season split. Most hotels have live music on weekends. This makes it difficult to sleep in several of the inexpensive downtown hotels. The only inexpensive hotel I could find that didn't have this problem is listed below.

Very Expensive

Hyatt Villahermosa ★★ I like this property more than the Camino Real (which is the other top hotel in the city), for its better location and service. A short walk away is the Parque–Museo La Venta. The entire hotel was completely remodeled in 2009. The rooms have a sleek, modern design with sharp-looking furnishings, fixtures, and accents. This is true of the bathrooms as well, which are large and made to feel larger by the use of sliding doors and minimal clutter.

Av. Juárez 106, 86000 Villahermosa, Tab. ✆ **800/233-1234** in the U.S., or 993/310-1234. Fax 993/315-1963. www.villahermosa.regency.hyatt.com. 206 units. $227–$289 double; $265–$335 Regency Club room; $330–$375 junior suite. Weekend rates often discounted. AE, DC, MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 bars (1 w/live music, 1 sports bar); concierge; concierge-level rooms; well-equipped exercise room; outdoor pool and wading pool; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi (for a fee).

Expensive

Best Western Hotel Maya Tabasco This hotel is centrally located between the downtown area and the modern western section. It's close to the Parque–Museo La Venta, the bus station, and the city's principal restaurant district. Rooms are larger than the norm. Most have ceramic tile floors and are simply furnished. Midsize bathrooms are attractive and have good counter space. A lush pool area separates the hotel from the hotel's bar, which gets fairly good live talent.

Bulevar Ruiz Cortines 907, 86000 Villahermosa, Tab. ✆ **800/528-1234** in the U.S. and Canada, or 993/358-1111, ext. 822. Fax 993/358-1118. www.hotelmaya.com.mx. 151 units. 1,270 pesos double; 1,975 pesos junior suite. AE, MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; free airport transfer; large outdoor pool; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Inexpensive

Hotel Plaza Independencia Value The Plaza Independencia is the only hotel in this price range with a pool and enclosed parking. It's located downtown, by the pedestrian bridge, and not far from the Anthropology Museum. Rooms are a little small but

are better lit than the norm. End rooms, whose numbers end in 01, 02, 14, and 15, have balconies and are generally preferable.

Independencia 123, 86000 Villahermosa, Tab. ✆ **993/312-1299,** -7541. Fax 993/314-4724. www.hotelesplaza.com.mx. 90 units. 720 pesos double. AE, MC, V. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; small outdoor pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

WHERE TO DINE

Like other Mexican cities, Villahermosa has seen the arrival of U.S. franchise restaurants, but as these things go, I prefer the Mexican variety: **Sanborn's,** Av. Ruiz Cortines 1310, near Parque–Museo La Venta (✆ **993/316-8722**), and **VIPS,** Av. Fco. I. Madero 402, downtown (✆ **993/312-3237**). Both usually do an okay job with traditional dishes such as enchiladas or *antojitos.*

Jangada ★★ SEAFOOD My favorite restaurant in the city is an all-you-can-eat seafood buffet. Start with a small glass of delicious seafood broth and an appetizing empanada of *pejelagarto,* a freshwater fish for which Tabasco is famous. The salad and cold seafood bar offers a seafood salad of freshwater lobster, different kinds of ceviche, and seafood cocktails made to order. There's a variety of soups—especially good is the shrimp-and-*yuca* chowder. And then, of course, there are the main dishes, including charcoal-grilled *pejelagarto* (mild taste—light and almost nutty), and fish kabobs. Jangada is in the fancy western part of town in La Choca neighborhood. It closes early, but next door is a good Brazilian-style steakhouse (Rodizio) that stays open until 9pm.

Paseo de la Choca 126, Fracc. La Choca. ✆ **993/317-6050.** Reservations not accepted. 340 pesos per person, excluding drinks and dessert. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 12:30–7pm.

Los Tulipanes SEAFOOD/STEAKS/REGIONAL Los Tulipanes is an old-school Mexican restaurant downtown, next to the Pellicer Museum of Anthropology. The food is good so long as you stick to the Mexican dishes and steer clear of the international. Before you order, *tostones de plátano macho*—mashed and fried plantain crisps—are brought to your table as an appetizer. Included on the menu are such Mexican specialties as chiles rellenos, tacos, and enchiladas. Dishes that are out of the ordinary include *tortilla de maíz nuevo* (oversize tortilla made with fresh corn and stuffed with shrimp or other seafood). For breakfast, the *tamales de chipilín* (an herb) are quite good.

CICOM Center, Periférico Carlos Pellicer Cámara 511. ✆ **993/312-9209,** -9217. Main courses 90–210 pesos; Sun buffet 205 pesos. MC, V. Mon–Sat 8am–7pm; Sun 12:30–7pm.

2 PALENQUE ★★

142km (88 miles) SE of Villahermosa; 229km (142 miles) NE of San Cristóbal de las Casas

The ruins of Palenque look out over the jungle from a tall ridge that juts out from the base of steep, thickly forested mountains. It is a dramatic sight colored by the mysterious feel of the ruins themselves. The temples here are in the Classic style, with high-pitched roofs crowned with elaborate combs. Inside many are representations in stone and plaster of the rulers and their gods, which give evidence of a cosmology that is—and perhaps will remain—impenetrable to our understanding. This is one of the grand archaeological sites of Mexico.

Eight kilometers (5 miles) from the ruins is the town of Palenque. There you can find lodging and food, as well as make travel arrangements. Transportation between the town and ruins is cheap and convenient.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There & Departing

BY CAR **Hwy. 186** from Villahermosa should take about 2 hours. You may encounter military roadblocks that involve a cursory inspection of your travel credentials and perhaps your vehicle. The 230km (143-mile) trip from San Cristóbal to Palenque takes 5 hours and passes through lush jungle and mountain scenery. Take it easy, though, and watch out for potholes and other hindrances.

BY BUS **ADO/Cristóbal Colón** (✆ **916/345-1344**) has regular service to and from Villahermosa and San Cristóbal, as wells as Campeche (six per day, 5 hr.), Villahermosa (nine per day, 2 hr.), Mérida (two per day, 9 hr.), and Playa del Carmen (once per day, 12 hr.). The station is located on Avenida Juárez between the town center and La Cañada.

Orientation

VISITOR INFORMATION The downtown tourism office is a block from the main square at the corner of Avenida Juárez and Abasolo. It's open Monday to Saturday from 9am to 9pm, Sunday from 9am to 1pm. There's no phone at the downtown office. To get info over the phone, call the tourism office's business office (✆ **916/345-0356**).

CITY LAYOUT **Avenida Juárez** is Palenque's main street. At one end is the **plaza;** at the other a traffic circle adorned with a monument imitating the iconic figure of a Maya head, which was discovered at the ruins. To the right of the statue is the entrance to La Cañada; to the left is the road to the ruins, and straight ahead past the statue is the highway to Villahermosa. The distance between the town's main square and the monument is about 1.5km (1 mile).

La Cañada is a restaurant and Hotel Zone tucked away in the forest. Aside from the main plaza area, this is the best location for travelers without cars, because the town is within a few blocks, and the buses that run to the ruins pass right by.

GETTING AROUND The cheapest way to get back and forth from the ruins is on the white vans *(colectivos)* that run down Juárez every 10 minutes from 6am to 6pm. The buses pass La Cañada and hotels along the road to the ruins, and can be flagged down at any point, but they may not stop if they're full. The cost is 10 pesos per person.

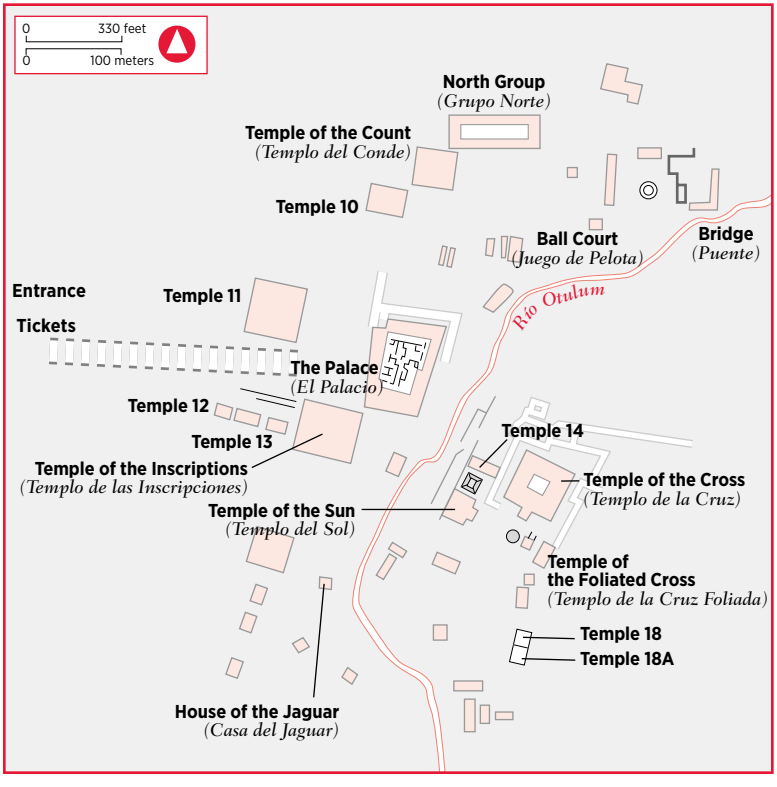
FAST FACTS The telephone **area code** is **916.** As for the **climate,** Palenque's high humidity is downright oppressive in the summer, especially after rain showers. During the winter, the damp air can occasionally be chilly in the evening. Rain gear is handy at any time of year. **Internet service** and **ATMs** are easily available.

EXPLORING PALENQUE

The reason to come here is the ruins; although you can tour them in a morning, many people savor Palenque for days. There are no must-see sights in town.

Parque Nacional Palenque ★★★

A **museum and visitor center** sits not far from the entrance to the ruins. Though it's not large, the museum is worth the time it takes to see; it's open Tuesday to Sunday from 10am to 5pm and is included in the price of admission to the ruins. It contains well-chosen and artistically displayed exhibits, including jade from recently excavated tombs. Text in Spanish and English explains the life and times of this magnificent city. New pieces are sometimes added as they are uncovered in ongoing excavations.



The **main entrance,** about 1km (½ mile) beyond the museum, is at the end of the paved highway. There you'll find a large parking lot, a refreshment stand, a ticket booth, and several shops. Among the vendors selling souvenirs are often some Lacandón Indians wearing white tunics and hawking bows and arrows.

Admission to the ruins is 73 pesos. The fee for using a video camera is 50 pesos. Parking at the main entrance and at the visitor center is free. The site and visitor center shops are open daily from 8am to 4:45pm.

TOURING THE RUINS Pottery shards found during the excavations show that people lived in this area as early as 300 B.C. By the Classic period (A.D. 300–900), Palenque was an important ceremonial center. It peaked around A.D. 600 to 700.

When John Stephens visited the site in the 1840s, the ruins that you see today were buried under centuries of accumulated earth and a thick canopy of jungle. The dense jungle surrounding the cleared portion still covers unexcavated temples, which are easily discernible in the forest even to the untrained eye. But be careful not to drift too far from the main path—there have been a few incidents where tourists venturing alone into the rainforest were assaulted.

Of all Mexico's ruins, this is the most haunting, because of its majesty; its history, recovered by epigraphers; and its mysterious setting. Scholars have identified the rulers and constructed their family histories, putting visitors on a first-name basis with these ancient people etched in stone. You can read about it in *A Forest of Kings,* by Linda Schele and David Freidel.

As you enter the ruins, the building on your right is the **Temple of the Inscriptions,** named for the great stone hieroglyphic panels found inside. (Most of the panels, which portray the family tree of King Pacal, are in the National Anthropological Museum in Mexico City.) This temple is famous for the crypt of King Pacal deep inside the pyramid, but the crypt is closed to the public. The archaeologist Alberto Ruz Lhuillier discovered the tomb in the depths of the temple in 1952—an accomplishment many scholars consider one of the great discoveries of the Maya world. In exploratory excavations, Ruz Lhuillier found a stairway leading from the temple floor deep into the base of the pyramid. The original builders had carefully concealed the entrance by filling the stairway with stone. After several months of excavation, Ruz Lhuillier finally reached King Pacal's crypt, which contained several fascinating objects, including a magnificent carved stone sarcophagus. Ruz Lhuillier's own gravesite is opposite the Temple of the Inscriptions, on the left as you enter the park.

Just to your right as you face the Temple of the Inscriptions is **Temple 13,** which is receiving considerable attention from archaeologists. They recently discovered the burial of another richly adorned personage, accompanied in death by an adult female and an adolescent. Some of the artifacts found there are on display in the museum.

Back on the main pathway, the building directly in front of you is the **Palace,** with its unique tower. The explorer John Stephens camped in the Palace when it was completely covered in vegetation, spending sleepless nights fighting off mosquitoes. A pathway between the Palace and the Temple of the Inscriptions leads to the **Temple of the Sun,** the **Temple of the Foliated Cross,** the **Temple of the Cross,** and **Temple 14.** This group of temples, now cleared and in various stages of reconstruction, was built by Pacal's son, Chan-Bahlum, who is usually shown on inscriptions with six toes. Chan-Bahlum's plaster mask was found in Temple 14 next to the Temple of the Sun. Archaeologists have begun probing the Temple of the Sun for Chan-Bahlum's tomb. Little remains of this temple's exterior carving. Inside, however, behind a fence, a carving of Chan-Bahlum shows him ascending the throne in A.D. 690. The panels depict Chan-Bahlum's version of his historic link to the throne.

To the left of the Palace is the North Group, also undergoing restoration. Included in this area are the **Ball Court** and the **Temple of the Count.** At least three tombs, complete with offerings for the underworld journey, have been found here, and the lineage of at least 12 kings has been deciphered from inscriptions left at this site.

Just past the North Group is a small building (once a museum) now used for storing the artifacts found during restorations. It is closed to the public. To the right of the building, a stone bridge crosses the river, leading to a pathway down the hillside to the new museum. The rock-lined path descends along a cascading stream, on the banks of which grow giant ceiba trees. Benches are placed along the way as rest areas, and some small temples have been reconstructed near the base of the trail. In the early morning and evening, you may hear monkeys crashing through the thick foliage by the path; if you keep noise to a minimum, you may spot wild parrots as well. Walking downhill (by far the best way to go), it will take you about 20 minutes to reach the main highway. The path ends at the paved road across from the museum. The *colectivos* (minibuses) going back to the village will stop here if you wave them down.

WHERE TO STAY

English is spoken in all the more expensive hotels and about half of the inexpensive ones. The quoted rates include the 18% tax. High season in Palenque is limited to Easter week, July to August, and December. Palenque gets most of its visitors through bus tours, which originate in Cancún; if you want to avoid running into large groups, pick a small hotel.

Expensive

Chan-Kah Resort Village ★ This is a pretty property located between the town and the ruins. It's a grouping of comfortable bungalows, called casitas, surrounded by tropical forest. Staying here offers a measure of privacy and quiet in the tropical surroundings. The grounds are well tended, and an inviting freshwater pool fed by a stream runs through the property. The bungalows are made of stone and plaster. They are spacious, and each comes with its own terrace and two rocking chairs. The master suites are two-bedroom bungalows. Christmas prices will be higher than those quoted here, and you may be quoted a higher price if you reserve a room in advance from outside the country. Room service is pricey.

Carretera Las Ruinas Km 3, 29960 Palenque, Chi. ✆ **916/345-1100.** Fax 916/345-0820. www.chan-kah.com.mx. 73 units. 1,580 pesos casita; 3,861 pesos master suite. Promotional rates Sept–Nov. MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; 3 outdoor pools (1 large w/natural spring); room service; smoke-free rooms; Wi-Fi (in common areas). *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer.

Moderate

Hotel Ciudad Real Though not fancy, this hotel does the important things right—the rooms are ample, quiet, well lit, and comfortably furnished. Most units hold two double beds; a few have king-size beds. All rooms have a small balcony, which, in the best case, overlooks tropical vegetation. When making a reservation, specify the hotel in Palenque (there's also a Ciudad Real in San Cristóbal). It's at the edge of town in the direction of the airport. Though it works with bus tours, as other large hotels do, this hotel works well for individual travelers who have their own car.

Carretera a Pakal-Na Km 1.5, 29960 Palenque, Chi. ✆ **916/345-1343** (reservations: ✆ 967/678-4400). www.ciudadreal.com.mx. 72 units. High season 1,330 pesos double, 1,695 pesos junior suite; low season 900 pesos double, 1,150 pesos junior suite. AE, MC, V. Free secured parking. Internet discounts sometimes available. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; baby pool; room service; smoke-free rooms; Wi-Fi (in lobby and restaurant). *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer.

Hotel La Aldea Value This hotel on the way to the ruins enjoys the same lush surroundings as the more expensive Chan-Kah Resort Village, but it's smaller and most often quieter. It is a family-owned hotel, designed and managed by an architect. The rooms show that a good deal of thought went into making them attractive and functional. They are in a collection of free-standing bungalows set on rising ground (mostly two rooms per bungalow). A few of the rooms (no. 10 in particular) have views of the forest. All rooms are large, with good space for luggage. Each has an outdoor sitting area. In terms of layout and decor, I like them better than those in the neighboring Chan-Kah Village.

Carretera Las Ruinas Km 2.8, 29960 Palenque, Chi. ✆/fax **916/345-1693.** www.hotellaaldea.net. 28 units. 1,100 pesos double. Low season discounts of 20%–30%. MC, V. Free secured parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; smoke-free rooms; Wi-Fi (in common areas). *In room:* A/C, no phone.

Hotel Maya Tulipanes This is an attractive hotel tucked away in the Cañada. I like it for its location and management. Service and upkeep are both good. Rooms are medium to large and come with a queen-size, a king-size, or two double beds. Tropical

vegetation adorns the grounds, along with some reproductions of famous Maya architecture. The Maya Tulipanes has an arrangement with a sister hotel at the ruins of Tikal, in Guatemala. The travel agency operates daily tours to Bonampak and other attractions.

Calle Cañada 6, 29960 Palenque, Chi. ✆ **916/345-0201,** -0258. Fax 916/345-1004. www.mayatulipanes.com.mx. 74 units. High season 1,190 pesos double; low season 795–1,000 pesos double. Internet packages available. AE, MC, V. Free secured parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; ground transportation to/from Villahermosa airport; outdoor pool; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Misión Palenque ★ This hotel has returned to being among the most comfortable in the city after a total remodeling that includes new air-conditioning and other amenities. Rooms are medium size and attractively furnished with light, modern furniture. Bathrooms are spacious, with ample counters. The hotel has extensive grounds and is very quiet. In one corner of the property, a natural spring flows through an attractive bit of jungle, where the hotel has installed the spa. Part of the spa is a *temazcal,* or sweat lodge. There's also a mud bath along with the more common elements. The hotel is a few blocks east of the town's main square.

Periférico Oriente s/n, 29960 Palenque, Chi. ✆ **916/345-0241,** or 01-800-900-3800 in Mexico. Fax 916/345-0300. www.hotelesmision.com.mx. 156 units. 1,100 pesos double; 2,925 pesos junior suite. AE, MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; babysitting; exercise room; Jacuzzi; outdoor pool; wading pool; room service; spa; 2 tennis courts. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer (on request), Wi-Fi.

Inexpensive

Hotel Xibalba This budget hotel recently expanded to handle larger groups, but the price is still right. You can ask for a room in back if a group is being noisy. The medium-to-small rooms are basic but clean, with functioning air-conditioning, which is not always the case at the budget level. The upstairs units are a little smaller than the downstairs units. Most of the beds have firm mattresses. Check out the full-size replica of Pacal's sarcophagus lid on the premises.

Calle Merle Green 9, Col. La Cañada, 29960 Palenque, Chi. ✆ **916/345-0392.** Fax 916/345-0411. www.hotelxibalba.com. 35 units. 500–700 pesos double. MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, TV, no phone.

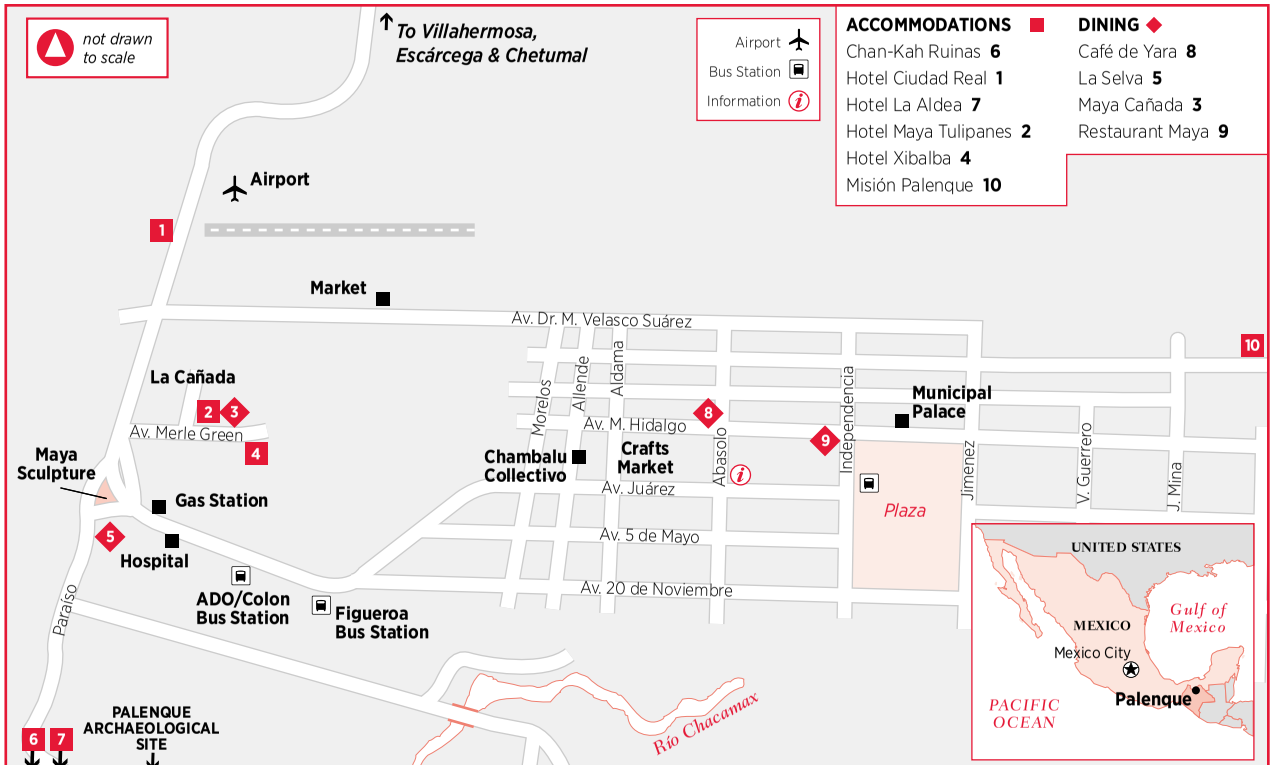
WHERE TO DINE

Palenque and, for that matter, the rest of backwater Chiapas, are not for gourmets. Who'd a thunk? I had an easy time eliminating a number of restaurants that didn't even seem to be keeping up the appearance of serving food. But the situation has been improving, and you can at least get some decent Mexican food.

Moderate

La Selva INTERNATIONAL/MEXICAN At La Selva (the jungle), you dine under a large, attractive thatched roof beside well-tended gardens. The menu includes seafood, freshwater fish, steaks, and Mexican specialties. The most expensive thing on the menu is *pigua,* freshwater lobster caught in the large rivers of southeast Mexico. These can grow quite large—the size of small saltwater lobsters. This and the finer cuts of meat have been frozen, but you wouldn't want otherwise in Palenque. I liked the fish stuffed with shrimp, and the *mole* enchiladas. La Selva is on the highway to the ruins, near the statue of the Maya head.

Carretera Palenque Ruinas Km 0.5. ✆ **916/345-0363.** Main courses 145–220 pesos. MC, V. Daily 11:30am–11:30pm.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Inexpensive

Café de Yara MEXICAN A small, modern cafe and restaurant with a comforting, not overly ambitious menu. The cafe's strong suit is healthful salads (with disinfected greens) and home-style Mexican entrees, such as the beef or chicken *milanesa* or chicken cooked in a *chile pasilla* sauce. It also offers decent tamales. In the evenings it occasionally offers live music.

Av. Hidalgo 66 (at Abasolo). ✆ **916/345-0269.** Main courses 60–105 pesos. MC, V. Daily 7am–11pm.

Restaurant Maya and Maya Cañada ★ MEXICAN These two are the most consistently good restaurants in Palenque. One faces the main plaza from the corner of Independencia and Hidalgo, the other is in La Cañada (✆ **916/345-0216**). Menus differ a bit, but much is the same. Both do a good job with the basics—good strong, locally grown coffee and soft, pliant tortillas. The menu offers a combination of Mexican standards and regional specialties. If you're in an exploratory mood, try one of the regional specialties such as the *mole chiapaneco* (dark red, like *mole poblano,* but less sweet) or any of the dishes based on *chaya* or *chipilin* (mild-flavored local greens), such as the soup with *chipilin* and *bolitas de masa* (corn dumplings). If you want something more comforting, go for the chicken, rice, and vegetable soup, or the *sopa azteca.* The plantains stuffed with cheese and fried Mexican style are wonderful. Waiters sometimes offer specials not on the menu, and these are often the thing to get. You can also try *tascalate,* a pre-Hispanic drink made of water, *masa,* chocolate, and *achiote,* and served room temperature or cold.

Av. Independencia s/n (at Hidalgo). ✆ **916/345-0042.** Breakfast 50–80 pesos; main courses 50–160 pesos. MC, V. Daily 7am–11pm.

ROAD TRIPS FROM PALENQUE

Bonampak & Yaxchilán: Murals in the Jungle

Intrepid travelers may want to consider the day trip to the Maya ruins of Bonampak and Yaxchilán. The **ruins of Bonampak** ★, southeast of Palenque on the Guatemalan border, were discovered in 1946. The site is important for the vivid and well-preserved **murals** of the Maya on the interior walls of one temple. Particularly striking is an impressive battle scene, perhaps the most important painting of pre-Hispanic Mexico.

Several tour companies offer a day trip. The drive to Bonampak is 3 hours. From there you continue by boat to the **ruins of Yaxchilán** ★, famous for its highly ornamented buildings. Bring rain gear, boots, a flashlight, and bug repellent. All tours include meals and cost about 900 pesos. No matter what agency you sign up with, the hours of departure and return are the same. You leave at 6am and return at 7pm.

Try **Viajes Na Chan Kan** (✆ **916/345-2154;** www.nachankan.com), at Hidalgo 5 across from the main square offers all the usual side trips as well as ecological and cultural tours to outlying Indian communities.

Waterfalls at Misol Ha & Agua Azul

Misol Ha is 20km (12 miles) from Palenque, in the direction of Ocosingo. It takes about 30 minutes to get there, depending on the traffic. The turnoff is clearly marked; you'll turn right and drive another 1.5km (1 mile). The place is absolutely beautiful. Water pours from a rocky cliff into a broad pool of green water bordered by thick tropical vegetation. There's a small restaurant and some rustic cabins for rent for around 500 pesos per night, depending on the size of the cabin. The place is run by the *ejido*

cooperative that owns the site, and it does a good job of maintaining the place. To inquire about the cabins, call ✆ **916/345-1506.** Admission for the day is 25 pesos.

Approximately 44km (27 miles) beyond Misol Ha are the **Agua Azul** waterfalls—270m (886 ft.) of tumbling falls with lots of water. There are cabins for rent here, too, but I would rather stay at Misol Ha. You can swim either above or below the falls, but make sure you don't get pulled by the current. You can see both places in the same day or stop to see them on your way to Ocosingo and San Cristóbal. Agua Azul is prettiest after 3 or 4 consecutive dry days; heavy rains can make the water murky. Check with guides or other travelers about the water quality before you decide to go. The cost to enter is 25 pesos per person. Trips to both of these places can be arranged through just about any hotel.

Ocosingo & the Ruins of Toniná

By the time you get to Agua Azul, you're halfway to Ocosingo, which lies halfway between Palenque and San Cristóbal. So instead of returning for the night to Palenque, you can go on to Ocosingo. It's higher up and more comfortable than Palenque. It's a nice little town, not touristy, not a lot to do other than see the ruins of Toniná. But it is a nice place to spend the night so that you can see the ruins early before moving on to San Cristóbal. There are about a half-dozen small hotels in town; the largest is not the most desirable. I would stay at the **Hospedaje Esmeralda** (✆ **919/673-0014**) or the **Hotel Central** (✆ **919/673-0024**), on the main square. Both of these are small and simple, but welcoming. The restaurant in front of Hotel Central has good cooking.

RUINS OF TONINÁ ★★ The ruins of Toniná (the name translates as "house of rocks") are 14km (8¾ miles) east of Ocosingo. You can take a cab there and catch a *colectivo* to return. The city dates from the Classic period and covered a large area, but the excavated and restored part is all on one steep hillside that faces a broad valley. This site is not set up to handle lots of tourists (and doesn't really receive many). There is a good bit of climbing involved, and some of it is a little precarious. This is not a good place to take kids. Admission is 41 pesos.

This complex of courtyards, rooms, and stairways is built on multiple levels that are irregular and asymmetrical. The overall effect is that of a ceremonial area with multiple foci instead of a clearly discernible center. It affords beautiful and intriguing perspectives from just about any spot.

As early as A.D. 350, Toniná emerged as a dynastic center. In the 7th and 8th centuries, it was locked in a struggle with rival Palenque and, to a lesser degree, with faraway Calakmul. This has led some scholars to see Toniná as more militaristic than its neighbors—a sort of Sparta of the Classic Maya. Toniná's greatest victory came in 711, when, under the rule of Kan B'alam, it attacked Palenque and captured its king, K'an Joy Chitam, depicted on a stone frieze twisted, his arms bound with rope.

But the single most important artifact yet found at Toniná is up around the fifth level of the acropolis—a large stucco frieze divided into panels by a feathered framework adorned with the heads of sacrificial victims (displayed upside down) and some rather horrid creatures. The largest figure is a skeletal image holding a decapitated head—very vivid and very puzzling. There is actually a stylistic parallel with some murals of the Teotihuacán culture of central Mexico. The other special thing about Toniná is that it holds the distinction of having the last ever date recorded in the long count (A.D. 909), which marks the end of the Classic period.

3 SAN CRISTOBAL DE LAS CASAS ★★★

229km (142 miles) SW of Palenque; 80km (50 miles) E of Tuxtla Gutiérrez; 74km (46 miles) NW of Comitán; 166km (103 miles) NW of Cuauhtémoc; 451km (280 miles) E of Oaxaca

San Cristóbal is a colonial town of white stucco walls and red-tile roofs, of cobblestone streets and narrow sidewalks, of graceful arcades and open plazas. It lies in a green valley 2,120m (6,954 ft.) high. The city owes part of its name to the 16th-century cleric Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, who was the town's first bishop and spent the rest of his life waging a political campaign to protect the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Surrounding the city are many villages of Mayan-speaking Indians who display great variety in their language, dress, and customs, making this area one of the most ethnically diverse in Mexico. San Cristóbal is the principal market town for these Indians, and their point of contact with the outside world. Most of them trek down from the surrounding mountains to sell goods and run errands

Several Indian villages lie within reach of San Cristóbal by road: **Chamula,** with its weavers and unorthodox church; **Zinacantán,** whose residents practice their own syncretic religion; **Tenejapa, San Andrés,** and **Magdalena,** known for brocaded textiles; **Amatenango del Valle,** a town of potters; and **Aguacatenango,** known for embroidery. Most of these "villages" consist of little more than a church and the municipal government building, with homes scattered for miles around and a general gathering only for church and market days (usually Sun).

Many Indians now live on the outskirts of town because they've been expelled from their villages over religious differences. They are known as *los expulsados.* No longer involved in farming, they make their living in commerce and handicrafts. Most still wear traditional dress, but they've adopted Protestant religious beliefs that prevent them from partaking in many of their community's civic and religious celebrations.

The influx of outsiders hasn't created in most Indians a desire to adopt mainstream customs and dress. It's interesting to note that the communities closest to San Cristóbal are the most resistant to change. The greatest threat to the cultures in this area comes not from tourism, but from the action of large market forces, population pressures, environmental damage, and poverty. The Indians aren't interested in acting or looking like the foreigners they see. They may steal glances or even stare at tourists, but mainly they pay little attention to outsiders, except as potential buyers for handicrafts.

You may see or hear the word *Jovel,* San Cristóbal's Indian name, incorporated often in the names of businesses. You'll hear the word *coleto,* used in reference to someone or something from San Cristóbal. You'll see signs for *tamales coletos, pan coleto,* and *desayuno coleto* (Cristóbal breakfast).

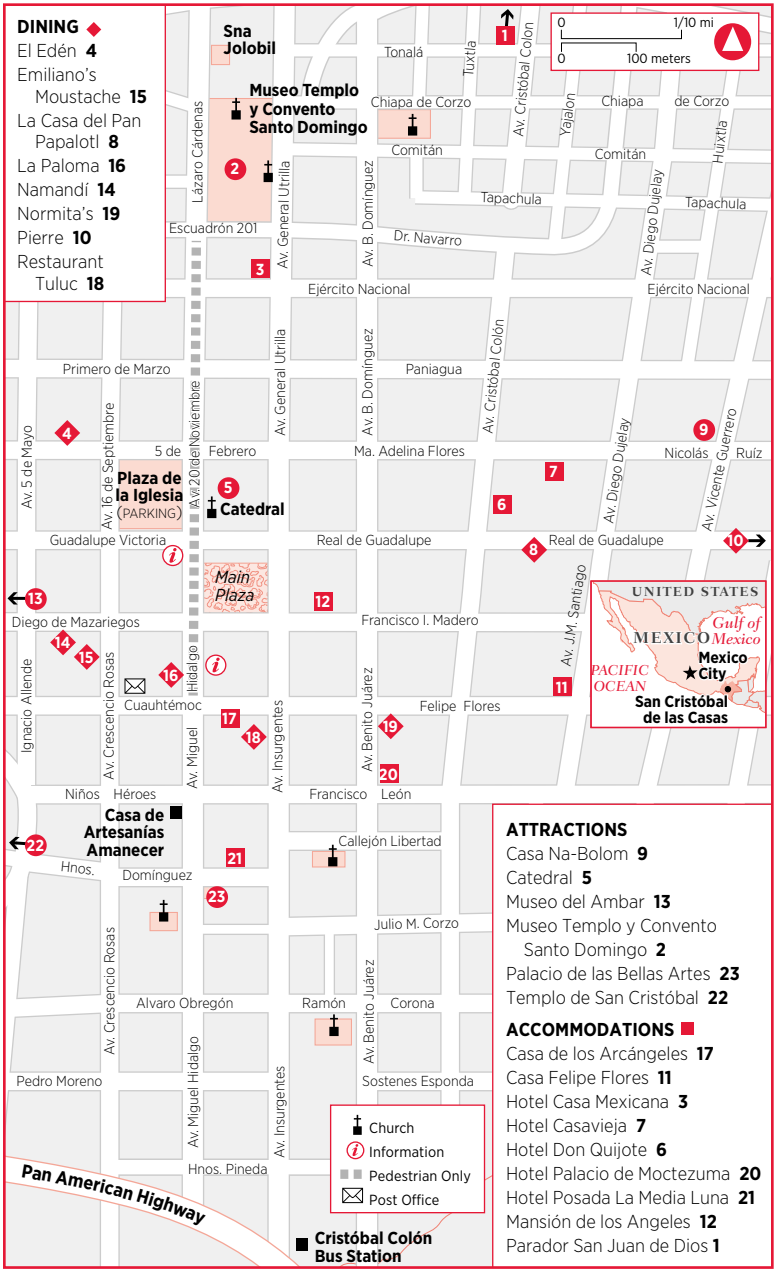
ESSENTIALS

Getting There & Departing

BY PLANE The local airport is little used, and the closest airport with regular service is in Tuxtla Gutiérrez (p. 674).

BY CAR From Palenque (5 hr.), the beautiful road provides jungle scenery, but portions of it may be heavily potholed or obstructed during rainy season. Check with the local state tourism office before driving. From Tuxtla Gutiérrez, the 1½-hour trip winds through beautiful mountain country.

BY TAXI Taxis from Tuxtla Gutiérrez to San Cristóbal cost around 600 pesos.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The Zapatista Movement & Chiapas

In January 1994, Indians from this area rebelled against the Mexican government over healthcare, education, land distribution, and representative government. Their organization, the **Zapatista Liberation Army,** known as EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional), and its leader, Subcomandante Marcos, became symbols of the struggle for social justice. Times have changed. The situation has long since quieted, and there is no longer any talk of armed revolt. Subcomandante Marcos has become a social critic and commentator, and the EZLN has become an independent political organization not tied to any particular party. Even the town's graffiti reflects the new mood, with political exhortations disappearing in favor of the more artsy, more obscure scribblings, resembling the graffiti in the U.S.

BY BUS The **ADO** station (which also handles the affiliates Altos, Cristóbal Colón, and Maya de Oro) is at the corner of Insurgentes and Bulevar Juan Sabines, 8 blocks south of the main square. This company offers service to and from Tuxtla (12 buses per day), Palenque (almost every hour), and several other destinations: Mérida (two buses per day), Villahermosa (two buses per day), Oaxaca (two buses per day), and Puerto Escondido (two buses per day). To buy a bus ticket without going down to the station, go to the **Ticket Bus** agency, Real de Guadalupe 24 (✆ **967/678-8503**). Hours are Monday to Saturday from 7am to 10pm.

The best cheap way to get to and from nearby Tuxtla Gutiérrez is by microbus, 16-seat buses that depart every 5 to 15 minutes from the small bus station across the street from the ADO bus station. The company is called **Omnibuses de Chiapas** (no phone). Look for white buses that say *omni* or *expreso* on the front. The fare is 35 pesos and the trip takes an hour. There are also vans making the run every 15 to 30 minutes. They can be found just off Juan Sabines by the bus station. You'll have to ask someone to point them out to you because there isn't a sign. The problem with these is that they pack too many passengers in them for comfort.

Orientation

ARRIVING To get to the town square from the highway, turn on to **Avenida Insurgentes** (at the traffic light). From the bus station, the main plaza is 8 blocks north up Avenida Insurgentes (a 10-min. walk, slightly uphill). Cabs are cheap and plentiful.

VISITOR INFORMATION The **Municipal Tourism Office** (✆/fax **967/678-0665**) is in the town hall, west of the main square. It's open daily from 9am to 9pm. Check the bulletin board here for apartments, shared rides, cultural events, and local tours.

CITY LAYOUT San Cristóbal is laid out on a grid; the main north-south axis is **Insurgentes/Utrilla,** and the east-west axis is **Mazariegos/Madero.** All streets change names when they cross either of these streets. The *zócalo* (main plaza) lies where they intersect. An important street to know is **Real de Guadalupe,** which runs from the plaza eastward to the church of Guadalupe; located on it are many hotels and restaurants. The market is 7 blocks north of the *zócalo* along Utrilla.

Take note that this town has at least three streets named Domínguez and two streets named Flores. There are Hermanos Domínguez, Belisario Domínguez, and Pantaleón Domínguez; and María Adelina Flores and Dr. Felipe Flores.

GETTING AROUND Most of the sights and shopping in San Cristóbal are within walking distance of the plaza.

***Urbano* buses** (minibuses) take passengers between town and the residential neighborhoods. All buses pass by the market and central plaza on their way through town. Utrilla and Avenida 16 de Septiembre are the two main arteries; all buses use the market area as the last stop. Any bus on Utrilla will take you to the market.

Colectivos to outlying villages depart from the public market at Avenida Utrilla. Buses late in the day are usually very crowded. Always check to see when the last or next-to-last bus returns from wherever you're going, and then take the one before that—those last buses sometimes don't materialize, and you might be stranded. I speak from experience!

Rental cars come in handy for trips to the outlying villages and may be worth the expense when shared by a group, but keep in mind that insurance is invalid on unpaved roads. Try **Optima Car Rental,** Av. Mazariegos 39 (✆ **967/674-5409**). Office hours are daily from 9am to 1pm and 5 to 8pm. You'll save money by arranging the rental from your home country; otherwise, a day's rental with insurance will cost around 700 pesos for a VW Beetle with manual transmission, the cheapest car available.

Scooters can be rented from **Croozy Scooters** (✆ **967/631-4329**), at Belisario Domínguez 7-A. Passport and 500 pesos deposit required.

Bikes are another option for getting around the city; a day's rental is about 120 pesos. **Los Pingüinos,** Av. Ecuador 4-B (✆ **967/678-0202;** pinguinosmex@yahoo.com), offers bike tours to a few out-of-town locations. Tours in the valley around San Cristóbal last 4 to 6 hours and cost 300 to 400 pesos. It's open daily from 10am to 2:30pm and 4 to 7pm.

Fast Facts San Cristóbal de las Casas

Area Code The telephone area code is **967.**

ATMs San Cristóbal has a number of ATMs.

Currency Exchange There are at least five *casas de cambio* on Real de Guadalupe, near the main square, and a couple under the colonnade facing the square. Most are open until 8pm, and some are open Sunday.

Doctor Try **Dr. Roberto Lobato,** Av. Belisario Domínguez 17, at Calle Flavio A. Paniagua (✆ **967/678-7777**). Don't be unsettled by the fact that his office is next door to Funerales Canober.

Internet Access Internet cafes are everywhere.

Parking Use the underground public lot in front of the cathedral, just off the main square on 16 de Septiembre. Entry is from Calle 5 de Febrero.

Post Office The *correo* is at Crescencio Rosas and Cuauhtémoc, a block south and west of the main square. It's open Monday to Friday from 8am to 7pm, Saturday from 9am to 1pm.

Spanish Classes The **Centro Bilingüe,** at the Centro Cultural El Puente, Real de Guadalupe 55, 29250 San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chi. (✆ **800/303-4983** in the

U.S., or ✆/fax 967/678-3723), offers classes in Spanish and can arrange home stays for their students.

Weather San Cristóbal can be chilly when the sun isn't out, especially during the winter. It's 2,120m (6,954 ft.) above sea level. Most hotels are not heated, although some have fireplaces. There is always a possibility of rain, but I would avoid going to San Cristóbal from late August to late October, during the height of the rainy season.

EXPLORING SAN CRISTOBAL

San Cristóbal is a lovely town in a lovely region. A lot of people come for the beauty, but the main thing that draws most visitors here is the highland Maya. They can be seen anywhere in San Cristóbal, but most travelers take at least one trip to the outlying villages to get a close-up of Maya life.

Casa Na-Bolom ★ This is the old headquarters of anthropologists Frans and Trudy Blom, who made this little corner of the world their home and their passion. It became a gathering place for those studying in the region. Frans Blom (1893–1963) led many early archaeological studies in Mexico, and Trudy (1901–93) was noted for her photographs of the Lacandón Indians and her efforts to save them and their forest homeland. A room at Na-Bolom contains a selection of her Lacandón photographs, and postcards of the photographs are on sale in the gift shop (daily 9am–2pm and 4–7pm). The house is now a museum. A tour covers the displays of pre-Hispanic artifacts collected by Frans Blom; the cozy library, with its numerous volumes about the region and the Maya (weekdays 10am–2pm); and the gardens Trudy Blom started for the ongoing reforestation of the Lacandón jungle. The tour ends with a showing of *La Reina de la Selva,* an excellent 50-minute film on the Bloms, the Lacandón, and Na-Bolom.

The 17 guest rooms, named for surrounding villages, are decorated with local objects and textiles. All rooms have fireplaces and private bathrooms. Prices (including admission to the museum) are 970 to 1,110 pesos for a double; 1,250 to 1,520 pesos for a suite.

Even if you're not a guest here, you can come for a meal, usually an assortment of vegetarian and other dishes. Just be sure to make a reservation at least 2½ hours in advance, and be on time. The colorful dining room has one large table, and the eclectic mix of travelers sometimes makes for interesting conversation. Breakfast costs 60 pesos; lunch and dinner cost 150 pesos each. Dinner is served at 7pm. Following breakfast (8–10am), a guide not affiliated with the house offers tours to San Juan Chamula and Zinacantán (see "The Nearby Maya Villages & Countryside," below) on every day but Monday.

Av. Vicente Guerrero 33, 29200 San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chi. ✆ **967/678-1418.** Fax 967/678-5586. www.nabolom.org. Group tour and film 45 pesos. Tours daily 11:30am (Spanish only) and 4:30pm.

Catedral San Cristóbal's main cathedral was built in the 1500s. Make note of the interesting beamed ceiling and a carved wooden pulpit.

Calle 20 de Noviembre at Guadalupe Victoria. No phone. Free admission. Daily 7am–6pm.

El Mercado Once you've visited Santo Domingo (see listing below), meander through the San Cristóbal town market and the surrounding area. Every time I do, I see something different to elicit my curiosity.

By Santo Domingo church. No phone. Mon–Sat 8am–7pm.

Museo del Ambar If you've been in this town any time at all, you know what a big deal amber is here. Chiapas is the third-largest producer of amber in the world, and many experts prefer its amber for its colors and clarity. A couple of stores tried calling themselves museums, but they didn't fool anybody. Now a real museum moves methodically through all the issues surrounding amber—mining, shaping, and identifying it, as well as the different varieties found in other parts of the world. It's interesting, it's cheap, and you get to see the restored area of the old convent it occupies. There are a couple of beautiful pieces of worked amber that are on permanent loan—make sure you see them. In mid-August, the museum holds a contest for local artisans who work amber; they do remarkable work.

Exconvento de la Merced, Diego de Mazariegos s/n. ✆ **967/678-9716.** Admission 25 pesos. Tues–Sun 10am–2pm and 4–7pm.

Museo Templo y Convento Santo Domingo Inside the front door of the carved-stone facade is a beautiful gilded wooden altarpiece built in 1560, walls with saints, and gilt-framed paintings. Attached to the church is the former Convent of Santo Domingo, now a small museum about San Cristóbal and Chiapas. It has changing exhibits and often shows cultural films. It's 5 blocks north of the *zócalo,* in the market area.

Av. 20 de Noviembre. ✆ **967/678-1609.** Free admission to church; museum 41 pesos. Museum Tues–Sun 9am–6pm; church daily 10am–2pm and 5–8pm.

Palacio de las Bellas Artes Bellas Artes periodically hosts dance events, art shows, and other performances. The schedule of events is usually posted on the door if the Bellas Artes is not open. A public library is next door. Around the corner, the Centro Cultural holds concerts and other performances; check the posters on the door to see what's scheduled.

Av. Hidalgo, 4 blocks south of the plaza. No phone.

Templo de San Cristóbal For the best view of San Cristóbal, climb the seemingly endless steps to this church and *mirador* (lookout point). A visit here requires stamina. There are 22 more churches in town, some of which also demand strenuous climbs.

At the very end of Calle Hermanos Domínguez.

Horseback Riding

The **Casa de Huéspedes Margarita,** Real de Guadalupe 34, can arrange horseback rides for around 150 to 180 pesos, including a guide. The excursions are around 4½ hours long. Reserve your steed at least a day in advance. Possible places to visit might include San Juan Chamula, some nearby caves, or some of the outlying hills, depending upon interest.

Tips Recommended Books

The People of the Bat: Mayan Tales and Dreams from Zinacantán, by Robert M. Laughlin, is a priceless collection of beliefs from that village near San Cristóbal. Another good book with a completely different view of today's Maya is ***The Heart of the Sky,*** by Peter Canby, who traveled among the Maya to chronicle their struggles (and wrote his book before the Zapatista uprising).

The Nearby Maya Villages & Countryside

The Indian communities around San Cristóbal are fascinating worlds unto themselves. If you are unfamiliar with these indigenous cultures, you will understand and appreciate more of what you see by visiting them with a guide, at least for your first foray out into the villages. Guides are acquainted with members of the communities and are viewed with less suspicion than newcomers. These communities have their own laws and customs—and visitors' ignorance is no excuse. Entering these communities is tantamount to leaving Mexico, and if something happens, the state and federal authorities will not intervene except in case of a serious crime.

The best guided trips are the locally grown ones. Three operators go to the neighboring villages in small groups. They all charge the same price (175 pesos per person), use minivans for transportation, and speak English. They do, however, have their own interpretations and focus.

Pepe and Ramiro leave from **Casa Na-Bolom** (see above) for daily trips to San Juan Chamula and Zinacantán at 10am, returning to San Cristóbal between 2 and 3pm. They look at cultural continuities, community relationships, and religion.

Alex and Raúl can be found in front of the cathedral between 9:15 and 9:30am. They are quite personable and get along well with the Indians in the communities. They focus on cultural values and their expression in social behavior, which provides a glimpse of the details and the texture of life in these communities (and, of course, they talk about religion). Their tour is very good. They can be reached at ✆ **967/678-3741** or chamul@hotmail.com.

For excursions farther afield, see "Road Trips from San Cristóbal," later in this chapter. Also, Alex and Raúl can be contracted for trips to other communities besides Chamula and Zinacantán; talk to them.

CHAMULA & ZINACANTÁN A side trip to the village of San Juan Chamula will get you into the spirit of life around San Cristóbal. Sunday, when the market is in full swing, is the best day to go for shopping; other days, when you'll be less impeded by eager children selling their crafts, are better for seeing the village and church.

The village, 8km (5 miles) northeast of San Cristóbal, has a large church, a plaza, and a municipal building. Each year, a new group of citizens is chosen to live in the municipal center as caretakers of the saints, settlers of disputes, and enforcers of village rules. As in other nearby villages, on Sunday local leaders wear their leadership costumes, including beautifully woven straw hats loaded with colorful ribbons befitting their high position. They solemnly sit together in a long line somewhere around the central square. Chamula is typical of other villages, in that men are often away working in the "hot lands," harvesting coffee or cacao, while women stay home to tend the sheep, the children, the cornfields, and the fires.

Don't leave Chamula without seeing the **church interior.** As you step from bright sunlight into the candlelit interior, you feel as if you've been transported to another country. Pine needles scattered amid a sea of lighted candles cover the tile floor. Saints line the walls, and before them people are often kneeling and praying aloud while passing around bottles of Pepsi-Cola. Shamans are often on hand, passing eggs over sick people or using live or dead chickens in a curing ritual. The statues of saints are similar to those you might see in any Mexican Catholic church, but beyond sharing the same name, they mean something completely different to the Chamulas. Visitors can walk carefully through the church to see the saints or stand quietly in the background.

Just to the south, in Zinacantán, a wealthier village than Chamula, you must sign a strict form promising *not to take any photographs* before you see the two side-by-side **sanctuaries.** Once permission is granted and you have paid a small fee, an escort will usually show you the church, or you may be allowed to see it on your own. Floors may be covered in pine needles here, too, and the rooms are brightly sunlit. The experience is an altogether different one from that of Chamula. You may be approached by children who will offer to show you to their home where their female relatives will most likely be weaving or working at some other craft.

AMATENANGO DEL VALLE About an hour's ride south of San Cristóbal is Amatenango, a town known mostly for its **women potters.** You'll see their work in San Cristóbal—small animals, jars, and large water jugs—but in the village, you can visit the potters in their homes. Just walk down the dirt streets. Villagers will lean over the walls of family compounds and invite you in to select from their inventory. You may even see them firing the pieces under piles of wood in the open courtyard or painting them with color derived from rusty iron water. The women wear beautiful red-and-yellow *huipiles,* but if you want to take a photograph, you'll have to pay. To get here, take a *colectivo* from the market in San Cristóbal. Before it lets you off, be sure to ask about the return-trip schedule.

AGUACATENANGO This village, 16km (10 miles) south of Amatenango, is known for its **embroidery.** If you've visited San Cristóbal's shops, you'll recognize the white-on-white and black-on-black floral patterns on dresses and blouses for sale. The locals' own regional blouses, however, are quite different.

TENEJAPA The **weavers** of Tenejapa, 28km (17 miles) northeast from San Cristóbal, make some of the most beautiful and expensive work you'll see in the region. The best time to visit is on market day (Sun and Thurs, though Sun is better). The weavers of Tenejapa taught the weavers of San Andrés and Magdalena—which accounts for the similarity in their designs and colors. To get to Tenejapa, try to find a *colectivo* in the very last row by the market, or hire a taxi. On Tenejapa's main street, several stores sell locally woven regional clothing, and you can bargain for the price.

THE HUITEPEC CLOUD FOREST **Pronatura,** Av. Benito Juárez 11-B (✆ **967/678-5000**), a private, nonprofit, ecological organization, offers environmentally sensitive tours of the cloud forest. The forest is a haven for **migratory birds,** and more than 100 bird species and 600 plant species have been discovered here. Guided tours run from 9am to noon Tuesday to Sunday. They cost 250 pesos per group of up to eight people. Make reservations a day in advance. To reach the reserve on your own, take the Chamula road north; the turnoff is at Km 3.5. The reserve is open Tuesday to Sunday from 9am to 4pm.

SHOPPING

Many Indian villages near San Cristóbal are noted for **weaving, embroidery, brocade work, leather,** and **pottery,** making the area one of the best in the country for shopping. You'll see beautiful woolen shawls, indigo-dyed skirts, colorful native shirts, and magnificently woven *huipiles,* all of which often come in vivid geometric patterns. A good place to find textiles as well as other handicrafts, besides what's mentioned below, is in and around Santo Domingo and the market. The stalls and small shops in that neighborhood make for interesting shopping. Working in leather, the craftspeople are artisans of the highest caliber. Tie-dyed *jaspe* from Guatemala comes in bolts and is made into clothing. The town is also known for **amber,** sold in several shops; two of the best are mentioned below.

For the best selection of new and used books and reading material in English, go to **La Pared,** Andador Eclesiásticos 13 (✆ **967/678-6367**). The owners keep a large collection of books on the Maya, and Mexico in general, both fiction and nonfiction. Hours are Monday through Saturday 10am to 7:30pm.

Crafts

El Encuentro The owner has been in business for more than 50 years and has quite a list of local artisans who sell her merchandise. She specializes in textiles, but also sells other forms of handicrafts, such as work made with agave fibers, forged iron, carved wood, or shaped tin. The store is open Monday to Saturday from 9am to 8pm. Calle Real de Guadalupe 63-A (btw. Dugelay and Colón). ✆ **967/678-3698.**

La Galería This art gallery beneath a cafe shows the work of national and international painters. Also for sale are paintings and greeting cards by Kiki, the owner, a German artist who has found her niche in San Cristóbal. There are some Oaxacan rugs and pottery, plus unusual silver jewelry. It's open daily from 10am to 9pm. Hidalgo 3. ✆ **967/674-7273.**

Lágrimas de la Selva "Tears of the Jungle" deals in amber and jewelry, and few shops have the variety, quality, or artistic flair of this one. It's not a bargain hunter's turf, but a great place for the curious to go. Often you can watch the jewelers in action. Open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 8pm, Sunday from noon to 8pm. Hidalgo 1-C (half-block south of the main square). ✆ **967/674-6348.**

Piedra Escondida This is another excellent choice for out-of-the-ordinary amber and jewelry. Open daily from 8:30am to 8pm. 20 de Noviembre 22. No phone.

Tienda Chiapas This showroom has examples of every craft practiced in the state. It is run by the government in support of Indian crafts. You should take a look, if only to survey what crafts the region practices. It's open Monday to Friday from 9am to 9pm, Saturday 10am to 8pm, and Sunday 10am to 2pm. Niños Héroes at Hidalgo. ✆ **967/678-1180.**

Textiles

El Telar "The Loom" sells textiles all handmade in San Cristóbal, and most are from the store's workshop, which you can visit in the northwest part of town, next to the hotel Rincón del Arco. It specializes in textiles made on large floor looms. Open Monday to Saturday from 9am to 2pm and 4 to 8pm. Calle 28 de Agosto 3 (next door to Hotel Casa Mexicana). ✆ **967/678-4422.** www.eltelar.com.mx.

Plaza de Santo Domingo The plazas around this church and the nearby Templo de Caridad fill with women in native garb selling their wares. Here you'll find women from Chamula weaving belts or embroidering, surrounded by piles of loomed woolen textiles from their village. Their inventory includes Guatemalan shawls, belts, and bags. There are also some excellent buys on Chiapanecan-made wool vests, jackets, rugs, and shawls, similar to those at Sna Jolobil (described below), if you take the time to look and bargain. Vendors arrive between 9 and 10am and begin to leave around 3pm. Av. Utrilla. No phone.

Sna Jolobil Meaning "weaver's house" in Mayan, this place is in the former convent (monastery) of Santo Domingo, next to the church of Santo Domingo. Groups of Tzotzil and Tzeltal craftspeople operate the cooperative store, which has about 3,000 members who contribute products, help run the store, and share in the moderate profits. You'll

find some elegant *huipiles* and other weavings; prices are high, as is the quality. It's open Monday to Saturday from 9am to 2pm and 4 to 6pm; credit cards are accepted. Calzada Lázaro Cárdenas 42 (Plaza Santo Domingo, btw. Navarro and Nicaragua). ✆ **967/678-2646.**

Unión Regional de Artesanías de los Altos Also known as J'pas Joloviletic, this cooperative of weavers is smaller than Sna Jolobil (described above) and not as sophisticated in its approach to potential shoppers. It sells blouses, textiles, pillow covers, vests, sashes, napkins, baskets, and purses. It's near the market and worth looking around. Open Monday to Saturday from 9am to 2pm and 4 to 7pm, Sunday from 9am to 1pm. Av. Utrilla 43. ✆ **967/678-2848.**

WHERE TO STAY

Among the most interesting places to stay in town is the seminary-turned-hotel-and-museum **Casa Na-Bolom** (p. 664).

Hotels in San Cristóbal are inexpensive. You can do tolerably well for $50 to $70 per night per double. Rates listed here include taxes. High season is Easter week, July, August, and December.

Expensive

Parador San Juan de Dios ★★ This is the handsomest property in San Cristóbal. It's located in the north end of town in some old buildings that belonged to a 17th-century farm. The rooms are large, plush, and distinctive, with something of the air of the old adobe and stone buildings. Most have fireplaces and period pieces mixed with a few modern comforts. Bathrooms are large and beautifully finished. In the suites they include Jacuzzi tubs. Most rooms also come with their own stone terraces (and in some cases two terraces), which afford views of the extensive grounds. The hotel is a long walk or short taxi ride from the main square.

Calzada Roberta 16, Col. 31 de Marzo, 29229 San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chi. ✆/fax **967/678-1167,** -4290. www.sanjuandios.com. 12 units. High season 1,800 pesos double, 3,300–4650 pesos suite; low season 1,600 pesos double, 2,200–4100 pesos suite. AE, MC, V. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Moderate

Casa de los Arcángeles (Value) The owner of a large courtyard restaurant decided to convert the rooms surrounding the courtyard into hotel rooms. This kind of afterthought is often a recipe for disaster, but it works in this case. The rooms, each with a queen-size bed, are large, comfortable, attractive, and well priced. The restaurant closes early so noise isn't a factor, and the location just south of the main square is excellent.

Cuauhtémoc 4, 29200 San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chi. ✆ **967/678-1531,** -1936. casadelosarcangeles@hotmail.com. 7 units. 950–1,100 pesos double. Rates include full breakfast. MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Casa Felipe Flores ★ This beautifully restored colonial house is the perfect setting for getting a feel for San Cristóbal. The patios and common rooms are relaxing and comfortable, and their architectural details are so very *coleto.* The guest rooms are nicely furnished and full of character and are heated in winter. The owners, Nancy and David Orr, enjoy sharing their appreciation and knowledge of Chiapas and the Maya.

Calle Dr. Felipe Flores 36, 29230 San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chi. ✆/fax **967/678-3996.** www.felipeflores.com. 5 units. $95–$125 double. Rates include full breakfast. 10% service charge. No credit cards. Limited street parking. **Amenities:** Library. *In room:* No phone.

Hotel Casa Mexicana ★ This colonial hotel with well-manicured courtyards offers attractive, comfortable lodging. The management is attentive and keeps the property looking sharp. Service is great. The standard rooms are carpeted and come with two double beds or one king-size. They have good lighting, electric heaters, and spacious bathrooms. Across the street in another colonial house are several suites that are much larger and have distinctive clay tile floors and larger bathrooms. The hotel handles many tour groups; it can be quiet and peaceful one day, full and bustling the next.

28 de Agosto 1 (at General Utrilla), 29200 San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chi. ✆ **967/678-1348,** -0698. Fax 967/678-2627. www.hotelcasamexicana.com. 55 units. High season $105 double, $160 junior suite, $180 suite; low season $85 double, $140 junior suite, $170 suite. AE, MC, V. Free secure parking 1½ blocks away. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; room service; sauna; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Hotel Casavieja Unlike Casa Mexicana, this old colonial house has retained some of the original creakiness, at least in the original section. Most of the rooms, however, are in the new section, where construction has been faithful to the original design in essentials such as wood-beam ceilings. Half the rooms have carpeted floors, and half have tile or laminate flooring. Rooms are medium size and not brightly lit. Some have smallish bathrooms.

María Adelina Flores 27 (btw. Cristóbal Colón and Diego Dugelay), 29200 San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chi. ✆/fax **967/678-6868,** -0385. www.casavieja.com.mx. 40 units. 780–1,100 pesos double; 1,100–1,350 pesos junior suite. Internet specials often available. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar. *In room:* TV, Wi-Fi.

Mansión de los Angeles This colonial hotel is clean and attractive. Guest rooms are medium size and come with either a single and a double bed or two double beds. They are more attractive, warmer, and better lit than most hotels in this town. They are also quiet. Some of the bathrooms are small. Most rooms have windows that open onto a pretty courtyard with a fountain. The rooftop sun deck is a great siesta spot.

Calle Francisco Madero 17, 29200 San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chi. ✆ **967/678-1173,** -4371. www.hotelmansiondelosangeles.com. 20 units. 600–800 pesos double. MC, V. Limited street parking. *In room:* TV.

Inexpensive

Hotel Don Quijote Value Rooms in this three-story hotel (no elevator) are small but quiet, carpeted, and well lit, but a little worn. All have two double beds with reading lamps over them, tiled bathrooms, and plenty of hot water. There's complimentary coffee in the mornings.

Cristóbal Colón 7 (near Real de Guadalupe), 29200 San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chi. ✆ **967/678-0920.** Fax 967/678-0346. 25 units. 250–350 pesos double. MC, V. Free parking 1 block away. *In room:* TV.

Hotel Palacio de Moctezuma The rooms in this three-story hotel have windows facing one of the two courtyards. They are quiet, minimally furnished, carpeted, and poorly lit. Most are medium size and come with two double beds, but a few are large. On the third floor is a solarium with comfortable tables and chairs and a view of the city.

Juárez 16 (at León), 29200 San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chi. ✆ **967/678-0352,** -1142. Fax 967/678-1536. 48 units. 300–500 pesos double. MC, V. Free limited parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Hotel Posada La Media Luna Value A modern two-story hotel in the downtown area with medium-size, attractive rooms for a good price. The bathrooms are larger than the norm, and the staff is helpful and friendly, and some speak English.

Hermanos Domínguez 5, 29200 San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chi. ✆ **967/631-5590.** www.hotel-lamedialuna.com. 11 units. 350 pesos double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant. *In room:* TV, no phone, Wi-Fi.

WHERE TO DINE

San Cristóbal is not known for its cuisine, but you can eat well at several restaurants. For baked goods, try the **Panadería La Hojaldra,** Insurgentes 14 (✆ **967/678-4286**). It's a traditional Mexican bakery that's open daily from 8am to 9:30pm. (It will move 1 block south sometime in late 2010/early 2011.) In addition to the restaurants listed below, consider making reservations for dinner at **Casa Na-Bolom** (p. 664).

Moderate

El Edén ★ INTERNATIONAL This is a small, quiet restaurant inside the Hotel El Paraíso where the food and service are consistently good, better than in most restaurants in San Cristóbal. The steaks are tender, and the margaritas are especially dangerous (one is all it takes). Specialties include Swiss cheese fondue for two, Edén salad, and brochettes.

In the Hotel El Paraíso, Av. 5 de Febrero 19. ✆ **967/678-5382.** Breakfast 35–55 pesos; main courses 60–150 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 8am–10:30pm.

La Paloma ★ INTERNATIONAL/MEXICAN La Paloma I particularly like in the evening because the lighting is so well done. For starters, I enjoyed the quesadillas Mexico City style (small fried packets of *masa* stuffed with a variety of fillings). Don't make my mistake of trying to share them with your dinner companion—it will only lead to trouble. Mexican classics include *albóndigas en chipotle* (meatballs in a thick chipotle sauce), Oaxacan black *mole,* and a variety of chiles rellenos. Avoid the *profiteroles.* Live music nightly 9 to 10:30pm.

Hidalgo 3. ✆ **967/678-1547.** Main courses 100–140 pesos. MC, V. Daily 9am–midnight.

Pierre FRENCH Who would have thought that you could get good French food in San Cristóbal? And yet Frenchman Pierre Niviere offers an appealing selection of traditional French dishes, simplified and tweaked for the tropical surroundings. I showed up on a Sunday, enjoyed the fixed menu, and left well satisfied.

Real de Guadalupe 73. ✆ **967/678-7211.** Main courses 150–200 pesos; Sun fixed menu 130 pesos. No credit cards. Fri–Wed 1:30–10pm.

Inexpensive

Emiliano's Moustache Finds MEXICAN/TACOS Like any right-thinking traveler, I initially avoided this place on account of its unpromising name and some cartoonlike figures by the door. But a conversation with some local folk overcame my prejudice and tickled my sense of irony. Sure enough, the place was crowded with *coletos* enjoying the restaurant's popular *comida corrida.* You can choose from a menu of taco plates (a mixture of fillings cooked together and served with tortillas and a variety of hot sauces). Live music Thursday through Saturday.

Crescencio Rosas 7. ✆ **967/678-7246.** Main courses 70–90 pesos; taco plates 40–50 pesos; *comida corrida* 48 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 8am–midnight.

La Casa del Pan Papalotl VEGETARIAN This place is best known for its vegetarian lunch buffet with salad bar. The vegetables and most of the grains are organic. Kippy, the owner, has a home garden and a field near town where she grows vegetables. She buys locally grown, organic red wheat for her breads. These are all sourdough breads, which she likes because she feels they are easily digested and have good texture and taste. The pizzas are a popular item. The restaurant shares space with other activities in the cultural center El Puente, which has gallery space, a language school, and cinema.

Real de Guadalupe 55 (btw. Diego Dugelay and Cristóbal Colón). ✆ **967/678-7215.** Main courses 50–70 pesos; pizzas 50–140 pesos; lunch buffet 60–70 pesos. No credit cards. Mon–Sat 9am–10pm (lunch buffet 2–5pm).

Namandí INTERNATIONAL/REGIONAL If you're looking for a light meal or snack this place would be the perfect choice. Excellent-quality fair-trade coffee and delicious Mexican items such as enchiladas or tostadas. The crepes are excellent, but on my last visit I really enjoyed the local tamales, which were delicious and different. The restaurant space is modern, light, and airy.

Mazarriegos 16. ✆ **967/678-8054.** Crepes, salads, and sandwiches 40–75 pesos; breakfasts 35–50 pesos. MC, V. Mon–Sat 8am–11:30pm; Sun 8:30am–11pm.

Normita's MEXICAN Normita's is famous for its *pozole,* a chicken and hominy soup to which you add extra ingredients at the table. It also offers cheap, short-order Mexican mainstays. This is a "people's" restaurant; the open kitchen takes up one corner of the room, the rest of which is filled with simple tables and chairs.

Av. Juárez 6 (at Dr. José Flores). No phone. Breakfast 30–40 pesos; *pozole* 35 pesos; tacos 30 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 7am–11pm.

Restaurant Tuluc Value MEXICAN/INTERNATIONAL The owner hails from Puebla, but learned the restaurant business in Germany and Belgium. On my visits I often see him attending to his customers. The house specialty is *filete Tuluc,* a beef filet wrapped around spinach and cheese served with fried potatoes and green beans; while not the best cut of meat, it's certainly priced right. The *tampiqueña* steak, served with a plethora of sides, is certainly good and filling. The Chiapaneco breakfast is a filling quartet of juice, toast, two Chiapanecan tamales, and coffee. Lighter favorites include the sandwiches and enchiladas.

Av. Insurgentes 5 (btw. Cuauhtémoc and Francisco León). ✆ **967/678-2090.** Breakfast 35–50 pesos; main courses 68–85 pesos; *comida corrida* (served 2–5pm) 65 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 7am–10pm.

Coffeehouses

Because Chiapas-grown coffee is highly regarded, it's not surprising that coffeehouses proliferate here. Most are concealed in the nooks and crannies of San Cristóbal's side streets. Try **Café La Selva,** Crescencio Rosas 9 (✆ **967/678-7244**), for coffee served in all its varieties and brewed from organic beans; it is open daily from 9am to 11pm. A more traditional-style cafe, where locals meet to talk over the day's news, is **Café San Cristóbal,** Cuauhtémoc 1 (✆ **967/678-3861**), between Hidalgo and Insurgentes. It's open daily 7:30am to 10pm, Sunday from 9am to 9pm.

SAN CRISTOBAL AFTER DARK

San Cristóbal is blessed with a variety of nightlife, both resident and migratory. There is a lot of live music, surprisingly good and varied. The bars and restaurants are cheap. And they are easy to get to: You can hit all the places mentioned here without setting foot in a cab. Weekends are best, but on any night you'll find something going on.

Almost all the clubs in San Cristóbal host Latin music of one genre or another. **El Cocodrilo** (✆ **967/678-1140**), on the main plaza in the Hotel Santa Clara, has acoustic performers playing Latin folk music *(trova, andina)* from 9 to 11pm daily. Relax at a table in what usually is a not-too-crowded environment. After that, your choices vary. One of the two most popular bars is **Café Bar Revolución** (✆ **967/678-6664**), on the

pedestrian-only 20 de Noviembre at 1 de Marzo. It has two live acts every night—usually blues, reggae, Latin, or rock, and always rock on Saturday nights. Usually it winds down around midnight. For Latin dance music, there's a club on the corner of Madero and Juárez, called **Latino's** (✆ **967/678-9972**)—good bands playing a mix of salsa, merengue, and cumbia. On weekends it gets crowded, but it has a good-size dance floor. There's a small cover on weekends. The place is dark and has a bit of an urban edge to it. For a relaxing place to have a drink, try the bar at the **Hotel Posada Real de Chiapas.** It's across the street from Latino's. There's a piano player on Saturdays, and soft recorded music the rest of the week.

ROAD TRIPS FROM SAN CRISTOBAL

For excursions to nearby villages, see "The Nearby Maya Villages & Countryside," earlier in this chapter; for destinations farther away, there are several local travel agencies. But first you should try **Alex and Raúl** (p. 666). You can also try **ATC Travel and Tours,** Calle 5 de Febrero 15, at the corner of 16 de Septiembre (✆ **967/678-2550;** fax 967/678-3145), across from El Fogón restaurant. The agency has bilingual guides and reliable vehicles. ATC regional tours focus on birds and orchids, textiles, hiking, and camping.

Strangely, the cost of the trips includes a driver but not necessarily a bilingual guide or guided information of any kind. You pay extra for those services, so when checking prices, be sure to flesh out the details.

Palenque, Bonampak & Yaxchilán

For information on these destinations, see the section on Palenque, earlier in this chapter.

Chincultic Ruins, Comitán & Montebello National Park

Almost 160km (99 miles) southeast of San Cristóbal, near the border with Guatemala, is the **Chincultic** archaeological site and **Montebello National Park,** with 16 multicolored lakes and exuberant pine-forest vegetation. Seventy-four kilometers (46 miles) from San Cristóbal is **Comitán,** a pretty hillside town of 40,000 inhabitants known for its flower cultivation and a sugar cane–based liquor called *comiteco.* It's also the last big town along the Pan-American Highway before the Guatemalan border.

The Chincultic ruins, a late Classic site, have barely been excavated, but the main **acropolis,** high up against a cliff, is magnificent to see from below and is worth the walk up for the view. After passing through the gate, you'll see the trail ahead; it passes ruins on both sides. More unexcavated tree-covered ruins flank steep stairs leading up the mountain to the acropolis. From there, you can gaze upon distant Montebello lakes and miles of cornfields and forest. The paved road to the lakes passes six lakes, all different colors and sizes, ringed by cool pine forests; most have parking lots and lookouts. The paved road ends at a small restaurant. The lakes are best seen on a sunny day, when their famous brilliant colors are optimal.

Most travel agencies in San Cristóbal offer a daylong trip that includes the lakes, the ruins, lunch in Comitán, and a stop in the pottery-making village of Amatenango del Valle. If you're driving, follow Hwy. 190 south from San Cristóbal through the pretty village of Teopisca and then through Comitán; turn left at La Trinitaria, where there's a sign to the lakes. After the Trinitaria turnoff and before you reach the lakes, there's a sign pointing left down a narrow dirt road to the Chincultic ruins.

4 TUXTLA GUTIERREZ

82km (51 miles) W of San Cristóbal; 277km (172 miles) S of Villahermosa; 242km (150 miles) NW of Ciudad Cuauhtémoc on the Guatemalan border

Tuxtla Gutiérrez (altitude 557m/1,827 ft.) is the commercial center of Chiapas. Coffee is the basis of the region's economy, along with recent oil discoveries. Tuxtla (pop. 350,000) is a business town, and not a particularly attractive one. Most travelers simply pass through Tuxtla on their way to San Cristóbal, the Sumidero Canyon, or Oaxaca.

ESSENTIALS

Getting There & Departing

BY PLANE Tuxtla's airport (airport code: TGZ) is 45 minutes south of the city. There is taxi service at the airport. With the demise of **Aviacsa,** air traffic has declined. **Mexicana** (✆ **01-800/801-2030** in Mexico) and its subsidiary, **Click** (✆ **01-800/122-5425** in Mexico), have nonstop flights to and from Mexico City, Oaxaca, and Mérida.

BY CAR From Oaxaca, you'll enter Tuxtla by Hwy. 190. From Villahermosa, or Palenque and San Cristóbal, you'll enter at the opposite end of town on the same highway from the east. In both cases, you'll arrive at the large main square at the center of town, La Plaza Cívica (see "City Layout," below).

From Tuxtla to Villahermosa, take Hwy. 190 east past the town of Chiapa de Corzo; soon you'll see a sign for Hwy. 195 north to Villahermosa. To San Cristóbal and Palenque, take Hwy. 190 east. The road is beautiful but tortuous. It's in good repair to San Cristóbal, but there may be bad spots between San Cristóbal and Palenque. The trip from Tuxtla to Villahermosa takes 8 hours by car; the scenery is beautiful.

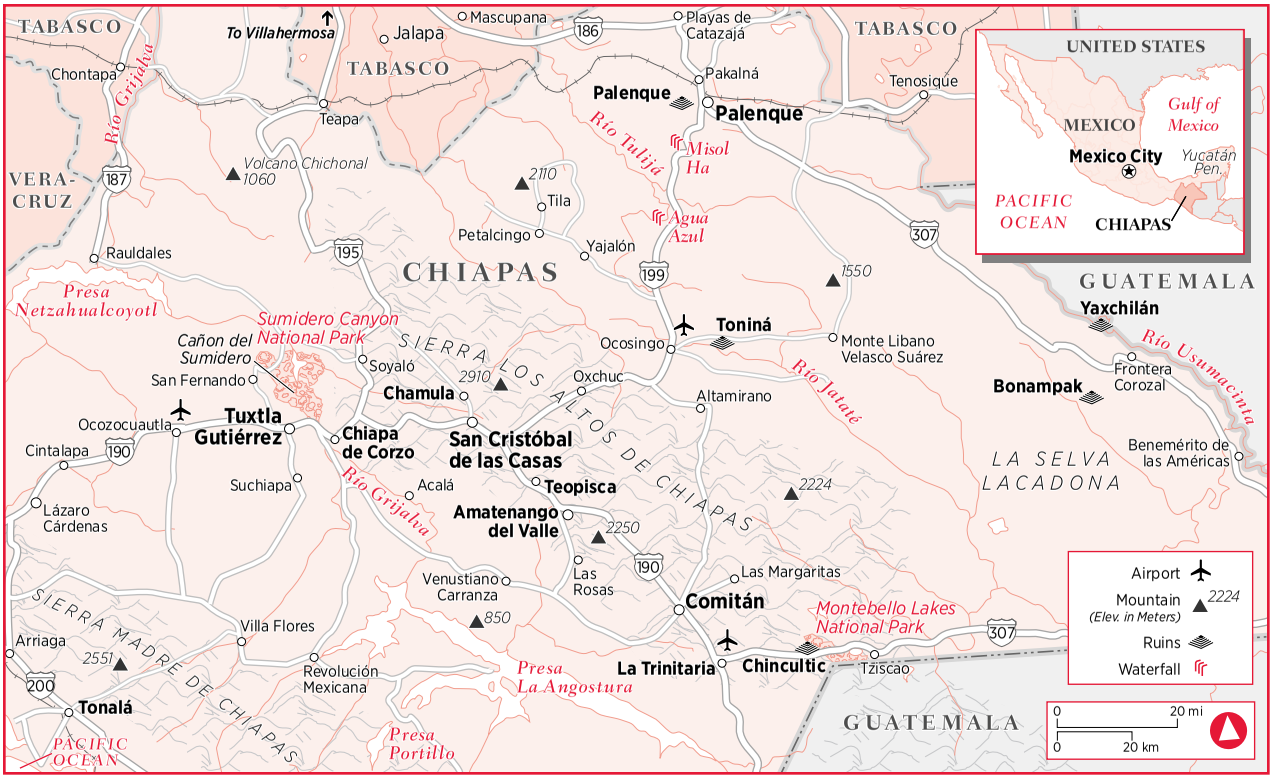
BY BUS The **ADO bus station** (✆ **961/612-2624**) is a mile northwest of the city center on Avenida 5 Norte Poniente, at the Plaza del Sol. There are eight buses a day to Villahermosa, three or four buses a day to Oaxaca, and five to Palenque. There's usually no need to buy a ticket ahead of time, except during holidays. Small buses (microbuses) to San Cristóbal leave every 5 to 15 minutes from the station at the intersection of Avenida 4 Sur and Calle 15 Oriente.

Orientation

ARRIVING There is taxi service from the airport to town (220 pesos) and taxi service at the bus station.

VISITOR INFORMATION Information desks are on the main square and on Avenida Central across from Parque de la Marimba. They are open daily from 9am to 2pm and from 4 to 8pm. Some staff speak English and can provide good maps.

CITY LAYOUT Tuxtla is laid out on a grid. The main street, **Avenida Central,** is the east-west axis and is the artery through town for Hwy. 190. West of the central district, it's called **Bulevar Belisario Domínguez,** and in the east, it's **Bulevar Angel Albino Corzo. Calle Central** is the north-south axis. The rest of the streets have names that include one number and two directions. This tells you how to get to the street. For example, to find the street 5 Norte Poniente (5 North West), you walk 5 blocks north from the center of town and turn west. To find 3 Oriente Sur, you walk 3 blocks east from the main square and turn south. When people indicate intersections, they can shorten the names because it's redundant.


TABASCO
To Villahermosa
Jalapa
Mascupana
186
Playas de Catazajá
TABASCO
Chontapa
Río Grijalva
Teapa
TABASCO
Pakalná
Palenque
Palenque
Tenosique
Río Tulijá
Misol Ha
Volcano Chichonal
1060
2110
Tila
VERA-CRUZ
187
Agua Azul
Petalcingo
Yajalón
307
Rauldales
195
CHIAPAS
199
1550
Presa Netzahualcoyotl
Sumidero Canyon National Park
Cañon del Sumidero
SIERRA LOS ALTOS DE CHIAPAS
Ocosingo
Toniná
Monte Libano Velasco Suárez
GUATEMALA
Yaxchilán
Río Usumacinta
Soyaló
2910
Oxchuc
Frontera Corozal
San Fernando
Chamula
Altamirano
Río Jataté
Bonampak
Ocozocuautla
Tuxtla Gutiérrez
Chiapa de Corzo
San Cristóbal de las Casas
Benemérito de las Américas
Cintalapa
190
LA SELVA LACADONA
Suchiapa
Acalá
Teopisca
2224
Río Grijalva
Lázaro Cárdenas
Amatenango del Valle
2250
Las Rosas
190
Venustiano Carranza
Las Margaritas
Comitán
Montebello Lakes National Park
SIERRA MADRE DE CHIAPAS
850
Villa Flores
307
Arriaga
2551
Revolución Mexicana
Presa La Angostura
La Trinitaria
Chincultic
Tziscao
200
Tonalá
GUATEMALA
PACIFIC OCEAN
Presa Portillo
UNITED STATES
Gulf of Mexico
MEXICO
Mexico City
Yucatán Pen.
PACIFIC OCEAN
CHIAPAS
Airport
Mountain
(Elev. in Meters)
2224
Ruins
Waterfall
0
20 mi
0
20 km

GETTING AROUND Taking taxis is the easiest way to get around in this city. They are plentiful and easy to come by. **Buses** to all parts of the city converge upon the Plaza Cívica along Calle Central.

FAST FACTS The telephone **area code** is **961.** If you need medical help, the best **clinic** in town is Sanatorio Rojas, Calle 2 Sur Poniente 1847 (✆ **961/611-2079** or 612-5414).

EXPLORING TUXTLA

Miguel Alvarez del Toro Zoo (ZOOMAT) Located in the forest called El Zapotal, ZOOMAT is one of the best zoos in Mexico. The collection of animals and birds indigenous to this area gives the visitor a tangible sense of what the wilds of Chiapas are like. The zoo keeps jaguars, howler monkeys, owls, and many more exotic animals in roomy cages that replicate their home terrain; the whole zoo is so deeply buried in vegetation that you can almost pretend you're in a natural habitat. Unlike at other zoos I've visited, the animals are almost always on view.

Bulevar Samuel León Brinois, southeast of downtown. No phone. 20 pesos general admission. Tues–Sun 9am–5:30pm. The zoo is about 8km (5 miles) southeast of downtown; catch a bus along Av. Central and at the Calzada.

SHOPPING

The government-operated **Instituto Marca Chiapas,** Bl. Domínguez 2035 (✆ **961/602-9800**), endeavors to support artisans and promote the crafts from all parts of the state. The store is subsidized, making the prices here quite reasonable. The two stories of rooms feature an extensive collection of crafts grouped by region and type from throughout the state of Chiapas. It's open Monday to Saturday from 9am to 8pm and Sunday from 10am to 2pm.

WHERE TO STAY

As Tuxtla booms, the center of the hotel industry has moved out of town, west to Hwy. 190. You'll notice the new motel-style hotels, such as the **Hotel Flamboyán, Palace Inn, Hotel Laganja,** and **La Hacienda.**

Camino Real Tuxtla Gutiérrez ★★ Bold modern architecture is the hallmark of the Camino Real chain, and this one is no exception, with stark lines and bright colors. This one makes subtle references to the Maya culture and the local region. The center of the hotel is open-air and filled with a spot of jungle, a small cascade, and tropical birds flying freely about. This is a relaxing hotel; walking to and from your room, you hear bird song and the falling of water. Guest rooms have two doubles or a king and are carpeted and comfortably furnished. Bathrooms are large.

Bulevar Domínguez 1159, 29060 Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chi. ✆ **800/7CAMINO** (226466) in the U.S. or Canada, or 961/617-7777. Fax 961/617-7779. 210 units. 2,200 pesos double; 2,600 pesos and up suite. Internet promotions often available. AE, MC, V. Free secured parking. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; babysitting; concierge; executive floor; health club and spa; outdoor pool; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Hotel María Eugenia This is a centrally located, well-managed property with plain, medium-size rooms. The white walls and white ceramic tile make them seem even plainer, but clean and uncluttered. Beds have comfortable mattresses and come either as two doubles or one king. There is good space for luggage.

Av. Central Oriente 507, 29000 Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chi. ✆ **961/613-3767** or 01-800/716-0149 in Mexico. 83 units. 800 pesos double. AE, MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; outdoor pool; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, Wi-Fi.

Hotel Regional San Marcos For a discount hotel, this was the best I could find in central Tuxtla. It's in the downtown zone and close to the *colectivos* that go to Chiapa de Corzo. Rooms are distributed on four floors (no elevator). They are medium in size but not too depressing. The air-conditioning window units can be a bit noisy.

1 Sur Oriente 176 (at Av. 4 Oriente), 29000 Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chi. ✆ **961/613-1940,** -1887. hotelsanmarcos@prodigy.net.mx. 40 units. 409 pesos double. MC, V. *In room:* A/C, TV, Wi-Fi.

WHERE TO DINE

For a full sit-down meal, you can try local Chiapan food at **Las Pichanchas,** Av. Central Oriente 837 (✆ **961/612-5351**). It's festively decorated and pretty to look at. The emphasis is on meat, with several heavy dishes on the menu. I would recommend the *filete simojovel* (a thin steak in a not-spicy chile sauce) or the *comida grande,* which is beef in a pumpkinseed sauce. Eating here is a cultural experience, but I usually prefer to head over to the **Flamingo,** 1 Poniente Sur 168, just off Avenida Central (✆ **961/612-0922**), which serves standard Mexican dishes: enchiladas, *mole,* roast chicken. The restaurant is owned by a Spaniard, who also owns an elegant steakhouse called El Asador Castellano, which is on the west side of town. Take a taxi.

If all you want is tacos, there are several good places around the **El Parque de la Marimba.** This plaza has free *marimba* music nightly and is enjoyable. There you'll find a couple of local taco restaurants bordering the plaza, such as **Parrilla Suiza** and **El Fogón Norteño.** Both have good grilled tacos. The Parque de la Marimba is on Avenida Central Poniente, 8 blocks west of the main square.

CHIAPA DE CORZO & THE SUMIDERO CANYON

The real reason to stay in Tuxtla is to take a boat trip through the **Canyon of El Sumidero** ★★. The canyon is spectacular, and the boat ride is fun. Boats leave from the docks in **Chiapa de Corzo,** a colonial town of about 50,000 inhabitants that bumps up to Tuxtla. To get there, take a taxi or hop on the bus operated by Transportes Chiapa-Tuxtla (Av. 1 Sur btw. calles 5 and 6 Oriente). Buses leave every couple of minutes and cost 9 pesos. The ride takes a half-hour. Ask to get off at the main square *(parada del parque).* The two main boat cooperatives have ticket booths under the archways bordering the square. But you don't have to look for these; just go straight to the boats at the pier *(embarcadero)* 1½ blocks below the square.

As you pass the church of Santo Domingo, you'll see a large **ceiba** tree shading the churchyard. In better circumstances these trees get even larger than this, but this one has taken up an interesting position in front of the church. The Maya felt that these trees embodied the connection between the heavens, the world of men, and the underworld because they extend into all three realms.

The **two cooperatives** (the reds and the greens identified by the color of their boats) offer the same service. They work together sharing passengers and such. Boats leave as soon as a minimum of 12 people show up. The interval can be up to an hour or as short as 10 minutes, depending on the season. The cost is 150 pesos. The ride takes 2 hours. This river is the Grijalva, which flows to the Gulf of Mexico from Guatemala and is one of Mexico's largest. Besides the canyon vistas, you're likely to see some crocodiles and other things of interest. The boat's pilot will explain a few things in Spanish, but much of what he says adds little to the tour. At the deepest point in the canyon, our pilot said the walls stretch up vertically 1,000m (3,280 ft.) above the water, which, in turn, is about 100m (328 ft.) deep at that point. I wasn't about to double-check this statement—all I know is that the view was really something. There are some interesting things happening

on the walls; water seeps out in places, creating little micro-environments of moss, grass, and mineral deposits. One of these places is called the Christmas Tree, for its form. Our boat glided slowly by as a fine mist fell on us from the plants.

The boats operate from 8am to 4pm. They are fast, and the water is smooth. The best times to see the canyon are early or late in the day, when the sun is at an angle and shines on one or the other of the canyon walls. The boats are necessarily open, so you should take an adjustable cap or a hat with a draw string or some sunscreen. A pair of earplugs would come in handy, too.

If you'd rather stay in Chiapa de Corzo than Tuxtla, check out the simple but nice hotel off the main square: **Hotel Los Angeles,** at Av. Julián Grajales 2 (✆ **916/616-0048**). It offers rooms with or without air-conditioning for 400 to 500 pesos per night.

19

The Copper Canyon

by David Baird

If you are interested in viewing a rugged and beautiful land, if you're interested in taking one of the most remarkable train trips in the world, if you're interested in hiking or riding horseback through remote areas to see an astonishing variety of plants and animals, or if you're curious about a land still populated by indigenous people living pretty much the way they have for centuries, the Copper Canyon is the place to go.

The first time I went, I had a vision of the Grand Canyon, because I had read many remarks comparing the two. But the comparison is misleading and does neither place justice. The canyons are not alike; they have different topography, geology, climate, flora, and fauna, and different local cultures, too.

When people talk about the **Copper Canyon (la Barranca del Cobre),** they are referring to a section of the Sierra Madre of northwestern Mexico known as the **Sierra Tarahumara** (after the indigenous people who live there). The area was formed through violent volcanic uplifting followed by the gradual process of erosion that carved a vast network of canyons into the soft volcanic stone. In geological time, it's much newer than the Grand Canyon.

Crossing the Sierra Tarahumara is the famed **Chihuahua al Pacífico (Chihuahua to the Pacific)** railway. Acclaimed as an engineering marvel, the 624km (387-mile) railroad has 39 bridges—the highest is more than 300m (984 ft.) above the Chinipas River, and the longest is about .5km (¼ mile) long—and 86 tunnels, including one that stretches more than 1.5km (1 mile) long. It climbs from **Los Mochis,** at sea level, up nearly 2,425m (7,954 ft.) through some of Mexico's most magnificent scenery—thick pine forests, jagged peaks, and shadowy canyons—before descending to the city of **Chihuahua.**

EXPLORING THE COPPER CANYON

PLANNING YOUR TRIP The principal airports for the region are Los Mochis and Chihuahua, the two terminal points of the railroad. This chapter covers these cities and how to get there.

Connecting flights are available out of both Chihuahua and Los Mochis, which makes entry into the region fairly easy. But moving through the canyon still requires planning. Train tickets and hotel rooms are limited, and in high season (Mar–Apr and Oct–Nov) tour companies buy up large blocks of both. If going in high season, you should work your trip around an itinerary and have train tickets and hotel reservations *in hand* when you arrive in the region. You can make arrangements on your own or go through a travel agent or tour operator. (For tips, see "Choosing a Package or Tour Operator," p. 684.) During the rest of the year, it's possible to buy train tickets as you need them and make last-minute reservations or no reservations at all. There is a small risk that you might run into a large group that has taken all the hotel rooms, but in most locations now, somebody usually has an inexpensive cabin for rent. The most plentiful lodging is to be found in Creel, which makes it a good base of operations for a minimally planned trip.

WHEN TO GO There are two high seasons for the Sierra: from mid-October to mid-November and March through April. These months are the most popular because of the likelihood of moderate temperatures—but even in these months, temperatures in the bottom of the canyon will be warm. Most canyon visitors stay up in the rim country. To avoid the crowds and get cheaper prices, I suggest **going in August or September** (the rainy season). During that time, barring drought, you'll find occasional afternoon thundershowers (very pretty in the canyon land), green vegetation, flowing water, and comfortable temperatures up along the rim. If you plan to do some serious hikes into the canyon, consider going in the winter, when temperatures at the bottom will be the least tropical. **Avoid the Sierra from late April through June.** This is the driest part of the year, with chronic water shortages in many of the towns and hotels; the vegetation is brown, and the canyons can be hazy.

1 THE COPPER CANYON TRAIN & STOPS ALONG THE WAY

THE TRAIN

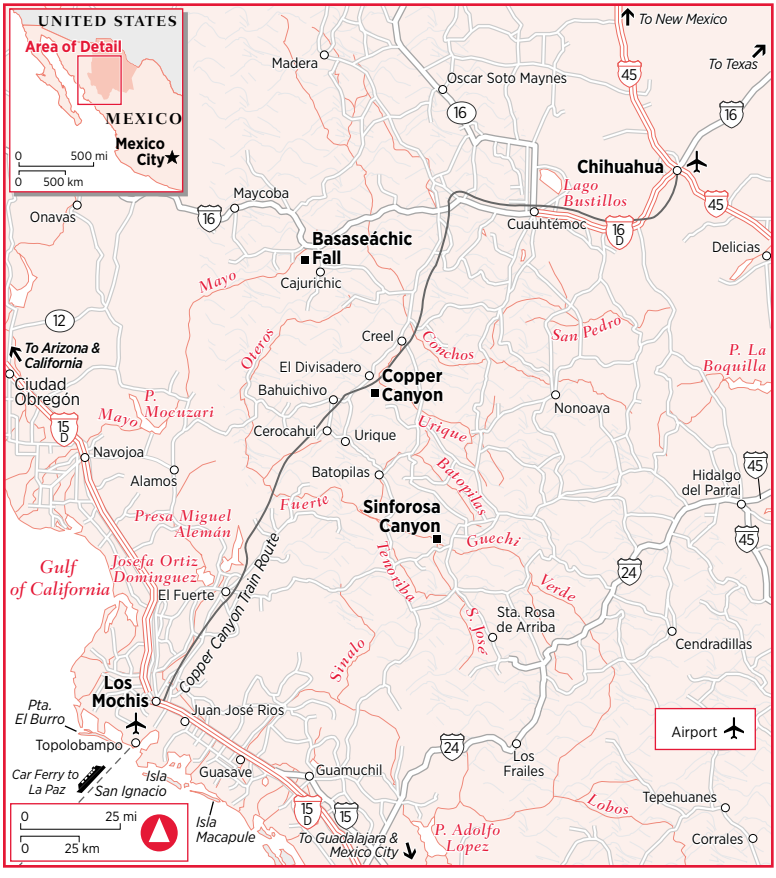
First-class service between Chihuahua and Los Mochis operates daily in both directions. Departure times are listed below. Second-class trains also run daily. They stop more frequently than the first-class trains and are slower. First-class service has undergone major improvements. The passenger cars have been revamped, with clean bathrooms that work and improved seating and windows. (They already were air-conditioned in summer and heated in winter.) The train now hauls both a dining car and a club car. In addition, it makes fewer stops than before. The owner, **Ferromex** (www.ferromex.com.mx), invested heavily in improving the tracks, making delays due to landslides less frequent. It has also spruced up some of the local stations.

The train makes 12 stops; the five of principal interest to travelers are described in detail below. The schedule is a word problem that would gratify any high school algebra teacher: Two trains depart from opposite ends of the line (Chihuahua and Los Mochis) at the same time (6am) to meet at point *x*. So that you don't have to solve for *y*, I've included the "official" schedule below.

Train Departure Times

From Los Mochis		From Chihuahua	
Los Mochis	6am	Chihuahua	6am
El Fuerte	9am	Creel	11:35am
Bahuichivo/Cerocahui	1:10pm	El Divisadero	1:30pm
Barrancas	2:25pm	Barrancas	2pm
El Divisadero	2:35pm	Bahuichivo/Cerocahui	3:15pm
Creel	4:50pm	El Fuerte	7:20pm
Chihuahua (arrives)	10:25pm	Los Mochis (arrives)	10:25pm

Actual times vary. The local people at each stop are well attuned to train times, so it's good to ask them. The stops are short except at **El Divisadero,** where you have 20 minutes to get out and walk down the steps to the overlook for a spectacular panorama of the canyon, and perhaps time to buy a trinket or a taco from one of the many vendors.



DELAYS Travelers may have to contend with delays because of landslides, minor derailments, or maintenance projects. Traveling in this region requires some flexibility and patience. In case of a major service interruption, you can travel on a highway that parallels the railway from Chihuahua as far as Cerocahui, but the final stretch from Cerocahui to El Fuerte is not much of an option because it requires four-wheel-drive.

BUYING A TICKET The train offers no rail pass; you must buy a ticket for a particular day, point of departure, and destination. This is not usually a problem during the off season. You can buy a ticket for the first leg of your trip when you get to Los Mochis or Chihuahua, and then buy the rest each time you board the train. You're not going to have a guaranteed seat, but there's usually abundant seating during this part of the year. If you have an itinerary, you'll have guaranteed seating throughout the trip. You may not get to choose which seat, but that's a minor issue. Should you deviate from your itinerary, you can buy a new ticket at the local station or aboard the train. The cost of a ticket for the entire trip one-way is 1,981 pesos.

To reserve tickets ahead of time, call the railway directly (✆ **888/484-1623** in the U.S. or Canada, or 614/436-7212). A few days before your trip, you will need to call again to reconfirm your reservations. Then you can buy the tickets at the station the morning of your departure with cash or credit card (MasterCard or Visa). For more information, see **www.chepe.com.mx**. If you actually want to purchase tickets ahead of time, you can do so from a local travel agency in Chihuahua or Los Mochis. To start out in Chihuahua, contact **Turismo al Mar** (✆ **614/410-9232** or 416-5950; www.coppercanyon.net); from Los Mochis, contact **Viajes Araceli** (✆ **668/815-5780;** fax 668/815-8787; ventasaracely@viajearacely.com) or **Viajes Flamingo** (✆ **668/812-1613;** fax 668/812-0046; www.mexicoscoppercanyon.com). Travel agencies outside of Mexico sell tickets only as part of a package that includes transportation to the region and hotel accommodations. A wide variety of packages and custom trips are available. Look into these carefully before you book (see "Choosing a Package or Tour Operator," below).

LODGING If you spend a night at any spot en route, you'll have roughly 24 hours to explore, unless you're heading back in the direction from which you came. Drivers from all canyon hotels pick up guests from the train station; if you don't have a reservation, ask a driver about room availability. Standard accommodations in the canyon are getting more expensive, especially in El Divisadero and Cerocahui. In high season, I wouldn't arrive at either place without reservations. Rates for hotels in both of these towns usually include meals. The number of rooms is limited, and with groups of 40 or 50 people going through the Sierra, a hotel can be empty one day and full the next. When hotels are full, you'll notice a decline in service in the dining room, or you'll have to wait in line at the buffet even if you're not part of the group. Overbooking rooms also seems to be a problem with some of the large hotels, though it's not common enough that you should worry about it. In Creel, you find the greatest variety of accommodations and restaurants. This is where most of the economical hotels are.

CLIMATE Los Mochis and El Fuerte are warm year-round. Chihuahua can be warm in summer, windy at almost any time, and freezing in winter. The canyon rim may experience freezes from November through March; the bottom of the canyon may occasionally get cool enough for a sweater. In the other half of the year, it's hot below and cool above.

STOP 1: EL FUERTE ★

El Fuerte is on the coastal plain before the foothills of the Sierra Madre. With its charming cobblestone streets and handsome colonial mansions, it is the prettiest town along the train route. At only 80m (262 ft.) above sea level, it is most comfortable in winter. The town owes its origin to silver mining, and its existence in recent times to booming agriculture. From the late 18th century onward, the town has been under the control of

Tips Which Direction Should I Travel?

For sightseeing, **Los Mochis,** the western terminus, is the better starting place: The most scenic part of the 15- to 16-hour journey comes between **El Fuerte** and **Bahuichivo/Cerocahui,** which you are guaranteed to see in daylight if you come from Los Mochis. The train that starts in Chihuahua often gets to this area in darkness. This chapter lists the stops in order from Los Mochis to Chihuahua.

Troubled Times in Chihuahua & Sinaloa

Conflicts between drug gangs, and the Mexican government's attempts to eradicate them, have led to increased violence in parts of the states of Chihuahua and Sinaloa. The violence has taken the form of killings, kidnappings, and carjackings. The U.S. State Department has issued a travel alert for the Mexican border area that specifically mentions Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua City (www.travel.state.gov). It doesn't say not to go to the area, but it urges travelers to practice caution and avoid traveling at night. The Mexican government has sent in the military to aid federal and local police. Checkpoints can now be found on many area roads. If you decide to go to the Copper Canyon, be prepared to find added security in and around the cities and on the highways. Don't travel in a way that will make you a target. That means don't drive a vehicle such as a pickup or SUV, which are highly desired by gangs, and don't travel alone into areas of the canyon that are too far off the beaten path.

a few families, and to this day, much of the real estate in and about the center of town remains in their hands. The town's plaza is quaint and handsome, with a 19th-century bandstand surrounded by graceful palms. One way to see the town is to take a taxi from Los Mochis and pick up the train the next day. An added advantage to this plan is that it allows you an extra hour in bed. The train station is a few kilometers from town.

EXPLORING THE TOWN Possible activities include visiting nearby villages, birding, fishing for black bass and trout, and hunting for duck and dove. Hotels can arrange guides and all equipment if they're contacted in advance.

Where to Stay & Dine

Besides the restaurants at the hotels mentioned here, more inexpensive restaurants are on and near the central plaza.

Hotel El Fuerte ★ This is a charming inn loaded with character. Rooms have double or king-size beds, tiled bathrooms, and colonial furnishings. The courtyard and common areas are shady and cool. During high season, this hotel usually books up with tour groups, but it's a good option for the rest of the year.

Montesclaro 37, 81820 El Fuerte, Sin. ✆ **698/893-0226.** Fax 698/893-1246. www.hotelelfuerte.com.mx. 49 units. 714–893 pesos double. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; Jacuzzi; room service; smoke-free room, Wi-Fi (in lobby). *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, no phone.

Hotel La Choza Two stories of rooms are arranged around a modern courtyard/parking lot. The upstairs rooms are nicer, as they come with a *bóveda* ceiling, but all are comfortable and colorfully decorated and have nice, midsize bathrooms. Most have two double beds.

Cinco de Mayo 101, 81820 El Fuerte, Sin. ✆ **698/893-1274.** www.hotellachoza.com. 36 units. 714 pesos double. MC, V. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar/dance club; outdoor pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV, no phone, Wi-Fi.

Tips Choosing a Package or Tour Operator

A number of tour operators and packagers offer trips to the Copper Canyon. You can purchase your package through a travel agency; those that do frequent business with Copper Canyon trips have better knowledge of what's out there. Keep in mind that the travel agent may try to steer you toward one package over another because it pays a higher commission.

The industry breaks down into the following categories:

Bus Tours Some outfits run buses from El Paso to Chihuahua or Tucson to Los Mochis, and then put their customers on the train. The usual length of stay in the Sierra is 2 nights before returning by bus to the U.S. These tours involve a lot of sitting on a bus or train, but they are the least expensive.

Train Tours **Sierra Madre Express** has stopped running trains into the Copper Canyon from Tucson, Arizona, probably as a result of the economic downturn—perhaps, too, because of the bad press that Chihuahua is getting.

Standard Packages This option merely bundles airfare, train tickets, and lodging. Hotels in the canyon send drivers to meet the train, so getting to your hotel is not hard once you're in the canyon. With these tours, you can have more time in the canyon, but once you're there, it's up to you to line up activities.

Custom Tour Operators These outfits sell fixed package tours through travel agents only because it simplifies the agent's job. If you eliminate the middle person and call any of the outfits directly, you might be able to arrange a custom trip. Travel through these companies generally allows you more time in the canyon and a better experience. Some assemble small groups with a guide; some allow you to travel by yourself and supply you with contacts in different locations. As the number of people visiting the Sierra increases, these companies are taking people deeper into the mountains to get away from the effects of mass tourism. The **California Native,** 6701 W. 87th Place, Los Angeles, CA 90045 (✆ **800/926-1140** in the U.S.; www.calnative.com), and **Native Trails,** 613 Querétaro, El Paso, TX 79912-2210 (✆ **800/884-3107** in the U.S.; www.nativetrails.com).

Hotel Posada del Hidalgo ★★ This handsome hotel is one of the Balderrama properties and can be booked through the central reservations office in Los Mochis. It, too, fills up fast with several tour groups. The mansion section, with open arcades around a central patio, belonged to silver barons in the 18th century; there's even a steep carriage ramp from its days as a stagecoach stop. There are three courtyards, each in a different style, with bougainvillea and tall palm trees. The guest rooms are nicely finished with lovely tile or hardwood floors, attractive furniture, and good bathrooms. All have two double beds.

Hidalgo 101, 81820 El Fuerte, Sin. ✆ **800/896-8196** in the U.S. (to the Hotel Santa Anita in Los Mochis) or 698/893-1194 in El Fuerte. Fax 698/893-1194. www.hotelposadadelhidalgo.com. 68 units. 1,430 pesos double. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; Jacuzzi; outdoor pool; spa. *In room:* A/C, hair dryer, no phone.

Río Vista Lodge (Finds) Free-spirited owner Chal Gámez has done it his way in this small hotel on a hilltop above the town. The common areas and rooms hold fanciful murals, artifacts of Yaqui and Mayo Indians, decorations from northern Mexico, and a few things reminiscent of the Old West. The outdoor dining area is a lovely place to gaze out over the river or watch the swarms of hummingbirds that feast at Chal's feeders. These birds seem little bothered by the proximity of humans—you can even put your hand under the feeder and be fanned by their wings. Meals are simple but good.

Cerro de la Pilas s/n, 81820 El Fuerte, Sin. ✆/fax **698/893-0413.** hotelriovista@hotmail.com. 32 units. 600 pesos double. MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant. *In room:* A/C, hair dryer, no phone.

STOP 2: BAHUICHIVO & CEROCAHUI ★★★

This is the first train stop in canyon country. **Bahuichivo** is merely the train depot and didn't exist before the railroad's construction. The village of **Cerocahui** (elevation 1,670m/5,478 ft.) dates from before the Colonial Era. It's home to 600 people and is in a valley about 10km (6¼ miles) from the train stop. The road is unpaved, so the trip takes about 30 minutes. The most dramatic part of the train ride is the section between El Fuerte and Bahuichivo.

EXPLORING CEROCAHUI Built around a humble mission church, Cerocahui consists of little more than rambling unpaved streets and 100 or so houses. It enjoys a wonderful view of the mountains, but you have to take an excursion to get real canyon vistas. All hotels can arrange horseback rides to nearby waterfalls and other scenic spots, as well as trips to **Cerro Gallego,** a famous lookout point with a beautiful vista of Urique Canyon. It's possible to see the waterfall on arrival, schedule the Gallego trip for the next morning, have lunch, and still make the train. I like the quiet of Cerocahui, however, and recommend staying here as long as you can, provided you like hiking or horseback riding. There are a number of secluded places, both near and far, to visit. One possible trip is a hike down to the mining town of **Urique** at the bottom of the Urique Canyon (one of several canyons that make up the Copper Canyon), and then a car ride back up. There are a few simple but comfortable hotels where you can stay for between 350 and 450 pesos a night. The nicest is **Hotel Barrancas Urique** (✆ **635/456-6076**). It can provide you with a guide if you feel like doing some more hiking. The rooms come with fans, but the hotel might install air-conditioning units in a couple of the rooms.

Where to Stay & Dine

Rates for doubles in the two hotels listed below include all meals for two people and transportation to and from the train station. The Paraíso del Oso is less than a kilometer (about a mile) short of the village. The mission is in Cerocahui proper. In the town, you can find simple lodging for a fraction of the cost of the other places. There are also some

Tips **Going Solo on Foot: Not a Good Idea**

If you're planning to hike in the Copper Canyon, it's a good idea to have company, especially someone who knows the area. Guides tell me that they come across lost hikers all the time. Also, ankles can get sprained, knees can give out—it helps to have someone who knows where to get the nearest horse and such.

Tips Money-Changing: Be Prepared

Be sure to start the journey with adequate funds, because exchanging money outside of Creel is almost impossible; even credit cards are good only at the expensive hotels. I won't use a credit card at some of the hotels listed in this chapter because they use radio communication to the main office to confirm a card—hardly a secure system.

cabins for rent up above town. They go for 600 pesos for two people and include transportation from the train station. You can reserve a cabin through Río Vista Lodge (see above) or by calling ✆ **635/456-5257** and saying you want a cabin in Cerocahui (the staff speaks English).

Hotel Misión Cerocahui ★ Established years ago, the Hotel Misión is right on the town's little plaza. Guest rooms have hot water and electricity. The lobby and restaurant area surrounds a large rock fireplace, where a local guitarist and singer sometimes entertain in the evenings. The food is usually good, and the ranch-style rooms (with tile floors, wood-burning stoves, and kerosene lanterns) are comfortable. The hotel offers several tours, including rides to Cerro Gallego, Urique, and the local waterfalls. There are also hiking, mountain-biking, and horseback-riding trips.

Domicilio Conocido, Cerocahui. www.hotelmision.com. (Reservations: Hotel Santa Anita, Apdo. Postal 159, 81200 Los Mochis, Sin.; ✆ **800/896-8196** in the U.S.) 38 units. 2,572 pesos double. Rates include meals. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant.

Paraíso del Oso ★ Moments Paraíso del Oso sits in a sheltered hollow with a backdrop of impressive stone palisades less than a kilometer (about a half-mile) from the town. Owner Doug Rhodes is an avid horseman and takes guests for rides that can last anywhere from 3 hours to more than a week. Rooms come with two double beds and ranch furniture. They are comfortable, with wood-burning stoves and plenty of hot water. Solar-generated electricity fuels such vital services as refrigeration, while lanterns provide light. This and the utter solitude of the area are charming traits that make you feel more in touch with the Sierra than you would at the big canyon hotels along the railroad tracks. They have a cash bar, a small but good library, Wi-Fi, and topographical maps of the area.

Cerocahui. ✆ **800/884-3107** or 915/833-3107 in the U.S., or 614/421-3372. Fax 614/421-3372. (Reservations: Paraíso del Oso, P.O. Box 31089, El Paso, TX 79931.) www.mexicohorse.com. 21 units. $185 double. Rates include meals. MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Bar; library; Wi-Fi. *In room:* No phone.

STOPS 3 & 4: BARRANCAS/EL DIVISADERO ★★

Between Bahuichivo and here, the train stops at San Rafael to change crews. By the time it arrives in this area, it is at the highest part of its journey. Many packages include at least a night here for soaking up the great views of the canyons. Two nights would be better if you want to do some hiking or horseback riding.

Barrancas and El Divisadero are less than 3km (1¾ miles) apart. Coming from Los Mochis, you'll arrive at Barrancas first. At this stop, drivers from the **Hotel Mirador,** the **Hotel Rancho,** and the **Mansion Tarahumara** meet passengers. Then the train takes you to El Divisadero (elevation 2,240m/7,347 ft.), where you'll find the **Hotel Divisadero-Barrancas,** taco stands (at train time), and the most **spectacular view of the canyon** that

you'll get if you are making no overnight stops. The train stops for 20 minutes—time enough to walk down the steps to the lookout to enjoy the view and purchase one or two mementos from the Tarahumara Indians, who sell sweet-smelling pine-needle baskets, homemade violins, and wood and cloth dolls. Hotels arrange various excursions, including a visit to a cave-dwelling Tarahumara family, hiking, and horseback riding. All hotels listed below offer free secure parking.

Where to Stay & Dine

Hotel Divisadero-Barrancas ★★ This location, on the edge of the canyon overlook, provides the most spectacular view of any hotel in the canyon. The restaurant has a large picture window, perfect for hours of sitting and gazing at the canyon. The rooms are in four sections. The newest section (nos. 35–48) is a two-story building perched on the edge of the canyon. These rooms have sliding glass doors that open on to balconies with a view. The bathrooms are midsize and modern. The new rooms are probably the quietest, but I also like the original section (room nos. 1–10). These are made of logs and stones and are more rustic, which for me is a good part of their appeal.

El Divisadero. ✆ **800/232-4219** in the U.S. and Canada, or 635/578-3060. (Reservations: Av. Mirador 4516, Apdo. Postal 661, Col. Residencial Campestre, 31238 Chihuahua, Chih.; ✆ 614/415-1199; fax 614/415-6575.) www.hoteldivisadero.com. 52 units. High season $220 double; low season $180 double. Rates include meals and 2 tours. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar.

Hotel Mirador ★★ Moments The Mirador sits on the edge of the canyon 5 minutes up the mountain from its sister hotel, the Hotel Rancho (see below). Every room has a dramatic balcony that seems to hang right over the cliff's edge. The views are beautiful. Rooms have attractive decorations and furniture, with bold Mexican color combinations; most hold two double beds. Each room has its own heater. The common areas are also comfortable and attractive.

El Divisadero. ✆ **635/578-3020.** (Reservations: Hotel Santa Anita, Apdo. Postal 159, 81200 Los Mochis, Sin.; ✆ 800/896-8196 in the U.S.) Fax 668/812-0046. www.mexicoscoppercanyon.com/mirador. 65 units. 2,895 pesos double. Rates include meals. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; transportation to and from train station. *In room:* Hair dryer, no phone.

Hotel Rancho The train stops right in front of this inn. Rooms are comfortable, with two double beds and a wood-burning iron stove. As in other lodges, meals are a communal affair in the cozy living and restaurant area, and the food is good. You can rent horses or hike to the Tarahumara caves and to the rim of the canyon, where a more expensive sister hotel, the Hotel Mirador (see above), has a beautiful restaurant and bar with a magnificent view. This hotel sometimes accommodates overbooking at its sister hotel.

El Divisadero. ✆ **635/578-3020.** (Reservations: Hotel Santa Anita, Apdo. Postal 159, 81200 Los Mochis, Sin.; ✆ 800/896-8196 in the U.S.) Fax 668/812-0046. www.mexicoscoppercanyon.com/rancho. 25 units. 2,572 pesos double. Rates include meals. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; transportation to and from train station. *In room:* Hair dryer, no phone.

Mansion Tarahumara ★ The Mansion Tarahumara spreads across a mountainside above the train stop at Posada Barrancas. The cabin rooms offer more privacy and space than the hotel rooms, but not direct views of the canyon. Made of stone and wood, each room has a big fireplace, a wall heater, and two double beds. The castlelike structure, which is the first thing that catches the guest's eye, houses the restaurant and bar. It offers views from its big windows and good food from its kitchen.

El Divisadero. ✆ **635/578-3030.** (Reservations: Mansion Tarahumara, Calle Juárez 1602-A, Col. Centro, 31000 Chihuahua, Chih.; ✆ 614/415-4721; fax 614/416-5444.) www.mansiontarahumara.com.mx. 60 units. $172 double. Rates include meals. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; Jacuzzi; heated outdoor pool; transportation to and from train station; tours. *In room:* No phone.

STOP 5: CREEL ★

This rustic logging town with a handful of paved streets offers the most economical lodgings in the canyon. Creel (rhymes with "feel") is also the starting point for some of the best side trips, especially hiking and overnight camping. Creel sits at an elevation of 2,210m (7,249 ft.); its population of around 6,000 makes it the largest town in the canyon area.

Essentials

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING **By Train** See the chart on p. 680 for "official" arrival and departure times.

By Car From Chihuahua, follow the signs to La Junta until you see signs for Hermosillo. Follow those signs until you see signs to Creel (left). The trip takes about 4 hours on a paved road.

By Bus **Estrella Blanca** (✆ **614/429-0219** in Chihuahua) has six trips to Chihuahua per day. The trip takes 4 hours and costs 238 pesos. This is cheaper and faster than the train.

ORIENTATION The train station, around the corner from the Mission Store and the main plaza, is in the heart of the village and within walking distance of all lodgings except the Copper Canyon Sierra Lodge. Look for your hotel's van waiting at the station (unless you're staying at the Casa de Huéspedes Margarita, which is only 2 blocks away). There's one main street, **López Mateos,** and almost everything is within a couple of blocks.

FAST FACTS The telephone **area code** is **635.** Electricity is available 24 hours daily in all Creel hotels. (In other parts of the canyon, electricity is sporadic or not available.) Creel has one ATM, one bank, and one *casa de cambio.* The best sources of information are the Mission Store and the hotels. Several businesses and many of the hotels offer long-distance **telephone** service; look for LARGA DISTANCIA signs or ask at your hotel.

Exploring Creel

You'll occasionally see the Tarahumara as you walk around town, but mostly, you'll see rugged logging types and tourists from around the world.

Several stores around Creel sell Tarahumara arts and crafts. The best is **Artesanías Misión (Mission Crafts),** which sells quality merchandise at reasonable prices; all profits go to the Mission Hospital run by Father Verplancken, a Jesuit, and benefit the Tarahumara. Here you'll find dolls, pottery, woven purses and belts, drums, violins (an instrument borrowed from the Spanish), bamboo flutes, bead necklaces, bows and arrows, cassettes of Tarahumara music, woodcarvings, baskets, and heavy wool rugs, as well as an excellent supply of books and maps relating to the Tarahumara and the region. It's open daily from 9:30am to 1pm, and Monday through Saturday from 3 to 6pm. It's beside the railroad tracks on the main plaza.

Where to Stay

Though a small town, Creel has several places to stay, all with free parking. A lot of these hotels cater to backpackers. It's advisable to make reservations during high season.

Expensive

Copper Canyon Sierra Lodge ★★ (Finds) About 20 minutes (22km/14 miles) southwest of Creel, the Sierra Lodge has everything you hope for in a mountain lodge—rock walls, beamed ceilings, lantern lights, and wood-burning stoves; in other words, rustic charm and no electricity. Its out-of-town location is a great starting point for self-guided hikes and walks in the mountains to the Cusárare Waterfalls. This hotel has a sister lodge in Batopilas, which is beautiful and runs a little cheaper per room.

Apdo. Postal 3, 33200 Creel, Chih. ✆ **800/776-3942** in the U.S. (in Creel). www.coppercanyonlodges.com. 22 units. $184 double. Rates include meals. MC, V for deposits. *In room:* No phone.

The Lodge at Creel Each of this Best Western hotel's cheerfully decorated cabins holds four units, built completely of pine, including the furniture. Most have two double beds, and some have their own porches. Their construction, decor, and layout remind me of old-style motels that you find next to U.S. national parks. The lobby, next to the dining area, has a phone for guests' use and a small gift shop. The hotel offers 3-night backpacking trips to the bottom of the canyon, among other tours, for 4 to 10 people. The on-site restaurant serves all three meals. The van meets all trains.

Av. López Mateos 61, 33200 Creel, Chih. ✆ **877/844-0409** in the U.S., or 635/456-0071. Fax 635/456-0082. www.thelodgeatcreel.com. 38 units. 1,341 pesos double. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; fitness room; Jacuzzi; room service; sauna; smoke-free rooms; Wi-Fi (in half the hotel). *In room:* TV, hair dryer, no phone.

Moderate

Hotel Parador de la Montaña This is the largest hotel in town, located 4 blocks west of the plaza. The comfortable rooms have two double beds, high wood-beamed ceilings, central heating, tiled bathrooms, and thin walls. Guests congregate in the restaurant, bar, and lobby, which has a roaring fireplace. The hotel caters to groups and offers some 10 overland tours, priced from 300 to 800 pesos.

Av. López Mateos s/n, 33200 Creel, Chih. ✆ **635/456-0023.** Fax 635/456-0085. (Reservations: Calle Allende 1414, 31300 Chihuahua, Chih.; ✆ 614/415-5408.) www.hotelparadorcreel.com. 50 units. 842 pesos double. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; tours. *In room:* TV, no phone.

Inexpensive

Hotel Nuevo The Nuevo has two sections: the older one, across the tracks from the train station and next to the restaurant and variety store, and newer log cabañas in back. Rooms are small to midsize and not as attractive as the higher-priced (and carpeted) cabañas. Half the rooms have TVs. The nice hotel restaurant is open from 8:30am to 8pm, and the small general store carries local crafts as well as basic supplies. Ask at the store about rooms.

Francisco Villa 121, 33200 Creel, Chih. ✆ **635/456-0022.** Fax 635/456-0043. 27 units. 450–760 pesos double. MC, V. **Amenities:** Restaurant; general store. *In room:* TV (in some), no phone.

Where to Dine

There are several places to eat in Creel, but no standouts. Aside from the restaurants at the hotels, you might want to try one of the establishments on López Mateos, such as the **Caballo Bayo, Tío Molcas,** or **Verónica's.**

Nearby Excursions

Close by are several canyons, waterfalls, a lake, hot springs, Tarahumara villages and cave dwellings, and an old Jesuit mission. Ten kilometers (6¼ miles) north of town is an

 ecotourism complex, **San Ignacio de Arareko** (✆ **635/456-0126**). It has a lake, hiking and biking trails, horses, cabins, and a crafts shop, all run by indigenous peoples of the *ejido* (cooperative). **Batopilas,** an 18th-century silver-mining town at the bottom of the canyon, requires an overnight excursion. You can ask for information about these and other things to do at your hotel, or go by the office of the **3 Amigos** (✆ **635/456-0179;** www.amigos3.com), at Av. López Mateos 46 in downtown Creel. These guys rent pick-ups with crew cabs or mountain bikes and can give you maps and advice on where to go, depending on your interests.

From Creel, you can drive to **El Divisadero** (see "Stops 3 & 4: Barrancas/El Divisadero," above, for details) on a recently paved road. The trip takes about an hour.

ORGANIZED TOURS Hotels offer 2- to 10-hour organized tours that cost between 300 and 900 pesos per person (four-person minimum). All tour availability depends on whether a group can be assembled; your best chance is at the **Hotel Parador de la Montaña.**

Basaseáchic Falls

This is an exhausting day tour to what is billed as the tallest single cascade in North America. The best time to go is during the rainy season, from July to September. The tour costs around 750 pesos per person and takes about 11 hours. Driving time is 4 hours one-way, and the strenuous hike to the bottom and back up takes 3 hours—not a lot of time to be by the falls. Another option is to stay in one of the simple accommodations that have opened near the falls, if you can get transportation back the next day. Ask around Creel.

Batopilas

You can make an overnight side trip from Creel to the old silver-mining town of Batopilas, founded in 1708. It's 7 to 9 hours from Creel by town bus, 5 hours by sport utility vehicle, along a narrow, winding dirt road through some of the most spectacular scenery in the Copper Canyon. In Batopilas, which lies beside a river at the bottom of a deep canyon, the weather is tropical, though it can get cool in the evenings. You can visit a beautiful little church and do several walks, including one to **Misión Satevó,** a ruined mission church that dates from the early 18th century. The place has many colorful little details: The dry-goods store is a veritable time capsule, cobblestone streets twist past whitewashed homes, miners and ranchers come and go on horseback, and the Tarahumara frequently visit. A considerable number of pigs, dogs, and flocks of goats roam at will—this is, after all, Chihuahua's goat-raising capital.

GETTING THERE From Creel, take the **bus** from the Restaurant Herradero, López Mateos s/n, three doors past the turnoff to Hotel Plaza Mexicana. It goes to Batopilas on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, leaving Creel at 7am and arriving midafternoon. Tickets are sold at the restaurant. Several Suburban-type **vans** offer transportation. One leaves on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 10:30am and arrives midafternoon. Both bus and

Tips Caution: Don't Be a Dope

It's no secret that marijuana farmers use clandestine farmlands in the Copper Canyon, and that rumors link prominent names in the state to their activities. This has never affected any of my trips to the region. If you are hiking the backwoods and happen upon a field of marijuana, simply leave the area.

van return the following day. There are no bathrooms, restaurants, or other conveniences of civilization along the way, but the bus may stop to allow passengers to stretch and find a bush.

WHERE TO STAY & DINE Batopilas has a few little restaurants and inns. There are no telephones, though, so don't expect to make reservations. One night probably isn't enough for a stay here, since you arrive midafternoon and must leave at 7am or 10:30am the next day.

The staff at the Hotel Parador de la Montaña (see above) in Creel provides information about vacancies at the basic, comfortable, 10-room **Hotel Mary** (formerly Parador Batopilas). All rooms have private bathrooms and cost around 250 pesos per night. There are also the rustic **Hotel Batopilas** and **Hotel Las Palmeras,** with five or six rooms each; if all else fails, you can probably find a family willing to let you stay in an extra room.

Restaurants in Batopilas are informal about their schedules, so bring along some snacks and bottled water to tide you over; snacks are available at the general store. The place to eat in Batopilas is **Doña Mica's,** facing a little plaza tucked behind the main square. Ask anyone for directions (everyone knows her). She serves meals on her front porch surrounded by plants, but it's best to let her know in advance when to expect you. On short notice, she can probably rustle up some scrambled eggs.

2 LOS MOCHIS: THE WESTERN TERMINUS

202km (125 miles) SW of Alamos; 80km (50 miles) SW of El Fuerte; 309km (192 miles) SE of Guaymas; 416km (258 miles) NW of Mazatlán

Los Mochis, in Sinaloa State, is a coastal city of 350,000 founded in 1893 by Benjamin Johnson of Pennsylvania. It is a prosperous city in a fertile agricultural area but holds little of interest for the visitor. The most important aspects of the city are that it is a boarding point for the train, it has an airport, and it is connected to La Paz, Baja California, by ferry, and to the U.S. border by highway.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING **By Plane** **Aeroméxico/Aerolitoral** (✆ **800/237-6639** in the U.S., or 668/815-2570 for reservations) has direct service from Phoenix, Chihuahua, Hermosillo, Mazatlán, and La Paz. The airport is 21km (13 miles) north of town; transportation is by *combi* (collective minivan) or airport taxi (125 pesos).

By Train The first-class **Chihuahua al Pacífico (Copper Canyon train)** runs between Los Mochis and Chihuahua once daily, departing at 6am.

By Car **Coastal Hwy. 15** is well maintained in both directions leading into Los Mochis.

By Ferry A ferry plies the waters between La Paz and Topolobampo, the port for Los Mochis carrying passengers, vehicles, and cargo. The company, **Baja Ferries** (✆ **668/817-3752,** -3864; www.bajaferries.com), uses a larger and more dependable ship than the company that used to operate this ferry route.

By Bus Buses serve Los Mochis, however marginally. Most are *de paso*—passing through. All bus stations are downtown, within walking distance of the hotels. The **first-class station** is near Juárez at Degollado 200. From here, Elite buses go to and from Tijuana, Monterrey, Nogales, and Ciudad Juárez. Auto-transportes Transpacíficos, in the same station, serves Nogales, Tijuana, Mazatlán, Guadalajara, Querétaro, and Mexico City. A

lot of travelers who arrive in Los Mochis prefer to go directly to El Fuerte, spend the night there, and then catch the train. There are two places to catch the bus to El Fuerte (1½–2 hr.). The first is at the **Mercado Independencia;** the bus stops at the corner of Independencia and Degollado. The other is at the **corner of Cuauhtémoc and Prieto,** near the Hotel América. Ask hotel desk clerks or the tourism office for a schedule. These are second-class buses, which stop frequently, prolonging the trip well beyond the normal 1-hour travel time.

CITY LAYOUT Los Mochis contains no central plaza, and streets run northwest to southeast and southwest to northeast.

FAST FACTS The telephone **area code** for Los Mochis is **668.** Changing money outside of Los Mochis is difficult, so stock up on pesos before boarding the train. Most places in the canyons do not accept credit cards.

EXPLORING LOS MOCHIS

For most travelers, Los Mochis is a stopover en route to somewhere else. There isn't much here, but the town is pleasant, and you can enjoy some excellent seafood. The **Viajes Flamingo** travel agency, on the ground floor of the Hotel Santa Anita (✆ **668/812-1613,** -1929), arranges a city tour, hunting and fishing trips, and a harbor tour around **Topolobampo Bay.** The harbor tour is fun. The agency is open Monday through Saturday from 8:30am to 1pm and 3 to 6:30pm. The boat ride is really just a spin in the bay and not especially noteworthy, although the bay is pretty and dolphins often show up.

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Corintios Behind a campy entrance with Greek columns and mirrored glass are two stories of rooms with ample light, carpeted floors, and adequate space for two comfortable double beds and luggage. The bathrooms are midsize and are neatly finished, but with poor lighting. The junior suites come with a king-size bed.

Obregón 580 Poniente, 81200 Los Mochis, Sin. ✆ **668/818-2300** or 01-800/690-3000 in Mexico. Fax 668/818-2277. www.hotelcorintios.com. 59 units. 577 pesos double; 784 pesos junior suite. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; Jacuzzi; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, Wi-Fi.

Hotel Las Fuentes Among the inexpensive hotels in town, I like this one the best. The rooms are cheerful and clean, and the staff is helpful. Rooms come with one or two double beds, and the cost varies accordingly. Bathrooms are midsize with okay elbowroom and counter space. The hotel is 5 minutes from downtown on one of the main arteries.

Blvd. Adolfo López Mateos 1251-A Norte, 81220 Los Mochis, Sin. ✆ **668/818-8871,** -8172. Fax 668/812-5983. www.hotellasfuentes.com. 38 units. 480–550 pesos double. AE, MC, V. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV, Wi-Fi.

Hotel Santa Anita The Santa Anita is the choice of most travelers going to the canyon; not only is it a comfortable, quiet hotel, but it offers reliable transportation to and from the train station. The rooms are modern and well furnished but vary a good deal in size. All are carpeted and most come with two double beds. They also come with good air-conditioning, lots of English-speaking channels on the TV, and tap water purified for drinking. There are two bars, one with live music at least 1 day a week.

Leyva, at the corner of Hidalgo (Apdo. Postal 159), 81200 Los Mochis, Sin. ✆ **800/896-8196** in the U.S., or 668/818-7046. Fax 668/812-0046. 116 units. 1,337 pesos double. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; transportation to and from the train station; room service; smoke-free rooms. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

WHERE TO DINE

El Farallón ★★ SEAFOOD If you like seafood, there's no reason to eat anywhere else in Los Mochis. Don't be put off by the menu, which is confusing—to put it simply, you can order seafood cooked any way you want. Try a Mexican style such as *al ajillo,* with toasted *guajillo* chiles. If you're hungry, I recommend the *mariscada* for two or more, which comes with a cold and a hot platter of a variety of fish and shellfish. Try *calamares* (squid), the cheapest thing on the platter. Forget about those rubbery rings fried up in other restaurants; because the squid get to be giant-size in this region's waters, the meat comes in big, tender chunks. One of my favorites is *machaca,* made with either shrimp or smoked marlin (cooked in a reduced fish stock, which is mild and satisfying). The atmosphere is casual, the air-conditioning functions with gusto, and the white-tiled dining area is simply furnished.

Obregón, at Angel Flores. ✆ **668/812-1428.** Main courses 100–238 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 8am–11pm.

El Taquito Value MEXICAN Any time of the day or night, El Taquito serves standard Mexican fare at a good price. With orange booths and Formica tables, the cafe looks like an American fast-food place. Tortilla soup comes in a large bowl, and both breakfast and main-course portions are quite generous.

Leyva at Barrera. ✆ **668/812-8119.** Breakfast 30–60 pesos; main courses 50–85 pesos. AE, DC, MC, V. Daily 24 hr. From the Hotel Santa Anita, turn left on Leyva, cross Hidalgo, and go 1 block; it's on your right.

Restaurante España STEAK/SEAFOOD This Spanish-style restaurant is a favorite among downtown professionals, who feast on large plates of paella (available Thurs and Sun after 1pm; at other times, it's made to order, which takes 45 min.). The decor is upscale for Los Mochis, with a splashing fountain in the dining room and heavy, carved-wood tables and chairs.

Obregón 525. ✆ **668/812-2221.** Breakfast 40–70 pesos; main courses 90–130 pesos. AE, MC, V. Mon–Sat 7:30am–11pm; Sun 9am–7pm.

3 CHIHUAHUA: THE EASTERN TERMINUS ★

341km (211 miles) S of El Paso; 440km (273 miles) NW of Torreón

Chihuahua, a city of wide boulevards and handsome buildings, is the capital of the state of Chihuahua, the largest and richest in Mexico. The wealth comes from mining, timber, cattle raising, *maquiladoras* (assembly plants for export goods), and tourism. The city has grown a lot in the last 30 years, thanks mainly to an increase in manufacturing plants, and has lost its frontier feeling. But the historic center of Chihuahua retains much of its character and holds a few museums and buildings worth visiting, including the house where Pancho Villa once lived.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING **By Plane** **Continental** (✆ **800/525-0280** in the U.S., or 01-800/900-5000 in Mexico) has nonstop service to and from Houston on a 50-seat jet. **Aeroméxico/Aerolitoral** (✆ **800/237-6639** in the U.S., or 614/415-6303) flies direct from El Paso, Phoenix, Guadalajara, Hermosillo, Mexico City, Monterrey, Torreón, Tijuana, Culiacán, La Paz, and Los Mochis, with connecting flights from Los Angeles and San Antonio. **American Airlines** (✆ **800/223-5436** in the U.S. or 01-800/904-6000 in Mexico) has nonstop service to/from Dallas.

Transportes Terrestre (✆ **614/420-3366**) controls minivan service from the airport and charge 78 to 95 pesos per person. Taxis from town charge 170 pesos for up to four people.

By Train The **Chihuahua al Pacífico** (✆ **614/439-7212;** fax 614/439-7208) leaves Chihuahua daily for Los Mochis by way of the Copper Canyon country. The complete train schedule and the train route appear in "The Copper Canyon Train & Stops Along the Way," earlier in this chapter. In that section, you'll find information on purchasing tickets. It's easier to go through a travel agency than to deal directly with the company. The train is scheduled to leave at 6am daily. To get to the station in time, it's best to arrange transportation through one of the travel agencies recommended under "Fast Facts," below. They pick up clients taking the train each morning.

By Car **Hwy. 45** leads south from Ciudad Juárez, **Hwy. 16** south from Ojinaga, and **Hwy. 49** north from Torreón. For the drive to Creel, see "Getting There & Departing" under "Stop 5: Creel," earlier in this chapter.

By Bus The **Terminal de Autobuses (bus station)** is on Avenida Juan Pablo II, 8km (5 miles) northeast of town en route to the airport. Buses leave hourly for major points inland and north and south on the coast. Transportes Chihuahuenses, the big local line, offers first-class service to Ciudad Juárez every half-hour; the trip takes 4 hours. Transportes del Norte and Autobuses Estrella Blanca also run buses hourly from the border through Chihuahua to points south. Omnibus de México has *servicio ejecutivo* (deluxe service) from Juárez, Mexico City, and Monterrey. Futura/Turistar also has deluxe service to Monterrey and Durango.

For travel to Creel, look for the Estrella Blanca line. Buses leave every 2 hours from 6am to 6pm. Direct buses make the trip in 4 hours.

VISITOR INFORMATION For basic info, visit the **tourist information center** (✆ **614/410-1077** or 429-3596), Calle Aldama at Carranza in the Government Palace, just left of the altar and murals dedicated to Father Hidalgo. It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 6pm and Saturday from 10am to 3pm.

CITY LAYOUT The town center is laid out around the **Plaza Principal,** bounded by avenidas Libertad and Victoria (which run northeast-southwest) and Avenida Independencia and Calle 4 (which run northwest-southeast). The **cathedral** is at the southwest end of the plaza, and the city offices are on the northeast end. If you're standing on Independencia with the cathedral on your left, odd-numbered streets and blocks will be to your right, and even-numbered streets and blocks to your left.

GETTING AROUND Local buses run along main arteries beginning at the central plaza. Taxis are readily available. If you want to see the sights and have only 1 day, take a tour (see "Exploring Chihuahua," below).

FAST FACTS The telephone **area code** is **614.** If you have waited to purchase train tickets and make canyon hotel reservations, contact **Turismo al Mar,** Calle Berna 2202, Colonia Mirador, 31270 Chihuahua, Chih. (✆ **614/410-9232** or 416-5950; fax 614/416-6589). **Clínica del Parque** is at Pedro Leal del Rosal and de la Llave (✆ **614/415-7411**). For medical emergencies, call ✆ **614/411-8141.**

0 330 feet
0 100 meters
Bus
Escudero
To Ciudad Juárez
Holiday Inn Hotel & Suites
Restaurante Todo de Maíz
J.D. Palomino
J.E. Múñoz
G. Conde
Reforma
De Marzo
Progreso
Revolución
Calle 10
Bus
Julian Carrillo
Calle 6
Calle 4
Calle 2
Calle 3
Hotel Parador Chihuahua
Av. Universidad
Niños Héroes
Posada Tierra Blanca
Calle 5
Calle 7
Calle 9
Calle 13
Trias
Av. Ocampo
Av. Independencia
Doblado
Juárez
Libertad
Hidalgo's Dungeon
Quality Inn Chihuahua San Francisco
Catedral Plaza Principal
Palacio del Gobierno
Victoria
Aldama
Escorza
Guerrero
Av. V. Carranza
Calle 10
Morelos
Allende
G. Farias
Coronado
Lallave
Centro Cultural Quinta Gameros
Calle 7
PARQUE LERDO
Paseo Bolívar
Irigoyen
Mina
To Chihuahua al Pacifico Railway
To Museo de la Revolución
UNITED STATES
Chihuahua
MEXICO
Mexico City
0 500 mi
0 500 km

WHERE TO STAY

Expensive

Holiday Inn Hotel and Suites ★ This Holiday Inn offers the most comfortable rooms in the downtown area. All units are suites, with kitchenettes that include stove, refrigerator, and coffeemaker. There's a sitting area, a large writing table, and a choice of one king-size bed or two doubles. Guests have the use of a video library. The hotel staff is helpful and efficient. They can provide a continental breakfast for people heading off on the train, as well as a box lunch. The hotel is a 5-minute walk from downtown.

Calle Escudero 702 (btw. Av. Universidad and Av. de Montes), 31240 Chihuahua, Chih. ✆ **800/465-4329** in the U.S., or 614/439-0000. Fax 614/414-3313. 74 units. $118 double. Rates include breakfast buffet. AE, MC, V. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; babysitting; fitness room; Jacuzzi; 2 pools (1 indoor); room service; smoke-free rooms; steam room. *In room:* A/C, TV, fridge, hair dryer, Internet, kitchenette.

Quality Inn Chihuahua San Francisco The good location and comfortable midsize rooms are the main attractions here. Don't bother about getting a view; ask for something quiet. Rooms are well furnished. The bathrooms are well equipped and have ample counter space. Bed choices include two doubles, a queen, or a king. Mattresses are firm.

Victoria 409, 31000 Chihuahua, Chih. ✆ **800/847-2546** in the U.S., or 614/439-9000. Fax 614/415-3538. www.qualityinnchihuahua.com. 131 units. 1,357 pesos double. AE, MC, V. Free covered parking and continental breakfast. From the cathedral, walk to Victoria and turn right; the hotel is 1½ blocks down on your right, before Av. Ocampo. **Amenities:** Restaurant (see review for Degá, below); bar; fitness room; room service; travel agency. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Moderate

Hotel Posada Tierra Blanca This downtown hotel has an attractive large pool area shaded by trees. Rooms are in two- and three-story buildings. They are large and quiet (none have windows facing the street). Bathrooms are midsize with good counter space and better lighting than in most of the hotels in Chihuahua.

Niños Héroes 102, 31000 Chihuahua, Chih. ✆ **614/415-0000.** www.posadatierrablanca.com.mx. 94 units. 730 pesos double. AE, MC, V. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; fitness room; large outdoor pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV, Wi-Fi.

Inexpensive

Hotel Parador Chihuahua I like this motel for the price, the downtown location, and the well-maintained rooms. It occupies the interior of a small city block, with the rooms built around the pool and the garden area. The midsize rooms are carpeted and furnished rather plainly. You'll have a choice of one king-size bed or two doubles. Bathrooms are midsize.

Calle 3, no. 304 (btw. Julián Carrillo and Niños Héroes), 31000 Chihuahua, Chih. ✆ **614/415-0827.** www.paradorchihuahua.com. 34 units. 600 pesos double. AE, MC, V. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; small outdoor pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV.

WHERE TO DINE

As a large city, Chihuahua has plenty of international restaurants, but I recommend sticking with steakhouses and Mexican cuisine.

Degá MEXICAN/INTERNATIONAL This restaurant bar at the Quality Inn Chihuahua San Francisco (see above) draws both downtown workers and travelers. The breakfast buffet features made-to-order omelets. The steaks and Mexican dishes are well

priced; try the *plato mexicano,* a popular dish that comes with a tamal, chile relleno, beans, chips, and guacamole.

In the Quality Inn Chihuahua San Francisco, Calle Victoria 409. ✆ **614/416-7550.** Breakfast 38–85 pesos; breakfast buffet 90 pesos; main courses 60–180 pesos; Sun buffet 160 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 7am–11pm.

La Calesa STEAKS/MEXICAN The dining room, with its heavy furniture, wood paneling, and bound menus, gets the message across that this is Chihuahua's establishment restaurant. Some of the steaks go by different names here, but the waiters are familiar with all the cuts. A pianist entertains diners from 2:30 to 5pm and 9pm to midnight.

Av. Colón 3300, corner of Av. Juárez. ✆ **614/410-1038.** www.lacalesa.com.mx. Steaks 120–240 pesos; Mexican dishes 80–142 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 12:30pm–midnight.

Restaurante Todo de Maíz ★ Finds MEXICAN To eat cheaply and well in Chihuahua is a bit of a trick—unless you dine at this place. When I'm in Chihuahua, I never miss it. Sra. María Matilde Salazar, the owner, is an unabashed leftist, perhaps the only one in Chihuahua. On occasion I've seen her in the plaza getting signatures for petitions. She's also a great cook and maintains quality and freshness by keeping the menu simple. Between 1 and 2:30pm she offers a *comida corrida* that's a bargain. The rest of the time she makes tacos, quesadillas, tostadas, and *peneques* (a local form of *antojito* that's like a *gordita*) all made with corn *masa,* as the restaurant's name suggests. This place is down the street from the Holiday Inn.

Calle Escudero 2103 (btw. calles 21 and 23). ✆ **614/414-5778.** *Comida corrida* 45 pesos; *antojitos* 20–30 pesos. No credit cards. Mon–Fri 9am–5pm; Sat 11am–5pm.

Rincón Mexicano ★ MEXICAN The Rincón serves great Mexican food and offers a substantial number of choices. Good appetizers include *quesadillas de huitlacoche* (corn empanadas with cheese and corn fungus) for the adventurous, and *chile con asadero* (melted spicy cheese). For a main dish that gives you a little of everything, try *enchiladas tres moles.* As you would expect of a restaurant in Chihuahua, the emphasis is on beef, prepared in very Mexican ways such as *puntas en chile pasado* (beef tips cooked in a dried chile sauce) or *molcajete de res* (fajitas cooked and served in a steaming stone vessel accompanied by tortillas). The interior is easy on the eyes, with muted tones of yellow and orange, good lighting, and tablecloths. A guitar trio occasionally performs soft music in the evenings. The restaurant is a short taxi ride from downtown.

Av. Cuauhtémoc 2224. ✆ **614/411-1510,** -1427. Main courses 80–160 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily noon–midnight.

Warning! Border Unrest Heads South

The U.S. Department of State Travel Advisory notes that drug-related violence along the U.S.-Mexico border continues to escalate. Though most of it occurs in Ciudad Juárez, there was a shootout between cartel members and Mexico's police in Chihuahua's capital, and two assassinations in late 2008/early 2009. Since then, no major attacks, but travelers should keep to the central part of town and be careful at night.

EXPLORING CHIHUAHUA

To see Chihuahua's sights in 1 day, consider taking a 3-hour city tour; English-speaking guides are available. Three recommended agencies are **Torre del Sol,** Independencia 116-2 (✆ **614/415-7380**), in the Hotel Palacio del Sol; **Turismo al Mar** (see "Fast Facts," above); and **Viajes Rojo y Casavantes** in the Quality Inn Chihuahua San Francisco (p. 696) and at Vicente Guerrero 1207 (✆ **614/415-4636;** fax 614/415-5384). Any of these will pick you up at your hotel. A half-day city tour includes visits to the museums, the churches, the colonial aqueduct, the state capitol building, the state penitentiary, and more. A 7-hour trip to the Mennonite village near Cuauhtémoc costs about 350 pesos per person, with a minimum of four people. Unless you have a particular interest in cheese making or the Mennonites, it's not worth your time.

Sights in Town

Hidalgo's Dungeon Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla was a priest in Dolores, Guanajuato, when he started the War of Independence on September 16, 1810. Six months later, he was captured by the Spanish, brought to Chihuahua, and thrown in a dungeon for 98 days. He was then shot along with his lieutenants, Allende, Aldama, and Jiménez. The four were beheaded, and their heads hung in iron cages for 9½ years on the four corners of the Alhóndiga granary in Guanajuato (see chapter 7) as examples of the fate revolutionaries would meet. In this cell, Hidalgo lived on bread and water before his execution. The night before his death, he wrote a few words on the wall with a piece of charcoal to thank his guard and the warden for the good treatment they gave him. A bronze plaque commemorates his final message.

In the Palacio Federal, Av. Juárez at Guerrero. No phone. Admission 15 pesos. Tues–Sun 10am–6pm. From Plaza Principal, walk on pedestrian-only Calle Libertad for 3 long blocks to Guerrero, turn left, and walk to corner of Juárez; turn right and go a half-block; museum entrance is on the right, below the post office.

Museo de la Revolución ★★ Finds The Revolution Museum is Pancho Villa's house, where Luz Corral de Villa, Pancho Villa's widow, lived until her death in 1981. Exhibits include Villa's weapons, some personal effects, lots of period photos, and the 1922 Dodge in which he was shot in 1923 (you'll see the bullet holes). It's best to see the place with a guide who can add lots of biographical details about this larger-than-life character. Be sure to ask about Villa's opinions on marriage and about the total number of his offspring and grandchildren.

Calle 10 no. 3014 (at Méndez). ✆ **614/416-2958.** Admission 30 pesos. Tues–Sat 9am–1pm and 3–7pm. Bus: Colonia Dale (runs west on Juárez, then south on Ocampo); exit at corner of Ocampo and Méndez.

Palacio del Gobierno The Palacio del Gobierno is a magnificent, ornate structure dating in part from 1890; the original building, the Jesuit College, was built in 1718. A colorful, expressive mural encompasses the first floor of the large central courtyard and tells the history of the area around Chihuahua from the time of the first European visitation through the Revolution. In the far-right corner, note the scene depicting Benito Juárez flanked by Abraham Lincoln and Simón Bolívar, liberator of South America. In the far-left rear courtyard are a plaque and altar commemorating the execution in 1811 of Miguel Hidalgo, the father of Mexican independence; the plaque marks the spot where the hero was executed in the old building, and the mural portrays the scene.

Av. Aldama (btw. Guerrero and Carranza). ✆ **614/410-6324.** Free admission. Daily 8am–10pm. With the cathedral on your right, walk along Independencia 1 block, turn left on Aldama, continue 2 long blocks, and cross Guerrero; entrance is on the left.

Quinta Gameros ★★ Quinta Gameros is a neoclassical, French Second Empire–style mansion with a beautiful Art Nouveau interior. Built in 1910 for Manuel Gameros, the mansion became a museum in 1961. Pancho Villa used it briefly as a headquarters. The interior walls, floors, and ceilings are lavishly decorated, which inspired the transfer of a beautiful collection of fine Mexican Art Nouveau furnishings from Mexico City to this museum. If you like design and beautiful antiques, especially Art Nouveau, don't miss this place.

Quinta Gameros, Paseo Bolívar 401. ✆ **614/416-6684.** Admission 30 pesos. Tues–Sun 11am–2pm and 4–7pm. Heading away from the Plaza Principal with the cathedral on your right, walk 7 blocks on Independencia to Bolívar, turn right, and walk 1 block; museum is on the right.

CHIHUAHUA AFTER DARK

The nightlife in Chihuahua has seen better times. If your hotel has live music, you're probably best bet is to stay put. At the **Quality Inn Chihuahua San Francisco,** there's live music Monday through Saturday, with happy hour from 5 to 8pm. The lobby bar at the **Hotel Palacio del Sol** schedules live entertainment nightly.

20

Los Cabos & Baja California

by Joy Hepp

Long before crowds of bikini-clad babes lined the beaches of Los Cabos and adventurous fisherman sought trophies from beyond its shores, Baja California captured the imaginations of adventurous travelers. After conquering mainland Mexico in the 1500s, Spanish conquistador Hernando Cortez was looking for a nice retirement destination. Tales of a paradise called Calafia—which was widely believed to be inhabited solely by wild "Amazon" women—reached Cortez, and so he set out for Baja California to find it. Upon his arrival, Cortez was run off by fierce locals; among them—surprise, surprise—were male warriors. Cortez fled, but others were drawn to this land of azure waters, dramatic landscapes, and diverse wildlife.

Attached mostly to the United States and separated from all but a sliver of Mexico by the Sea of Cortez (Gulf of California), the peninsula consists of one long granite ridge extending about 1,500km (930 miles)—longer than Italy—from Mexico's northernmost city of **Tijuana** to **Cabo San Lucas** at its southern tip. Baja is part Wild West, part country club, part seafaring paradise, part adventure wonderland, and there's room enough for all of its visitors to blaze their own trails. For more detailed coverage of this region, consult *Frommer's Los Cabos & Baja.*

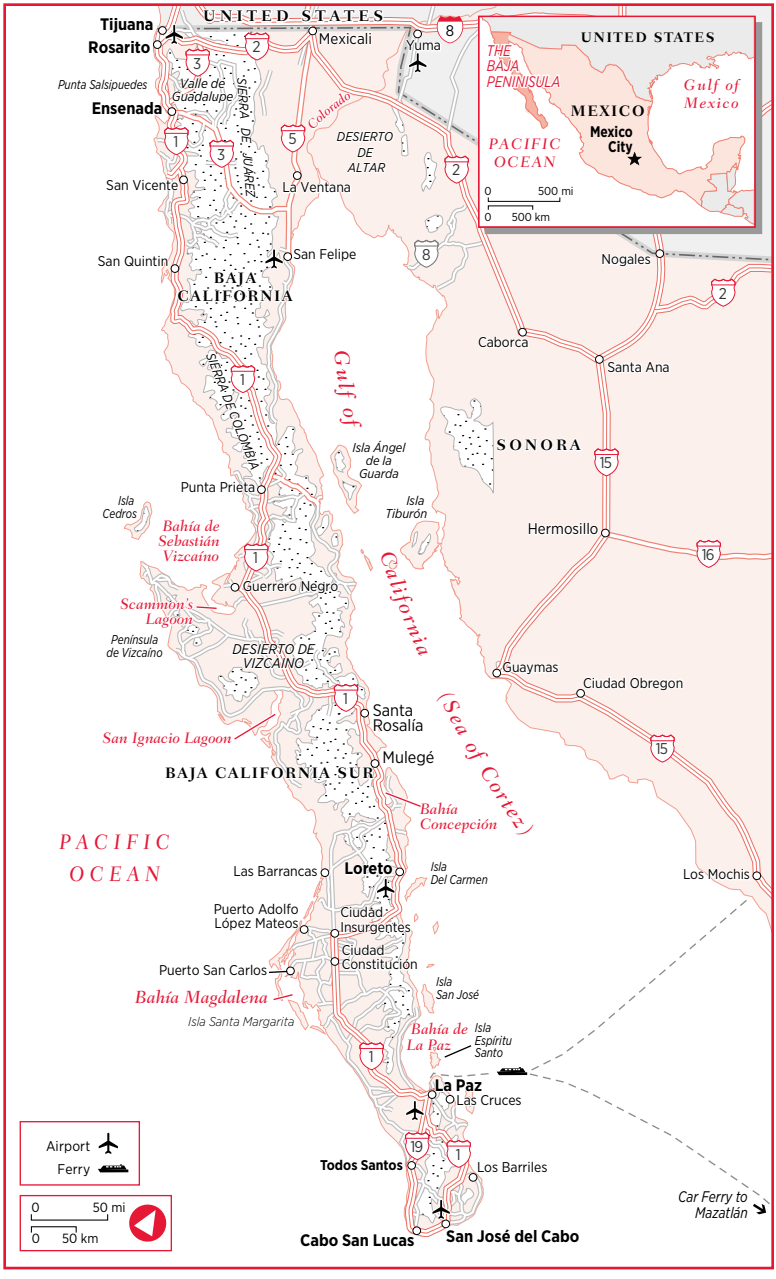
EXPLORING BAJA CALIFORNIA

The weather in this land of extremes can be sizzling hot in summer, and cold and windy in winter. Though winter is often warm enough for watersports, bring a wet suit for diving and snorkeling, as well as warmer clothes for chilly temperatures. Although Baja's climate varies greatly by season, it is predictable—an important quality for the increasing number of golfers looking for sunny skies. Rainy days are few and far between, with most showers concentrated in September.

THE TWO CABOS Nearly two million visitors—a number that is steadily growing—are lured to Los Cabos (the Capes), the twin towns at the peninsula's southernmost tip, each year. **Cabo San Lucas** holds court on the Western cape, and **San José del Cabo** rounds out the Eastern cape. Connected only by the **Tourist Corridor,** 33km (20 miles)

Tips The Best Websites for Los Cabos & Baja

- All About Cabo: www.allaboutcabo.com
- Baja Quest: www.bajaquest.com
- Turista Libre: www.derrikchinn.blogspot.com
- Baja Insider: www.bajainsider.com
- Roz in La Paz: www.rozinlapaz.com


UNITED STATES
Tijuana
Rosarito
Punta Salsipuedes
Ensenada
Valle de Guadalupe
SIERRA DE JUÁREZ
Mexicali
Yuma
Colorado
DESIERTO DE ALTAR
San Vicente
La Ventana
San Quintin
San Felipe
BAJA CALIFORNIA
SIERRA DE COLUMBIA
Gulf of California
Isla Ángel de la Guarda
Isla Cedros
Punta Prieta
Isla Tiburón
Bahía de Sebastián Vizcaíno
Guerrero Negro
Scammon's Lagoon
Península de Vizcaíno
DESIERTO DE VIZCAÍNO
Santa Rosalía
San Ignacio Lagoon
Mulegé
BAJA CALIFORNIA SUR
Bahía Concepción
PACIFIC OCEAN
Las Barrancas
Loreto
Isla Del Carmen
Puerto Adolfo López Mateos
Ciudad Insurgentes
Ciudad Constitución
Puerto San Carlos
Bahía Magdalena
Isla Santa Margarita
Isla San José
Bahía de La Paz
Isla Espíritu Santo
La Paz
Las Cruces
Todos Santos
Los Barriles
Cabo San Lucas
San José del Cabo
Car Ferry to Mazatlán
Nogales
Caborca
Santa Ana
SONORA
Hermosillo
Guaymas
Ciudad Obregon
Los Mochis
(Sea of Cortez)
Airport
Ferry
0 50 mi
0 50 km
THE BAJA PENINSULA
UNITED STATES
Gulf of Mexico
MEXICO
Mexico City
PACIFIC OCEAN
0 500 mi
0 500 km

of coastline studded with golf courses, luxury resorts, and master-planned communities, the two capes could not be more different.

Cabo San Lucas, also known as Land's End, is twofold. Most obviously, she's the rowdy younger sister who takes tequila shots from a holster while dancing on the table chanting, "What happens in Cabo stays in Cabo," and wraps up the night at a local American fast-food joint. The other side of San Lucas is a bling-flashing older brother who frequents swanky clubs, sips champagne in his oceanfront Jacuzzi, or cruises the bay in his luxury yacht. Somewhere in between are the fun-loving aunts and uncles who've come to fish for marlin and/or take a peep at Sammy Hagar.

On the other hand, San José del Cabo, on the eastern side of Baja's tip, is a decidedly more "Mexican" experience. Colorful 18th-century homes–turned–artisan shops, vibrant flowering trees, world-class waves, and exquisite restaurants draw well-tanned West Coast surfers; jolly snowbirds in search of sun and margaritas; celebrities and executives looking for respite from the rat race; and couples and families who wake up early to walk on the beach, go for a swim, take a tour, and spend the afternoon relaxing before enjoying a nice dinner on the town.

Todos Santos, an artistic community on the Pacific side of the coastal curve (1 hr. north of the tip), and Baja's **East Cape** both draw travelers who find that Los Cabos has outgrown them. **La Paz,** capital of Baja Sur, remains an easygoing maritime port skirted by white-sand beaches and a smattering of islands worth exploring.

MID BAJA Among the highlights of the mid-Baja region are the east coast towns of **Loreto, Bahía Magdalena, Mulegé,** and **Santa Rosalía.** These towns have a much richer cultural heritage than those in Baja Sur. Although Loreto is experiencing growth—driven by a real estate project just outside of town—the remaining east coast towns have all but escaped the tourism boom experienced by the two Cabos.

These mid-Baja towns were the center of the 18th-century Jesuit mission movement. Today they attract travelers who are drawn to Baja's wild natural beauty but find the popularity of Los Cabos a bit overwhelming. This area's natural attractions have made it a center for sea kayaking, sportfishing, diving, and hiking—including excursions to view indigenous cave paintings.

BAJA NORTE **Tijuana** has the dubious distinction of being the most visited and perhaps most misunderstood town in all of Mexico. Underneath the layers of grit, Tijuana is a true cultural gem with a vibrant art community and fascinating history.

Tranquil **Rosarito Beach** has suffered from the overflow of discordance from its northern neighbor, but locals are holding strong and proud, and there is still a sense of glamour from the days when classic movie stars made it their playground. Farther south on the Pacific Coast, the lovely port town of **Ensenada** is known for surfing and sportfishing. Tours of nearby inland vineyards (Mexico's wine country) are growing in popularity.

1 LOS CABOS: RESORTS, WATERSPORTS & GOLF ★★★

The two towns at the southern tip of the rugged Baja Peninsula are grouped together as Los Cabos, although they couldn't be more different. San José del Cabo and Cabo San Lucas are separated not just by 33km (20 miles), but also by distinct attitudes and ways of life. Where Cabo San Lucas mirrors a spirited version of the Los Angeles lifestyle, San

José del Cabo remains a traditional, tranquil Mexican small town, although recent gentrification is turning it into the more sophisticated of the two resorts. Because each Cabos has its own character and attractions, we treat them separately; but it's common to stay in one—or in the Corridor between—and make day trips to the other.

The golden days of Los Cabos began when silver-screen greats such as Bing Crosby, John Wayne, and Ava Gardner ventured south in the 1950s. Sportfishing was the first draw, but the transfixing landscape, rich waters, and nearly flawless climate quickly gained the favor of other explorers. The only way to get to the soon-to-be "marlin capital of the world" was by boat or private airplane. As such, Los Cabos was born of exclusivity and extravagance. Fishing remains a lure today, although golf may have overtaken it as the principal attraction. By the early 1980s, the Mexican government realized Los Cabos' growth potential and invested in new highways, airport facilities, golf courses, and marine facilities. Increased air access and the opening of Transpeninsular Hwy. 1 (in 1973) paved the way for booming growth.

Today Los Cabos is not just about marlin and the links. It has become a hub for surfing, hiking, diving, whale-watching, sea kayaking, and spas. And there's always an isolated, wild beach on which to picnic, camp, or simply watch the tide come in.

The road from Cabo San Lucas to San José del Cabo is the centerpiece of resort growth. Known as the "Tourist Corridor," or simply "the Corridor," this four-lane stretch offers cliff-top vistas and an easy ride between the towns, but still has no nighttime lighting and bears too many roadside memorials to count—fair warning that cautious driving is imperative, especially at night. Deluxe resorts and renowned golf courses are here, along with dramatic beaches and coves. The view is especially outstanding in January and February, when gray whales often spout close to shore.

The Los Cabos area is more expensive than other Mexican resorts because luxury is the norm among local hotels, and real estate prices make the San Diego market seem tame. However, a new boom in all-inclusive resorts and off-season travel deals is making Los Cabos vacations more affordable.

You should consider renting a car, even if only for a day or two, because there's too much to see to spend an hour waiting at the bus stop or hundreds of dollars on expensive taxis. For those who like the freedom to explore on their own terms, a rental car is essential, not to mention economical. And to best understand Los Cabos, both capes need your attention.

SAN JOSE DEL CABO

180km (112 miles) SE of La Paz; 33km (20 miles) NE of Cabo San Lucas; 1,760km (1,091 miles) SE of Tijuana

San José del Cabo, with its pastel cottages and narrow streets lined with flowering trees, retains the air of a provincial Mexican town. The main square, adorned with a wrought-iron bandstand and shaded benches, faces the cathedral, which was built on the site of an early mission. San José is becoming increasingly sophisticated, with a collection of noteworthy cafes, art galleries, interesting shops, and intriguing inns adding a newly refined flavor to the downtown area. This is the best choice for those who want to enjoy the paradoxical landscape but still be aware that they're in Mexico.

Essentials

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING **By Plane** **Aeroméxico** (✆ **800/237-6639** in the U.S., 01-800/021-4010 in Mexico, or 624/146-5098, -5097) flies nonstop from San Diego and New York; **American Airlines** (✆ **800/223-5436** in the U.S., or 624/146-5300, -5309) flies from Dallas/Ft. Worth, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Las Vegas and

Sacramento; **US Airways/America West** (✆ **800/235-9292** in the U.S., or 624/146-5380) operates nonstop flights from Phoenix, Las Vegas, Oakland, and San Diego; **Alaska Airlines** (✆ **800/252-7522** in the U.S., or 624/146-5100, -5101) flies from Los Angeles, Portland, San Diego, Seattle, Denver, and San Francisco; **Continental** (✆ **800/537-9222** in the U.S., or 624/146-5080) flies nonstop from Houston and Newark; **Delta** (✆ **800/241-4141** in the U.S., or 624/146-5005) has flights from Atlanta, Cincinnati, New York, and San Diego; **Frontier** (✆ **800/432-1359** in the U.S., or 624/146-5421) has nonstop service from Denver, and connecting flights through Kansas City, Los Angeles, Sacramento, and San José; **Mexicana** (✆ **800/531-7921** in the U.S., or 624/146-5002) has direct or connecting flights from Guadalajara, Dallas, Chicago, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Sacramento, and Mexico City; **United Airlines** (✆ **800/538-2929** in the U.S., or 624/146-5433) flies nonstop from Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco, and Denver; **Air Canada** (✆ **888/247-2262**) has flights from San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Denver.

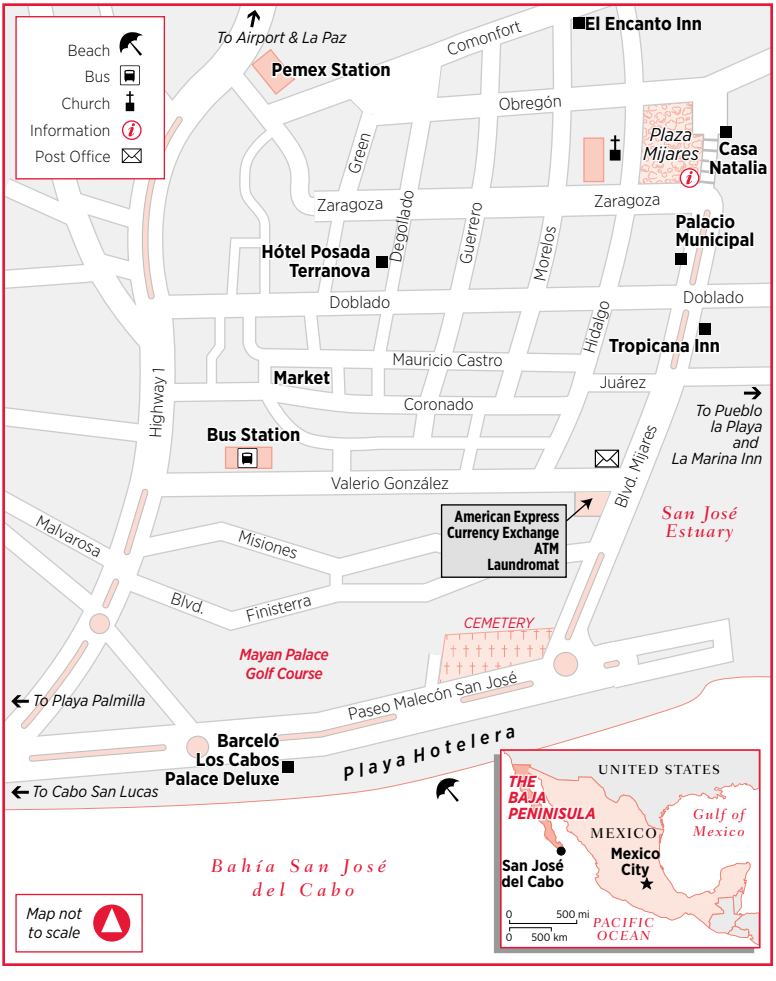
By Car From San Diego, drive south on Hwy. 1. Night driving is inadvisable, so the drive takes about 2½ days. From La Paz, take Hwy. 1 south; the drive takes 3 to 4 hours. Or take Hwy. 1 south just past the village of San Pedro, and then take Hwy. 19 south (a less winding road) through Todos Santos to Cabo San Lucas, where you pick up Hwy. 1 east to San José del Cabo. From Cabo San Lucas, it's a half-hour drive to San José.

By Bus The **Terminal de Autobuses (bus station),** on Valerio Gonzalez, a block east of Hwy. 1 (✆ **624/143-7880**), is open daily from 5:30am to 8pm.

Orientation

ARRIVING **Los Cabos International Airport** (✆ **624/146-5111**) serves both Cabos and the Corridor in between. San José is 13km (8 miles) from the airport, and Cabo San Lucas is a 48km (30-mile) drive. Despite passenger traffic being down as low as 25% in 2009, Los Cabos experienced rapid growth in the preceding years, which enabled the construction and modernization of its three terminals. Be sure to request the correct terminal when you head home. Upon arriving, pass Customs and baggage claim, and turn right once you exit the sliding doors. Ask for the shuttle desk while breezing past the timeshare booths that hawk free amenities in exchange for attending their sales pitch presentation. You'll have plenty of encounters with timeshare salespeople—especially in Cabo San Lucas—so feel free to head straight for a taxi or shuttle if you want to get to the beach in a hurry. At about $10 to $17 per person, depending on the location of your hotel, shuttles are the most economic transportation option. **Josefinos** (✆ **624/146-5354**) is located in the airport. A private van for up to five passengers is $85 and may be able to whisk away your large group more quickly than a regular shuttle. Taxis charge about $30 to San José and upward of $70 to San Lucas.

For those who like their freedom, it's helpful to have a car in Los Cabos, and rental is very affordable when booked online in advance. However, the major car-rental agencies all have counters at the airport, open during flight arrivals for last-minute booking. **Avis** (✆ **800/331-1212** in the U.S., or 624/146-0201) is open daily 6am to 10pm; **Budget** (✆ **800/527-0700** in the U.S., 624/146-5333 at the airport, or 624/143-4190 in Cabo San Lucas) is open daily 8am to 9pm; **Hertz** (✆ **800/654-3131** in the U.S., 624/146-1803 in San José del Cabo, or 624/105-1428 in Cabo San Lucas) is open daily 8am to 8pm; and **National** (✆ **800/328-4567** in the U.S., 624/146-5022 at the airport, or 624/142-2424 in San José del Cabo) is open daily 8am to 8pm.



VISITOR INFORMATION San José's city tourist information office (✆/fax **624/142-3310** or 142-9628) is in the old post office building on Zaragoza at Mijares. It offers maps, free local publications, and other basic information about the area. It's open Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 3pm. Prior to arrival, contact the **Los Cabos Tourism Board** (✆ **866/567-2226** in the U.S., or 624/143-4777; www.visitloscabos.travel).

CITY LAYOUT San José del Cabo sprawls from the airport halfway to San Lucas, but two main areas are most enticing to visitors: **Downtown,** or *el centro,* has restaurants, shopping, sophisticated inns, and traditional budget hotels, while the **hotel zone** is lined with all-inclusive resorts along the beach. **Zaragoza** is the main street leading from the

 highway into town; **Paseo San José** runs parallel to the beach and is the principal boulevard of the hotel zone. The 1.6km-long (1 mile) **Bulevar Mijares** connects the two areas and is the center of most tourist activity in San José.

GETTING AROUND There is no local bus service between downtown and the beach, but it's about a 30-minute walk from the center of downtown to the sand, and **taxis** (✆ **624/142-0580**) connect the two for about $6 each way. For day trips to **Cabo San Lucas,** ask your concierge if your hotel has a daily shuttle, or just catch a **bus** (see "Getting There & Departing," above) or a cab.

Fast Facts San José del Cabo

Area Code The local telephone area code is **624.**

Banks Banks exchange currency during business hours, which are generally Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 6pm, and Saturday from 10am to 2pm. There are several major banks with ATMs on Zaragoza between Morelos and Degollado and in the downtown.

Consular Agency The **Canadian** office is at Plaza José Green, Local 9, Blvd. Mijares s/n (✆ **624/142-4333**), open Monday to Friday, 9:30am to 12:30pm.

Drugstores **Farmacía Las Palmas,** Carretera Transpeninsular Km 31, Plaza Las Palmas near the Scotiabank (✆ **624/146-9077**), is open daily from 8am to 10pm.

Emergencies Dial ✆ **066,** or the local police number at City Hall: ✆ **624/142-0361.**

Hospital **Amerimed Hospital** is at Plaza Cabo Ley, Paseo de las Misiones Residencial Club de Golf (✆ **624/105-8550**).

Internet Access Around here, Internet cafes have about as much shelf life as your average reality television star. Most hotels provide some sort of Wi-Fi and/or provide a computer for guest use. Your best bet is to ask your concierge or the front desk.

Post Office The *correo,* Bulevar Mijares 1924, at Valerio Gonzalez (✆ **624/142-0911**), is open Monday through Friday from 8am to 6pm, Saturday from 9am to noon. For more substantial mailings, Mail Boxes Etc., Plaza Las Palmas Km 31 (✆ **624/142-4355**), is open Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 5:30pm and Saturday from 9am to noon.

Outdoor Activities: Beaches, Sports & More

Although the water activities hub is on Cabo San Lucas's Medano Beach, San José is tops for outdoor adventure, and its relaxed pace also makes it an ideal place to unwind in the sand. From quiet coves to advanced surf breaks and untouched beaches to a living estuary, San José has relaxation and adventure by land and by sea.

ADVENTURE TOURS **Tío Sports** (✆ **624/143-3399;** www.tiosports.com) arranges a variety of land- and water-based adventure and nature tours, including popular ATV tours to La Candelaria; parasailing; and kayak, catamaran, snorkeling, and diving trips. The website gives current prices. **Baja Wild** (✆ **624/172-6300;** www.bajawild.com) is ideal for a wide range of adventure, as they offer every excursion imaginable in Los

Cabos, from rock climbing to kayaking, hiking to jeep safaris, ATV rides and more. **Baja Outback** (✆ **624/142-9200;** www.bajaoutback.com) provides single-day and multiday adventure tours throughout Southern Baja. Armed with a naturalist guide and an expedition guide, who provide information and offer driving instruction over the two-way radios that connect each Hummer in the caravan, you take the wheel of your own H2 Hummer and discover mountain, desert, and sea.

BEACHES The best beach safe for swimming is **Palmilla Beach** ★★★, which fronts the glitzy One&Only Palmilla resort 8km (5 miles) west of San José. With its rocky coves, soft sand, and visible sea life, this beach has been home to fishermen for centuries and is the preeminent picnic destination for Mexican families on Sunday afternoons. Past the rock formations, the beach curves east and the culminating swim is well worth the pebble-strewn stroll. Locals agree there's just something about the water on the other side of the rocks. Perfect for swimming, the water in Palmilla Bay has a sort of magic unlike anywhere else, and when you emerge, you'll feel it for yourself. To reach Playa Palmilla, enter the lush Palmilla community at Km 27.5 on the highway, take the road toward the beach, and then take the fork to the left (without entering the hotel grounds) and park in the lot.

Estero San José, a natural freshwater estuary on which the ancient Pericúe Indians built their civilization centuries ago, has at least 270 species of birds and is on the east end of the hotel zone. The estuary is a protected ecological reserve and merits a sunset beach walk from the Hotel Presidente InterContinental to the river mouth where the spring-fed estuary meets the Sea of Cortez.

For a list of other beaches worth exploring if you have a rental car, see "Outdoor Activities: Fishing, Golf & More," under "Cabo San Lucas," later in this chapter.

FISHING The least expensive way to enjoy deep-sea fishing is to pair up with another angler and charter a *panga,* a 7m (23-ft.) skiff used by local fishermen, from Pueblo la Playa, the beach near the new Puerto Los Cabos Marina. Several *panga* fleets offer 6-hour sportfishing trips, usually from 6am to noon, for $210 to $550. Two or three people can split the cost. For information, visit the fishermen's cooperative in Pueblo la Playa (no phone) or contact **Gordo Banks Pangas** (✆ **624/142-1147;** www.gordobanks.com). For larger charter boats, you'll depart from the marina in Cabo San Lucas (see "Outdoor Activities: Fishing, Golf & More," under "Cabo San Lucas," later in this chapter).

GOLF Los Cabos has become Latin America's leading golf destination, with a collection of top signature courses and others under construction. The lowest greens fees in the area are at the 9-hole **Mayan Palace Golf Los Cabos,** Paseo Finisterra 1 (✆ **624/142-0900,** -0901), which is the first right turn east of the yellow Fonatur statue in the highway roundabout. See p. 723 for fees.

HORSEBACK RIDING Horses can be rented near the Presidente InterContinental, Fiesta Inn, and in the Costa Azul Canyon for $20 to $30 per hour. Most people choose to ride on the beach, but a trip up the arroyo also could prove scenic. For a more organized riding experience—English or Western—there's **Cuadra San Francisco Equestrian Center,** Km 19.5, along the Corridor (✆ **624/144-0160;** www.loscaboshorses.com). It's owned by master horseman Francisco Barrena, whose more than 30 years of experience in training horses and operating equestrian schools will comfort any level of rider, as will his expertise in selecting and fitting a horse to riders' skill levels. A 2-hour canyon ride in and around Arroyo San Carlos or Venado Blanco costs $90; a 1-hour ride to the beach or desert is $45. Private tours go for $60 per hour, and equestrian aficionados may schedule a dressage class for $70.

Tips Swimming Safety

Although this area is ideal for watersports, occasional strong currents and undertows can make swimming dangerous at most **beaches in San José,** the **Tourist Corridor,** and **Cabo San Lucas.** Check conditions before entering the surf. Swimming is generally safe at **Palmilla Beach** (see "Beaches," above), though it, too, can be rough. The safest area beach for swimming is **Medano Beach** in Cabo San Lucas.

SEA KAYAKING Guided, ecology-minded **ocean kayak tours** are available through **Cabo Expeditions** (✆ **624/143-2700;** www.caboexpeditions.com.mx) and **Cabo Kayak** (✆ **624/143-3399;** www.cabokayak.com). Most ocean kayaking tours depart from Cabo San Lucas, curve around the bay toward the Arch, and break for snorkeling at Lover's Beach.

SNORKELING & DIVING **Manta** (✆ **624/144-3871;** www.caboscuba.com) and **Amigos del Mar** in Cabo San Lucas (✆ **513/898-054** in the U.S., or 624/143-0505; www.amigosdelmar.com) are two of the most reputable dive operations in Los Cabos. Manta offers everything from advanced dive trips to PADI open-water diver certification. Prices start at $60 for a one-tank dive and at $441 for 3 days of diving. Night dives are $70 per person. The 4-day PADI certification course, which certifies you to scuba-dive anywhere in the world, costs $450. A 3-hour resort course including one shallow dive is $115. Among the area's best dive sites are **Gordo Banks** and **Cabo Pulmo.** Gordo Banks is an advanced dive site where you can see whale sharks and hammerhead sharks. It's a deep dive—27 to 30m (89–98 ft.)—with limited visibility (9–12m/30–39 ft.). Most dives are drift dives, and wet suits are highly recommended. Cabo Pulmo, a protected marine park 72km (45 miles) northeast of San José, has seven sites geared for divers of all experience levels, plus some of the most beautiful stretches of Baja beach, so it never feels crowded. **Cabo Pulmo Beach Resort** (✆ **562/366-0722** in the U.S., or 624/141-0726; www.cabopulmo.com) offers charming rental bungalows to call home in between dives or long walks on the beach.

SURFING ★★ Surfing is becoming one of the hottest trends in the entire destination. **Playa Costa Azul,** at Km 29, on Hwy. 1 just south of San José, has the most popular surfing beaches in the area. The **Costa Azul Surf Shop,** Km 28, Playa Costa Azul (✆ **624/142-2771;** www.costa-azul.com.mx), offers surfing lessons, surfboard and snorkeling equipment rentals, and specialized surf excursions to any of the 15 local breaks. Excursions include transportation and a DVD video of the day, and owner Alejandro Olea handcrafts all rental boards. Just $20 a day will get you a board, leash, shade umbrella, beach chair, and car rack. One-hour lessons are $70, and special packages are available. **Cabo Surf Hotel** (✆ **858/964-5117** in the U.S., or 624/142-2666; www.cabosurfhotel.com) offers surf lessons and daily board rentals for $37.

The surf switches sides with the seasons, so the waves break on the eastern side of the peninsula in the spring and summer (Mar–Oct), and the Pacific plays host to surfers in the fall and winter (Nov–Mar). The most popular summer breaks start at Acapulquito and extend up the East Cape, while the hot spot for winter waves is Los Cerritos Beach, south of Todos Santos. As every break has its secret—from rocks covered in sea urchins to territorial locals—your best bet is to hook up with a reputable surf shop or guide to take you to the break that's right for you.

TENNIS Tennis is available at many resorts throughout Los Cabos, but if you're staying somewhere tennis isn't available, the two courts at the **Mayan Palace Resort Golf Los Cabos,** Paseo Finisterra 1 (✆ **624/142-0905**), rent for 200 pesos an hour during the day, 230 pesos an hour at night. Call the club to reserve. Club guests also can use the swimming pool.

WHALE-WATCHING From January through March, migrating gray and humpback whales visit Los Cabos to breed and bear their calves, creating one of Baja's most impressive spectacles. Practically every local tour company advertises whale-watching tours that range from an hour to a half-day. Options include Zodiac-style rafts, sportfishing boats, glass-bottom boats, and cruise catamarans, all of which depart from the Cabo San Lucas Marina and cost $35 to $50, depending on the type of boat and whether the trip includes snacks and beverages. You can also spot whales from the shore; good spots include the beach by the Westin Resort & Spa, at Esperanza Resort in the Punta Ballena community, and along the beaches and cliffs of the Corridor.

Shopping

San José is the capes' seat of artisan finery, design boutiques, and hip art galleries, clustered around **Bulevar Mijares** and **Zaragoza.** Start in the main plaza and head northwest toward the historic gallery district for a peek at the paintings and sculptures of Pez Gordo Gallery, the Fine Art Annex, Old Towne Gallery, and Galería de Ida Victoria. Head any other direction from the main plaza for crafts boutiques. The Galleries host a festive art walk on Thursday nights from 6 to 9pm during high season. A good place to start out is **Casa Dahlia,** near the corner of Morelos and Zaragoza (✆ **624/685-2642;** www.casadahlia.com), a contemporary gallery and cafe with a great view of the cathedral from the back garden. The following businesses accept credit cards (American Express, MasterCard, and Visa).

Mejicanisimo This shop sells everything from locally made soaps and Damiana tea to embroidered linens and exquisite Emilia Castillo sterling-silver-embedded porcelain. The luminous owner, Magdalena del Río, supplies most of the area's luxury resorts with their fine Oaxacan embroidery, often used for tablecloths and throw pillows. Right across from the plaza, it can't be missed. Open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 9pm. Zaragoza, across from the cathedral. ✆ **624/142-3090.**

Necri ★ This shop sells the finest in Talavera ceramics and pewter accessories. Shipping is available. Open Monday through Saturday from 9am to 9pm. Zaragoza at Hidalgo, fronting the giant fig tree in the plaza. ✆ **624/142-2777.** www.necri.com.mx.

SAX For unusual and well-priced jewelry, visit this lovely shop where two local designers (who also happen to be sisters) create one-of-a-kind pieces using silver, coral, and semiprecious stones. They'll even create a special-request design for you and have it ready in 24 hours. Open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 9pm, closed Sunday. On Mijares next to Casa Natalia. ✆ **624/130-7500** or 559/316-5375 in the U.S. www.saxstyle.com.

The Shoppes The ultimate in luxury, style, and home design can be found in San José's opulent shopping center, located on the grounds of the One&Only Palmilla Resort. Among other shops, **Pepita** sells haute couture, **Casa Vieja** sells chic women's clothing and resort wear, **Q Boutique** houses Diamonds International's connoisseur collection, and there's even a kiosk that sells gear to support the local humane society. Store hours vary; most are open Monday to Friday 9am to 9pm. Km 27.5 Carretera Transpeninsular. ✆ **624/144-6999.** www.lastiendasdepalmilla.com.

Where to Stay

There's more demand than supply in Baja Sur—especially during the idyllic winter months—so prices tend to be higher than those for equivalent accommodations in other parts of Mexico. It's best to call ahead for reservations. Properties in the beachside hotel zone often offer package deals that bring room rates down to the moderate range, especially during summer months. Check with your travel agent. High season generally denotes December through April, and low season is from May through November. Rates listed below do not include tax, which is 15%, and most resorts in Los Cabos offer free parking—although that, too, is changing.

Expensive

Barceló Los Cabos Palace Deluxe ★★★ (Kids) If the aim of an all-inclusive resort is to make guests feel as though they're living in their own luxurious self-contained world, then the Barceló chain's latest offering is on the mark. Located in San José's hotel zone, the Palace Deluxe is home to 619 suites, seven restaurants, seven bars, and four swimming pools—it's a wonder that guests ever make it off the property. The rooms pack as much luxury as the 400-thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets pack comfort, with walk-in closets, custom shower heads, and Italian tile in the bathroom. When the Palace Deluxe opened in December 2009, it had the claim to fame of being the first resort in Los Cabos to feature swim-up suites. Like most all-inclusive properties, Palace Deluxe is a hit with groups and families, so if you're looking for quiet, this may not be your ideal spot.

Paseo del Malecón 1-5 D, Fonatur Zona Hotelera, 23400 San José del Cabo, B.C.S. ✆ **800/227-2356** in the U.S., or 624/163-7730. www.barceloloscabos.com. 619 units. $226 junior suite; $366 family suite; $476 master suite. All-inclusive rate based on double occupancy for 2 adults. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** 7 restaurants; basketball court; kids' club; concierge; 4 swimming pools; steam room; sauna; gym; tennis court; theater. *In room:* A/C, TV, MP3 player, Wi-Fi.

Casa Natalia ★★★ (Finds) This acclaimed boutique hotel is exquisite. Owners Nathalie and Loic have transformed a former residence into a beautiful amalgam of palms, waterfalls, and flowers. The inn is a completely renovated historic home that combines modern architecture with traditional Mexican touches. All rooms have sliding glass doors that open onto small private terraces or balconies with hammocks and chairs, shaded by bougainvillea and bamboo. Rooms are equipped with CD and DVD players, along with a small collection of DVDs. The two spa suites each have a private terrace with a whirlpool and hammock. The terraces face a small courtyard pool surrounded by California palms. Casa Natalia offers its guests privacy, style, and romance. It's in the heart of downtown San José, just off the central plaza. The excellent on-site restaurant, **Mi Cocina,** is reviewed in "Where to Dine," below.

Bulevar Mijares 4, 23400 San José del Cabo, B.C.S. ✆ **888/277-3814** in the U.S., or 624/142-5100. Fax 624/146-7100. www.casanatalia.com. 20 units. High season $425 double, $575 spa suite; low season $230–$350 double, $395–$465 spa suite. AE, MC, V. Free parking. No children 13 and under. **Amenities:** Gourmet restaurant; bar; heated outdoor pool w/waterfall and swim-up bar; access and transportation to private beach club; concierge; room service; in-room spa services. *In room:* A/C, fan, TV/DVD, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Moderate

El Encanto Inn ★ (Value) On a quiet street in the historic downtown district, this charming inn borders a grassy courtyard with a fountain and small pool. It's a relaxing alternative to busy hotels and an excellent value. Rooms are decorated with rustic wood and contemporary iron furniture. Nice-size bathrooms have colorful tile accents. Rooms have two double beds, while suites have king-size beds and a sitting room. A pool area with a *palapa* bar and 14 impeccable poolside suites were recently added. These newer

suites have minibars and other extras, while all rooms offer DirecTV satellite. The owners, Cliff and Blanca (a lifelong resident of San José), can arrange fishing packages and golf and diving outings. The inn is a half-block from the church.

Morelos 133 (btw. Obregón and Comonfort), 23400 San José del Cabo, B.C.S. ✆ **624/142-0388.** www.elencantoinn.com. 26 units. $99 double; $126–$240 suite. MC, V. Limited street parking available. **Amenities:** Restaurant; *palapa* bar; small outdoor pool; spa. *In room:* A/C, fan, TV, minibar (in some).

La Marina Inn This impeccably clean and friendly courtyard hotel (formerly La Playita Hotel) is an ideal place for visitors looking for a little bit of "old" San José, as the new Puerto Los Cabos community and marina continue to grow and evolve around it. For now, it's the only hotel on the only beach in San José that's safe for swimming. Steps from the water and the lineup of fishing *pangas* on the new marina, the two stories of sunlit rooms frame a patio with a pool just large enough to allow you to swim laps. Each room is spacious, with high-quality basic furnishings, screened windows, a nicely tiled bathroom, and cable TV. Two large suites on the second floor have full kitchens. The inn's La Marina Café, open from 9am until 5pm, serves killer bloody marys for breakfast and their famous fish tacos all day.

Pueblo la Playa, Apdo. Postal 437, 23400 San José del Cabo, B.C.S. ✆/fax **624/142-4166.** www.lamarinahotel.com. 27 units. $80 double; $130–$190 suite. MC, V. Free parking. From Bulevar Mijares, follow sign pointing to Pueblo la Playa for about 3km (1¾ miles); hotel is on the left. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; kayaks; outdoor pool; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, fan, TV.

Tropicana Inn ★ This hacienda-style hotel, a long-standing favorite in San José, welcomes many repeat visitors. Just behind the Tropicana Bar and Grill, it frames a plant-filled courtyard with a graceful arcade bordering the rooms and inviting swimming pool. Each nicely furnished, medium-size room in the L-shaped building (which has a two- and a three-story wing) has tile floors, two double beds, a window looking out on the courtyard, and a brightly tiled bathroom with shower. Each morning, freshly brewed coffee, delicious sweet rolls, and fresh fruit are set out for hotel guests. There's room service until 10pm from the adjacent Tropicana Bar and Grill (owned by the hotel).

Bulevar Mijares 30 (1 block south of the town square), 23400 San José del Cabo, B.C.S. ✆ **624/142-0907** or 142-580. www.tropicanainn.com.mx. Fax 624/142-1590. 40 units. High season $128 and up double; low season $108 and up double. Rates include continental breakfast. AE, MC, V. Free limited parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant/bar; small outdoor pool; room service, Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar.

Inexpensive

Hotel Posada Terranova This small family-owned hotel is so famous for its traditional Mexican breakfasts and charming outdoor dining terrace that locals often forget it's even a hotel. While local Mexicans and expats love it for weekend brunch, the budget traveler will love it for its spare decor, clean rooms, soft sheets, ideal location in the center of downtown San José, and, yes, its huevos rancheros and fresh-squeezed OJ in the morning.

Degollado, btw. Doblado and Zaragoza, 23400 San José del Cabo, B.C.S. ✆ **624/142-0534.** Fax 624/142-0902. www.hterranova.com.mx. 25 units. $70 double. Seasonal rates available. Rates include continental breakfast. MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar; room service. *In room:* A/C, fan, satellite TV, no phone.

Where to Dine

Expensive

Baan Thai ★★ Finds PAN-ASIAN Asian food is hard to come by in Los Cabos, and Baan Thai—set in one of San José's lovely historic buildings—does an impressive job of seasoning these flavors with a dash of Mexico. Move beyond traditional Asian starters,

such as spring rolls or satay, to one of Baan Thai's more unique offerings, such as Thai pizza topped with curried lamb, or steamed mussels with lemon grass. From there, try entrees such as wok-tossed lobster or five-spice barbecue ribs. An impressive wine list and full bar service are available.

Morelos s/n, 1 block behind the church and plaza. ✆ **624/142-3344.** www.loscabosguide.com/baan thai. Reservations recommended. Main courses 150–400 pesos. MC, V. Mon–Sat noon–10pm.

Don Emiliano ★★★ Finds MEXICAN If years of queso dip and fried chimichangas have framed your vision of Mexican food, be prepared for your world to come crashing delightfully down. Sparkling seasonal menus, rooted in Mexican traditions such as Days of the Dead and Independence Day, include rare *mole* sauces and stuffed chiles drenched in walnut cream sauce and pomegranate seeds *(chile en nogada).* On a regular basis, traditional staples such as flavored tamales and grilled farm cheese atop roasted tomatillo salsa grace the menu. The wine list is extensive, with both Mexican and imported wines, and fresh-mint mojitos are in ample supply, served by a warm staff. For nearly a decade, chef Margarita C. de Salinas has been the official gala chef for the Mexican government, which means she travels the world preparing gourmet Mexican fare for heads of state, while her son, Angel, holds down the fort with such graciousness and culinary precision it must be a secret family recipe. Try the tasting menu or create your own, but whatever you do, don't miss the locally made *queso corazón* (a local cow's milk cheese) to start.

Bulevar Mijares 27, downtown San José. ✆ **624/142-0266.** www.donemiliano.com.mx. Reservations recommended. Main courses $20–$30. AE, MC, V. Daily 5:30–10:30pm.

Mi Cocina ★★★ CONTEMPORARY MEXICAN Widely appreciated as one of Los Cabos' finest restaurants, Mi Cocina doesn't rely solely on the romance of its setting—the food is also superb, creative, and consistently flavorful. Notable starters include steamed baby clams topped with a creamy cilantro sauce and served with garlic croutons, or a healthy slice of Camembert cheese, fried and served with homemade toast and grapes. Among the favorite main courses are the baked baby rack of lamb served with grilled vegetables, and the Provençal-style shrimp served with risotto, roasted tomato, basil, and cilantro-fish consommé. Save room for dessert, like their famous chocolate-chocolate or crème brûlée. Be adventurous and try one of their special martinis—like the Flor de México, an adaptation of the Cosmo, using Jamaica (hibiscus flower infusion) rather than cranberry juice.

In the Casa Natalia (p. 711), Bulevar Mijares. ✆ **624/142-5100.** www.casanatalia.com/dining.htm. Reservations recommended. Main courses 110–260 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 6–10pm (hotel guests only 6:30am–6pm).

Tequila Restaurant ★ MEDITERRANEAN/ASIAN Contemporary fusion cuisine with a light and flavorful touch is the star attraction here, although the garden setting is lovely, with rustic *equipal* furniture and lanterns scattered among palms and mango trees. Organic produce and good greens are hard to find in these parts, so Tequila's homegrown produce, harvested from owner Enrique Silva's ranch, is a welcome dose of light-and-fresh fare, accompanying almost every entree. Try the shrimp risotto or beef tenderloin in rosemary-cabernet sauce. Other enjoyable options include perfectly seared tuna with cilantro and ginger, and rack of lamb topped with tamarind sauce. The accompanying whole-grain bread arrives fresh and hot with a pesto-infused olive oil, and attentive service complements the fine meal. Cuban cigars and an excellent selection of tequilas are available, as is an extensive wine list emphasizing California vintages.

Manuel Doblado s/n, near Hidalgo. ✆ **624/142-1155** or 142-3753. www.tequilarestaurant.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses 120–640 pesos. AE. Daily 7am–10:30pm.

Moderate

Zipper's ★★ MEXICAN/GRILL If cheeseburgers in paradise is your mission, Zipper's is the real deal. Along the Corridor near San José del Cabo, surfers downing icy Pacíficos and fresh shrimp ceviche merge with fishermen bolting Sauza and fried-fish tacos. However, the not-so-humble cheeseburger is the star of Zipper's gringo-fabulous menu. Service is slow, so pass the time watching pelicans swoop the swells, catching rays in board shorts and bikinis, and blissing out to the Jimmy Buffet–laced Radio Margaritaville, which is Zipper's 24/7 soundtrack. You won't find dance contests and Jet Ski vendors here; located beneath a beachfront *palapa* that faces a surf break of the same name, Zipper's is a stripped-down sensory experience that rivals even the swankiest Los Cabos restaurant—at a slightly lesser price tag.

Km 28.5 on Transpeninsular Hwy., in Playa Costa Azul, just south of San José. ✆ **624/172-6162.** Cheeseburgers and sandwiches $8–$10; main courses $13–$39. No credit cards. Daily 11am–10:30pm.

Inexpensive

Las Guacamayas ★★★ Finds TACOS This off-the-beaten-path dive is home to the most delectable tacos in all of Los Cabos. If you can get over the plastic chairs, occasional wandering roosters, and low-hanging fruit trees in the courtyard, which is packed nightly, you'll be mesmerized by this meticulously run hot spot for both gringos and Mexicans. Traditionalists wisely go for the *tacos al pastor*—shaved pork tacos with onion, cilantro, and pineapple in a corn or flour tortilla, but the *quesadillas chilangas*—crispy fried tortillas stuffed with an assortment of fillings—are a blissful indulgence. Pace yourself. The addicting flavors and rock-bottom prices may inspire you to stay all night.

Driving east on Transpeninsular Hwy., turn left at the Pescador street sign. The street winds into the Chamizal neighborhood. Take your 2nd left and look for the neon sign. Guacamayas is on the right side. No phone. Tacos, stuffed potatoes, quesadillas, and more 13–90 pesos. No credit cards. Weekdays 6pm–midnight; till 4am Fri–Sat. Closed Tues.

San José After Dark

The nightlife in San José is a bit more understated than in San Lucas, but a new crop of swanky clubs, wine bars, and neighborhood hangouts is pumping electronic DJ music till 2 or 3am on the weekends, drawing locals and San José visitors alike. Those intent on bumping and grinding to American music will have better luck in San Lucas.

Baja Brewing Company A new addition to the arts district, this hangout was run by a trio of buddies from Colorado who recognized a need for artesian brews in Baja. In addition to the beers—which run the gamut from the light-bodied Baja Blonde to the Scorpion Negro lager—the pub-style pizzas also make a great late-night snack. Live rock and jazz musicians often perform on the weekends. During the daily happy hour from 4 to 8pm, all beers are half-price. Open every day from noon to 2am. Morelos btw. Comonfort and Obregón. ✆ **624/146-9995.** www.bajabrewingcompany.com.

Tommy's Barefoot Cantina Next door to La Marina Inn, Tommy's offers a great mix of seafood and standard favorites, plus occasional live jazz or tropical music. It's open daily from noon to 11pm. On Pueblo La Playa, next door to La Marina Inn. ✆ **624/142-3774.** www.tommysbarefootcantina.com.

Tropicana This bar features American sports events and live mariachi music nightly from 6 to 9pm, with live Mexican and Cuban dance music playing from 9:30pm until about 1am on weekends. Bulevar Mijares. ✆ **624/142-1580.**

THE CORRIDOR: BETWEEN THE TWO CABOS

The Corridor between the towns of San José del Cabo and Cabo San Lucas contains some of Mexico's most lavish resorts. Most growth at the tip of the peninsula is occurring along the Corridor, which already has become center stage for championship golf. The five major resort areas are **Palmilla, Querencia, Cabo Real, Cabo del Sol,** and **Punta Ballena** and each is an enclosed master-planned community sprinkled with multimillion-dollar homes (or the promise of them). All but Punta Ballena have championship golf, and all but Querencia, which is a private residential community, have ultraluxury resorts within their gates. If you plan to explore the region while staying at a Corridor hotel, you'll need a rental car (available at the hotels) for at least 1 or 2 days. Even if you're not staying here, the beaches and dining options are worth investigating. All hotels listed here offer free parking and qualify as very expensive; quoted rates do not include tax, which is 12% in Baja, and some of the more luxurious resorts also add a 15% service charge to the tab to save guests from having to tip hotel staff. Most resorts offer golf and fishing packages.

Where to Stay

Esperanza ★★★ On a bluff overlooking two small, rocky coves, this new luxury resort along Cabo's Corridor amply compensates for the absence of a sandy beach with its pampering services and stylish details. Created by the famed Auberge Resorts group, the architecture of this hotel is dramatic, elegant, and comfortable. The casitas and villas spread across 7 hectares (17 acres) are designed to resemble a Mexican village and connect to the resort facilities by stone footpaths. The top-floor suites have handmade *palapa* ceilings and a private outdoor whirlpool spa. All rooms are exceptionally spacious, with woven wicker and tropical wood furnishings, original art, and rugs and fabrics in muted colors with jewel-tone color accents. Terraces are large, extending the living area into the outdoors. All have hammocks and views of the Sea of Cortez. The oversize bathrooms have separate tubs and showers with dual shower heads.

Carretera Transpeninsular Km 7 on Hwy. 1, at Punta Ballena, 23410 Cabo San Lucas, B.C.S. ✆ **866/311-2226** in the U.S., or 624/145-6400. Fax 624/145-6499. www.esperanzaresort.com. 50 suites, 6 villas. High season $950–$1,525 oceanview casita, $1,550–$1,875 beachfront casita, $3,000–$7,000 oceanfront suite; low season $475–$1,125 oceanview casita, $700–$1,675 beachfront casita, $1,800–$4,000 oceanfront suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** Oceanfront restaurant; sushi and ceviche bar; gourmet market; art gallery; babysitting; private beach w/club; concierge; fitness center; golf privileges; outdoor pool; room service; full-service luxury spa; yoga studio w/complimentary daily classes. *In room:* A/C, plasma TV w/DVD, in-suite bar, hair dryer, Wi-Fi.

Las Ventanas al Paraíso ★★★ Las Ventanas is known for its luxury accommodations and attention to detail. With adobe structures and rough-hewn wood accents, the architecture provides a soothing complement to the desert landscape. The only color comes from the dazzling *ventanas* (windows) of pebbled rainbow glass handmade by regional artisans. Richly furnished, Mediterranean-style rooms are large (starting at 300 sq. m/3,229 sq. ft.) and appointed with every conceivable amenity, from wood-burning fireplaces, iPods, and aromatherapy turndown service to computerized telescopes for stargazing or whale-watching. Sizable whirlpool tubs overlook each room. Larger suites have extras such as rooftop terraces, sunken whirlpools on a private patio, or a personal pool. The surrounding private residences are spacious, with full kitchens, but the rooms and suites have better views. The spa is considered among the best in Mexico, with a focus on holistic healing. The ayurvedic treatment is a one-of-a-kind spiritual experience. With a staff that outnumbers guests by four to one, this is the resort for those who can afford to be seriously spoiled. The 15% service charge is not included in the prices below.

Km 19.5 on Hwy. 1, 23410 San José del Cabo, B.C.S. ✆ **888/525-0483** or 888/767-3966 in the U.S., or 624/144-2800. Fax 624/144-2801. www.lasventanas.com. 61 suites. High season $815 garden-view double, $1,155 oceanview double, $1,340 split-level oceanview suite with rooftop terrace, $1,550 split-level oceanfront suite with rooftop terrace, $3,990–$6,516 luxury suite (1–3 bedrooms); low season $625 garden-view double, $790 oceanview double, $1,000 split-level oceanview suite with rooftop terrace, $1,155 split-level oceanfront suite with rooftop terrace, $2,835–$4,935 luxury suite. Spa Suites packages start at $7,270 for a 4-night program for 2. Spa and golf packages and inclusive meal plans available. AE, DC, MC, V. Free valet parking. **Amenities:** Oceanview restaurant; seaside grill; terrace bar w/live music; fresh juice bar; access to adjoining championship Cabo Real golf course; pet packages, including treats and massages; infinity pool; room service; deluxe European spa w/complete treatment and exercise facilities; sportfishing and luxury yachts; watersports. *In room:* A/C, TV/DVD, MP3 player, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

One&Only Palmilla Overrated The One&Only Palmilla is among the most spectacular resort hotels anywhere—certainly within Mexico. Decor features muted desert colors and luxury fabrics, with special extras such as flatscreen TVs with DVD/CD players, and Bose surround-sound systems. Guests receive twice-daily maid service, a personal butler, and an aromatherapy menu. Yet unless you're a Fortune 500 CEO or a Hollywood A-lister, staff mostly runs the gamut from indifferent to defiant. The guest-only spa and its 13 private treatment villas are reason enough to put up with the resort's too-cool attitude. There's also Market, a restaurant by Michelin-starred chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten, that serves Euro-Asian cuisine with Mexican influences. The resort's own championship golf course, designed by Jack Nicklaus, is available for guests. The lush tropical resort also has two lighted tennis courts, a 600-sq.-m (6,458-sq.-ft.) fitness center, and a yoga garden.

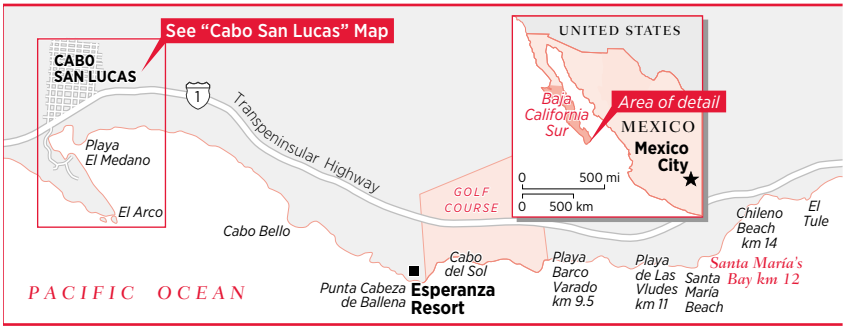
Carretera Transpeninsular Km 7.5, 23400 San José del Cabo, B.C.S. ✆ **866/829-2977** in the U.S., or 624/146-7000. Fax 624/146-7001. www.oneandonlypalmilla.com. 172 units. High season $700 double, $1,050–$3,300 suite; low season $675 double, $1,000–$3,250 suite. AE, MC, V. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; 2 bars; pool bar; championship Palmilla golf course; 2 infinity pools; room service; deluxe European spa w/complete treatment and exercise facilities; sportfishing; watersports; yoga garden. *In room:* A/C, TV/DVD, CD player, hair dryer, minibar.

Westin Resort & Spa, Los Cabos ★★ Kids The hotel sits at the end of a long paved road atop a seaside cliff. Vivid terra-cotta, yellow, and pink walls rise against a landscape of sandstone, cacti, and palms, with fountains and gardens lining the long pathways from the lobby to the rooms. The rooms, all of which are ocean view, are sleek and spacious, with fluffy Heavenly Beds and walk-in showers separate from the bathtubs. The seaside 18-hole putting green, first-rate fitness facility, and freshly renovated La Cascada restaurant set this property apart from other Corridor resorts. Plus, it's one of the best options along the corridor for families; it is smoke-free and offers a wealth of activities for children—not to mention Heavenly Dog Beds.

Hwy. 1 Km 22.5, 23400 San José del Cabo, B.C.S. ✆ **800/228-3000** in the U.S., or 624/142-9000. Fax 624/142-9010. www.westin.com/loscabos. 243 units. High season $344 oceanview double, $750 suite; low season 25% discount. AE, DC, MC, V. **Amenities:** 4 restaurants; 2 bars; babysitting; children's activities; concierge; full fitness center and spa; nearby Palmilla and Cabo Real golf courses; 18-hole putting course; 3 outdoor pools; room service; 2 tennis courts. *In room:* A/C, TV, Internet, hair dryer, minibar.

Where to Dine

Nick-San ★★★ JAPANESE/SUSHI If you eat one meal out in Los Cabos, do it at Nick-San. This dining experience is so superb, it may shift your worldview. Owned by Masayuki Niikura, Angel Carbajal, and his sister, Carmen Carbajal, who started their sushi dynasty 12 years ago at the original Nick-San in downtown Cabo San Lucas, the newer and swankier outpost at Las Tiendas de Palmilla ensures a taste of teppanyaki nirvana on both ends of the Corridor. The fire of Mexico meets traditional Japanese



ingredients in such delicacies as tuna tostada, locally caught sea bass sashimi, and lobster with curried cream sauce. Because the entire menu is too delectable to pick one thing, let someone else make the decision for you: Ask for the chef's tasting plate and, whatever you do, do not miss the lobster tempura roll or the sashimi. Just be sure to let your server know when you've had enough or the plates will keep on coming. By the time the check rolls around, you'll be so enamored it won't even faze you.

The Shoppes, Hwy. 1, Km 27.5 ✆ **624/144-6262,** -6263. www.nicksan.com. Reservations required unless you care to sit at the bar. Sashimi, rolls, and main courses 95–500 pesos. MC, V. Tues–Sun 12:30–10:30pm.

CABO SAN LUCAS

183km (113 miles) S of La Paz; 33km (20 miles) W of San José del Cabo; 1,792km (1,111 miles) SE of Tijuana

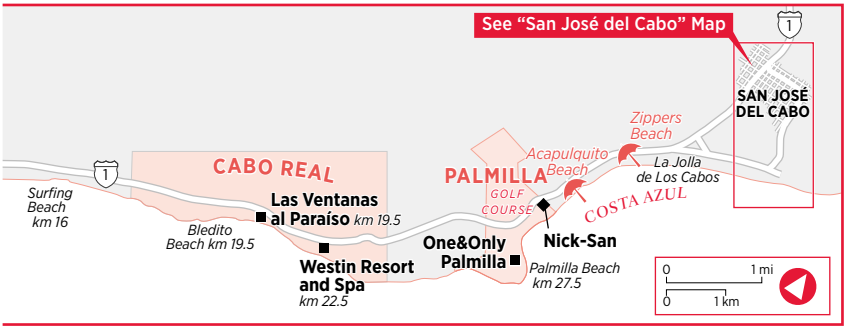
The hundreds of luxury hotel rooms along the Corridor north of Cabo San Lucas have transformed this formerly rustic and rowdy outpost. Although it retains boisterous nightlife, Cabo San Lucas is no longer the simple town Steinbeck wrote about. Once legendary for big-game fish, Cabo San Lucas now draws more people for its nearby world-class fairways and greens. This has become Mexico's most elite resort destination. Travelers enjoy a growing roster of adventure-oriented activities, as well as sumptuous spa services, and the nightlife is as hot as the desert in July. A collection of popular restaurants and bars along Cabo's main street stay open and active until the morning's first fishing charters head out to sea. Despite the growth in diversions, Cabo remains more or less a one-stoplight town, with almost everything along the main strip.

Essentials

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING **By Plane** For information, see "Getting There & Departing," under San José del Cabo.

By Car From La Paz, the best route is **Hwy. 1** south past San Pedro, and then **Hwy. 19** south through Todos Santos to Cabo San Lucas, a 2-hour drive.

By Bus The **bus terminal** (✆ **624/143-5020**) is on Héroes at Morelos; it is open daily from 7am to 10pm. Buses go to La Paz every 2 hours starting at 7:15am, with the last departure at 8:15pm. To and from San José, the more convenient and economical **Suburcabos** public bus service runs every 15 minutes and costs 25 pesos, though the routes tend to be meandering, and thus time-consuming.



Arriving At the airport, either buy a ticket for a *colectivo* (shuttle) from **Josefinos** (✆ **624/146-5354**), the authorized transportation booth inside the building (about $15), or arrange for a rental car, the most economical way to explore the area. Up to four people can share a private taxi, which costs about $65. If you're the chatty type, make friends with fellow travelers on your flight and share a taxi.

VISITOR INFORMATION The **Los Cabos Tourism Office** (✆ **624/146-9628**) is in San José, in the Plaza San José, Locs. 3 and 4, and is open daily from 8am to 3:30pm. The English-language ***Los Cabos Guide, Los Cabos News, Destino Los Cabos,*** and the irreverent and extremely entertaining ***Gringo Gazette*** are distributed free at most hotels and shops, and have up-to-date information on new restaurants and clubs. If you fall so deeply in love with Los Cabos to want to own a piece of it, the ***Baja Real Estate Guide*** is a great place to start (www.bajarealestateguide.com).

CITY LAYOUT The small town spreads out north and west of the harbor of **Cabo San Lucas Bay,** edged by foothills and desert mountains to the west and south. The main street leading into town from the airport and San José del Cabo is **Lázaro Cárdenas;** as it nears the harbor, **Bulevar Marina** branches off from it and becomes the main artery that curves around the waterfront.

GETTING AROUND Taxis are easy to find but expensive, in keeping with the high cost of everything else. Expect to pay about $25 to $40 for a taxi between Cabo and the Corridor hotels.

For day trips to San José del Cabo, take the Suburcabos (see "Getting There & Departing," above) or a cab. You'll see car-rental specials advertised in town, but before signing on, be sure you understand the total price after insurance and taxes are added. Rates can run between $30 and $75 per day, with insurance an extra $10 per day. One of the best and most economical agencies is **Advantage Rent-A-Car** (✆ **624/143-0909;** ✆/fax 624/143-0466), on Lázaro Cárdenas between Leona Vicario and Morelos. VW sedans rent for $50 per day, and weekly renters receive 1 free day. A collision-damage waiver will add $22 per day to the price. If you pick up the car downtown, you can return it to the airport at no extra charge.

Fast Facts Cabo San Lucas

Area Code The telephone area code is **624.**

Consular Agency A U.S. office is at Blvd. Marina Local C-4 (✆ **624/143-3566**), open Monday to Friday, 9am to 2pm.

Currency Exchange Banks exchange currency during normal business hours. Currency-exchange booths, throughout Cabo's main tourist areas, aren't as competitive, but they're more convenient. ATMs are widely available and even more convenient, dispensing pesos—and, in some cases, dollars—at bank exchange rates.

Drugstore **American Pharmacy,** in the Puerto Paraiso Mall next to the marina (✆ **624/143-0000**), stocks a wide selection of toiletries and medicine. It's open daily from 9am to 10pm and accepts MasterCard and Visa.

Emergencies & Hospital In Cabo, **Amerimed** (✆ **624/105-8500;** www.amerimed-hospitals.com) is a 24-hour, American-standards clinic with bilingual physicians and emergency air evacuation services that accepts major credit cards. Most of the larger hotels have a doctor on call. Dial ✆ **066** for emergency assistance.

Internet Access **Hemingway's** (✆ **624/143-9845;** www.hemingwayscabo.com, across from Cabo Wabo), is a cigar and tequila lounge that provides Wi-Fi access.

Post Office The *correo* is at Lázaro Cárdenas between Medano and Gomez Farías (✆ **624/143-0048**), on the highway to San José del Cabo, east of the bar El Squid Roe. It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm, Saturday from 9am to 3pm.

Outdoor Activities: Fishing, Golf & More

Although superb sportfishing put Cabo San Lucas on the map, there's more to do than drop your line and wait for the Big One. For most cruises and excursions, try to make fishing reservations at least a day in advance; keep in mind that some trips require a minimum number of people. Most sports and outings can be arranged through a travel agency; fishing can also be arranged directly at one of the fishing-fleet offices at the marina. The marina is on the south side of the harbor.

Besides fishing, there are kayak trips ($65 for a sunset trip around the Arch rock formation; $40 for morning trips) and boat trips to Los Arcos or uninhabited beaches. All-inclusive daytime or sunset cruises are available on a variety of boats, including a restored pirate ship. Many of these trips include snorkeling, and serious divers have great underwater venues to explore.

Between January and March, whale-watching is extremely popular. Guided ATV tours take you down dirt roads and canyons to an ancient Indian village. And then there's the challenge of world-class golf, a major attraction of Los Cabos.

For a complete rundown of what's available, look to **Book Cabo** (✆ **624/142-9200;** www.bookcabo.com). It offers tours from the best local companies, and you can book ahead online. Most businesses in this section are open daily from 10am to 2pm and 4 to 7pm.

BEACHES All along the curving sweep of sand known as Medano Beach, on the east side of the bay, you can rent snorkeling gear, boats, WaveRunners, kayaks, and sailboards. You can also take windsurfing lessons. This is the town's main beach and is a great place

Ildefonso Green
A. Mijares
Félix Ortega
Rosario Morales
Alikan
12 de Octubre
M. Hidalgo
Calle Juventud
Morelos
Leona Vicario
Narciso Mendoza
Gómez Farías
16 de Septiembre
A. Obregón
I. Zaragoza
V. Carranza
Matamoros
Abasolo
M. Ocampo
Cabo San Lucas
20 de Noviembre
Libertad
16 de Septiembre
Niños Héroes
Revolución
Lázaro Cárdenas
Constitución
5 de Mayo
Guerrero
Fco. I. Madero
J.O. de Domínguez
Marina Blvd.
Highway 1
0 0.25 mi
0 0.25 km
Beach
Bus
Church
Information
Post Office
To Airport & La Paz
To San José del Cabo
The Bungalows
Cabo Inn
Los Milagros
Plaza Aramburo
Iglesia de San Lucas
Main Square
Siesta Suites
Puerto Paraiso Entertainment Plaza
ME Cabo
Playa Medano
Marina
Bahía de Cabo San Lucas
Market
Playa del Amor
Land's End
El Arco
PACIFIC OCEAN
UNITED STATES
THE BAJA PENINSULA
MEXICO
Gulf of Mexico
Cabo San Lucas
Mexico City
0 500 mi
0 500 km
PACIFIC OCEAN

Tips Information, Please

The many "visitor information" booths along the street in Cabo are actually time-share sales booths, and their staffs will pitch a visit to their resort in exchange for discounted tours, rental cars, or other giveaways. Don't sign up unless you feel like sitting through a daylong sales pitch.

for safe swimming, happy-hour imbibing, and people-watching from one of the many outdoor restaurants along its shore.

Beach aficionados may want to rent a car (see "Getting Around," above) and explore the five more remote beaches and coves between the two Cabos: Playa Palmilla, Chileno, Santa María, Barco Varado, and Lover's Beach. Beaches other than Medano are not considered safe for swimming, although many people don't heed the warning. Experienced snorkelers may wish to check them out, but other visitors should go for the view only. Always check at a hotel or travel agency for directions and swimming conditions. Although a few travel agencies run snorkeling tours to some of these beaches, there's no public transportation: Your options for beach exploring are to rent a car or have a cab drop you off at the beach of your choice.

ATV TRIPS Expeditions on ATVs to visit La Candelaria, an Indian pueblo in the mountains, are available through travel agencies. A 440-pound weight limit per two-person vehicle applies. Most guided tours cost around $45 per person on a single vehicle, or $60 for two riding on one ATV. The vehicles are also available for rent ($35 for 3 hr.).

CRUISES **Glass-bottom boats** leave from the town marina daily every 45 minutes between 9am and 4pm. They cost about $15 for a 1-hour tour, which passes sea lions and pelicans on its way to the famous **El Arco (the Arch)** at Land's End, where the Pacific and the Sea of Cortez meet. Boats drop you off at Playa de Amor; make sure you confirm with your driver which boat will pick you up—it's usually a smaller one run by the same company that ferries people back at regular intervals—and when. Check the timing to make sure you have the correct boat, or expect an additional $10 charge for boarding the boat of an eager competitor.

A number of **daylong** and **sunset cruises** come in a variety of boats and catamarans. They cost $30 to $50 per person, depending on the boat, duration of cruise, and amenities. A sunset "booze cruise" on the 13m (43-ft.) catamaran ***Pez Gato*** (✆ **624/143-3797;** www.pezgatocabo.com) departs from the Tesoro Resort dock (Dock no. 4, 50m/164 ft. from the main dock) between 4:30 and 5:30pm, depending on the season. A 2-hour cruise costs $39 and includes an open bar and appetizers. The seasonal (winter) whale-watching tour leaves at 10:30am and returns at 1:30pm. It costs $35 and includes open bar and snacks. Similar boats leave from the marina and the Tesoro Resort. Check with travel agencies or hotel tour desks.

DRIVING TOURS A uniquely "Cabo" experience is offered by **Baja Outback** (✆ **624/142-9215;** fax 624/142-3166; www.bajaoutback.com) via their caravan-style Hummer Adventures. You drive these luxury Hummer H2s along a dusty trail paved by local ranchers to cruise desert and beachfront terrain in style, while learning about the surrounding area through expert guides. Communication links as many as 10 vehicles in the caravan, allowing you to listen to the narrations of the guide. There's a choice of several routes and itineraries, which include treks to Todos Santos, the East Cape,

Santiago and Cañón de la Zorra, and Rancho la Verdad. Tours depart at 9am and return at 3pm, with prices ranging from $67 to $121, depending upon the route, and include lunch. Visa, MasterCard, and American Express are accepted, and you must have your valid driver's license. Special group rates are also available.

If this sounds too tame, **Wide Open Baja Racing Experience** (✆ **949/340-1155** in the U.S., or 624/143-4170; office in Plaza Nautica; www.wideopenbaja.com) gives you the chance to drive actual Chenowth Magnum race cars through Baja's varied terrain with twists, turns, sand washes, and plenty of bumps for thrill seekers. Drivers meet up across from the bullring in Cabo for a training session before the "arrive and drive" tours. Prices range from $595 to $1,095 for the half- to 1-day trips. Wide Open Baja also offers multiday tours driving race vehicles through Cabo, Ensenada, and the entire Baja Peninsula starting at $1,295 per day.

GOLF Los Cabos has become the golf capital of Mexico, and although most courses are along the Corridor, people look to Cabo San Lucas for information about this sport in Baja Sur. The master plan for Los Cabos golf calls for a future total of 207 holes. Fees listed below are for 18 holes, including golf cart, water, club service, and tax. Summer rates are about 25% lower, and many hotels offer golf packages.

Specialty tour operator **Golf Adventures** (✆ **800/841-6570** in the U.S.; www.golfadventures.com) offers golf packages to Los Cabos, which includes accommodations, greens fees, and other amenities.

The 27-hole course at the **Palmilla Golf Club** (✆ **800/386-2465** in the U.S., or 624/144-5250; www.palmillagc.com; daily 7am–7pm) was Mexico's first Jack Nicklaus Signature layout, on 360 hectares (889 acres) of dramatic oceanfront desert. The course offers a choice of two back-9 options, with high-season greens fees of $180, lower after 1pm, and low-season greens fees running between $80 and $140; guests at some hotels pay discounted rates.

Just a few kilometers away is another Jack Nicklaus Signature course, the 18-hole Ocean Course at **Cabo del Sol,** the posh resort development in the Corridor (✆ **800/332-5523** in the U.S.; www.cabodelsolmexico.com). The 7,100-yard Ocean Course is known for its challenging 3 finishing holes, and greens fees start at $250 in the low season and range to $350 for the high season. Tom Weiskopf designed the new 18-hole Desert Course, for which greens fees are $220 in high season, and $185 in low season. Desert Course twilight play ranges from $120 to $165 in low and high seasons, respectively.

The 18-hole, 6,945-yard course at **Cabo Real,** by the Meliá Cabo Real Hotel in the Corridor (✆ **877/795-8727** in the U.S., or 624/144-1200; www.caboreal.com; daily 6:30am–6pm), was designed by Robert Trent Jones, Jr., and features holes that sit high on mesas overlooking the Sea of Cortez. Fees run $280 for 18 holes. After 3pm, rates drop to $140 in the low season and $180 in the high season.

Tips Beach Safety

Before swimming in the open water, *check if conditions are safe.* Undertows and large waves are common. **Medano Beach,** close to the marina and town, is the principal beach that's safe for swimming. The ME Cabo resort on Medano Beach has a roped-off swimming area to protect swimmers from personal watercraft and boats. Colored flags to signal swimming safety aren't generally found in Cabo, and neither are lifeguards, so be aware.

La Candelaria

Converting from a painter to a potter may not seem like much of a life change, but for Lorena Hankins of Portland, Oregon, the change was less about what she was doing, but where. For 16 years, Hankins has been living in the ranch community of La Candelaria, a ruggedly beautiful village on the interior route from Cabo San Lucas to Todos Santos, and she has become famous among locals and tourists for her pottery made in the ancient traditional style, which involves digging up clay during a specific cycle of the moon—a technique she learned from her sister-in-law.

La Candelaria is quite literally a two-horse town, but it's worth a stop on your way to Todos Santos to check out Hankins's pottery and to inquire about local mythology. Described in *National Geographic,* the old pueblo is known for the practice of white and black witchcraft, but the locals chuckle at the mention of *brujería.*

It's possible to get to La Candelaria on your own, but the road is sandy and bumpy, and if you're in a rental car with a "no off-roading clause," you probably don't want to risk it. **Baja Outback** (✆ **624/142-9200**) can help you arrange a tour via Humvee. Lush with palms, mango trees, and bamboo, the settlement gets its water from an underground river that emerges at the pueblo, and you'll get a chance to take it all in on a daylong excursion.

An 18-hole course designed by Roy Dye is at the **Cabo San Lucas Country Club,** formerly the Raven Club (✆ **888/328-8501** in the U.S., or 624/143-4653; fax 624/143-5809; www.golfincabo.com). The entire Dye-designed course overlooks the juncture of the Pacific Ocean and Sea of Cortez, including the famous rocks of Land's End. It includes a 607-yard, par-5 7th hole. High season greens fees are $185 for 18 holes, $139 for the noon rate, and $95 after 2:30pm. In summer, greens fees drop to $109 for 18 holes and $79 after 10:30am.

The lowest greens fees in the area are at the public 9-hole **Mayan Palace Golf Los Cabos** (✆ **624/142-0900,** -0901), in San José del Cabo (see earlier in this chapter). Greens fees are just $99 for 18 holes with equipment; rates drop to $69 for 18 holes after 3pm. All greens fees include the use of a cart.

HORSEBACK RIDING You can rent **horses** through **Rancho Colín** (✆ **624/143-3652**) for $30 per hour; the 2-hour desert-and-beach trail ride is $60; and the 3½-hour tour through the mountains is $80. If you're interested in a sunset ride with a view of the Sea of Cortez, be sure to call ahead to make sure you book the right time. The ranch is open daily from 8am to noon and 2 to 5pm, and is across from the Hotel Club Las Cascadas. For information on the highly recommended **Cuadra San Francisco Equestrian Center,** see p. 708.

SNORKELING & DIVING Several companies offer snorkeling; a 2-hour cruise to sites around El Arco is $30, and a 4-hour trip to Santa María is $55, including gear. Among the beaches visited on different trips are Playa de Amor, Santa María, Chileno, and Barco Varado. Snorkeling gear rents for $10 to $15; contact **Book Cabo** (✆ **624/142-9200;** www.bookcabo.com). For scuba diving, contact **Manta Diving** (✆ **624/144-3871;** www.caboscuba.com) and **Amigos del Mar** in Cabo San Lucas (✆ **813/898-0547** in the

U.S., or 624/143-0505; www.amigosdelmar.com). Dives are along the wall of a canyon in San Lucas Bay, where you can see the cascading sand falls by Anegada Rock. There are also scuba trips to Santa María Beach and more distant places, including Gordo Banks and Cabo Pulmo. Prices start at $50 for a one-tank dive and from $315 for 3 days of diving. Night dives are $70 per person. Snorkeling trips to the coral outcropping at Cabo Pulmo start at $100. You'll need a wet suit for winter dives. A 5-hour resort course is available for $100, and open-water certification is $450.

SPORTFISHING To make your own arrangements, go to the marina on the south side of the harbor, where you'll find several fleet operators with offices near the docks. ***Panga*** fleets offer the best deals; 5 hours of fishing for two or three people costs $200 to $450, plus a 20% tip. But talk with the captains at the marina—you might be able to negotiate a better deal. Try **Pisces Fleet,** located in the Cabo Maritime Center, behind Tesoro Resort and next to Captain Tony's on the marina (✆ **619/819-7983** in the U.S., or 624/143-1288; www.piscessportfishing.com; daily 10am–4pm; Visa and MasterCard accepted), or **Minerva's** (✆ **624/143-1282;** www.minervas.com; daily 6am–8pm; American Express, MasterCard, and Visa accepted), on the corner of Bulevar Marina and Madero. A day on a fully equipped cruiser with captain and guide starts at around $850 for up to six people. For deluxe trips with everything included aboard a 12m (39-ft.) boat, you'll have to budget around $1,500 and up. If you're traveling in your own vessel, you'll need a fishing permit, which you can get at Minerva's Baja Tackle. Depending on the size of the boat, it will cost $37 to $109 per month. Daily permits for individuals ($12) and weekly and monthly permits are also available. Visit www.conapesca.com for more info on Mexican permits and fishing

The fishing here lives up to its reputation: Bringing in a 100-pound marlin is routine, although decades of pressure on Sea of Cortez fisheries should inspire you to release your prized catch. Angling is good all year, though the catch varies with the season. Sailfish and wahoo are best from June through November; yellowfin tuna, May through December; yellowtail, January through April; black and blue marlin, July through December. Striped marlin and dorado, or mahimahi, are prevalent year-round.

SURFING Stellar surfing can be found from November through April all along the Pacific beaches north and west of town, and the East Cape is the ultimate North American surfing destination from May through October. (Also see "Surfing" in "San José del Cabo," earlier in this chapter, for details on Costa Azul and East Cape breaks.)

The areas to the east and west of Los Cabos, known as the East Cape and the Pacific side, respectively, have yet to face the onslaught of development that's so rapidly changed the tip. An hour-long drive up the western coast to the little towns of Pescadero and Todos Santos can be a great surf journey, as can a summer trek up the Sea of Cortez coastline toward Cabo Pulmo. Your best bet is to visit **www.costa-azul.com.mx/areas_maps.htm** for a detailed look at the different breaks, excursions, rental equipment, and lessons available.

Many beach breaks are ride-worthy at different times, depending on the wave conditions, but a vicious shore break and strong undertow characterize much of the beach around Todos Santos. The ocean's unruliness has helped keep industrial tourism at bay, but it also means you have to hunt a little harder to find playful waves.

WHALE-WATCHING Whale-watching cruises are the best way to get up close and personal with nature's majestic seafaring mammals. See "Whale-Watching in Baja," p. 749, for information on the excursions, which operate between January and March.

Surf & Sleep

If you can't get enough of the surf, stay where wave-riding is the specialty and not just another activity. The Los Cabos area has two outposts that cater to surfers, one along Los Cabos Corridor and the other on the Pacific coast, near Todos Santos.

The **Cabo Surf Hotel** (✆ **858/964-5117** from the U.S., or 624/142-2666; www.cabosurfhotel.com) has 16 beachfront rooms in a secluded, gated boutique resort. It's 13km (8 miles) west of San José del Cabo, across from the Querencia golf course, on Playa Acapulquito, which is the most popular surfing beach in Los Cabos. Along with a choice of rooms and suites, it has an oceanfront terrace restaurant, surf shop, and the Mike Doyle Surf School, which offers day lessons and instruction. Rates range from $265 to $310 for a double and $290 to $625 for suites and villas. Promotional rates are available during summer months, which is optimal for surfers who seek the Sea of Cortez's summertime swells.

The **Pescadero Surf Camp** (✆ **612/130-3022** or 134-0480; www.pescaderosurf.com) is a sparse Pacific getaway at Km 64 on Hwy. 1 toward Todos Santos. Eight pool-front casitas start at $30, and the two-story suite rents for $60 a night; camping spots are available for $10. Although it's a kilometer (half-mile) from the beach, this surf camp is a comfortable step up from the beach camping that's a way of life for most surf mongers, and in the winter, when the waves—and sometimes winds—are at their strongest, it's nice to have a roof overhead. The property's pool has a BYOB swim-up bar that's ideal for cooling off between surf excursions, and a large outdoor kitchen provides a space to prepare your own meals. Owner Jaime Dobies also offers 1½-hour lessons for $50, board rental for $20 a day, boogie and skim board rental for $10 a day, and daylong guided surf safaris starting at $100 per person. He also repairs boards, should your baby get dinged in action.

Of course, if you're coming to Baja strictly for the surf, you may join the other hard-core wave-riders and camp along the sugary beaches of the East Cape in the summer and the Pacific in the winter. Most beaches—especially the ones fronting secluded surf breaks—are safe and accommodating for overnight stays.

A Break from Sports: Exploring Cabo San Lucas

FESTIVALS & EVENTS **October 12** is the festival of the patron saint of Todos Santos, a town about 105km (65 miles) north. **October 18** is the feast of the patron saint of Cabo San Lucas, celebrated with a fair, feasting, music, and other special events.

HISTORIC CABO SAN LUCAS Watersports and outright partying are Cabo's main attractions, but there are also a few cultural and historical points of interest. The Spanish missionary Nicolás Tamaral established the **Iglesia de San Lucas (Church of San Lucas)** on Calle Cabo San Lucas, close to the main plaza, in 1730. A large bell in a stone archway commemorates the completion of the church in 1746. The Pericúe Indians, who resisted Tamaral's demands that, among other things, they practice monogamy, eventually killed him in

a violent uprising (there's even a painted tile depiction of the event on the front of the church). Buildings on the streets facing the main plaza are gradually being renovated to house restaurants and shops, and the picturesque block has the most Mexican ambience in town.

DAY TRIPS Most local and hotel travel agencies book day trips to the city of **La Paz;** they cost around $60, including beverages and a tour of the countryside along the way. Usually there's a stop at the weaving shop of Fortunato Silva, who spins his own cotton and weaves it into wonderfully textured rugs and textiles. Day trips are also available to **Todos Santos** ($60), with a guided walking tour of the mission, museum, Hotel California, and various artists' homes.

Shopping

San José has the better shopping of the two towns, when it comes to quality and uniqueness, but if you're after a beer-themed T-shirt, Cabo San Lucas can't be topped. Nevertheless, the **Puerto Paraíso Entertainment Plaza** (✆ **624/144-3000;** www.puertoparaiso.com) does have a selection of designer clothing stores, knickknack shops, and swimwear boutiques. Opened in 2002, this is now the focal point for locals' entertainment and tourists' exploration. It's a truly world-class mall, complete with free parking, movie theaters, a video arcade, a food court, and various restaurants, not the least of which is **Ruth's Chris Steak House,** adjacent to the marina (✆ **624/144-3232;** www.ruthschris.com.mx; daily 1–11:30pm). With more than 50,000 sq. m (538,195 sq. ft.) of air-conditioned space on three levels, it's a shame so much of the mall is still empty. A new addition to the Paraiso is a high-end section called **Luxury Avenue,** which has a separate entrance but is connected by an interior corridor. It features ritzy outlets for brands like Hermès, Fendi, and Swarovski. The plaza is located marina-side, between the Plaza Bonita Mall and Marina Fiesta Resort—you can't miss it if you try. Most other shops in Cabo are on or within a block or two of Boulevard Marina and the plaza.

The following specialty stores stand out among the crowd:

El Callejón This has San Lucas's best selection of fine Mexican furniture and decor items, plus gifts, accessories, tableware, fabrics, and lamps. Open Monday through Friday 10am to 7pm and Saturday 9am to 4pm. Hidalgo 2518 near 12 de Octubre in front of La Fonda Restaurant. ✆ **624/143-3188.**

J & J Habanos J & J is Cabo's largest cigar shop, selling premium Cuban and fine Mexican cigars—it even has a walk-in humidor. They also sell fine tequila and espresso. Open Monday through Saturday 9am to 10pm, Sunday 9am to 9pm. Madero btw. Bulevar Marina and Guerrero. ✆ **624/143-6061,** -3839. www.jnjhabanos.com.

100% Mexico If you're looking for authentic craftsmanship, a good place to start is 100% Mexico. All of the items in the store—including Oaxacan weavings, Pueblan Talavera, and lacquered boxes from Guerrero—are certified by *Fondo Nacional Para El Fomento de las Artesans* (FONART), Mexico's national foundation for the development of artisans. Open daily from 9am to 9pm. Near the main entrance of Plaza Paraiso. ✆ **624/105-0443.**

Ultrafemme Mexico's largest duty-free shop has an excellent selection of fine jewelry and watches, including Rolex, Cartier, Omega, TAG Heuer, Tiffany, and Tissot; perfumes, including Lancôme, Chanel, Armani, Carolina Herrera; and other gift items, all at duty-free prices. Open daily 10am to 9:30pm. On the 1st floor of the Luxury Avenue section of Puerto Paraiso. ✆ **624/145-6090.** www.ultrafemme.com.

Where to Stay

High-season prices are in effect from December to Easter. Several hotels offer package deals that significantly lower the nightly rate. Budget accommodations are scarce, but the number of small inns and B&Bs is growing; several notable ones have opened in recent years. Because most of the larger hotels are well maintained and offer packages through travel agents, I will focus on smaller, unique accommodations.

Expensive

ME Cabo ★★ If you've come to Cabo to party, this is your place. The ME Cabo is Sol Melia's foray into hip, making it Cabo's hottest hot spot. Party-ready rooms, an adult-focused floor called "The Level," and the swank Nikki Beach help to stake a glam claim on this beachfront property, which is geared toward those who'd rather party than relax. Its location on Medano Beach is central to any other action you may want to seek, but with Nikki Beach and Passion, you'll find plenty right here. Rooms are awash in fiery red and white, with a sleek, contemporary decor. All suites have ocean views and private terraces looking across to the famed El Arco. Master suites have a separate living room area. Guests gather by the beachfront pool, where oversize daybeds perfectly accommodate this lounge atmosphere.

Playa El Medano s/n; 23410 Cabo San Lucas, B.C.S. ✆ **624/145-7800.** Fax 624/143-0420. www.me-cabo.com. 150 units. High season $419–$459 double, $1,079 chic suite, $1,579 loft suite; low season $348–$389 double, $1,009 chic suite, $1,509 loft suite. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; bar/dance club; beach club; concierge; Jacuzzi; 2 outdoor pools; room service. *In room:* A/C, TV/DVD, Nintendo, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi (in some).

Moderate

The Bungalows Hotel ★ Finds This is one of the most special places to stay in Los Cabos. Each "bungalow" is a charming retreat decorated with authentic Mexican furnishings. Terra-cotta tiles, hand-painted sinks, wooden chests, blown glass, and other creative touches make you feel as if you're a guest at a friend's home rather than a hotel. Each room has a kitchenette, purified water, DVD player, and designer bedding. Rooms surround a lovely heated pool with cushioned lounges and tropical gardens. A brick-paved breakfast nook serves a gourmet breakfast with fresh-ground coffee and fresh juices. A 100% smoke-free environment, it is 5 blocks from downtown Cabo.

Miguel A. Herrera s/n, in front of Lienzo Charro, 23410 Cabo San Lucas, B.C.S. ✆/fax **624/143-5035** or 143-0585. www.cabobungalows.com. 16 units. High season $95–$150 suite, $115–$185 bungalow; low season $75–$95 suite, $95–$115 bungalow. Extra person $20. Rates include full breakfast. AE, V. Street parking available. **Amenities:** Breakfast room; concierge; outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, TV/VCR, fridge, kitchenette.

Los Milagros Hotel The elegant whitewashed two-level buildings containing the 12 suites and rooms of Los Milagros (the Miracles) border either a grassy garden area or the small tile pool. Rooms contain contemporary iron beds with straw headboards, buff-colored tile floors, and artistic details. Some units have kitchenettes, the master suite has a sunken tub, and there's coffee service in the mornings on the patio. Evenings are romantic: Candles light the garden and classical music plays. Request a room in one of the back buildings, where pomegranate trees buffer others' conversations. It's just 1½ blocks from the Giggling Marlin and Cabo Wabo.

Matamoros 116, 23410 Cabo San Lucas, B.C.S. ✆/fax **718/928-6647** in the U.S., or 624/143-4566. www.losmilagros.com.mx. 12 units. $85 double; $100 kitchenette suite; $125 master suite. Ask about summer discounts, group rates, and long-term discounts. No credit cards, but payable through PayPal. Free secure parking. **Amenities:** Small outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, TV, Wi-Fi.

Inexpensive

Cabo Inn ★★ (Finds) This three-story hotel on a quiet street is a real find, and it keeps getting better. It offers a rare combination of low rates, extra-friendly management, and great, funky style. Rooms are basic and very small, with either two twin beds or one queen; although this was a bordello in a prior incarnation, everything is kept new and updated, from the mattresses to the minifridges. Muted desert colors add a spark of personality. The rooms surround a courtyard where you can enjoy satellite TV, a barbecue grill, and free coffee. The third floor has a rooftop terrace with *palapa* and a small swimming pool. A large fish freezer is available, and most rooms have kitchenettes. The hotel is just 2 blocks from downtown and the marina. A lively restaurant next door will even deliver pitchers of margaritas and dinner to your room.

20 de Noviembre and Leona Vicario, 23410 Cabo San Lucas, B.C.S. ✆/fax **619/819-2727** in the U.S., or 624/143-0819. www.caboinnhotel.com. 23 units. Year-round $58 double; $79 triple; $90–$120 *palapa* suite. No credit cards. Street parking. **Amenities:** Barbecue; small rooftop pool; communal TV; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, fridge.

Siesta Suites Reservations are a must at this immaculate, small inn that's popular with return visitors. (It's especially popular with fishermen.) The very basic rooms have white-tile floors and white walls, kitchenettes with seating areas, refrigerators, and sinks. The mattresses are firm, and the bathrooms are large and sparkling clean. Rooms on the fourth floor have two queen-size beds each. The accommodating proprietors offer free movies and VCRs, a barbecue pit and outdoor patio table on the second floor, and a comfortable lobby with a TV. They also arrange fishing trips. Weekly and monthly rates are available. The hotel is 1½ blocks from the marina, where parking is available.

Calle Emiliano Zapata btw. Guerrero and Hidalgo, 23410 Cabo San Lucas, B.C.S. ✆ **866/271-0952** in the U.S., or 624/143-2773. www.cabosiestasuites.com. 20 suites. $69–$76 double; $440–$500 weekly rates. AE, MC, V. Parking available at marina. **Amenities:** Barbecue pit; outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, TV, fan, VCR, fridge, kitchenette (in some).

Where to Dine

It's not uncommon to pay a lot for mediocre food in Cabo, so try to get some unbiased recommendations. If people are only drinking and not dining, take that as a clue—many seemingly popular places are long on party atmosphere but short on food. Prices may decrease the farther you walk inland. The absolute local favorite is **Gardenia's Tacos,** a bare-bones eatery on Paseo Pescadores (same street as McDonald's) that serves Cabo San Lucas's best tacos. Streets to explore for other good restaurants include Hidalgo and Lázaro Cárdenas, plus the marina at the Plaza Bonita. Note that many restaurants automatically add the tip (15%) to the bill; make sure you ask. It's open from 8am to 5pm and closed Mondays.

Very Expensive

Edith's Restaurante ★★★ SEAFOOD/STEAKS/MEXICAN Prices may seem over-the-top and reservations hard to come by, but once you sit down at one of Edith Jiménez's cheerful tables, you will see you're paying for an exquisite meal and a great time. Lanterns light the open-air way, and bouquets of fresh lilies always perfume the entrance and washrooms. No detail is overlooked and, without exception, everyone in the house is in full celebration mode. You will be, too, after a celestial pitcher of margaritas or a bottle from Edith's carefully stocked cellar. While the lobster, shrimp, seafood, and steak combinations are worth every last penny, the grilled tuna is beyond compare when it comes to quality and value. And if Mexican food is what you crave, both the Tampiqueña and the Pancho Villa offer a magnanimous sampling of some of Mexico's most prized

 traditional dishes, which are abundant enough for two, especially when kicked off with the squash blossom quesadillas or a Caesar salad.

Camino a Playa Medano. ✆ **624/143-0801.** www.edithscabo.com. Reservations strongly recommended. Main courses $20–$70. MC, V. Daily 5–10pm.

Expensive

Nick-San ★★ JAPANESE/SUSHI This is the original branch of exceptional Japanese cuisine and sushi in Los Cabos. Now joined by a second location in the Corridor near San José, Nick-San's innovative flavors have two splendid homes. See p. 716 for menu details.

Bulevar Marina, Plaza de la Danza, Loc. 2. ✆ **624/144-6262.** www.nicksan.com. Reservations recommended. Sashimi, rolls, and main courses 95–500 pesos. MC, V. Daily 11:30am–10:30pm.

Moderate

La Dolce ITALIAN This restaurant is the offspring of Puerto Vallarta's La Dolce Vita, with authentic Italian thin-crust, brick-oven pizzas, fresh pasta dishes, and other specialties. Most of its business is from local customers, underscoring the attention to detail and reasonable prices. The simple menu also features sumptuous calzones and delightful starters, plus great salads. This is the best late-night dining option, and there's also an equally loved branch on the main square in San José del Cabo that's open from 2 to 11pm.

M. Hidalgo and Zapata s/n. ✆ **624/143-4122** or 143-9553. www.ladolcerestaurant.com. Main courses $7.50–$22. MC, V. Tues–Sun 5–11pm.

Mi Casa Restaurant ★ MEXICAN The building's vivid cobalt-blue facade is your first clue that this place celebrates Mexico, and the menu confirms that impression. This is one of Cabo's most renowned Mexican restaurants. Traditional specialties such as *manchamanteles* (literally, "tablecloth stainers"), *cochinita pibil,* and *chiles en nogada* are menu staples. Fresh fish is prepared with delicious seasonings from throughout Mexico. Especially pleasant at night, the restaurant's tables, scattered around a large patio, are set with colorful cloths, traditional pottery, and glassware. It's across from the main plaza.

Calle Cabo San Lucas (at Madero). ✆ **624/143-1933.** www.micasarestaurant.com. Reservations recommended. Main courses 130–330 pesos. MC, V. Mon–Sat 11am–3pm; daily 5:30–10:30pm.

Inexpensive

Cafe Canela ★ COFFEE/PASTRY/LIGHT MEALS This cozy, tasty cafe and bistro is a welcome addition to the Cabo Marina boardwalk. Espresso drinks or fruit smoothies and muffins are good eye-openers for early risers. Enjoy a light meal or a tropical drink either inside or on the bustling waterfront terrace. The appealing menu also offers breakfast egg wraps, salads (such as curried chicken salad with fresh fruit), sandwiches (such as blue-cheese quesadillas with smoked tuna and mango), and pastas—all reasonably priced. Full bar service is also available.

Marina boardwalk, below Tesoro Resort. ✆ **624/143-3435.** Breakfast 39–120 pesos; lunch and dinner main courses 50–350 pesos. AE, MC, V. Daily 6am–7pm.

Early Bird's MEXICAN/COFFEE/LIGHT FARE There are several decent restaurants along the new section of the Marina near Puerto Paraiso, and any one of them would probably suffice. However, if you're looking for a no-nonsense place that offers good value, head to Early Bird's. It has been around for years as a place for fishermen to gear up for their journey. It's open all day and offers *tacos guisados* with ingredients like steak and potatoes or pork and squash for only 15 pesos. They also offer boxed lunches with a sandwich, fruit, and other snacks for only 100 pesos—or 81 pesos if you order ahead. There's also a convenience store inside in case you need to stock your in-room minifridge.

Marina Boardwalk, Puerta 5. ✆ **624/143-5603.** Snacks starting at 15 pesos; shrimp tacos 25 pesos. MC, V. Daily 5am–10pm.

Mocambo's ★ SEAFOOD The location of this long-standing Cabo favorite is not inspiring—it's basically a large cement building—but the food definitely is. The place is always packed, generally with locals tired of high prices and small portions. Ocean-fresh seafood is the order of the day, and the specialty platter can easily serve four people. The restaurant is 1½ blocks inland from Lázaro Cárdenas.

Av. Leona Vicario and 20 de Noviembre. ✆ **624/143-2122.** www.mariscosmocambo.com. Main courses 110–410 pesos. MC, V. Daily noon–10pm.

Cabo San Lucas After Dark

Cabo San Lucas is the nightlife capital of Baja. After-dark fun starts with the casual bars and restaurants on Bulevar Marina or facing the marina, and transforms into a tequila-fueled dance club scene after midnight. You can easily find a happy hour with live music and a place to dance or a Mexican fiesta with mariachis.

MEXICAN FIESTAS & THEME NIGHTS Some larger hotels have weekly fiesta nights and other buffet-plus-entertainment theme nights that can be fun as well as a good buy. Check travel agencies and the following hotels: the **Solmar** (✆ **624/143-3535**) and the **Finisterra** (✆ **624/143-3333**). Prices range from $25, not including drinks, tax, and tips, to $50, which covers everything, including an open bar with national drinks. Otherwise, **Mi Casa** (✆ **624/143-1933;** see the "Where to Dine" section) is a veritable Mexican theme night every night.

SUNSET WATCHING Come twilight, check out Land's End, where the two seas meet. At **Whale Watcher's Bar,** in the Hotel Finisterra (✆ **624/143-3333**), not only will you get a world-class view of the sun sinking into the Pacific, but you'll get a taste of "old Cabo." Mariachis play on Friday from 6:30 to 9pm, and the bar is open daily from 10am to 11pm. Another good place to watch the sunset is at the **Pueblo Bonito Sunset Beach hotel**—where nothing obstructs the setting sun—on the Pacific side of San Lucas (✆ **624/142-9797**).

HAPPY HOURS, CLUBS & HANGOUTS If you shop around, you can usually find an *hora feliz* (happy hour) somewhere in town between noon and 7pm. The most popular places to drink and carouse until all hours are long-standing favorites such as the Nowhere Bar, the Giggling Marlin, El Squid Roe, and the Cabo Wabo Cantina.

A place to enjoy a more refined setting is **Hemingway's** (✆ **624/143-9845;** www.hemingwayscabo.com), a cigar lounge that features nightly live guitar or jazz music and where the mojitos are gaining fame and are the consummate beverage to complete a night out. It's open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 10pm.

Cabo Wabo Cantina Owned by Sammy Hagar (formerly of Van Halen) and his Mexican and American partners, this "cantina" packs in youthful crowds, especially when rumors (frequent and frequently false, just to draw a crowd) fly that a surprise appearance by a vacationing musician is imminent. One of Cabo's few air-conditioned dance venues, it's especially popular in the summer months. The house band, Cabo, plays hard-rock covers every night. Overstuffed furniture frames the dance floor. Beer goes for $4 and margaritas for $6. For snacks, the Taco Wabo, just outside the club's entrance, stays up late, too. The cantina is open from 11am to 2am. Vicente Guerrero at Lázaro Cárdenas. ✆ **624/143-1188.** www.cabowabocantina.com.

El Squid Roe Moments El Squid Roe is one of the late Carlos Anderson's inspirations, and it still attracts wild, fun-loving crowds of all ages with its two stories of nostalgic decor. The eclectic food is far better than you'd expect from such a party place and, as fashionable as blue jeans, you can't come to Cabo without a visit here. Skin-to-win is the theme as the dancing on tables moves into high gear around 9pm. The scene is mostly tourists jerking to American hip-hop from early evening to around midnight, and at 1am, the local Mexican crowd—just getting their night started—flow in, and the hips don't stop shaking until first light. Bar open daily from 9pm to 4am. Bulevar Marina, opposite Plaza Bonita. ✆ **624/143-0655.** www.elsquidroe.com.

Nikki Beach This haven of the hip in the ME Cabo hails from South Beach, Miami. White-draped lounge beds scatter the outdoor area, under a canopy of umbrellas, surrounding a pool, and overlooking Cabo's best swimming beach. A teak deck offers covered dining. The music is the latest in electronic, house, and chill, with visiting DJs often playing on weekend nights. Sundays feature the signature beach brunch. It's a great choice for catching rays during the day while sipping tropical drinks, but its real appeal is the nocturnal action. Open Sunday to Wednesday from 11am to 1am (food service stops at 11pm), and Thursday to Saturday from 11am to 3am (food service stops at 1am). On the beach at the ME Cabo resort, on Medano Beach. ✆ **624/145-7800.** www.nikkibeach.com.

Passion ME Cabo's most recent contribution to Cabo's growing high-end nightlife scene is Passion, arguably the most aphrodisiacal club in San Lucas. Champagne cocktails, the house music of resident and guest DJs, and a low-lit atmosphere prime Los Cabos' jet set for dancing and partying as long as they want. Open Sunday to Wednesday from 10am to 2am and Thursday to Saturday from 10am to 4am. In the ME Cabo resort, on Medano Beach. ✆ **624/145-7800.** www.me-cabo.com/thepassionclub.html.

2 TODOS SANTOS: A CREATIVE OASIS ★★★

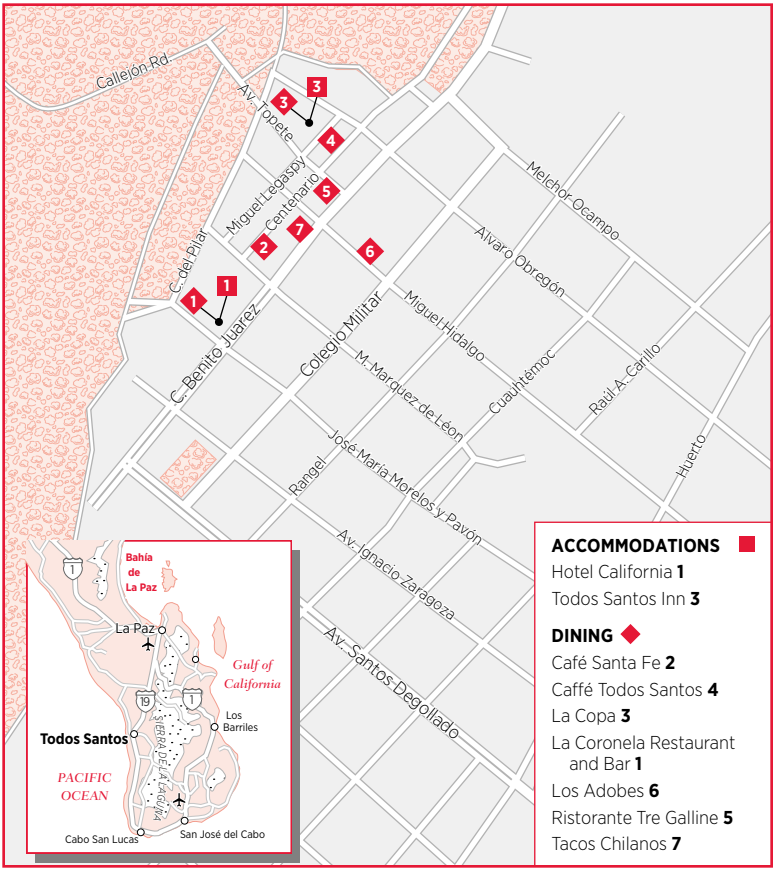
68km (42 miles) N of Cabo San Lucas

Although Todos Santos is well past its off-the-beaten-path days, it's still a favorite among bohemian types looking either for regional up-and-coming artists or simply a piece of art that makes them feel good—and it's a prime destination among those simply weary of the Cancún-ization of Cabo San Lucas.

The art and artistry created here—from the kitchen to the canvas—is of an evolved type that seems to care less about commercial appeal than quality. This makes it more of a draw. Not to be overlooked are the arts of agriculture, masonry, and weaving created by some of the town's original residents. From superb meals at **Café Santa Fe** to an afternoon browsing at **El Tecolote Libros,** Todos Santos is intriguing to its core.

Not only is the town a cultural oasis in Baja, it's an oasis in the true sense of the word—in this desert landscape, Todos Santos enjoys an almost continuous water supply from the peaks of the Sierra de la Laguna mountains. It's just over an hour's drive up the Pacific coast from Cabo San Lucas; you'll know you've arrived when the arid coastal scenery suddenly gives way to verdant groves of palms, mangos, avocados, and papayas.

During the Mission Period of Baja, this oasis valley was deemed the only area south and west of La Paz worth settling due to its reliable water supply. In 1723, an outpost mission was established, followed by the full-fledged Misión Santa Rosa de Las Palmas in



1733. At the time, the town was known as Santa Rosa de Todos Santos; eventually shortened to its current name, it translates as "All Saints."

Over the next 200 years, the town alternated between prosperity and difficulty. Its most recent boom lasted from the mid–19th century until the 1950s, when the town flourished as a sugar-cane production center and began to develop a strong cultural core. Many of the buildings now being restored and converted into galleries, studios, shops, and restaurants were built during this era. It wasn't until the 1980s that a paved road connected Todos Santos with La Paz, and tourism began to draw new attention to this tranquil town.

The demand for the town's older colonial-style structures by artists, entrepreneurs, and foreign residents has resulted in a real-estate boom, and new shops, galleries, and cafes crop up continuously. The coastal strip south of Todos Santos—once the exclusive hideaway of impassioned surfers—has plans for development, so visit soon, before this perfect stretch of beach and desert changes. For the casual visitor, Todos Santos is easy to explore in a day, but a few tranquil inns welcome guests who want to stay a little longer.

WHAT TO SEE & DO

During the **Festival Fundador** (usually the second week of Oct)—a celebration of the founding of the town in 1723—streets around the main plaza fill with food, games, and wandering troubadours. Many of the shops and the Café Santa Fe close from the end of September through the festival. A new **Arts Festival,** in February, seems to be gaining importance. It includes film festivals, dance and music performances, and more. For up-to-date information on events and festivals visit www.todossantos.cc.

Todos Santos has at least half a dozen galleries, including the noted **Galería de Todos Santos,** corner of Topete and Legaspi (✆ **612/145-0500;** www.galeriadetodossantos.com), which features a changing collection of works by regional artists. It's open daily from 11am to 4pm (closed Sun May–Nov).

El Tecolote Libros ★★★ (✆ **612/145-0295**), though tiny, is one of the best bookstores in Mexico. It carries an exceptional selection of Latin American literature, poetry, children's books, and reference books centering on Mexico. Both English and Spanish editions, new and used, are in stock, along with maps, magazines, cards, and art supplies. Information on upcoming writing workshops and local reading groups is also posted here. The shop is at the corner of Hidalgo and Juárez. It's open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 5pm, and Sunday from 10am to 3pm.

In keeping with the organic and artesian feel is **Heartsease** (✆ **612/132-0095**), a spa boutique that sells all-natural soaps and skin-care products created by Canadian expat Gwenn McDonald. Look for items like castor oil conditioner, mini perfumes, and after-sun balm; either McDonald or an employee can explain the healing effects. A masseuse offers services on the premises. It's on Juarez between Hidalgo and Topete.

Situated in the back of a labyrinthlike stall, the **Faces of Mexico Ethnic Art Gallery,** Mar de Cortez Local 2, Marquez de Leon between Juarez and Centenario (✆ **624/143-2631**), is easy to miss, but if you're a fan of Mexican antiques, it's worth meandering to find it. Owner Kersten Kiehnle is the son of famed explorer Constantine Kiehnle, who in the early 1900s amassed an impressive collection of centuries-old *exvotos,* or portraits made in order to commemorate a saint's miraculous intervention. Many church patrons have purchased them for decorations in their parishes in the U.S. In addition, there is a wall covered in traditional masks from around the country.

WHERE TO STAY

Consider the **Todos Santos Inn** ★★, Calle Legaspi 33, between Topete and Obregón (✆ **612/145-0040;** www.todossantosinn.com). An elegant place to stay, it is in a historic house that has served as a general store, cantina, school, and private residence. Now under new ownership, it retains its air of casual elegance, with luxurious white bed linens, netting draped romantically over the beds, Talavera tile bathrooms, antique furniture, and high, wood-beamed ceilings. Two rooms and four suites border a lush courtyard terrace, pool, and garden. Rates run $125 to $325 per night, depending on the room and the season, and breakfast is included in the room rate. The suites are air-conditioned but have neither television nor telephone, and the hotel offers free Wi-Fi. The hotel's wine bar, **La Copa,** is open to the public Tuesdays through Saturdays from 5 to 9pm and has an excellent selection of California and other imported wines. The hotel now accepts both Visa and MasterCard.

Hotel California, Calle Juárez, corner of Morelos (✆ **612/145-0525** or 145-0522; www.hotelcaliforniabaja.com), has been the stuff of legends—and the verdict is still out as to whether it's the source of inspiration for the Eagles' song of the same name. A few years back, it was a dilapidated guesthouse, but after an extensive renovation, it's now the hippest place to stay in the area. Think Philippe Stark in the desert—the decor here is a fusion of

jewel-tone colors with eclectic Mexican and Moroccan accents. Each room features a different decor, but all of it is high style, with rich hues and captivating details. Most rooms also offer an outdoor terrace or seating area. Rates for the 11 rooms average around $210. On the ground floor, you'll find the lobby and the low-lit library—with deep blue walls, a profusion of candles, and tin stars—as well as a small outdoor pool with sun chairs. Also at ground level is the **Emporio** boutique, which is well worth a visit for its rugs, jewelry, and glass lanterns; **La Coronela Restaurant and Bar** (open daily 7am–11pm) is the nocturnal hot spot, with live guitar, jazz, and blues on Saturday evenings. The recently added **Tequila Bar** is a small, decadently decorated spot, with red and black settees and an extensive selection of tequilas, including their own Hotel California label.

WHERE TO DINE

Much of the attention the town has received in recent years can be directly attributed to the outstanding **Café Santa Fe,** Calle Centenario 4 (✆ **612/145-0340**), which continues to live up to its lofty reputation. Owners Ezio and Paula Colombo refurbished a large stucco house across from the plaza, creating an exhibition kitchen, several dining rooms, and a lovely courtyard adjacent to a flowering garden. The excellent northern Italian cuisine emphasizes local produce and seafood; try ravioli stuffed with spinach and ricotta in a Gorgonzola sauce, or ravioli with lobster and shrimp, with an organic salad. In high season, the wait for a table at lunch can be long. Everything is prepared to order, and reservations are recommended. Main courses run 180 to 500 pesos. It's open Wednesday through Monday from noon to 9pm, closed September and October, and accepts MasterCard and Visa.

Giving Café Santa Fe a run for its money is **Ristorante Tre Galline,** on the corner of Topete and Juarez (✆ **612/145-0274;** main courses 140–260 pesos). When an earthquake destroyed Magda Valpiani's family restaurant in northern Italy, she and her husband, Angelo Dal Bon, took it as a sign to set out on a new adventure. They packed a shipping container to the brim with their personal treasures—virgin olive oil, fine Italian wines, table settings, and an authentic pasta machine—headed to Mexico, and signed the papers for their new restaurant within hours of stepping into the former art gallery. Their restaurant is truly a force of nature. I'm still thinking about the sweet potato tortellini with butter and almond sauce, and the tiramisu with fresh mascarpone.

If you prefer a gourmet Mexican experience, go to **Los Adobes** (✆ **612/145-0203;** www.losadobesdetodossantos.com; main courses 130–210 pesos), in Hidalgo, where the margaritas and the *sopa tarasca,* a decadent purée of white beans, chipotle peppers, and cream, are excellent.

A more casual option, and a magical place to start the day, is the garden setting of the **Caffé Todos Santos,** Centenario 33 (✆ **612/145-0300;** www.caffetodossantos.com). The bowl-size *cafe latte* can be accompanied by a freshly baked croissant or one of the signature cinnamon buns. Lunch or a light meal may include a *frittata* (an egg-based dish similar to quiche), a hearty sandwich on home-baked bread, or a fish filet wrapped in banana leaves with coconut milk. Main courses range from 60 to 130 pesos. The cafe is open Tuesday through Sunday from 7am to 9pm, and Monday from 7am to 2pm; credit cards are not accepted.

Finally, the best no-nonsense option is **Tacos Chilanos,** an authentic taco stand located on Topete near the corner of Centenario. Look for a red-and-white awning with a set of plastic tables on the sidewalk. A bean-and-cheese burrito served in a crispy, fresh flour tortilla costs 13 pesos, and a *carne asada* torta is 30 pesos. It's open from 9am to 9pm every day except Sunday.

3 LA PAZ: PEACEFUL PORT TOWN ★★

176km (109 miles) N of Cabo San Lucas; 195km (121 miles) NW of San José del Cabo; 1,544km (957 miles) SE of Tijuana

La Paz means "peace," and the feeling seems to float on the ocean breezes of this provincial town. Despite being an important port, home to almost 200,000 inhabitants and the capital of the state of Baja California Sur, it remains slow paced and relaxed. Beautiful deserted beaches just minutes away complement the lively beach and palm-fringed *malecón* (seaside boulevard) that front the town center. The easygoing city is the guardian of "old Baja" atmosphere, and it has an unmistakable air of outdoor adventure, thanks to the ubiquity of skilled anglers, competitive freedivers, Baja 1000 racers, recreational (as in noncommercial) spear fishermen, a marina full of large yachts, and kayak-rental agencies.

Adventurous travelers enjoy countless options, including hiking, rock climbing, diving, fishing, and sea kayaking. Islands and islets sit just offshore, once hiding places for looting pirates but now magnets for kayakers and beachcombers. You can even camp overnight, posh safari style, at **Baja Camp** (www.bajacamp.com), on Espíritu Santo, or swim with sea lions on Los Islotes. The best time for camping is from June through September.

The University of Southern Baja California adds a unique cultural presence that includes museums and a theater and arts center. The surrounding tropical desert diversity and pandemic wildlife are also compelling reasons to visit. Despite its name, La Paz has historically been a place of conflict between explorers and indigenous populations. Beginning in 1535, Spanish conquistadors and Jesuit missionaries arrived and exerted their influence on the town's architecture and traditions. From the time conquistadors saw local Indians wearing pearl ornaments, mass pearl harvesting lasted through the late 1930s, when all the pearls eventually were wiped out. John Steinbeck immortalized a local legend in his novella *The Pearl*.

La Paz is ideal for anyone nostalgic for Los Cabos the way it used to be—and it has the breathtaking sunsets not always visible at Baja's tip. From accommodations to taxis, it's also one of Mexico's most outstanding beach-vacation values and a great place for family travelers. However, as is the case throughout Mexico, development activity in the areas immediately surrounding La Paz may change this in the coming years, so plan a visit now to experience the pearl of La Paz in its natural state.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE & DEPARTING

By Plane Both **Alaska Airlines** (✆ **800/252-7522** in the U.S.) and **Delta** (✆ **800/241-4141** in the U.S.) have nonstop flights from Los Angeles. **Aeroméxico** (✆ **800/237-6639** in the U.S., or 612/122-0091, -0093, -1636) flies from Mexico City and other points within Mexico as do **Mexicana** (✆ **800/531-3585**) and **Volaris** (✆ **800/122-8000**). The airport is 18km (11 miles) northwest of town along the highway to Ciudad Constitución and Tijuana. Airport ***colectivos*** (around 120 pesos) run only from the airport to town, not vice versa, and a group shuttle is a flat charge of 250 pesos. **Taxi** service (around 350 pesos) is available as well. Most major rental-car agencies have booths inside the airport, including **Budget** (✆ **612/124-6433** or 122-7655), **Avis** (✆ **612/124-6312**), and **Alamo** (✆ **612/122-6262** or 122-6260).

By Car From San José del Cabo, **Hwy. 1** north is the more scenic route, and it passes through a mountain town called San Bartolo, where heavenly homemade macaroons made of thick, fresh-cut coconut and pralines made from *cajeta* (goat's-milk caramel) are

well worth the slightly longer drive; a faster route is heading east of Cabo San Lucas and then north to **Hwy. 19** through Todos Santos. A little before San Pedro, Hwy. 19 rejoins Hwy. 1 and runs north into La Paz; both trips takes 2½ to 3 hours. From northern Baja, Hwy. 1 south is the only choice.

By Bus The **Central Camionera** (main bus station) is at Jalisco and Héroes de la Independencia, about 25 blocks southwest of the center of town; it's open daily from 6am to 10pm. Bus service operates from the south (Los Cabos, 2½–3½ hr.) and north (as far as Tijuana). It's best to buy your ticket in person the day before, though reservations can be made over the phone at the bus station in your point of origin. Taxis are available in front of the station.

All routes north and south, as well as buses to Pichilingue, the ferry pier, and close to outlying beaches, are available through the **Transportes Aguila** station, sometimes called the beach bus terminal, on the *malecón* at Álvaro Obregón and Cinco de Mayo (✆ **612/122-7898**). The station is open daily from 6am to 10pm. Buses to Pichilingue depart seven times a day from 8am to 5pm and cost 20 pesos one-way. Local buses arrive at the **beach station,** along the *malecón.* Taxis line up out front of both.

By Ferry **Baja Ferries** serves La Paz from Topolobampo (the port for Los Mochis) daily at 11:30pm, and the return trip to Topolobampo leaves La Paz at 3pm daily. Tickets are available at the Baja Ferries office in La Paz, on the corner of Allende and Marcelo Rubio (✆ **612/123-6600** or 123-1313), or at any Banamex banks throughout Mexico (make payable to Baja Ferries, SA de CV, account #7145468 sucursal 001). The local office is open daily 8am to 6pm. To make reservations from the U.S., call ✆ **800/884-3107.**

The ferry departs for Topolobampo daily at 11:30pm and arrives in La Paz 6 hours later. The ferries can carry 1,000 passengers, as well as accommodate vehicles and trucks. Passengers pay one fee for themselves (1,065 pesos for a seat, 530 pesos for children ages 3–11, or 760 pesos for a cabin with four beds and one bathroom) and another for their vehicles (1,040 pesos). The ferries offer restaurant and bar service, as well as a coffee shop and live music, and a hot meal is included in the cost of the ticket. Access for those with disabilities is offered as well. Passengers are requested to arrive 3 hours prior to departure time. Information and updated schedules are available at **www.bajaferries.com**. Taxis meet each ferry as well and cost about 80 pesos to downtown La Paz.

VISITOR INFORMATION The most accessible visitor information office is on the corner of Álvaro Obregón and Nicolas Bravo (✆ **612/122-5939** or 124-0100; turismo@gbcs.gob.mx or turismo@lapaz.cromwell.com.mx). It's open daily from 8am to 8pm. The extremely helpful staff speaks English and can supply information on La Paz, Los Cabos, and the rest of the region. The official website of the La Paz Tourism Board is **www.vivalapaz.com**.

CITY LAYOUT Although La Paz sprawls well inland from the *malecón* (Paseo Álvaro Obregón), you'll probably spend most of your time in the older, more congenial downtown section within a few blocks of the waterfront. The main plaza, **Plaza Pública,** or Jardín Velasco, is bounded by Madero, Independencia, Revolución, and Cinco de Mayo.

GETTING AROUND Because most of what you'll need in town is on the *malecón,* between the tourist information office and the Hotel Los Arcos, or a few blocks inland from the waterfront, it's easy to get around La Paz on foot. Public buses go to some of the beaches north of town (see "Beaches & Sports," below). To explore the many beaches within 80km (50 miles) of La Paz, your best bet is to rent a car or hire a taxi. There are several car-rental agencies on the *malecón.*

FESTIVALS & EVENTS February features the biggest and best **Carnaval/Mardi Gras** in Baja, as well as a 4- to 5-week **Festival of the Gray Whale** (starting in late Jan or early Feb, sometimes extending through early Mar). On May 3, **a festival** celebrates the city's founding by Cortez in 1535 and features *artesanía* exhibitions from southern Baja. An annual **marlin-fishing tournament** is in August; **other fishing tournaments** occur in September and November. On November 1 and 2, the **Day of the Dead,** altars are on display at the Anthropology Museum.

Fast Facts La Paz

Area Code The telephone area code is **612.**

Banks Banks generally exchange currency during normal business hours: Monday through Friday from 9am to 6pm, Saturday from 10am to 2pm. ATMs are readily available and offer bank exchange rates on withdrawals.

Drugstore One of the largest pharmacies is **Farmacía Baja California,** corner of Independencia and Madero (✆ **612/122-0240** or 123-4408). Open 7am to 9:30pm Monday to Saturday, and Sunday from 8am to 9:30pm.

Emergencies Dial ✆ **066** for general emergency assistance, or ✆ **060** for the police.

Hospitals The two hospitals in the area are **Hospital Especialidades Médicas,** at Km 4.5 on the highway toward the airport (✆ **612/124-0400**), and **Hospital Juan María de Salvatierra** (✆ **612/122-1497**), Nicolás Bravo 1010, Col. Centro. Both are open 24 hours, and the former offers access to emergency air evacuation.

Internet Access In the fleeting world of Internet cafes, your best bet is to scan the *malecón* or ask your hotel concierge for their recommendations. However, **Omni Services,** which doubles as an Internet center and a real estate agency, offers Internet access, Wi-Fi, faxing, and long-distance VoIP phone service to the U.S. and Canada for 3 pesos per minute on the *malecón,* Álvaro Obregón 460-C, close to Burger King (✆ **612/123-4888;** www.osmx.com). It also offers hookups for laptops, color printers, and copiers.

Post Office The *correo,* 3 blocks inland at Constitución and Revolución de 1910 (✆ **612/122-0388**), is open Monday through Friday from 8am to 5pm, Saturday from 8am to 1pm.

Tourism Office The office is at Carretera al Norte Km 5.5, Edificio Fidepaz, Col. Fidepaz, La Paz, B.C.S. (✆ **612/124-0100**), open daily 8am to 3pm. The tourist information booth on the *malecón* is open daily 8am to 8pm.

BEACHES & SPORTS

La Paz combines the un-self-conscious bustle of a small capital port city with the charm of resort Mexico and beautiful, isolated beaches not far from town. Well on its way to becoming the undisputed adventure-tourism capital of Baja, it's the starting point for whale-watching, diving, sea kayaking, climbing, and hiking tours throughout the peninsula. For those interested in day adventures, travel agencies in major hotels or along the *malecón* usually can arrange all of the above, plus beach tours, sunset cruises, and visits to the sea lion colony. Agencies in the United States that specialize in Baja's natural history also book excursions (see "Special-Interest & Escorted Trips," in chapter 3).

BEACHES Within a 10- to 45-minute drive from La Paz lie some of the loveliest beaches in Baja. Many rival those of the Caribbean, with their clear, turquoise water. The beach bordering the *malecón* is the most convenient in town. Although the sand in the Bay of La Paz is soft and white and the water appears turquoise and gentle, locals don't generally swim there. Because of the commercial port, the water is not considered as clean as those at the very accessible outlying beaches. With colorful playgrounds dotting the central beachfront and numerous open-air restaurants that front the water, it's best for a casual afternoon of post-sightseeing lunch and play.

The best beach nearby is immediately north of town at **La Concha Beach Resort;** nonguests may use the hotel restaurant and bar, and rent equipment for snorkeling, diving, skiing, and sailing. It's 10km (6¼ miles) north of town on the Pichilingue Highway at Km 5.5. The other beaches are all farther north of town, but midweek you may have these distant beaches to yourself.

For more information about beaches and maps, check at the tourist information office on the *malecón.*

CRUISES A popular and very worthwhile cruise is to **Isla Espíritu Santo** and **Los Islotes.** You visit the largest sea lion colony in Baja, stunning rock formations, and remote beaches, with stops for snorkeling, swimming, and lunch. If conditions permit, you may even be able to snorkel beside the sea lions. (***Note:*** Remember, sea lions are wild animals. Blowing bubbles in your face is their sign of warning, not of play, so steer clear of the giant bulls—who can be quite protective of their females—and let the curious babies come to you.) Boat and bus tours are available to **Puerto Balandra,** where bold rock formations rising up like humpback whales frame pristine coves of crystal-blue water and ivory sand. **Viajes Lybs,** Independencia 1045 (✆ **612/128-4882;** www.lybs.com.mx), and other travel agencies can arrange these all-day trips, weather permitting. Price is $80 per person.

ECOTOURS A wide selection of ecotours and adventure activities are available through **Baja Quest** and **Grupo Fun Baja** (✆ **612/106-7148;** www.funbaja.com). In addition to diving excursions (the company's specialty), they offer a "cactus tour" of the interior as well as a tour of downtown La Paz. **DeSea Baja** (✆ **310/691-8040** from the U.S., or 612/121-5100; www.deseabaja.com) offers driving tours in rental vehicles equipped for off-road adventures.

SCUBA DIVING Scuba-diving trips are best June through September. Fernando Aguilar's **Club Cantamar,** Obregón 1665-2 (✆ **612/122-1826;** fax 612/122-3296; www.clubcantamar.com), arranges them. Rates start at $105 per person for a daylong three-tank dive, including transportation and food. Another excellent dive operator is **Baja Quest** (✆ **612/123-5320;** www.bajaquest.com.mx), at Rangel 10, between Sonora and Sinaloa. Day boat trips run approximately $125 for two to three tanks, depending on dive site. They also offer other outdoor adventures including kayaking and wildlife-watching, not to mention service in English, Spanish, and Japanese.

Also of note is **DeSea Baja** (✆ **612/121-5100;** www.deseabaja.com), a complete tour company with expertise in diving and sportfishing. Prices are $130 for two-tank dives, including equipment, or $147 for three. They also offer private boats with guides for underwater photo or video diving, and private divemasters or instructors for yachts or charters. DeSea also offers **freediving,** including instruction from internationally renowned freediving instructors Aharon and Maria Teresa (MT) Solomon. Courses include yoga-based breathing exercises, mental control, and the physiology of breath hold. Beginning through advanced instruction is available, as are **live-aboard charters** and **spearfishing** excursions.

SEA KAYAKING Kayaking in the many bays and coves near La Paz is a paddler's dream, and because some of the area's special sites for swimming and snorkeling are accessible only by kayak, daylong or multiday trips can't be beat. In the waters near La Paz, the water clarity gives the sensation of being suspended in the air. Bring your own equipment, or let the local companies take care of you. Several companies in the U.S. (see "Special-Interest & Escorted Trips," in chapter 3) can book trips in advance. Locally, **Baja Quest** (see above; day trips start at 900 pesos, and multiday trips also are available) and **Mar y Aventuras** (**Sea and Adventures;** ✆ **612/123-0559** in Mexico, 406/522-7596 from the U.S.; fax 612/122-3559; www.kayakbaja.com) arrange extended kayak adventures.

SPORTFISHING La Paz, justly famous for its sportfishing, attracts anglers from all over the world. Its waters are home to more than 850 species of fish. The most economical approach is to rent a *panga* boat with a captain and equipment. It costs 1,250 pesos for 3 hours, but you don't go very far out. Super *pangas,* which have a shade cover and comfortable seats, start at around 1,800 pesos for two persons. Larger cruisers with bathrooms start at 4,000 pesos.

You can arrange sportfishing trips locally through hotels and tour agencies. **La Paz Sportfishing** (✆ **612/141-6403** in Mexico, 310/691-8040 from the U.S.; www.lapazsportfishing.com) has rates starting at 2,200 pesos a day for two people. David Jones, of the **Fishermen's Fleet** (✆ **408/884-3932** in the U.S., or 612/122-1313; fax 612/125-7334; www.fishermensfleet.com), uses popular *panga* fishing boats. David is professional, speaks English, and truly understands area fishing. The average price is 2,600 pesos for the boat, and the price usually includes beer, soft drinks, breakfast, and lunch, as well as vacuum packing and freeze drying of your catch.

WHALE-WATCHING Between January and March, and sometimes as early as December, 3,000 to 5,000 gray whales migrate from the Bering Strait to the Pacific coast of Baja. The main whale-watching spots are **Laguna San Ignacio** (on the Pacific near San Ignacio), **Magdalena Bay** (on the Pacific near Puerto López Mateos—about a 2-hr. drive from La Paz), and **Scammon's Lagoon** (near Guerrero Negro).

Most tours originating in La Paz go to Magdalena Bay, where the whales give birth to their calves in calm waters. Several companies arrange whale-watching tours that originate in La Paz or other Baja towns or in the United States; 12-hour tours from La Paz start at around 1,200 pesos per person, including breakfast, lunch, transportation, and an English-speaking guide. Make reservations at **Viajes Lybs** (see above).

A BREAK FROM THE BEACHES: EXPLORING LA PAZ

Most tour agencies offer city tours of all the major sights. Tours last 2 to 3 hours, include time for shopping, and cost around 150 pesos per person.

When Cortez landed here on May 3, 1535, he named it Bahía Santa Cruz. It didn't stick. In April 1683, Eusebio Kino, a Spanish Jesuit, arrived and dubbed the place Nuestra Señora de la Paz (Our Lady of Peace). It wasn't until November 1, 1720, however, that Jaime Bravo, another Jesuit, set up a permanent mission. He used the same name as his predecessor, calling it the Misión de Nuestra Señora de la Paz. The mission church stands on La Paz's main square, on Revolución between Cinco de Mayo and Independencia.

The Anthropology Museum The museum features large, though faded, color photos of Baja's prehistoric cave paintings. There are also exhibits on various topics, including the geological history of the peninsula, fossils, missions, colonial history, and daily life. All information is in Spanish.

Altamirano and Cinco de Mayo. ✆/fax **612/122-0162** or 125-6424. Admission 31 pesos. Daily 9am–6pm.

Cactus Sanctuary ★ This 50-hectare (124-acre) natural reserve features 1,000m (3,280 ft.) of marked pathways and self-guided tours with information about the plants and animals of La Paz's desert region. Fifty unique areas have been identified, which you can explore. Route maps and guided tours are available, as well as descriptive signs for many of the plants. There's a surprising amount of wildlife to see here, from the myriad types of cacti, many of which are endemic to Baja California, to the numerous plants and animals that support this unique ecosystem. The sanctuary is in the Ejido El Rosario; go to the Ejido's main office (the *delegación*), and they will provide you with a key to enter the reserve.

Ejido El Rosario. ✆ **612/124-0245** (Dr. Hector Nolasco). hnolasco@cibnor.mx. 20 pesos donation to enter. No fixed hours. 45 min. south of La Paz; take Hwy. 1 toward the town of El Triunfo; drive 10 min. inland along a dirt road.

Serpentarium ★ This mostly open-air natural museum offers plenty of opportunities to observe various species of reptiles that inhabit the region's ecosystem, including snakes, turtles, iguanas, lizards, and crocodiles. It's on the corner of Calle Brecha California and Calle La Posada. To get there, go to the southernmost point of the *malecón* at Calle Abasolo, where the last streetlights are, and just before the beach you'll see an unpaved street—that's Brecha California. If you're going with a group, e-mail **cobra293@hotmail.com** to make a reservation.

Calles Brecha California and La Posada. ✆ **612/123-5731.** 80 pesos adults, 50 pesos children. Daily 10am–4pm.

El Teatro de la Ciudad The city theater is the cultural center, with performances by visiting and local artists. Bookings include small ballet companies, experimental and popular theater, popular music, and an occasional classical concert or symphony.

Av. Navarro 700. ✆ **612/125-0486.**

SHOPPING

La Paz has little in the way of folk art or other treasures from mainland Mexico. The dense cluster of streets behind the **Hotel Perla,** between 16 de Septiembre and Degollado, is full of small shops, some tacky, others quite upscale. In this area, there is also a very small but authentic **Chinatown,** dating from the time when Chinese laborers were brought to settle in Baja. Serdán from Degollado south is home to dozens of sellers of dried spices, piñatas, and candy. Stores carrying crafts, folk art, clothing, handmade furniture, and accessories lie mostly along the *malecón* (Paseo Obregón) or within 1 or 2 blocks. The **municipal market,** at Revolución and Degollado, has little of interest to visitors. Something you're sure to notice if you explore around the central plaza is the abundance of stores selling electronic equipment. This is because La Paz is a principal port for electronic imports to Mexico from the Far East and, therefore, offers some of the best prices in Baja and mainland Mexico.

Allende Books When you accidentally drop your beach read in the ocean (as happens to even the most seasoned traveler), this is the place to pick out a new one. Allende Books is relatively small, but its selection is cheeky and includes recent English-language bestsellers as well as local publications, including a Todos Santos cookbook. Open Monday to Saturday 10am to 1pm and 4 to 8pm. Independencia 518 near Serdán and Guillermo Prieto. ✆ **612/125-9114.** www.allendebooks.com.

Antigua California This shop manages to stay in business as others come and go. It carries a good selection of folk art from throughout Mexico. It's open Monday to Saturday from 9:30am to 8:30pm, Sunday from 10:30am to 2:30pm. Paseo Álvaro Obregón 220, at Arreola. ✆ **612/125-5230.**

Artesanías Cuauhtémoc (The Weaver) If you like beautiful hand-woven tablecloths, place mats, rugs, and other textiles, it's worth the long walk or taxi ride to this unique shop. Fortunato Silva, an elderly gentleman, weaves wonderfully textured cotton textiles from yarn he spins and dyes himself. He charges far less than what you'd pay for equivalent artistry in the United States. Open Monday through Saturday from 10am to 3:30pm and 6 to 7pm. On the corner of Abasolo and Oaxaca, btw. Jalisco and Nayarit. ✆ **612/122-4575.**

Dorian's If you've forgotten essentials or want to stock up on duty-free perfume or cosmetics, head for Dorian's, La Paz's major department store. La Paz is a duty-free port city, so prices are excellent. Dorian's carries a wide selection of stylish clothing, shoes, lingerie, jewelry, and accessories as well. Open daily from 10am to 9pm. 16 de Septiembre, btw. Esquerro and 21 de Agosto. ✆ **612/122-8014.**

Ibarra's Pottery Here you not only shop for tableware, hand-painted tiles, and decorative pottery, but you can also watch it being made. Each piece is individually hand-painted or glazed, and then fired. Open Monday to Saturday from 9am to 3pm. You can call ahead to schedule a tour. Guillermo Prieto 625, btw. Torre Iglesias and República. ✆ **612/122-0404.**

WHERE TO STAY

Grand Plaza La Paz ★ This all-suite hotel offers travelers a comfortable sense of U.S. standards and modern conveniences. It's considered the best option for business travelers to the area, one of the few in town with a full business center, Internet access, and meeting space. Vacationers will also enjoy the hotels' location on the marina, as well as its pleasant pool area. The clean, modern, and well-equipped rooms on three floors offer either views to the bay or overlooking the courtyard pool, with a choice of king-size or two double beds. Five different kinds of suites have a private balcony, and all have ocean views. The hotel is at the northern end of town, 5.6km (3½ miles) from downtown, at the Marina Fidepaz.

Lote A Marina Fidepaz, P.O. Box 482, 23090 La Paz, B.C.S. ✆ **866/357-9711** in the U.S., or 612/124-0830, -0833. Fax 612/124-0837. www.grandplazalapaz.com. 54 suites. Suites $99 and up. AE, DC, MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; 2 bars; concierge; fitness center; outdoor pool; room service; sauna; squash court; whirlpool; Wi-Fi (in lobby). *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer.

Hotel Los Arcos This three-story, neocolonial-style hotel at the west end of the *malecón* is the best place for downtown accommodations with a touch of tranquillity. Although the hotel is a bit dated, Los Arcos has functional furnishings and amenities and is filled with fountains, plants, rocking chairs, and even a Ping-Pong table. Most of the rooms and suites come with two double beds. Each has a balcony overlooking the pool in the inner courtyard or the waterfront, plus a whirlpool tub. I prefer the South Pacific–style bungalows with thatched roofs and fireplaces in the back part of the property.

Av. Álvaro Obregón 498, btw. Rosales and Allende (Apdo. Postal 112), 23000 La Paz, B.C.S. ✆ **800/347-2252** in the U.S., or 612/122-2744. Fax 612/125-4313. www.losarcos.com. 130 units. 52 bungalows. $90 double; $124 suite; $113 bungalow. AE, MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** Cafeteria; restaurant; bar w/live music; 2 outdoor pools (1 heated); fishing information desk; room service; sauna. *In room:* A/C, TV, minibar.

Hotel Mediterrane ★ Simple yet stylish, this unique inn mixes Mediterranean with Mexican, creating a cozy place for couples or friends to share. All rooms face an interior courtyard and are decorated with white-tile floors and *equipal* furniture, with colorful Mexican serapes draped over the beds. Some rooms have minifridges. All have VCRs. Its location is great—just a block from the *malecón.* The adjacent La Pazta restaurant (see

"Where to Dine," below) is one of La Paz's best. Rates include use of kayaks and bicycles for exploring the town. This is a gay-friendly hotel.

Allende 36, 23000 La Paz, B.C.S. ✆/fax **612/125-1195.** www.hotelmed.com. 9 units. $85 double; $95 suite. Extra person $100. Weekly discounts available. AE, MC, V. Street parking. *In room:* A/C, TV/VCR, no phone, Wi-Fi.

La Concha Beach Club Resort ★ Five kilometers (3 miles) north of downtown La Paz, this resort's setting is perfect: on a curved beach ideal for swimming and watersports. All rooms face the water and have double beds, balconies or patios, and small tables and chairs. Condos with full kitchens and one or three bedrooms are available on a nightly basis in the high-rise complex next door. They're worth the extra price for a perfect family vacation stay, although no children 13 and younger are allowed in the condos. The hotel offers scuba, fishing, and whale-watching packages.

Carretera Pichilingue Km 5, 23010 La Paz, B.C.S. ✆ **800/999-2252** in the U.S., or 612/121-6161. www.laconcha.com. 113 units. $90 double; $138 junior suite; $175–$338 condo. AE, DC, MC, V. Free guarded parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant (w/theme nights); 2 bars; beach club w/scuba program; babysitting; Jacuzzi; beachside pool; room service; free twice-daily shuttle to town; complete watersports center w/ WaveRunners, kayaks, and paddleboats. *In room:* A/C, TV, Internet, minibar.

Posada de Las Flores ★ Owner Giuseppe Marceletti has continued the tradition of hospitality in this elegant B&B (formerly Posada Santa Fe), the best bet for travelers looking for a more refined place to stay in La Paz. Each room is individually decorated with high-quality Mexican furniture and antiques, hand-loomed fabrics, and exquisite artisan details. Bathrooms are especially welcoming, with marble tubs and thick towels. Breakfast is served from 8 to 11am daily, and complimentary wake-up coffee service is available on request. Telephone, fax, and Internet service are available through the office. It's at the northern end of the *malecón.*

Álvaro Obregón 440, 23000 La Paz, B.C.S. ✆ **619/378-0103** in the U.S., or 612/125-5871. www.posadadelasflores.com. 8 units. High season $180 double, $290 suite; low season $150 double, $250 suite. Rates include full breakfast. MC, V. Street parking. No children 11 and younger accepted. **Amenities:** Hospitality desk; Internet; small outdoor pool. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar.

WHERE TO DINE

Although La Paz is not known for culinary grandeur, it has an assortment of small, pleasant restaurants. In addition to the usual seafood and Mexican dishes, you can find Italian, French, Spanish, Chinese, and vegetarian offerings. Restaurants along the *malecón* tend to be more expensive than those a few blocks inland. For an authentic Baja experience, head to **Palapa Azul ★** (✆ **612/122-1801**), just outside of town where the bus lets off on Tecolote beach. It's packed with hungry crowds on weekends, but if you make it early enough, you can get a head start on their famed oysters that are so fresh they still move when you squirt lime on them.

Moderate

Buffalo Bar-B-Q ★★ ARGENTINE/GRILL Indoor seating plays second fiddle to the outdoor courtyard, which fronts a fiery grill on which prime cuts are turned into delicacies. The hamburgers are big and flavorful, and come in so many delectable styles—from the special-sauced New Mexico burger to the standard cheeseburger—that a carnivore may just call this heaven. Otherwise, Buffalo Bar-B-Q's stellar steaks, ribs, and wine list are a worthy tribute to the chef's Argentinean roots.

Madero 1240 (near the corner of Cinco de Mayo and Constitución). ✆ **612/128-8755.** www.buffalolapaz.com. Hamburgers and main courses 80–250 pesos. AE, MC, V. Wed–Mon 2pm–midnight.

La Pazta ★ ITALIAN/SWISS The trendiest restaurant in town, La Pazta gleams with black-lacquered tables and white tile. The aromas of garlic and espresso float in the air. The menu features local fresh seafood in items such as pasta with squid in wine-and-cream sauce, and crispy fried calamari. There's also homemade lasagna, baked in a wood-fired oven. La Pazta's daytime cafe is appealing for breakfast, too. The restaurant is in front of the Hotel Mediterrane, 1 block inland from the *malecón.*

Allende 36. ✆ **612/125-1195.** www.hotelmed.com. Breakfast 20–40 pesos; main courses 114–240 pesos. AE, MC, V. Cafe Thurs–Tues 7am–11pm; restaurant Thurs–Tues 4–11pm.

Inexpensive

El Quinto Sol VEGETARIAN Not only is this La Paz's principal health food market, but it's a cheerful, excellent cafe for fresh-fruit *licuados* (smoothies), *tortas,* daily vegetarian lunch specials, and ice cream made from in-season fruit. Tables sit beside oversize wood-framed windows with flowering planters in the sills. Sandwiches are served on whole-grain bread—also available for sale—and the potato tacos are an excellent way for vegetarians to indulge in a Mexican staple. Owner Marta Alonso also offers free nightly meditation classes to clients.

Av. Independencia and B. Domínguez. ✆ **612/122-1692.** Main courses 20–75 pesos. No credit cards. Mon–Sat 8am–4pm; store hours 8am–9pm.

LA PAZ AFTER DARK

A night in La Paz logically begins at a bar or cafe along the *malecón* as the sun sinks into the sea. A favorite ringside seat at dusk is a table at **La Terraza,** next to the Hotel Perla (✆ **612/122-0777**). La Terraza makes good schooner-size margaritas. **Pelícanos Bar,** on the second story of the Hotel Los Arcos (✆ **612/122-2744**), has a good view of the waterfront and a clubby, cozy feel. **Carlos 'n' Charlie's La Paz-Lapa** (✆ **612/122-9290**) has live music on weekends; and on the second-floor terrace above is **Casa de Villa,** where current pop music commingles with young *Paceños,* or La Paz locals, till late. **La Cabaña** nightclub (✆ **612/122-0777**), in the Hotel Perla, features Latin rhythms. It opens at 9pm, and there's a cover on weekends that varies depending on the event. **Las Varitas,** Independencia and Domínguez (✆ **612/125-2025**), is where you'll hear Latin rock, ranchero, and salsa. It's open from 9pm to 3 or 4am, with cover charges around 55 pesos. ***Note:*** Covers may rise or fall.

4 MID-BAJA: LORETO, MULEGE & SANTA ROSALIA

Halfway between the resort sophistication of Los Cabos and the frontier exuberance of Tijuana lies Baja's midsection, an area rich in history and culture. The indigenous cave paintings here are a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the area was home to numerous Jesuit missions in the 1700s. These days, mid-Baja is known for its sea kayaking, freediving, sportfishing, off-road racing, and hiking.

Overlooked by many travelers (except avid sportfishermen), **Loreto** is a rare gem that sparkles under the desert sky. The purple hues of the Giganta Mountains meet the indigo waters of the Sea of Cortez, providing a spectacular backdrop of natural contrasts for the historic town. **Mulegé** is, literally, an oasis in the Baja desert. The only freshwater river (Río Mulegé) in the peninsula flows through town. And the port town of **Santa Rosalía,** while

a century or so past its prime, makes a worthy detour, with its pastel clapboard houses and unusual steel-and-stained-glass church, designed by Gustave Eiffel (of Eiffel Tower fame).

It's far enough from the polished tourism gem of Los Cabos that the people's smiles are more sincere, and you rarely hear the timeshare salesman's grating "Hola, amiga" as you walk the streets. But plans may be in the works to change that. Developers north of the border are snapping up spots in Ensenada Blanca Bay and Loreto Bay. Mid-Baja is still a decade or more from being a hot spot for anyone besides adventurers, racing teams, and RV caravans, but the plans are there. If you want a glimpse of the Wild West, now is the time to visit Loreto, Mulegé, Santa Rosalía, and San Ignacio.

The region is also a popular launch for whale-watching. To find out when, where, and how to view the gentle giants, see p. 749, "Whale-Watching in Baja."

LORETO & THE OFFSHORE ISLANDS

389km (241 miles) NW of La Paz; 533km (330 miles) N of Cabo San Lucas; 1,125km (698 miles) SE of Tijuana

The center of the Spanish mission effort during colonial times, Loreto was the first capital of the Californias and the first European settlement in the peninsula. Founded on October 25, 1697, it was selected by Father Juan María Salvatierra as the site of the first mission in the Californias. (California, at the time, extended from Cabo San Lucas to the Oregon border.) He held Mass beneath a figure of the Virgin of Loreto, brought from a town in Italy bearing the same name. For 132 years, Loreto served as the state capital, until an 1829 hurricane destroyed most of the town. The capital moved to La Paz the following year.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Mexican government saw in Loreto the possibility for another megadevelopment along the lines of Cancún, Ixtapa, or Los Cabos. It invested in a golf course and championship tennis facility, modernized the infrastructure, and built an international airport and marina facilities at Puerto Loreto, several kilometers south of town. The economics, however, didn't make sense, and few hotel investors and even fewer tourists came. In the past 2 years, however, this effort has been revitalized, and the area is seeing a welcome influx of flights, as well as the addition of its first new hotel in years, a sprawling Inn at Loreto Bay, which has had three different owners in as many years. The Loreto Bay residential development has been a major source of drama for the area as each new developer promises completion of the project. The best place to stay up to date with the saga is **www.nopolonews.com**.

The *Loretanos,* Loreto-born Mexicans, are friendly and helpful; unlike the swarms of proprietary tourists that dominate the peninsula's northern and southern reaches, the mid-Baja region attracts a more unassuming set of visitors, and locals play the part of gracious hosts. Canadian and American expatriates who've settled in Loreto may be a bit more aloof with tourists, and who can blame them? They settled here when there was nothing, and they can't help but want it to stay that way for as long as possible.

The main reason to come here is to see Loreto's historic center on the Sea of Cortez and the five islands just offshore, but the Sierra de la Giganta mountains offer a wealth of opportunities for exploration as well. The reefs around Isla Coronado are home to schools of giant grouper, and beachgoers won't find a bay more beautiful than the one on Coronado's north side. Puerto Escondido shelters a growing yachting community; it's so lovely that most of the sailboats stay put year-round. Kayakers launch here for trips to Isla del Carmen and Isla Danzante or down the remote mountain coast to La Paz; history buffs head for the mountains to visit some of the oldest Jesuit missions.

Essentials

The **Loreto International Airport** (✆ **613/135-0499,** -0498) is 6km (3¾ miles) southwest of town. **Taxis** (✆ **613/135-0047**) are readily available and charge about $20 for the 10-minute ride to Loreto. It is serviced by **Alaska Airlines** (✆ **800/252-7522** in the U.S.; www.alaskaair.com), and **Delta** (✆ **800/241-4141** in the U.S.), which both have nonstop flights from Los Angeles. **Continental** (✆ **800/523-3273** in the U.S.) also offers nonstop flights from Houston. Loreto's Terminal de Autobuses, or **bus station** (✆ **613/135-0767**), is on Salvatierra and Paseo Tamaral, a 10-minute walk from downtown. It's open 24 hours. The 5-hour trip from La Paz costs 300 pesos.

The city **tourist information office** (✆ **613/135-0411**) is in the southeast corner of the Palacio de Gobierno building, across from the town square. It offers maps, local free publications, and other basic information about the area. It's open Monday through Friday from 8am to 3pm. Information, which may be outdated, is also available at **www.gotoloreto.com** and **www.loreto.com**.

Salvatierra is the main street that runs northeast, merging into Paseo Hidalgo, which runs toward the beach. Calle de la Playa, also known as the Malecón, parallels the water; along this road you'll find many hotels, seafood restaurants, fishing charters, and the marina. Most of the town's social life revolves around the central square, the old mission, and the Malecón. The local telephone area code is **613.**

What to See & Do

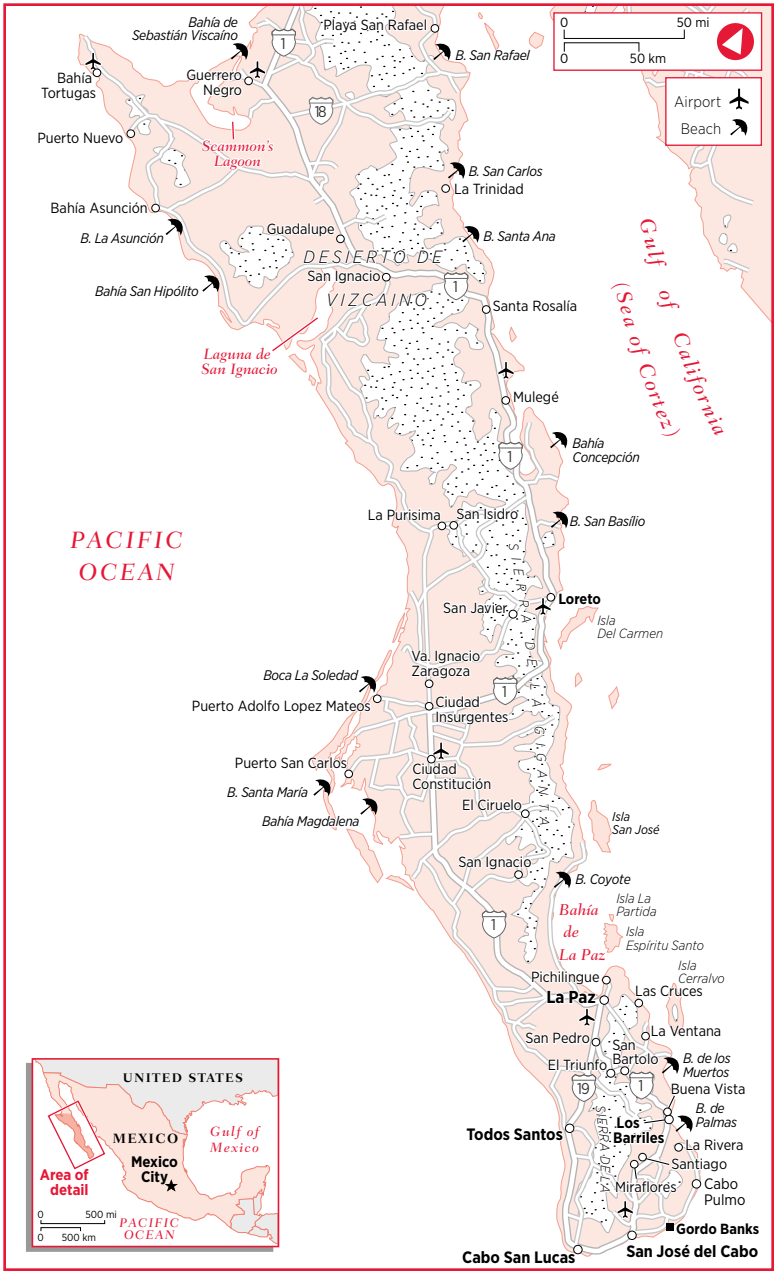
The Sea of Cortez is the star in Loreto, and the five islands just offshore make for some of the best kayaking, sailing, diving, and fishing in North America. Freediving, too, is becoming more popular. Loreto is the nearest major airport and city to **Bahía de Magdalena (Magdalena Bay),** the southernmost of the major gray whale–calving lagoons on the Pacific coast of Baja. For more information on popular whale-watching spots and tour operators, see "Whale-Watching in Baja," below.

Misión Nuestra Señora de Loreto was the first mission in the Californias, started in 1699. The original Virgen de Loreto, brought to shore by Padre Kino in 1697, is on display in the church's 18th-century gilded altar. The mission is on Salvatierra, across from the central square. Adjacent to the mission church and of equal or greater interest is the **Museo de las Misiones,** Salvatierra 16 (✆ **613/135-0441**). It has a small but complete collection of historical and anthropological exhibits from the Jesuit mission period. The museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 9am to 1pm and 1:45pm to 6pm. Admission is 30 pesos.

One of this region's greatest treasures is actually located 2 hours into its interior. The **Misión San Javier** is truly a sight to behold. Completed in 1759 near a mountain stream that still flows through a tiny mountain village, it's the only one of the missions in the Californias that has never been restored and still maintains its original grandeur. Its walls and foundation are made up of stone from a nearby quarry. The hour-long drive through the Sierra de la Giganta mountains involves a long dirt road, but the views of sweeping auburn and gold cliffs and canyon are reminiscent of the Grand Canyon or Sedona in Arizona. You'll encounter all manner of desert inhabitants, including cacti, *vaqueros,* and *burros* along the way.

Where to Stay

In general, accommodations in Loreto are the kind you used to find all over Mexico: inexpensive and unique, with genuine, friendly owner-operators. And as mid-Baja is a mecca


Bahía de Sebastián Vizcaíno
Playa San Rafael
B. San Rafael
Bahía Tortugas
Guerrero Negro
Puerto Nuevo
Scammon's Lagoon
B. San Carlos
La Trinidad
Bahía Asunción
B. La Asunción
Guadalupe
B. Santa Ana
DESIERTO DE VIZCAINO
San Ignacio
Bahía San Hipólito
Santa Rosalía
Laguna de San Ignacio
Gulf of California (Sea of Cortez)
Mulegé
Bahía Concepción
PACIFIC OCEAN
La Purisima
San Isidro
B. San Basilio
SIERRA DE LA GIGANTA
San Javier
Loreto
Isla Del Carmen
Boca La Soledad
Va. Ignacio Zaragoza
Puerto Adolfo Lopez Mateos
Ciudad Insurgentes
Puerto San Carlos
Ciudad Constitución
B. Santa María
El Ciruelo
Bahía Magdalena
Isla San José
San Ignacio
B. Coyote
Isla La Partida
Bahía de La Paz
Isla Espíritu Santo
Isla Cerralvo
Pichilingue
La Paz
Las Cruces
San Pedro
La Ventana
San Bartolo
El Triunfo
B. de los Muertos
Buena Vista
B. de Palmas
Los Barriles
Todos Santos
La Rivera
Santiago
Miraflores
Cabo Pulmo
Gordo Banks
San José del Cabo
Cabo San Lucas
SIERRA DE LA LAGUNA
0 50 mi
0 50 km
Airport
Beach
UNITED STATES
MEXICO
Gulf of Mexico
Mexico City
Area of detail
0 500 mi
0 500 km
PACIFIC OCEAN

for RV explorers, **Rivera Del Mar RV Park & Camping** (✆ **613/135-0718;** www.riveradelmar.com) has deluxe hookups just 2 blocks from the beach. The rates quoted below do not include the 12% tax. Parking is free at all hotels in mid-Baja. Also of note, as people fall in love with Loreto and build their dream homes there, vacation-rental properties are on the rise, and Kathy and Hector at **Rentals Loreto** (✆ **613/135-2505;** www.rentalsloreto.com) have the best selection in town. Gorgeous beachfront homes that sleep up to eight can go for a max of $170 a night and most also rent by the week.

La Damiana Inn ★★ Finds The location of the La Damiana Inn—in the heart of town on Calle Madero—is reason enough to book a reservation, but the warmth of color, style, and ownership make it the best accommodations value in Loreto. Debora Simmons lovingly operates this former family home, built in 1917. Today its five rooms, all equipped with air-conditioning and ceiling fans, offer a blend of twin, queen, and king-size beds that provide cozy resting places when you're not exploring the area. Wi-Fi throughout the hotel, laundry facilities, a shared living room, kitchen use, and free cuddles from two friendly house dogs are the perks that make La Damiana Inn seem like the home of a gracious friend. Pets welcome upon prior approval.

Madero, btw. Hidalgo and Jordan, Centro, 23880 Loreto, B.C.S. ✆ **613/135-0356.** www.ladamianainn.com. 5 units. $62 pesos double; $75 pesos suite. No credit cards (traveler's checks accepted). **Amenities:** Bikes; library; phone for local calls; TV; Wi-Fi. *In room:* A/C, fan, no phone.

Posada de Las Flores ★★★ The most luxurious place to stay in Loreto conveniently sits adjacent to the main square, in the heart of historic Loreto. The first thing you'll notice upon entering is a constant shift and sparkle of light—this is because a swimming pool sits atop the ceiling. Every room is beautifully decorated with fine Mexican arts and crafts, including heavy wood doors, Talavera pottery, painted tiles, candles, and Mexican scenic paintings. The colors and decor of the hotel are nouveau-colonial Mexico, with wood and tin accents. Large bathrooms have thick white towels and bamboo doors, with Frette bathrobes hanging in the closet. Every detail has been carefully selected, including the down comforters and numerous antiques tucked into corners. This hotel exudes class and refinement, from the general ambience to the warm polish of its employees. It's Italian-owned and -operated, and the sophisticated service has a European style to it.

Salvatierra and Francisco I. Madera, Centro, 23880 Loreto, B.C.S. ✆ **619/378-0103** in the U.S., or 613/135-1162. Fax 613/135-1099. www.posadadelasflores.com. 15 units. High season $180 double, $290 suite; low season $150 double, $250 suite. Rates include continental breakfast. MC, V. Street parking. Children 11 or younger not permitted. **Amenities:** Breakfast restaurant; hospitality desk; rooftop glass-bottom pool. *In room:* A/C, TV, hair dryer, minibar, Wi-Fi.

Where to Dine

Dining in Loreto affords surprising variety, given the small size and laid-back nature of the town. However, don't expect anything fancy, even at the nicest restaurant. Big flavors come in humble packages in Loreto. In addition to the following hubs, the cinnamon rolls at Mediterraneo, on the *malecón;* a vegetarian wood-fired pizza at **Pachamama,** on Zapata; the grilled porterhouse at **El Nido,** on Salvatierra; and the fried-shrimp tacos at **Tacos el Rey,** on Benito Juárez, are all meals that will add flavor to your stay in Loreto.

Augie's Bar ★ PIZZA/BAR Located on the *malecón,* this is the preeminent happy-hour hot spot for the gringo community. Augie, who hales from the California video arcade business and does fun for a living, offers dancing lessons to patrons after they've had six drinks—and he keeps good on his promise. With TV sports of all kinds, ocean views,

fabulous margaritas, tortilla pizzas that drive the town crazy, and an upstairs terrace that showcases Loreto's big-sky sunsets, this is the place to be after 4pm any day of the week.

On the corner of the Malecón and Zaragoza. ✆ **613/100-0086.** Pizza 50–100 pesos. No credit cards. Daily 7am–11pm.

Café Olé LIGHT FARE The breezy Café Olé is the best option for breakfast. Try eggs with *nopal* cactus or the hot cakes. For lunch, standards like burgers and fries, as well as tacos and some Mexican dishes are on the menu, as are fresh-fruit smoothies, or *licuados.*

Madero 14. ✆ **613/135-0496.** Breakfast 20–50 pesos; sandwiches 20–35 pesos. No credit cards. Mon–Sat 7am–10pm; Sun 7am–2pm.

Del Borracho ★ BURGERS/SANDWICHES If you're a *Three Amigos* fan from way back, Mike and Andrea Patterson's tribute to the obscure bar in the classic comedy will not disappoint. The movie often plays on loop in the background of this wooden saloon outside of town, while chili dogs, milkshakes, sandwiches, and burgers make the rounds among a happy-bellied crowd who are chugging draft beer. The only place in town to serve Modelo Light and Modelo Negro on draft, Del Borracho's real claim to fame is the 35-peso bowl of clam chowder that comes with a side of Andrea's homemade bread; of note for sports fans, Del Borracho has the *NFL Sunday Ticket.*

.5km (¼-mile) down the road to San Javier, 3.2km (2 miles) south of Loreto. ✆ **613/137-0112.** Main courses 30–100 pesos. No credit cards. Daily sunrise–sunset.

Loreto After Dark

Although selection is limited, Loreto after dark seems to offer a place for almost every nightlife preference. Happy hour starts in the late afternoon and ends shortly after sundown at bars like **Augie's Bar** (see above). Cocktails, music, and tapas flow into the wee hours at **Mike's Bar** on Paseo Hidalgo, and if dancing is your game, the *malecón's* **Black&White** club gets going around 10pm Friday and Saturday nights. In addition, as is the tradition throughout Mexico, Loreto's central plaza offers a **free concert** when there's a cruise ship in port. However, Loretanos and their families are so hospitable that the best party may be the one to which you're unexpectedly invited. In Loreto, magic is bound to happen.

SANTA ROSALIA

61km (38 miles) N of Mulegé

Located in an *arroyo* (dry streambed) north of Mulegé, Santa Rosalía looks more like an old Colorado mining town than a Mexican port city. Founded by the French in 1855, the town has a European ambience combined with a distinctly Mexican culture. Pastel clapboard houses surrounded by picket fences line the streets, giving the town its nickname—*ciudad de madera* (city of wood). The large harbor and rusted ghost of a copper-smelting facility dominate the central part of town bordering the waterfront. The town was a copper-mining center for years, and a French outfit operated here from 1885 until 1954, when the Mexicans regained the use of the land. Problems plagued the facility, which closed permanently in 1985.

Today Santa Rosalía (pop. 14,000) is known for its man-made harbor—the recently constructed Marina Santa Rosalía, complete with concrete piers, floating docks, and full docking accommodations for up to a dozen ocean liners. Because this is the prime entry point of manufactured goods into Baja, the town abounds with auto parts and electronics stores, along with shops selling Nikes and sunglasses. The town has no real beach to speak of and few recreational attractions.

Moments Whale-Watching in Baja

Few sights inspire as much reverence as close contact with a whale in its natural habitat. The various protected bays and lagoons on Baja's Pacific coast are the preferred winter waters for migrating gray whales as they journey south to mate and give birth to their calves. These whales are known to be so friendly and curious that they frequently come up to the boats and stay close by, and sometimes even allow people to pet them.

The experience is particularly rewarding in the protected areas of the **El Vizcaíno Biosphere Reserve,** where you can easily see many whales. This area encompasses Guerrero Negro, Laguna San Ignacio, Bahía Magdalena, and the famous **Laguna Ojo de Liebre**—also known as **Scammon's Lagoon.**

Because these protected waters offer ideal conditions for gray whales during the winter, the neighboring towns have developed the infrastructure and services to accommodate whale-watchers. Whale-watching season generally runs from January to March. But remember that the colder the water, the farther south the whales migrate, so check on water temperatures and whale sightings before you plan your expedition. The temperature on the boat can be cool, so bring a jacket.

Although you can fly from Los Cabos and La Paz, **Loreto** is the best place to launch a whale-watching journey, as it has a well-developed tourist infrastructure and a number of lovely resort hotels. Trips take you by road to Bahía Magdalena, where you board a skiff to get up close to the gentle giants. **Las Parras Tours** (✆ **613/135-1010;** www.mexonline.com/lasparras.htm) offers excellent tours. Prices for package trips from Loreto run around 900 to 1,000 pesos per person for a daylong trip. San Diego-based **Baja Expeditions** (✆ **800/843-6967** in the U.S., or 612/125-3828; www.bajaex.com) runs longer-term expeditions, which cost upward of $2,995 per person for a multiday trip.

Exploring Santa Rosalía

The principal attraction in Santa Rosalía is the **Iglesia de Santa Bárbara,** a structure of galvanized steel designed by Gustave Eiffel (of Eiffel Tower fame) in 1884. It was created for the 1889 Paris World Expo, then transported here section by section and reassembled in 1897. Its somber gray exterior belies the beauty of the intricate stained-glass windows as viewed from inside.

The other sight to see is the former Fundación del Pacífico, or **Museo Histórico Minero de Santa Rosalía.** Located in a landmark wooden building, it houses a permanent display of artifacts from the days of Santa Rosalía's mining operations. It's open Monday through Friday from 8am to 2pm. Admission is free.

However, the city itself is the macro-attraction. Wooden saloons, wraparound verandas, and mountainous terrain make for a paradoxical contrast to the Mexicans milling in the streets. You can't get lost in this grid of one-way streets, so even if you're on your way someplace else, a 15-minute drive through Santa Rosalía is a must. Here, in this thriving ghost town, you won't find hacienda-style architecture or red-tile roofs, but you will find the best bakery in Baja. **El Boleo,** at Avenida Obregón at Calle 4 (✆ **615/152-0310**), has been baking French baguettes since the late 1800s, but I recommend the pitahaya, a

dense sweetbread stuffed with a kind of almond paste. It's 3 blocks west of the church and is open from 8am to 9pm Monday to Saturday, and Sunday 9am to 2pm.

Where to Stay & Dine

Dining is limited in the small town of Santa Rosalía, but lunch at **El Muelle** restaurant, on Obregón, right across from the central plaza, is superb. The tacos, enchiladas in spicy fresh tomato sauce, and breaded fish bathed in peppers and cheese are all good reasons to visit, but the main draw is the creamy chipotle–smoked tuna dip that comes with chips before the meal. Follow it up with dessert bread from El Boleo.

Hotel Francés Founded in 1886, the Hotel Francés once set the standard of hospitality in Baja Sur, welcoming European dignitaries and hosting the French administrators and businessmen of the mining operations. Today it has a worn air of elegance but retains its position as the most welcoming accommodations in Santa Rosalía. Rooms are in the back, with wooden porches and balconies overlooking a small courtyard pool. Each room has individually controlled air-conditioning, plus windows that open for ventilation. Floors are wood planked, and the small bathrooms are beautifully tiled. You have a choice of two double beds or one king. Telephone service is available in the lobby. The popular restaurant serves breakfast until noon.

Calle Jean Michel Cousteau s/n, 23920 Santa Rosalía B.C.S. ✆/fax **615/152-2052.** 16 units. $29 single; $32 pesos double. Rates include breakfast. No credit cards. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant (7am–noon); small courtyard pool. *In room:* A/C, TV, no phone, Wi-Fi.

5 TIJUANA & ROSARITO BEACH

Northern Baja California is not only Mexico's most infamous border crossing, but it also claims to be the birthplace of the original Caesar salad and the margarita. Long notorious as a hard-partying 10-block border town, **Tijuana** has cleaned up its act a bit on its way to becoming a full-scale city. A growing number of sports and cultural attractions now augment the legendary shopping experience and wild nightlife. **Rosarito Beach,** of *Titanic* fame, remains a more tranquil resort town; the decidedly laid-back atmosphere makes it easy to enjoy its miles of beachfront.

TIJUANA: BAWDY BORDER TOWN

In northern Baja, 26km (16 miles) south of San Diego, the first point of entry from the West Coast of the U.S. is infamous Tijuana—a town that continues to delude travelers into thinking that a visit there means they've been to Mexico. An important border town, Tijuana is renowned for its hustling, carnival-like atmosphere.

Tijuana has been hit hard by Mexico's drug violence, and, unfortunately, tourism there has suffered. Nowadays you're most likely going to visit either on your way to another destination or for a day trip. However, vineyards associated with the expanding wine industry are nearby, and an increasing number of cultural offerings have joined the traditional sporting attractions of greyhound racing, jai alai, and bullfights.

You are less likely to find the Mexico you may be expecting here—no charming town squares and churches, no women in colorful embroidered skirts and blouses, no bougainvillea spilling out of every crevice. Tijuana has an urban culture and a profusion of U.S.-inspired goods and services, and its collection of world-class restaurants still warrants at least a day trip for the adventurous.

Essentials

A visit to Tijuana requires little in the way of formalities—people who stay less than 72 hours in the border zone do not need a tourist card. If you plan to stay longer, a tourist card is required in addition to a passport. If you're staying 7 days or less, tourist cards are free from the border crossing station or from any immigration office; they cost a small fee for more than 7 days.

From downtown San Diego, you have the option of taking the **bright-red trolley** headed for San Ysidro and getting off at the last stop, San Ysidro (it's nicknamed the Tijuana Trolley for good reason). From here, follow the signs to walk across the border, or hop one of the buses (✆ **664/685-1470**), which are located next to the trolley station. It's simple, quick, and inexpensive; the one-way fare is about $2. The last trolley leaving for San Ysidro departs downtown San Diego around midnight; the last returning trolley from San Ysidro is at 1am. On Saturday, the trolley runs 24 hours.

Once you're in Tijuana, it's easy to get around by taxis, which are still relatively safe compared to those in Mexico City. Cab fares from the border to downtown average 50 pesos; you can also hire a taxi to Rosarito for about 200 pesos one-way.

The Tijuana airport (✆ **664/607-8201**) is about 8km (5 miles) east of the city. To drive to Tijuana from the U.S., take I-5 or 805 south to the Mexican border at San Ysidro. The drive from downtown San Diego takes about a half-hour, or you can leave your car in a San Ysidro parking lot and walk the 20 minutes to Avenida Revolución.

Tijuana's **Central Camionera de Autobuses,** Blvd. Lázaro Cárdenas y Río Alamar (✆ **664/621-2982;** 24 hr. a day), is home to several regional lines including **Autotransportes Baja California** (**ABC;** ✆ **01-800/0520-222;** www.transportes-abc.com), which serves destinations throughout Baja; **Estrella Blanca** (✆ **01-800/507-5500;** www.estrellablanca.com.mx), which will take you throughout Mexico; and **Crucero** (✆ **800/231-2222** from the US, www.crucero-usa.com), Greyhound's Mexican affiliate.

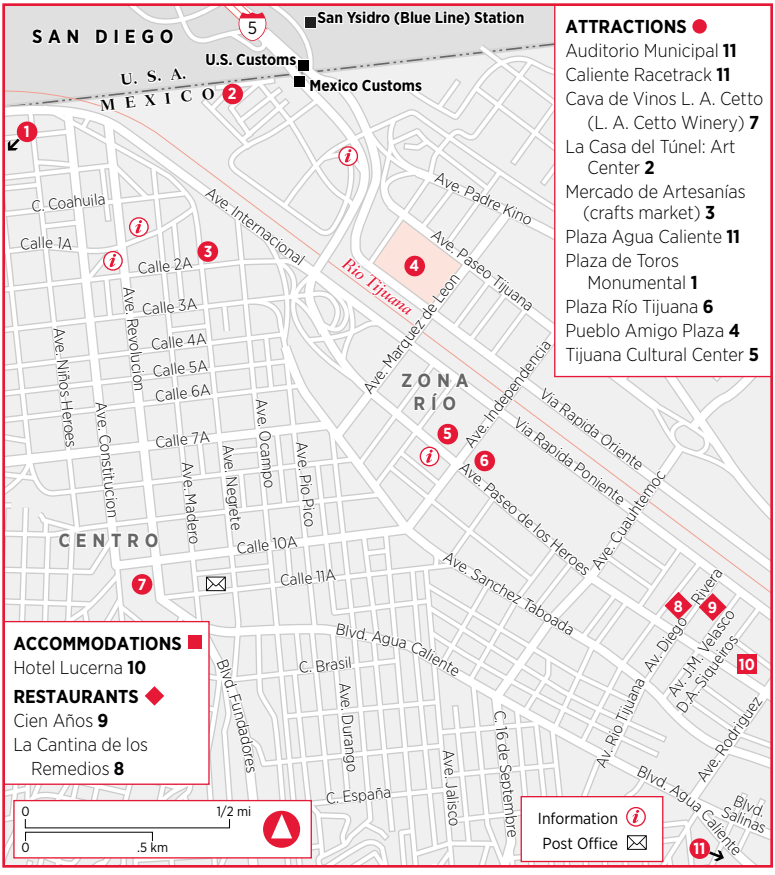
For **tourist information,** visit the Centro Cultural Tijuana, Paseo de los Héroes and Mina (✆ **664/687-9600**). It's in the Zona Río, the principal shopping and dining district, adjacent to the Tijuana River. For more information, visit the Tijuana Tourism board's official website, **www.seetijuana.com**, or **www.tijuanaonline.org**.

There are major banks with ATMs and *casas de cambio* (money-exchange houses) all over Tijuana, but you can easily come here—or to Rosarito and Ensenada, for that matter—without changing money, because dollars are accepted everywhere.

The **Canadian Consulate** is at Germán Gedovius 10411-101, Condominio del Parque, Zona Río (✆ **664/684-0461;** Mon–Fri 9:30am–12:30pm). The **U.S. Consulate** is at Av. Tapachula 96, Col. Hipodromo (✆ **664/622-7400;** Mon–Fri 8am–4:45pm).

Exploring Tijuana

For many visitors, Tijuana's main event is the bustling **Avenida Revolución,** which was constructed in 1889. Beginning in the 1920s, American college students, servicemen, and hedonistic tourists discovered this street as a center for illicit fun. Some of the original attractions—gambling, back-alley cockfights (now illegal), and girlie shows—have fallen by the wayside, with drinking and shopping the main order of business these days—although even these activities have fallen off recently due to the dismal headlines. You'll find the action between calles 1 and 9; the landmark Jai Alai Frontón Palace anchors the southern portion. If you don't want to navigate the area on your own, the **Tijuana Convention & Visitors' Bureau** (✆ **664/607-3097;** www.tijuanaonline.org) offers a 1-hour guided walking tour of the city, and **Eco Baja Tours** (www.ecobajatours.com) offers a selection of tours, including visits to the Guadalupe Valley, La Bufadora, and Tecate.



If you're looking to see a different side of Tijuana, the best place to start is the **Centro Cultural Tijuana (Tijuana Cultural Center),** Paseo de los Héroes and Mina Zona Río (✆ **664/607-3097,** ext. 9650; www.cecut.gob.mx). You'll easily spot the ultramodern Tijuana Cultural Center complex, which houses an IMAX theater, the museum's permanent collection of Mexican artifacts, and a gallery of visiting exhibits. The center is open daily from 9am to 9pm. Admission to the permanent exhibits is free, there's a 20-peso charge for the special-event gallery, and tickets for IMAX films are 45 pesos for adults and 25 pesos for children.

The fertile valleys of northern Baja produce most of Mexico's finest wines and export many high-quality vintages to Europe. For an introduction to Mexican wines, stop into **Cava de Vinos L. A. Cetto (L. A. Cetto Winery),** Av. Cañón Johnson 2108, at Avenida Constitución Sur (✆ **664/685-3031,** ext. 128, or 638-1644; www.lacetto.com). Shaped like a wine barrel, this building's facade is made from old oak aging barrels—call it

Warning! Staying out of Trouble in Tijuana

Although Tijuana has the reputation for being a carefree party playground, now more than ever it's important to use common sense while visiting. The U.S. Department of State first issued a Travel Advisory in February 2009, after a heightened amount of violence by drug gangs along the U.S.-Mexico border in cities like Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua City, and Tijuana. This advisory is still in effect. While most of the people targeted in the attacks were involved in law enforcement or the drug trade, the violence has come close to innocent bystanders in some instances. One shootout in Tijuana caused a kindergarten to be shut down, and another caused a high-speed chase that ended with a truck crashing into the airport. The U.S. Department of State offers the following advice to travelers who still wish to travel to Tijuana and other border cities: "Travelers should leave their itinerary with a friend or family member not traveling with them, avoid traveling alone, and should check with their cellular provider prior to departure to confirm that their cell phone is capable of roaming on GSM or 3G international networks. Do not display expensive-looking jewelry, large amounts of money, or other valuable items."

Despite these shake-ups, however, life goes on in Tijuana as in any other large metropolitan city—even the State Department's advisory mentions that thousands of people cross the border every day without incident. Locals are still very proud of their city's culture and welcome visitors with open arms. They also advise you, however, to say no to illegal drugs of any kind.

inspired recycling. Guided tours run Monday through Friday from 10am to 1:30pm and 4 to 6pm; it's open Saturday from 10am to 4pm.

Tijuana's biggest attraction is **shopping.** People come to take advantage of low prices on a variety of merchandise—terra cotta and colorfully glazed pottery, woven blankets and serapes, embroidered dresses and sequined sombreros, onyx chess sets, beaded necklaces and bracelets, silver jewelry, leather bags and *huarache* sandals, rain sticks, Cuban cigars, and Mexican liquors. Many Americans view Tijuana as a way to purchase inexpensive prescription drugs and bring them back across the border. Be aware—authorities have cracked down and are making surprise arrests of foreigners purchasing drugs without valid prescriptions from a Mexican doctor.

If a marketplace atmosphere and spirited bargaining are what you're looking for, head to **Mercado de Artesanías (crafts market),** Calle 2 and Avenida Negrete. Here vendors of pottery, clayware, clothing, and other crafts fill an entire city block. Shopping malls are as common in Tijuana as in any big American city; you shouldn't expect to find typical souvenirs there, but shopping alongside residents and other intrepid visitors is often more fun than feeling like a sitting-duck tourist. One of the biggest, and most convenient, is **Plaza Río Tijuana,** Paseo de los Héroes 96 at Avenida Independencia, Zona Río (✆ **664/684-0402**). **Plaza Agua Caliente** (✆ **664/681-7777**), at Bulevar Agua Caliente 4558, Col. Aviación, is a more upscale shopping center and, in addition to fine shops and restaurants, is known for its emphasis on health and beauty, with day spas, gyms, and doctors' offices found in abundance here. A comprehensive selection of shopping options is listed at **www.tijuanaonline.org/EN/Visitors/Shopping.php**.

Outdoor Activities & Spectator Sports

BULLFIGHTING Whatever your opinion, bullfighting has a prominent place in Mexican heritage and is even considered an essential element of the culture. The skill and bravery of matadors is linked with cultural ideals regarding *machismo,* and some of the world's best perform in Tijuana. As in Spain, however, the bulls die. The season runs late spring to early fall (usually May to early Oct), with events held on Sunday at 4:30pm. Ticket prices range from 100 to 300 pesos; the premium seats are on the shaded side of the arena, available at the bullring or in advance from San Diego's **Five Star Tours** (✆ **619/232-5049** or 664/622-2203). **Plaza de Toros Monumental,** also called Bullring-by-the-Sea (✆ **664/680-1808;** www.plazamonumental.com), is 10km (6¼ miles) west of downtown on Hwy. 1-D (before the first toll station); it's at the edge of both the ocean and the California border.

LUCHA LIBRE Although Jack Black made the flamboyant fighters popular with American filmgoers with his 2006 movie *Nacho Libre,* Mexicans have always had a fondness for great masked fighters like El Santo and Rey Misterio. The matches, which feature up to five different bouts, are spectacular. The *luchadores* are equal parts athlete, actor, and boogeyman, and audience members are never shy about joining in with jeers and taunts. **Auditorio Municipal** (✆ **664/681-6174**), at Diaz Ordaz 12421, hosts fights just about every Friday night at 8:30pm. Ticket prices start at $5 and vary depending on the popularity of the fight.

A Place to Stay

Hotel Lucerna Once the most chic hotel in Tijuana, Lucerna now feels slightly worn, though it still has personality. The flavor is Mexican colonial—wrought-iron railings and chandeliers, rough-hewn heavy wood furniture, brocade wallpaper, and traditional tiles. The hotel is in the Zona Río, away from the noise and congestion of downtown, so a quiet night's sleep is easily attainable. All of the rooms in the five-story hotel have balconies or patios. Hotel rates in Tijuana are subject to a 12% tax.

Av. Paseo de los Héroes, 10902 Zona Río, Tijuana. ✆ **664/633-3900.** 168 units. $85 double; $175–$360 suite. AE, MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Coffee shop; outdoor pool; room service. *In room:* A/C, satellite TV, hair dryer.

Moments Arte de la Frontera

The Casa del Túnel: Art Center ("House of the Tunnel") is built on the former site of a clandestine smuggling tunnel that went underneath the U.S.-Mexico border wall, allowing smugglers to carry contraband items between the two countries out of view of the authorities. Today, the tunnel is long gone, and the building is now home to a thriving art and cultural center, part of the Consejo Fronterizo de Arte y Cultura (COFAC; Border Council of Arts and Culture). On a recent visit, the Casa featured a photo exhibition on Che Guevara's time in Cuba and a sculpture of a white Mustang riddled with bullet holes. The building's third-floor patio and workspace features sweeping city vistas as well as a bird's-eye view of the border-crossing bridge. For more information, contact **La Casa del Túnel: Art Center,** Chapo Márquez 133, at ✆ **664/682-9570** in Mexico or ✆ **323/574-9197** from the U.S.

Finds

A Northern Baja Spa Sanctuary

One of Mexico's best-known spas is in northern Baja, just 58km (36 miles) south of San Diego. The **Rancho La Puerta** ★★ occupies 1,200 hectares (2,964 acres) of lush oasis surrounded by pristine countryside, which includes a 2.5-hectare (6¼-acre) organic garden and La Cocina Que Canta, a spa cuisine cooking school that opened in 2007. Cottages can accommodate up to 150 guests per week, and the ranch has a staff of almost 400. Each cottage has its own patio garden and is decorated with Mexican folk art. Inside the rooms are spacious living-room-size seating areas, desks, CD players, hair dryers, robes, and safes, and most rooms have fireplaces.

Three swimming pools, four tennis courts, five hot tubs, saunas, steam rooms, and 11 gyms for aerobic and restorative classes are only part of the facilities. Separate men and women's health centers offer the full range of spa services. Hiking trails surround the resort, and a labyrinth that is a full-size replica of the ancient labyrinth found in Chartres Cathedral allows for moving meditation.

There are also several lounges and shared spaces, including the library, with thousands of books to browse and read, an evening movie lounge, a recreation room, and for those who can't conceive of totally disconnecting, the E-center, with 24-hour access to e-mail and Internet.

Rancho La Puerta runs weeklong programs—Saturday through Saturday—emphasizing a mind/body/spirit philosophy, and certain weeks throughout the year are geared specifically to one topic; Specialty Week themes range from couples to Pilates and dance to meditation. Prices begin at $2,855 for the week most of the year and $2,980 for the week from February through June. Included in the rates are all classes, meals, evening programs, and use of facilities. Personal spa services cost extra. You may be able to book shorter stays (3 nights or more), and rates may be prorated on a nightly basis.

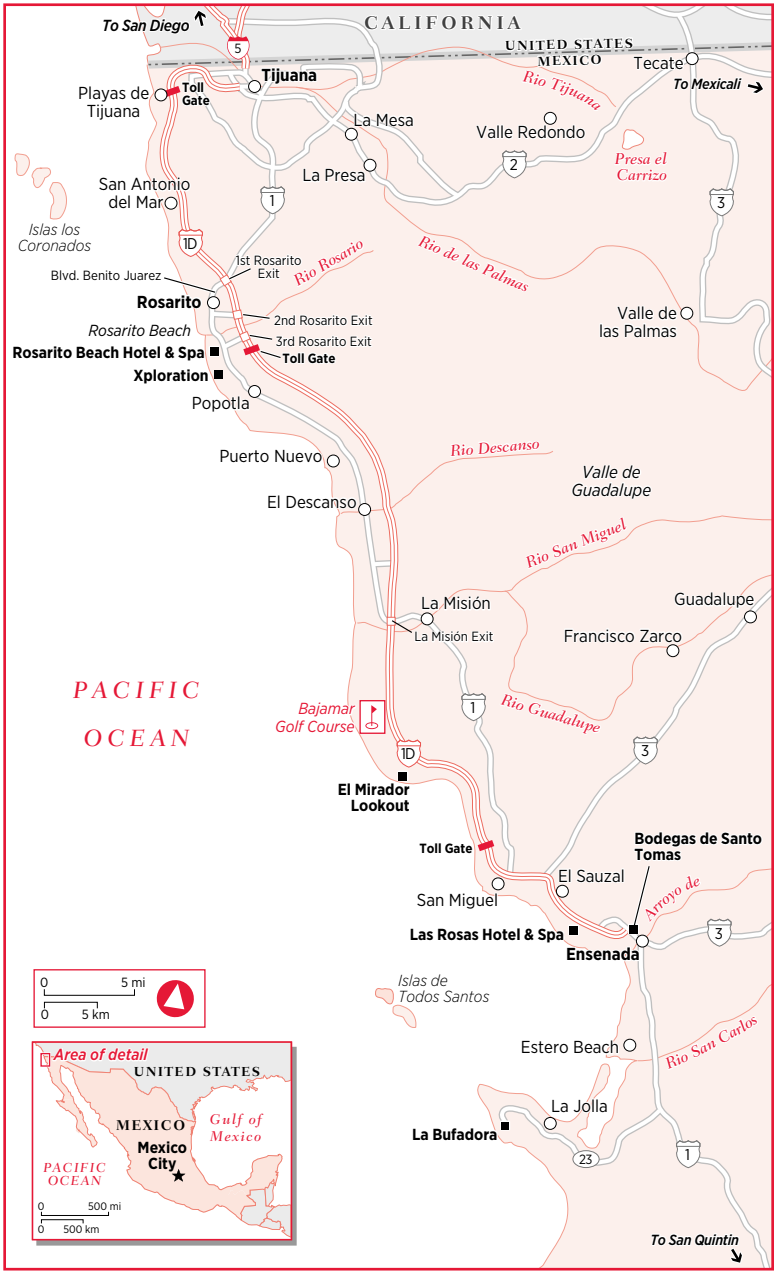
For reservations or to request a brochure, visit **www.rancholapuerta.com**, call ✆ **800/443-7565** in the U.S., or fax 858/764-5560. American Express, MasterCard, and Visa are accepted.

Where to Dine

Cien Años MEXICAN This elegant and gracious Zona Río restaurant offers artfully blended Mexican flavors (tamarind, poblano chile, mango) in stylish presentations. If you're interested in haute cuisine for breakfast, lunch, or dinner, stop here; the buzz around Tijuana is all about this place.

José María Velazco 1407, Zona del Río. ✆ **888/534-6088** or 619/819-5097 in the U.S., or 664/634-3039, -3794. www.cien.info. Main courses $10–$25. AE, MC, V. Mon–Thurs 8am–11pm; Fri–Sat 8am–midnight; Sun 8am–10pm.

La Cantina de los Remedios MEXICAN This is one of Tijuana's most festive atmospheres, wildly popular with Mexicans and Americans alike for its typical Mexican cuisine and courtyard atmosphere. Another highlight is its all-inclusive menu option, which has made it a hit in seven other cities throughout Mexico. For one price, guests


To San Diego
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Rio Tijuana
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Playas de Tijuana
Toll Gate
La Mesa
Valle Redondo
La Presa
Presa el Carrizo
San Antonio del Mar
Islas los Coronados
Rio Rosario
Rio de las Palmas
Blvd. Benito Juarez
1st Rosario Exit
Rosarito
2nd Rosario Exit
3rd Rosario Exit
Toll Gate
Rosarito Beach
Rosarito Beach Hotel & Spa
Xploration
Popotla
Valle de las Palmas
Puerto Nuevo
Rio Descanso
Valle de Guadalupe
El Descanso
Rio San Miguel
La Misión
La Misión Exit
Guadalupe
Francisco Zarco
PACIFIC OCEAN
Bajamar Golf Course
Rio Guadalupe
El Mirador Lookout
Toll Gate
Bodegas de Santo Tomas
El Sauzal
Arroyo de
San Miguel
Las Rosas Hotel & Spa
Ensenada
Islas de Todos Santos
Estero Beach
Rio San Carlos
La Jolla
La Bufadora
To San Quintin
0 5 mi
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Area of detail
UNITED STATES
MEXICO
Gulf of Mexico
Mexico City
PACIFIC OCEAN
0 500 mi
0 500 km

 can enjoy an appetizer, soup or salad, main course, dessert, and cocktail. Here the drink menu is extensive, inspiring the name *los remedios,* or "the remedies."

Av. Diego Rivera 19 718, Zona del Río. ✆ **664/634-3065.** www.losremedios.com.mx. All-inclusive meal $24–$42. MC, V. Mon–Thurs 1pm–1am; Fri–Sat 1pm–2am; Sun 1–10pm.

Tijuana After Dark

Avenida Revolución is the city's nightlife center, often compared with Bourbon Street in New Orleans during Mardi Gras—though here the blowout is year-round.

Zona Río and Plaza Fiesta are more geared toward late-night dining and dance-clubbing than tequila swilling and barhopping. Although the nightlife scene changes regularly, a very popular dance club is **Baby Rock,** Diego Rivera 1482, Zona Río (✆ **664/634-2404**), a cousin to Acapulco's lively Baby O, which features everything from Latin rock to rap. It's open from 9pm to 3am, with a cover charge of $12 on Saturday.

Also popular in Tijuana are sports bars, which feature wagering on events in the United States, as well as races from Tijuana's Caliente track. The most popular cluster is in the Pueblo Amigo and Vía Oriente areas and around Plaza Rio Tijuana in the Zona Río, a center designed to resemble a colonial Mexican village. Just beyond Zona Río, you'll find **Tangaloo,** Av. Monterrey 3215 (✆ **664/681-8091;** www.myspace.com/tangaloo; Thurs–Sun 9pm–4am), a hip club featuring DJs spinning electronic dance music. Two of the town's hottest clubs, which are open until 4 or 5am on the weekends, **Rodeo Santa Fe** (✆ **664/682-4967;** cover $8) and **Señor Frog's** (✆ **664/682-4964;** no cover), are in **Pueblo Amigo Plaza,** which is just off of Paseo Tijuana. Pueblo Amigo Plaza is less than 3km (1¾ miles) from the border, a short taxi ride, or—during daylight hours—a pleasant walk.

ROSARITO BEACH: BAJA'S FIRST BEACH RESORT

Just 29km (18 miles) south of Tijuana and a complete departure in ambience, Rosarito Beach is a tranquil, friendly beach town. Hollywood has played a major part in Rosarito's recent renaissance—it was the location for the soundstage and filming of the Academy Award–winning *Titanic.* The former *Titanic* Museum—now called **Xploration**—continues to draw the fans of this film and moviegoers in general. The beaches between Tijuana and Rosarito are also known for excellent surf breaks.

GETTING THERE Two roads run between Tijuana and Ensenada (the largest and third-largest cities in Baja): the scenic, coast-hugging toll road (**Hwy. 1-D,** marked *cuota,* costs $2.40), and the free but slower public road (**Hwy. 1,** marked *libre*). Both roads pass through Rosarito Beach. Alternatively, you can take a shuttle from the last trolley stop in San Ysidro. **Mexicoach** (✆ **619/428-9517** in the U.S., or 664/685-1470 locally; www.mexicoach.com) offers shuttle rides for about $20 round-trip.

What to See & Do

A few kilometers south of Rosarito proper lies the **seaside production site** of 1997's megablockbuster *Titanic,* and more recently, *Master and Commander.* On 16 otherwise dry hectares (40 acres) along the Pacific Coast, the studio has several huge tanks that fill with water to reproduce seafaring conditions. Filled with *Titanic* memorabilia, it has now become the moviemaking theme park **Xploration,** devoted to the art of moviemaking. The Cinemágico area has interactive displays about filmmaking and special effects, and guided tours are available in English and Spanish. There is also a play center for kids, plus a gift shop. Admission is $12 for adults, $9 for children 3 to 11. Xploration (✆ **866/369-2252** in the U.S., or 661/612-4294; www.xploration.com.mx) is open Wednesday

Tips Surfing, Northern Baja Style

Undoubtedly, the most famous surf spot in all of Mexico is **Killers,** at Todos Santos Island. This was the location of the winning wave in the 1997–98 K2 Challenge (a worldwide contest to ride the largest wave each winter—and be photographed doing it). Killers is a very makeable wave for confident, competent surfers. To get there, you need a boat. You can get a lift from the local *panga* (skiff) fleet, for about $150 for the day. That's pretty much the going rate, and the tightly knit Ensenada *pangueros* aren't eager to undercut each other. It's about 15km (9¼ miles) out to the island; there you'll anchor and paddle into the lineup. You must bring everything you'll need—food, drink, sunscreen, and so on.

Other less radical and easier-to-reach spots include the rocky **Popotla** break, south of Rosarito, where you'll walk to the beach through the Popotla trailer park. **Calafia,** just a few kilometers south of Rosarito, has a reeling right point that can get very heavy. **San Miguel** is the point break just south of the final tollbooth on the highway into Ensenada. It's an excellent wave but generally crowded.

If you're a surfer looking to get your bearings or a beginner wanting to get your feet wet, stop by **Inner Reef** (✆ **661/613-2065;** Km 34.5 on the free road, 9.7km/6 miles south of Rosarito). This tiny shack, painted green with blue flames, sells all the essentials: wax, leashes, patch kits, custom surfboards, rentals, and ding repairs. Owner Mitch Benson is there daily 9am to 5pm in winter, and 8am to 6pm in summer. He also has a shop in front of Rosarito Beach Hotel.

through Friday from 9am to 4:30pm, and Saturday and Sunday from 10am to 5:30pm. There's a food court with Domino's Pizza, Subway, and even a Starbucks coffee.

If you have only a few hours to spend in Rosarito Beach, that's still enough time to have a swim or a horseback ride at the beach, shop for souvenirs, and dine on fish tacos or tamales from one of the family-run stands along **Bulevar Benito Juárez,** the town's main (and only) drag. The dozen or so blocks of Rosarito north of the Rosarito Beach Hotel are packed with stores typical of Mexican border towns: curio shops, cigar and *licores* (liquor) stores, and *farmacías*.

The die-hard Baja fans still make it to the most popular spot in town: **Papas & Beer** (✆ **661/612-0444;** www.papasandbeer.com). It's a relaxed come-as-you-are-type club on the beach, just a block north of the hotel. Even for those young in spirit only, it's great fun, with outdoor tables and a bar surrounding a sand volleyball court. The **Rosa and Rita** karaoke bar (✆ **661/612-0144**), in the Rosarito Beach Hotel, attracts a slightly more mature evening crowd, with live music and karaoke on Friday and Saturday.

Where to Stay & Dine

Rosarito Beach Hotel & Spa This family-owned resort had its glamorous heyday in the 1920s and is currently defined by glaring nighttime neon and party-mania. The Torres family changed the hotel's image yet again with the addition of a 17-story condo hotel that opened in the summer of 2008. The new addition features sleek and modern furnishing and suites that include full kitchens. Despite the resort's ever-changing

 personality, its unique artistic construction and lavish decoration remain on the original property. It has a wide, family-friendly stretch of beach. The stately home of the original owners has been transformed into the full-service **Casa Playa Spa,** where massages and other treatments are only slightly less costly than in the U.S. You'll pay more for a room with an ocean view, and more for the newer, air-conditioned units in the tower; the older rooms in the poolside building have only ceiling fans, but they prevail in the character department, with hand-painted trim and original tile. The mansion's dining room (Chabert's Restaurant) charges top dollar for Continental cuisine; Azteca is a casual Mexican restaurant in the main building.

Bulevar Benito Juárez, Zona Centro, 22710 Rosarito, B.C. ✆ **800/343-8582** in the U.S., or 661/612-0144. Fax 661/612-1125. www.rosaritobeachhotel.com. 500 units. $79–$139 double; $159–$459 suite. 2 children younger than 12 stay free in parent's room. Packages available. MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** 2 restaurants; bar; playground; 2 outdoor pools; wading pool; racquetball court; room service; spa; Wi-Fi (in some common areas). *In room:* A/C (in some), fan (in some), TV.

6 ENSENADA: PORT OF CALL

134km (83 miles) S of San Diego; 109km (68 miles) S of Tijuana

Ensenada is an attractive town on a lovely bay, surrounded by sheltering mountains. About 40 minutes from Rosarito, it's the kind of place that loves a celebration—be it for a bicycle race or a seafood festival.

GETTING THERE & INFORMATION After passing through the final tollgate, **Hwy. 1-D** curves sharply toward downtown Ensenada.

The **Tourist and Convention Bureau booth** (✆ **646/178-2411;** www.enjoyensenada.com) is at the western entrance to town, where the waterfront-hugging Bulevar Lázaro Cárdenas—aka Bulevar Costero—curves away to the right. It's open Tuesday through Sunday from 9am to 5pm. Taxis park along López Mateos.

EXPLORING ENSENADA

While Ensenada is technically a border town, one of its appeals is its multilayered vitality. The bustling port consumes the entire waterfront—beach access can be found only north or south of town—and the Pacific fishing trade and agriculture in the fertile valleys surrounding the city dominate the economy.

Even part-time oenophiles should visit the **Bodegas de Santo Tomás Winery** ★★, Av. Miramar 666, at Calle 7 (✆ **646/178-3333;** www.santo-tomas.com), the oldest winery in Mexico, and the largest in Baja. It uses old-fashioned methods of processing grapes, first cultivated from Spanish varietals in 1888, in the lush Santo Tomás Valley, where a Dominican mission of the same name was founded almost a century earlier. Tours in English run every hour from 9am to 5pm Monday through Saturday and from 10am to 4pm Sunday. The tour is free, and if you wish to follow it up with a tasting, 80 pesos gets you a sampling of three white wines, and the 160-peso option includes six older or high-priced wines and two reserves. For a complete list of other nearby wineries and tour information, visit www.enjoyensenada.com/english/wineries.jsp.

Ensenada's equivalent of Tijuana's Avenida Revolución is crowded **Avenida López Mateos,** roughly parallel to Bulevar Lázaro Cárdenas (Bulevar Costero); the highest concentration of shops and restaurants is between avenidas Ruiz and Castillo. Compared to Tijuana, there is more authentic Mexican art and craftwork in Ensenada. And

Ensenada is home to a thriving adventure subculture: off-road racers, surfers, kayakers, and more flock to Ensenada in search of their adrenaline fix.

South of the city, 45 minutes by car along the rural Punta Banda peninsula, is one of Ensenada's major attractions: **La Bufadora,** a natural sea spout in the rocks. With each incoming wave, water is forced upward through the rock, creating a geyser whose loud grunt gave the phenomenon its name (it means "buffalo snort"). From downtown Ensenada, take Avenida Reforma (Hwy. 1) south to Hwy. 23 west. La Bufadora is at the end of the road. Once parked (about $2 per car in crude dirt lots), you must walk downhill to the viewing platform, at the end of a 270m (886-ft.) pathway lined with souvenir stands. Also, **Picacho del Diablo,** the 3,046m (10,154-ft.) mountain located in the Sierra de San Pedro Mártir national park, draws hikers and backpackers eager to scale its two-pronged peak about 129km (80 miles) south of Ensenada.

WHERE TO STAY

Las Rosas Hotel & Spa One of the most modern hotels in the area, Hotel Las Rosas still falls short of most definitions of luxurious, yet the pink oceanfront hotel 3km (1¾ miles) outside Ensenada is the favorite of many Baja aficionados. It offers most of the comforts of an upscale American hotel—which doesn't leave room for much Mexican personality, but surfers will appreciate the view of Todos Santos Island. The atrium lobby is awash in pale pink and sea foam green, a color scheme that pervades throughout. Some rooms have fireplaces, Wi-Fi, and/or in-room whirlpools, and all have balconies overlooking the pool and ocean. One of the resort's main photo ops is the swimming pool that overlooks the Pacific and features a vanishing edge. If you want to maintain the highest comfort level possible, this would be your hotel of choice.

Hwy. 1, 3km (1¾ miles) north of Ensenada. ✆ **866/447-6727** in the U.S., or 646/174-4310. www.lasrosas.com. 48 units. $80–$164 double; $105–$203 suite. MC, V. Free parking. **Amenities:** Restaurant; cocktail lounge; cliff-top hot tub; small workout room; outdoor pool; room service; full-service spa; tennis court. *In room:* Fan, TV, hair dryer, Wi-Fi (in some).

WHERE TO DINE

El Rey Sol ★ FRENCH/SEAFOOD If you've been to Ensenada without eating at El Rey Sol, you'd better not tell a local. *Ensenadenses* are as proud of this family-run French restaurant as they are of their festivals, and after one taste of the clams au gratin, chateaubriand bouquetière, or mango charlotte, you will understand why. El Rey Sol, which opened in 1947, also offers a selection of traditional Mexican plates for dinner, as well as coffee and French pastries at the sidewalk cafe during the day.

Av. Lopez Mateos 1000. ✆ **646/178-1733.** www.elreysol.com. Reservations recommended on weekends. Main courses $10–$25. AE, MC, V. Daily 7:30am–10:30pm.

ENSENADA AFTER DARK

Just like in *Casablanca,* where "everyone goes to Rick's," everyone's been going to **Hussong's Cantina,** Av. Ruiz 113, near Avenida López Mateos (✆ **646/178-3210;** www.cantinahussongs.com), since the bar opened in 1892. Not much has changed—the place still sports Wild West–style swinging saloon doors, a long bar to slide beers along, and strolling mariachis bellowing above the din. While the crowd (a pleasant mix of tourists and locals) at Hussong's can really whoop it up, they're amateurs compared to those who frequent **Papas & Beer,** Avenida Ruiz near Avenida López Mateos (✆ **646/174-0145;** www.papasandbeer.com), across the street. A tiny entrance leads to the upstairs bar and dance club. The music is loud and the hip young crowd is here to party.

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Fast Facts

1 FAST FACTS: MEXICO

BUSINESS HOURS Most businesses in larger cities are open between 9am and 7pm; in smaller towns, many close between 2 and 4pm. Most close on Sunday. In resort areas, stores commonly open in the mornings on Sunday and shops stay open late, until 8 or even 10pm. Bank hours are Monday through Friday from 9 or 9:30am to anywhere between 3 and 7pm. Banks open on Saturday for at least a half-day.

DRINKING LAWS The legal drinking age in Mexico is 18; however, asking for ID or denying purchase is extremely rare. Grocery stores sell everything from beer and wine to national and imported liquors. You can buy liquor 24 hours a day, but during major elections, dry laws often are enacted by as much as 72 hours in advance of the election—and they apply to tourists as well as local residents. Mexico does not have laws that apply to transporting liquor in cars, but authorities are beginning to target drunk drivers more aggressively. It's a good idea to drive defensively.

It's illegal to drink in the street, but many tourists do. If you are getting drunk, you shouldn't drink in the street, because you are more likely to get stopped by the police.

ELECTRICITY The electrical system in Mexico is 110 volts AC (60 cycles), as in the United States and Canada. In reality, however, it may cycle more slowly and overheat your appliances. To compensate, select a medium or low speed on hair dryers. Many older hotels still have electrical outlets for flat two-prong plugs; you'll need an adapter for any plug with an enlarged end on one prong or with three prongs. Many better hotels have three-hole outlets (*trifásicos* in Spanish). Those that don't may have loan adapters, but to be sure, it's always better to carry your own.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES Most countries have an embassy in Mexico City, and many have consular offices or representatives in the provinces.

The Embassy of **Australia** in Mexico City is at Rubén Darío 55, Col. Polanco (✆ **55/1101-2200;** www.mexico.embassy.gov.au). It's open Monday through Thursday from 9:30am to noon. An Australian consulate is in Guadalajara, López Cotilla 2018, Col. Arcos Vallarta (✆ **33/3615-7418**).

The Embassy of **Canada** in Mexico City is at Schiller 529, in Polanco (✆ **55/5724-7900** or for emergencies toll-free, 24 hr. a day 01-800/706-2900); it's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 1pm and 2 to 5pm. Visit www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca or www.canada.org.mx for addresses of consular agencies in Mexico. Canadian consulates are in Acapulco (✆ 744/484-1305), Cancún (✆ 998/883-3360), Guadalajara (✆ 33/3671-4740), Mazatlán (✆ 669/913-7320), Monterrey (✆ 818/344-2753, -3200), Oaxaca (✆ 951/513-3777), Playa del Carmen (✆ 984/803-2411), Puerto Vallarta (✆ 322/293-0098), San José del Cabo (✆ 624/142-4333), and Tijuana (✆ 664/684-0461).

The Embassy of **Ireland** in Mexico City is at Cda. Blvd. Manuel Avila Camacho 76, 3rd floor, Col. Lomas de Chapultepec (✆ **55/5520-5803**). See www.irishembassy.com.mx. It's open Monday through Thursday from 8:30am to 5pm, and Friday from 8:30am to 1:30pm.

The Embassy of **New Zealand** in Mexico City is at Jaime Balmes 8, 4th Floor, Col. Los Morales, Polanco (✆ **55/5283-9460;** www.nzembassy.com/home.cfm?c=50). It's open Monday through Thursday from 8:30am to 2pm and 3 to 5:30pm, and Friday from 8:30am to 2pm.

The Embassy of the **United Kingdom** in Mexico City is at Río Lerma 71, Col. Cuauhtémoc (✆ **55/5207-2089** or 5242-8500; http://ukinmexico.fco.gov.uk/en). It's open Monday through Thursday from 8am to 4pm and Friday from 8am to 1:30pm. A British consulate is in Guadalajara, Calle Jesús Rojas 20, Col. Los Pinos (✆ **33/3343-2296**).

The Embassy of the **United States** in Mexico City is at Paseo de la Reforma 305, next to the Hotel María Isabel Sheraton at the corner of Río Danubio (✆ **55/5080-2000**); hours are Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 5:30pm. Visit **http://www.usembassy-mexico.gov** for information related to U.S. Embassy services. U.S. consulates are at Paseo de la Victoria 3650, Ciudad Juárez (✆ 656/227-3000); Progreso 175, Col. Americana, Guadalajara (✆ 33/3268-2200, -2100); Av. Constitución 411 Poniente, Monterrey (✆ 818/345-2120); Av. Tapachula 96, Col. Hipodromo, Tijuana (✆ 664/622-7400); Calle Monterrey 141 Poiniente, Col. Esqueda, Hermosillo (✆ 662/289-3500); Av. Primera 200 y Azaleas, Matamoros (✆ 868/812-4402); Calle 60 No. 338 K x 29 y 31, Col. Acala Martin, Mérida (✆ 999/942-5700); Calle San Jose, Fraccionamiento "Los Alamos" Nogales, (✆ 631/311-8150); and Allende 3330, Col. Jardin, Nuevo Laredo (✆ 867/714-0512). In addition, consular agencies are in Acapulco (✆ 744/469-0556 or 484-0300), Cabo San Lucas (✆ 624/143-3566), Cancún (✆ 998/883-0272), Cozumel (✆ 987/872-4574), Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo (✆ 755/553-2100), Mazatlán (✆ 669/916-5889), Nuevo Vallarta (✆ 322/222-0069), Oaxaca (✆ 951/516-2853 or 514-3054), Playa del Carmen (✆ 984/873-0303), Reynosa (✆ 882/823-9331), San Luis Potosí (✆ 444/811-7802, -7803), and San Miguel de Allende (✆ 415/152-2357).

EMERGENCIES In case of emergency, dial ✆ **060** from any phone within Mexico. Dial ✆ **065** for the Red Cross. For police emergency numbers, turn to the "Fast Facts" sections in each of the individual chapters. The 24-hour **Tourist Help Line** in Mexico City is ✆ **01-800/987-8224** or 55/5089-7500, or you can now simply dial ✆ **078.** The operators don't always speak English, but they are always willing to help.

INSURANCE For information on traveler's insurance, trip-cancellation insurance, and medical insurance while traveling, visit www.frommers.com/planning.

LANGUAGE Spanish is the official language in Mexico. English is spoken and understood to some degree in most tourist areas. Mexicans are very accommodating with foreigners who try to speak Spanish, even in broken sentences. See chapter 22 for a glossary of simple phrases for expressing basic needs.

MAIL Postage for a postcard or letter varies depending on its destination; it may take a few weeks to arrive. The price for registered letters and packages depends on the weight, and unreliable delivery time can take 2 to 6 weeks. The recommended way to send a package or important mail is through FedEx, DHL, UPS, or another reputable international mail service.

POLICE In Mexico City, police have a mixed reputation as the city works to overcome corruption in its law enforcement;

however, you'll find many who are quite honest and helpful. In the rest of the country, especially in the tourist areas, most are very protective of international visitors. Several cities, including Puerto Vallarta, Mazatlán, Cancún, and Acapulco, have a special corps of English-speaking Tourist Police to assist with directions, guidance, and more. In case of emergency, dial ✆ **060** from any phone within Mexico. Dial ✆ **065** for the Red Cross. For police emergency numbers, turn to "Fast Facts" in the individual chapters.

TAXES The 15% IVA (value-added) tax applies on goods and services in most of Mexico, and it's supposed to be included in the posted price. This tax is 10% in Cancún, Cozumel, and Los Cabos. There is a 5% tax on food and drinks consumed in restaurants that sell alcoholic beverages with an alcohol content of more than 10%; this tax applies whether you drink alcohol or not. Tequila is subject to a 25% tax. Mexico imposes an exit tax on every foreigner leaving the country by plane.

TIME Central Time prevails throughout most of Mexico. The states of Sonora, Sinaloa, and parts of Nayarit are on Mountain Time. The state of Baja California Norte is on Pacific Time, but Baja California Sur is on Mountain Time. All of Mexico observes **daylight saving time.**

TIPPING Most service employees in Mexico count on tips for the majority of their income, and this is especially true for bellboys and waiters. Bellboys should receive the equivalent of 5 to 15 pesos per bag; waiters generally receive 10% to 15%, depending on the level of service. It is not customary to tip taxi drivers, unless they are hired by the hour or provide touring or other special services.

TOILETS Public toilets are not common in Mexico, but an increasing number are available, especially at fast-food restaurants and Pemex gas stations. These facilities and restaurant and club restrooms commonly have attendants, who expect a small tip (about 5 pesos).

VISITOR INFORMATION The **Mexico Tourism Board** (✆ **866/640-0597** toll-free in the U.S., or 01-800/006-8839 or 078 from within Mexico; www.visitmexico.com) is an excellent source for general information; you can request brochures and get answers to the most common questions from the exceptionally well-trained, knowledgeable staff.

The **Mexican Government Tourist Board's** main office is in Mexico City (✆ 55/5278-4200). Satellite offices are in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. In **Canada:** Toronto (✆ 416/925-0704). In the **United Kingdom:** London (✆ 020/7488-9392). In the **United States:** Chicago (✆ 312/228-0517), Houston (✆ 713/772-2581), Los Angeles (✆ 213/739-6336), Miami (✆ 786/621-2909), and New York (✆ 212/308-2110).

The **Mexican Embassy** in **Canada** is at 055 Rue Peel, Ste. 1000, Montreal, QUE, H3A 1V4 (✆ **514/288-2502**); Commerce Court West, 199 Bay St., Suite 4440, Toronto, ON, M5L 1E9 (✆ **416/684-3522**); 411-117 W. Hastings Street, 4th Floor, Vancouver, BC, V6E2K3 (✆ **604/684-1859**); and 1500-45 O'Connor St., Ottawa, ON, K1P 1A4 (✆ **613/233-8988;** fax 613/235-9123).

The **Mexican Embassy** (Consular Section) in the **United Kingdom** is at 16 Georges Dr., London, W1S1FD (✆ **020/7235-6393**).

The **Mexican Embassy** in the **United States** is at 1911 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20006 (✆ **202/728-1600**).

WATER Tap water in Mexico is generally not potable, and it is safest to drink purified bottled water. Some hotels and restaurants purify their water, but you should ask rather than assume this is the case. Ice may also come from tap water and should be used with caution.

2 AIRLINE & CAR RENTAL WEBSITES

MAJOR AIRLINES

Aeroméxico
www.aeromexico.com
Alaska Airlines/Horizon Air
www.alaskaair.com
American Airlines
www.aa.com
British Airways
www.ba.com
Continental Airlines
www.continental.com
Continental ExpressJet
www.expressjet.com
Delta Air Lines
www.delta.com
Iberia Airlines
www.iberia.com
North American Airlines
www.flynaa.com
Northwest Airlines
www.nwa.com
United Airlines
www.united.com
US Airways
www.usairways.com
Virgin America
www.virginamerica.com
Virgin Atlantic Airways
www.virgin-atlantic.com

BUDGET AIRLINES

Aero California
www.aerocalifornia.com.mx
AirTran Airways
www.airtran.com
Avolar
www.avolar.com.mx
Click Mexicana
www.clickmx.com
Frontier Airlines
www.frontierairlines.com
Interjet
www.interjet.com.mx
JetBlue Airways
www.jetblue.com
Southwest Airlines
www.southwest.com
Spirit Airlines
www.spiritair.com
VivaAerobus
www.vivaaerobus.com
Volaris
www.volaris.com.mx
WestJet
www.westjet.com

CAR RENTAL AGENCIES

Advantage
www.advantage.com
Alamo
www.alamo.com
Auto Europe
www.autoeurope.com
Avis
www.avis.com
Budget
www.budget.com
Dollar
www.dollar.com
Enterprise
www.enterprise.com
Hertz
www.hertz.com
Kemwel (KHA)
www.kemwel.com
National
www.nationalcar.com
Thrifty
www.thrifty.com

22

Survival Spanish

Most Mexicans are very patient with foreigners who try to speak their language; it helps a lot to know a few basic phrases. Included here are simple phrases for expressing basic needs, followed by some common menu items.

1 ENGLISH-SPANISH PHRASES

English	Spanish	Pronunciation
Good day	**Buen día**	Bwehn *dee*-ah
Good morning	**Buenos días**	*Bweh*-nohs *dee*-ahs
How are you?	**¿Cómo está?**	*Koh*-moh eh-*stah*
Very well	**Muy bien**	Mwee byehn
Thank you	**Gracias**	*Grah*-syahs
You're welcome	**De nada**	Deh *nah*-dah
Goodbye	**Adiós**	Ah-*dyohs*
Please	**Por favor**	Pohr fah-*bohr*
Yes	**Sí**	See
No	**No**	Noh
Excuse me	**Perdóneme**	Pehr-*doh*-neh-meh
Give me	**Déme**	*Deh*-meh
Where is . . . ?	**¿Dónde está . . . ?**	*Dohn*-deh eh-*stah*
the station	**la estación**	lah eh-stah-*syohn*
a hotel	**un hotel**	oon oh-*tehl*
a gas station	**una gasolinera**	*oo*-nah gah-soh-lee-*neh*-rah
a restaurant	**un restaurante**	oon res-tow-*rahn*-teh
the toilet	**el baño**	el *bah*-nyoh
a good doctor	**un buen médico**	oon bwehn *meh*-dee-coh
the road to . . .	**el camino a/hacia**	el cah-*mee*-noh ah/*ah*-syah
To the right	**A la derecha**	Ah lah deh-*reh*-chah
To the left	**A la izquierda**	Ah lah ees-*kyehr*-dah
Straight ahead	**Derecho**	Deh-*reh*-choh
I would like	**Quisiera**	Key-*syeh*-rah
I want . . .	**Quiero**	*Kyeh*-roh
to eat	**comer**	koh-*mehr*
a room	**una habitación**	*oo*-nah ah-bee-tah-*syohn*

English	Spanish	Pronunciation
Do you have . . . ?	**¿Tiene usted . . . ?**	Tyeh-neh oo-*sted*
a book	**un libro**	oon *lee*-broh
a dictionary	**un diccionario**	oon deek-syoh-*nah*-ryoh
How much is it?	**¿Cuánto cuesta?**	*Kwahn*-toh *kweh*-stah
When?	**¿Cuándo?**	*Kwahn*-doh
What?	**¿Qué?**	Keh
There is (Is there . . . ?)	**(¿)Hay (. . . ?)**	Eye
What is there?	**¿Qué hay?**	Keh eye
Yesterday	**Ayer**	Ah-*yer*
Today	**Hoy**	Oy
Tomorrow	**Mañana**	Mah-*nyah*-nah
Good	**Bueno**	*Bweh*-noh
Bad	**Malo**	*Mah*-loh
Better (best)	**(Lo) Mejor**	(Loh) Meh-*hohr*
More	**Más**	Mahs
Less	**Menos**	*Meh*-nohs
No smoking	**Se prohibe fumar**	Seh proh-*ee*-beh foo-*mahr*
Postcard	**Tarjeta postal**	Tar-*heh*-tah poh-*stahl*
Insect repellent	**Repelente contra insectos**	Reh-peh-*lehn*-teh *cohn*-trah een-*sehk*-tohs

MORE USEFUL PHRASES

English	Spanish	Pronunciation
Do you speak English?	**¿Habla usted inglés?**	*Ah*-blah oo-*sted* een-*glehs*
Is there anyone here who speaks English?	**¿Hay alguien aquí que hable inglés?**	Eye *ahl*-gyehn ah-*kee* keh *ah*-bleh een-*glehs*
I speak a little Spanish.	**Hablo un poco de español.**	*Ah*-bloh oon *poh*-koh deh eh-spah-*nyohl*
I don't understand Spanish very well.	**No (lo) entiendo muy bien el español.**	Noh (loh) ehn-*tyehn*-doh mwee byehn el eh-spah-*nyohl*
The meal is good.	**Me gusta la comida.**	Meh *goo*-stah lah koh-*mee*-dah
What time is it?	**¿Qué hora es?**	Keh *oh*-rah ehs
May I see your menu?	**¿Puedo ver el menú (la carta)?**	*Pweh*-doh vehr el meh-*noo* (lah *car*-tah)
The check, please.	**La cuenta, por favor.**	Lah *kwehn*-tah pohr fa-*borh*
What do I owe you?	**¿Cuánto le debo?**	*Kwahn*-toh leh *deh*-boh
What did you say?	**¿Mande?** (formal) **¿Cómo?** (informal)	*Mahn*-deh *Koh*-moh

English	Spanish	Pronunciation
I want (to see) . . .	**Quiero (ver) . . .**	*kyeh*-roh (vehr)
a room	**un cuarto** or **una habitación**	oon *kwar*-toh, *oo*-nah ah-bee-tah-*syohn*
for two persons	**para dos personas**	*pah*-rah dohs pehr-*soh*-nahs
with (without) bathroom	**con (sin) baño**	kohn (seen) *bah*-nyoh
We are staying here only . . .	**Nos quedamos aquí solamente . . .**	Nohs keh-*dah*-mohs ah-*kee* soh-lah-*mehn*-teh
one night.	**una noche.**	*oo*-nah *noh*-cheh
one week.	**una semana.**	*oo*-nah seh-*mah*-nah
We are leaving . . .	**Partimos (Salimos) . . .**	Pahr-*tee*-mohs (sah-*lee*-mohs)
tomorrow.	**mañana.**	mah-*nya*-nah
Do you accept . . . ?	**¿Acepta usted . . . ?**	Ah-*sehp*-tah oo-*sted*
traveler's checks?	**cheques de viajero?**	*cheh*-kehs deh byah-*heh*-roh

NUMBERS

1	uno (ooh-noh)	17	diecisiete (dyeh-see-syeh-teh)
2	dos (dohs)	18	dieciocho (dyeh-syoh-choh)
3	tres (trehs)	19	diecinueve (dyeh-see-nweh-beh)
4	cuatro (kwah-troh)	20	veinte (bayn-teh)
5	cinco (seen-koh)	30	treinta (trayn-tah)
6	seis (sayes)	40	cuarenta (kwah-ren-tah)
7	siete (syeh-teh)	50	cincuenta (seen-kwen-tah)
8	ocho (oh-choh)	60	sesenta (seh-sehn-tah)
9	nueve (nweh-beh)	70	setenta (seh-tehn-tah)
10	diez (dyehs)	80	ochenta (oh-chehn-tah)
11	once (ohn-seh)	90	noventa (noh-behn-tah)
12	doce (doh-seh)	100	cien (syehn)
13	trece (treh-seh)	200	doscientos (do-syehn-tohs)
14	catorce (kah-tohr-seh)	500	quinientos (kee-nyehn-tohs)
15	quince (keen-seh)	1,000	mil (meel)
16	dieciséis (dyeh-see-sayes)		

TRANSPORTATION TERMS

English	Spanish	Pronunciation
airport	**Aeropuerto**	Ah-eh-roh-*pwehr*-toh
flight	**Vuelo**	*Bweh*-loh
rental car agency	**Arrendadora de autos**	Ah-*rehn*-da-doh-rah deh *ow*-tohs
bus	**Autobús**	Ow-toh-*boos*
bus or truck	**Camión**	Ka-*myohn*
lane	**Carril**	Kah-*reel*
nonstop (bus)	**Directo**	Dee-*rehk*-toh
baggage (claim area)	**Equipajes**	Eh-kee-*pah*-hehss

English	Spanish	Pronunciation
intercity	**Foraneo**	Foh-rah-*neh*-oh
luggage storage area	**Guarda equipaje**	*Gwar*-dah eh-kee-*pah*-heh
arrival gates	**Llegadas**	Yeh-*gah*-dahss
originates at this station	**Local**	Loh-*kahl*
originates elsewhere	**De paso**	Deh *pah*-soh
Are seats available?	**Hay lugares disponibles?**	Eye loo-*gah*-rehs dis-pohn-*ee*-blehss
first class	**Primera**	Pree-*meh*-rah
second class	**Segunda**	Seh-*goon*-dah
nonstop (flight)	**Sin escala**	Seen ess-*kah*-lah
baggage claim area	**Recibo de equipajes**	Reh-*see*-boh deh eh-kee-*pah*-hehss
waiting room	**Sala de espera**	*Sah*-lah deh ehss-*peh*-rah
toilets	**Sanitarios**	Sah-nee-*tah*-ryohss
ticket window	**Taquilla**	Tah-*kee*-yah

2 DINING TERMINOLOGY

MEALS

desayuno Breakfast.

comida Main meal of the day, taken in the afternoon.

cena Supper.

COURSES

botana A small serving of food that accompanies a beer or drink, usually served free of charge.

entrada Appetizer.

sopa Soup course. (Not necessarily a soup—it can be a dish of rice or noodles, called *sopa seca* [dry soup].)

ensalada Salad.

plato fuerte Main course.

postre Dessert.

comida corrida Inexpensive daily special usually consisting of three courses.

menú del día Same as *comida corrida.*

DEGREE OF DONENESS

término un cuarto Rare, literally means one-fourth.

término medio Medium rare, one-half.

término tres cuartos Medium, three-fourths.

bien cocido Well-done.

Note: Keep in mind, when ordering a steak, that *medio* does not mean "medium."

MISCELLANEOUS RESTAURANT TERMINOLOGY

cucharra Spoon.

cuchillo Knife.

la cuenta The bill.

plato Plate.

plato hondo Bowl.

propina Tip.

servilleta Napkin.

tenedor Fork.

vaso Glass.

IVA Value-added tax.

fonda Strictly speaking, a food stall in the market or street, but now used in a loose or nostalgic sense to designate an informal restaurant.

POPULAR MEXICAN DISHES

a la tampiqueña (Usually *bistec a la t.* or *arrachera a la t.*) A steak served with several sides, including but not limited to an enchilada, guacamole, rice, and beans.

adobo Marinade made with chiles and tomatoes, often seen in adjectival form *adobado*/*adobada.*

albóndigas Meatballs, usually cooked in a *chile chipotle* sauce.

antojito Literally means "small temptation." It's a general term for tacos, tostadas, quesadillas, and the like, which are usually eaten for supper or as a snack.

arrachera Skirt steak, fajitas.

arroz Rice.

bistec Steak.

bolillo Small bread with a crust much like a baguette.

buñuelos Fried pastry dusted with sugar. Can also mean a large, thin, crisp pancake that is dipped in boiling cane syrup.

cajeta Thick caramel sauce made from goat's milk.

calabaza Zucchini squash.

caldo tlalpeño Chicken and vegetable soup, with rice, *chile chipotle,* avocado, and garbanzos. Its name comes from a suburban community of Mexico City, Tlalpan.

caldo xochitl Mild chicken and rice soup served with a small plate of chopped onion, chile serrano, avocado, and limes, to be added according to individual taste.

camarones Shrimp. For common cooking methods, see ***pescado.***

carne Meat.

carnitas Slow-cooked pork dish from Michoacán and parts of central Mexico, served with tortillas, guacamole, and salsa or pickled jalapeños.

cebolla Onion.

cecina Thinly sliced pork or beef, dried or marinated, depending on the region.

ceviche Fresh raw seafood marinated in fresh lime juice and garnished with chopped tomatoes, onions, chiles, and sometimes cilantro.

chalupas poblanas Simple dish from Puebla consisting of handmade tortillas lightly fried but left soft, and topped with different chile sauces.

chayote Spiny squash boiled and served as an accompaniment to meat dishes.

chilaquiles Fried tortilla quarters softened in either a red or a green sauce and served with Mexican sour cream, onion, and sometimes chicken *(con pollo).*

chile Any of the many hot peppers used in Mexican cooking, in fresh, dried, or smoked forms.

chile ancho A dried *chile poblano,* which serves as the base for many varieties of sauces and *moles.*

chile chilpotle (or **chipotle**) A smoked jalapeño dried or in an *adobo* sauce.

chile en nogada *Chile poblano* stuffed with a complex filling of shredded meat, nuts, and dried, candied, and fresh fruit, topped with walnut cream sauce and a sprinkling of pomegranate seeds.

chile poblano Fresh pepper that is usually dark green in color, large, and not usually spicy. Often stuffed with a variety of fillings (chile relleno).

chile relleno Stuffed pepper.

chivo Kid or goat.

cochinita pibil Yucatecan dish of pork, pit-baked in a *pibil* sauce of *achiote,* sour orange, and spices.

col Cabbage. Also called *repollo.*

consomé Clear broth, usually with rice.

cortes Steak; in full, it is *cortes finas de carne* (fine cuts of meat).

cuitlacoche Variant of *huitlacoche.*

elote Fresh corn.

empanada For most of Mexico, a turnover with a savory or sweet filling. In Oaxaca and southern Mexico, it is corn *masa* or a tortilla folded around a savory filling and roasted or fried.

empanizado Breaded.

enchilada A lightly fried tortilla, dipped in sauce and folded or rolled around a filling. It has many variations, such as *enchiladas suizas* (made with a cream sauce), enchiladas del portal or enchiladas placeras (made with a predominantly *chile ancho* sauce), and enchiladas verdes (in a green sauce of tomatillos, cilantro, and chiles).

enfrijoladas Like an enchilada, but made with a bean sauce.

enmoladas Enchiladas made with a *mole* sauce.

entomatadas Enchiladas made with a tomato sauce.

escabeche Vegetables pickled in a vinegary liquid.

flan Custard.

flautas Tortillas that are rolled up around a filling (usually chicken or shredded beef) and deep-fried; often listed on a menu as *taquitos* or *tacos fritos.*

gorditas Thick, fried corn tortillas, slit open and stuffed with meat or cheese.

horchata Drink made of ground rice, melon seeds, ground almonds, or coconut and cinnamon.

huazontle A vegetable vaguely comparable to broccoli, but milder in taste.

huitlacoche Salty and mild-tasting corn fungus that is considered a delicacy in Mexico.

jitomate Tomato.

lechuga Lettuce.

limón A small lime. Mexicans squeeze these limes on everything from soups to tacos.

lomo adobado Pork loin cooked in an ***adobo.***

masa Soft dough made of corn that is the basis for making tortillas and tamales.

menudo Soup made with beef tripe and hominy.

milanesa Beef cutlet breaded and fried.

mole Any variety of thick sauce made with dried chiles, nuts, fruit or vegetables, and spices. Variations include *m. poblano* (Puebla style, with chocolate and sesame), *m. negro* (black *mole* from Oaxaca, also with chocolate), and *m. verde* (made with herbs and/or pumpkinseeds, depending on the region).

pan Bread. A few of the varieties include *p. dulce* (general term for a variety of sweet breads), *p. de muerto* (bread made for the Day of the Dead holidays), and *p. Bimbo* (packaged sliced white bread).

panuchos A Yucatecan dish of *masa* cakes stuffed with refried black beans and topped with shredded turkey or chicken, lettuce, and onion.

papas Potatoes.

papadzules A Yucatecan dish of tortillas stuffed with hard-boiled eggs and topped with a sauce made of pumpkinseeds.

parrillada A sampler platter of grilled meats or seafood.

pescado Fish. Common ways of cooking fish include *al mojo de ajo* (pan seared with oil and garlic), *a la veracruzana* (with tomatoes, olives, and capers), and *al ajillo* (seared with garlic and fine strips or rings of *chile guajillo*).

pibil See ***cochinita pibil.*** When made with chicken, it is called *pollo pibil.*

picadillo Any of several recipes using shredded beef, pork, or chicken and onions, chiles, and spices. Can also contain fruit and nuts.

pipián A thick sauce made with ground pumpkinseeds, nuts, herbs, and chiles. Can be red or green.

poc chuc A Yucatecan dish of grilled pork with onion marinated in sour orange.

pollo Chicken.

pozole Soup with chicken or pork, hominy, lettuce, and radishes, served with a small plate of other ingredients to be added according to taste (onion, pepper, lime juice, oregano). In Jalisco it's red *(p. rojo),* in Michoacán it's clear *(p. blanco),* and in Guerrero it's green *(p. verde).* In the rest of Mexico, it can be any one of these.

puerco Pork.

quesadilla Corn or flour tortillas stuffed with white cheese and cooked on hot griddle. In Mexico City, it is made with raw *masa* folded around any of a variety of fillings (often containing no cheese) and deep-fried.

queso Cheese.

res Beef.

rompope Mexican liqueur, made with eggs, vanilla, sugar, and alcohol.

salbute A Yucatecan dish like a *panucho,* but without bean paste in the middle.

solomillo Filet mignon.

sopa azteca Tortilla soup.

sopa tarasca A blended soup from Michoacán made with beans and tomatoes.

sope Small fried *masa* cake topped with savory meats and greens.

tacos al pastor Small tacos made with thinly sliced pork marinated in an *adobo* and served with pineapple, onion, and cilantro.

tamal (Not "tamale.") *Masa* mixed with lard and beaten until light and folded around a savory or sweet filling, and encased in a cornhusk or a plant leaf (usually corn or banana) and then steamed. *Tamales* is the plural form.

taquitos See ***flautas.***

tinga Shredded meat stewed in a *chile chipotle* sauce.

torta A sandwich made with a bolillo.

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