

Around Mexico City



With its daunting size and seemingly endless urban sprawl, the megalopolis of Mexico City may seem a challenging place to escape from, yet thousands of Chilangos (Mexico City residents) do so every weekend. Fast toll roads fan out in all directions to the cities, towns and the so-called *pueblos mágicos* (magical villages) that surround the Distrito Federal, taking you surprisingly easily into a world of ancient ruins, well-preserved colonial towns and beautiful mountain scenery.

Even if you're in Mexico City for a only week, make a point of taking a day trip out of the city to experience something of the 'other' Mexico, as Mexico City – like so many capitals – has little in common with even its neighboring provinces. Indeed, the area around Mexico City offers copious rewards for people who make time to explore places often overlooked by travelers eager to get to the coast.

While nearly all visitors day-trip from the capital to the stunning complex at Teotihuacán, this is just one of many extraordinary sights in the area. The gorgeous colonial towns of Taxco, Puebla and Cuernavaca shouldn't be missed, nor should the scenery of Valle de Bravo and Tepoztlán, the peaks of Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl or the ruins of Xochicalco and Tula (to name just a few). Outside the weekends, you'll be able to enjoy many of these places without the tourist hordes. So give yourself a welcome change of pace, leave the hustle and bustle of the city and relax into the groove of life just outside the capital.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Take in the astonishing views of **Popocatepetl** (p231) and **Iztaccíhuatl** (p231), and descend to the beautiful volcanic lakes at **Nevalo de Toluca** (p269)
- Be blown away by the sheer scale of the two huge pyramids at **Teotihuacán** (p209)
- Enjoy a sunset drink on the charming *zócalo* of tiny **Cuetzalan** (p238) amid the dramatic scenery of the Sierra Madre Oriental
- Discover some of the lesser-known ancient sites of central Mexico, often entirely free of other visitors, at **Xochicalco** (p258), **Yohualichán** (p240) and **Cantona** (p238)
- Wander cobbled side streets in magical villages such as easy-going **Malinalco** (p270), artsy **Tepoztlán** (p242) and beautiful **Valle de Bravo** (p269)



History

Long a cultural and economic crossroads, the region around present-day Mexico City played host to a succession of important indigenous civilizations (notably the Teotihuacán, Toltec and Aztec). By the late 15th century, the Aztecs had managed to dominate all but one of central Mexico's states. Many archaeological sites and museums preserve remnants of pre-Hispanic history; Puebla's Museo Amparo provides an excellent overview of the region's history and cultures.

Post-conquest, the Spanish transformed central Mexico, establishing ceramic industries at Puebla, mines at Taxco and Pachuca, and haciendas producing wheat, sugar and cattle. The Catholic church used the region as a base for its missionary activities, and left a series of imposing churches and fortified monasteries. Today, most towns retain a central plaza surrounded by colonial buildings.

Climate

The extra altitude outside Mexico City makes for a very agreeable climate – cooler and less humid than the lowlands, with most rain falling in brief summer downpours. Snow tops the highest peaks (*nevados*) for several months a year (October through March), but the populated areas in the foothills continue to enjoy a mild climate while cross-country skiers glide about up in the clouds.

Parks & Reserves

Several national parks within a day's drive of Mexico City are delightfully crowd-free and, with a bit of effort, are accessible via public transportation. Grutas de Cacahuamilpa (p265), the region's most popular park, preserves a staggering network of gaping caverns in a beautiful setting straddling a raging river. Rock formations attract climbers, and pine forests make for cool day hiking at diminutive, mountainous El Chico (p215) outside Pachuca.

Iztaccíhuatl-Popocatepetl (p231), in the foothills around Amecameca, offer some fine hiking. Popo remains off limits due to volcanic activity, while only experienced climbers should attempt to summit Izta. Near Puebla, the towering peak La Malinche, accessed via La Malintzi (p237), is a challenging nontechnical goal for day hikers. You can also drive right up to, or cross-country ski around, the extinct crater of Nevado de Toluca (p269).

Getting There & Around

The cities, towns and – to a lesser extent – even the villages around Mexico City enjoy excellent bus links to both the capital and each other. Even the very smallest backwaters have daily services to Mexico City and to the closest transportation hub. While airports also serve Puebla, Toluca, Cuernavaca and Pachuca in the region, it's nearly always cheaper and easier to fly to Mexico City and travel onward from there. Roads in the region, though they're busy, are some of the best-maintained and safest in the country, so hiring a car to explore is also a highly recommended option. However, for all but the most obscure sights, it's no problem to get almost anywhere by bus.

NORTH OF MEXICO CITY

The two big attractions north of Mexico City are both ancient sites: the extraordinary complex at Teotihuacán, once the largest metropolis in the Americas and one of Mexico's most spectacular pre-Hispanic sights; and the lesser-known Tula, the Toltec capital northwest of Teotihuacán, far smaller but home to some truly extraordinary stone statues that have been almost perfectly preserved in a small central plaza.

Far more obscure but equally impressive is the Parque Nacional El Chico and the charming village of Mineral del Chico – the perfect escape from the big city, with stunning views, wide open spaces and friendly locals.

Pachuca, the fast-growing capital of dynamic Hidalgo state, has little to recommend it overall, although it does look charming from a distance, with its brightly painted houses, and it has a pretty colonial center and a great line in Cornish pasties. From Pachuca, well-paved routes snake east and north to the Gulf coast, traversing some spectacular country as the fringes of the Sierra Madre Oriental tumble to the coastal plain.

TEPOTZOTLÁN

☎ 55 / pop 45,000 / elevation 2300m

This little charmer is the easiest single-day trip from Mexico City, but it's hard to imagine anywhere less like the chaotic streets of the capital, despite the fact that urban sprawl gets closer and closer to Tepotzotlán's colonial streets every year.



Sights

There's a very simple reason to visit: the wonderful **Museo Nacional del Virreinato** (National Museum of the Viceregal Period; ☎ 5876-2771; Plaza Hidalgo 99; admission M\$43; 🕒 9am-6pm Tue-Sun), comprising the restored Jesuit **Iglesia de San Francisco Javier** and an adjacent **monastery**. Audioguides (M\$40) are in Spanish only.

Once occupied by a Jesuit college of Indian languages, the complex dates from 1606, although various additions were made over the following 150 years, creating a fascinating showcase of the developing architectural styles of New Spain. Much of what is on display comes from Mexico City Cathedral's large collection, and the standard is very high. Among the folk art and fine art on display are silver chalices, pictures created from inlaid wood, porcelain, furniture and fine religious paintings and statues.

Don't miss the **Capilla Doméstica**, with a Churrigueresque main altarpiece that boasts more mirrors than a carnival fun house. The biggest crowds arrive on Sunday, when a crafts market convenes out front. The church was originally built between 1670 and 1682; additions carried out in the 18th century made it one of Mexico's most lavish places of worship. The facade is a phantasmagoric array of carved saints, angels, plants and people, while the interior walls and the Camarín del Virgen adjacent to the altar are swathed with a circus of gilded ornamentation.

Festivals

Tepotzotlán's highly regarded Christmas *pas-torelas* (nativity plays) are performed inside the former monastery in the weeks leading up to December 25. Tickets, which include Christmas dinner and piñata smashing, can be purchased at La Hostería de Tepotzotlán (see right) or via Spanish-language **Ticketmaster** (☎ 5325-9000; www.ticketmaster.com.mx).

Sleeping

Tepotzotlán is geared toward day-trippers, but there are a few good-value hotels.

Hotel Posada San José (☎ /fax 5876-0340; Plaza Virreinal 13; r without/with view M\$185/250) Within a gorgeous old colonial building on the south side of the *zócalo*, this well-run hotel has a great atmosphere, charming tiled bathrooms and decent rooms, although the furniture is not always as evocative of the colonial area complex as it could be. Avoid rooms 8 and 9,

which are directly below the building's noisy water pump.

Hotel Posada del Virrey (☎ /fax 5876-1864; Av Insurgentes 13; r M\$250; 📺) This place, popular with weekenders, is set around a large, fairly charmless courtyard. The rooms are all fine with bathrooms and TV, but some can be a little dark, although the better ones have Jacuzzis in them.

Posada Castro (☎ 5876-0964; Av Insurgentes 11; r M\$300-500; 📺) This friendly, family-run place has 17 smart and comfy rooms a short walk from the *zócalo*, all with bathroom and TV. The Virgin Mary adorns almost every wall, and a selection of religious icons and crucifixes completes the décor of each room.

Eating

La Hostería de Tepotzotlán (☎ 5876-0243; Plaza Virreinal 1; mains M\$60-150; 🕒 12:30-5:30pm Tue-Sun) The town's most atmospheric place for lunch is this restaurant, housed within the monastery in a delightful little courtyard. It serves hearty soups along with original main courses like *huitlacoche* (earthy corn mushroom) crepes for brunch and lunch.

Restaurant-Bar Pepe (☎ 5876-0520; Plaza Virreinal; mains M\$80-140; 🕒 8am-11pm) A charming place facing the Iglesia de San Francisco Javier across the *zócalo*, with a great terrace and an intimate, gently buzzing interior. Specialties include *camarones empanizados* (breaded shrimp), and there are good breakfasts for around M\$65.

It's best to avoid the other almost indistinguishable restaurants aimed squarely at tourists elsewhere on the *zócalo* – the food is mediocre and prices high. A much better option is to join the locals at the *taquerías* (taco stalls) west of the plaza, or in the market behind the Palacio Municipal, where food stalls serve rich *pozole* (a thin stew of hominy, pork or chicken), *gorditas* (fried stuffed tacos in fat, handmade blue corn tortillas), and fresh-squeezed juices all day long. One particularly good option for tacos *al pastor* in a pleasant setting is **Taquería la Dueña** (tacos from M\$16), just behind the Posada San José in the same colonial arcade. This beautifully decorated spot serves up a delicious range of tacos and other tasty snacks.

Getting There & Away

Tepotzotlán is en route from Mexico City to Querétaro, 1.5km west of the first tollbooth on Hwy 57D.

From Mexico City's Terminal Norte, Autotransportes Valle del Mezquital (AVM) buses stop at the tollbooth every 15 minutes en route to Tula. From there, catch a local bus (M\$4) or taxi (M\$30), or walk west for about 20 minutes along Av Insurgentes. You can also catch a *colectivo* to Tepetzotlán from Mexico City's Rosario metro station (M\$15). In Tepetzotlán, returning 'Rosario' buses depart from Av Insurgentes opposite Posada San José.

TULA

☎ 773 / pop 27,000 / elevation 2060m

The probable capital of the ancient Toltec civilization is best known for its fearsome 4.5m-high stone warrior figures. Though less spectacular and far smaller than Teotihuacán, Tula is still an fascinating site and well worth the effort of a day trip. The modern town of Tula de Allende is surrounded by a Pemex refinery and an odoriferous petrochemical plant, but the center is pleasant enough for an overnight stay.

History

Tula was an important city from about AD 900 to 1150, reaching a peak population of 35,000. Aztec annals tell of a king called Topiltzin – fair-skinned, black-bearded and long-haired – who founded a Toltec capital in the 10th century. There's debate, however, about whether Tula was this capital.

The Toltecs were empire-builders upon whom the Aztecs looked with awe, going so far as to claim them as royal ancestors. Topiltzin was supposedly a priest-king, dedicated to peaceful worship (which only included sacrifices of animals) of the feathered serpent god Quetzalcóatl. Tula is known to have housed followers of the less likable Tezcatlipoca (Smoking Mirror), god of warriors, witchcraft, life and death; worshipping Tezcatlipoca required human sacrifices. The story goes that Tezcatlipoca appeared in various guises in order to provoke Topiltzin. As a naked chili-seller, he aroused the lust of Topiltzin's daughter and eventually married her. As an old man, he persuaded the teetotaling Topiltzin to get drunk.

Eventually, the humiliated leader left for the Gulf coast, where he set sail eastward on a raft of snakes, promising one day to return and reclaim his throne. (This caused the Aztec emperor Moctezuma much consternation

when Hernán Cortés appeared on the Gulf coast in 1519.) The conventional wisdom is that Topiltzin set up a new Toltec state at Chichén Itzá in Yucatán, while the Tula Toltecs built a brutal, militaristic empire that dominated central Mexico.

Tula was a place of some splendor – the legends speak of palaces of gold, turquoise, jade and quetzal feathers, of enormous corn cobs and colored cotton that grew naturally. Possibly its treasures were looted by the Aztecs or Chichimecs.

In the mid-12th century, the ruler Huémac apparently moved the Toltec capital to Chapultepec after factional fighting at Tula, then committed suicide. Tula was abandoned in the early 13th century, seemingly after a violent destruction by the Chichimecs.

Orientation & Information

The Zona Arqueológica (Archaeological Zone) is 2km north of the center. Tula's principal avenue, Av Zaragoza, links the *zócalo* with the outskirts. Av Hidalgo, the other main drag, has essential services like internet access and ATMs.

Sights

ZONA ARQUEOLÓGICA

The **ruins** (admission M\$37; ☎ 9am-5pm) of the main ceremonial center of Tula are perched on a hilltop, with good views over rolling countryside. These make up just a small part of the 16-sq-km site, but are home to the most interesting remnants. It costs M\$35 to use a video.

From the main road and now disused guard boxes, it's a 300m walk to the ticket office and the excellent **site museum** (admission included in site ticket) displaying ceramics, metalwork, jewelry and large sculptures.

From here, walk around to the left another 800m through several souvenir markets and you'll reach the center of the ancient city. Explanatory signs at the site are in English, Spanish and Nahuatl.

From the museum, the first large structure you'll reach is the **Juego de Pelota No 1** (Ball Court No 1). Archaeologists believe its walls were decorated with sculpted panels that were removed under Aztec rule.

Also known as the Temple of Quetzalcóatl or Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli (the Morning Star), **Pirámide B** can be scaled via steps on its south side. At the top of the stairway, the remains of

three columnar roof supports – which once depicted feathered serpents with their heads on the ground and their tails in the air – remain standing. The four basalt warrior telamones at the top and the four pillars behind supported the temple's roof. Wearing headdresses, breastplates shaped like butterflies and short skirts held in place by sun disks, the warriors hold spear-throwers in their right hands and knives and incense bags in their left. The telamon on the left side is a replica of the original, now in Mexico City's Museo Nacional de Antropología (p153). The columns behind the telamones depict crocodile heads (which symbolize the Earth), warriors, symbols of warrior orders, weapons and Quetzalcóatl's head.

On the pyramid's north wall are some of the carvings that once surrounded the structure. These show the symbols of the warrior orders: jaguars, coyotes, eagles eating hearts, and what may be a human head in Quetzalcóatl's mouth.

Now roofless, the **Gran Vestíbulo** (Great Vestibule) extends along the front of the pyramid, facing the plaza. The stone bench carved with warriors originally ran the length of the hall, possibly to seat priests and nobles observing ceremonies in the plaza.

Near the north side of Pirámide B is the **Coatepantli** (Serpent Wall), 40m long, 2.25m high and carved with rows of geometric patterns and a row of snakes devouring human skeletons. Traces remain of the original bright colors with which most of Tula's structures were painted.

Immediately west of Pirámide B, the **Palacio Quemado** (Burnt Palace) is a series of halls and courtyards with more low benches and relief carvings, one depicting a procession of nobles. It was probably used for ceremonies or reunion meetings.

The plaza in front of Pirámide B would have been the scene of religious and military displays. At its center is the *adoratorio* (ceremonial platform). On the east side of the plaza, **Pirámide C** is Tula's biggest structure, and was in the early stages of excavation at the time of writing. To the west is **Juego de Pelota No 2**, central Mexico's largest ball court at more than 100m in length.

On the far side of the plaza is a path leading to the **Sala de Orientación Guadalupe Mastache** (admission free), a small museum named after one of the archaeologists who pioneered excavations here. It includes large items taken from the

site, including some huge caryatid feet, and a visual representation of how the site would have looked at its prime.

TOWN CENTER

On Av Zaragoza, Tula's fortress-like **cathedral** was part of the 16th-century monastery of San José. Inside, its vault ribs are picked out in gold. On the library wall opposite the *zócalo* is a colorful **mural** of Tula's history.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Casa Blanca (☎ 732-11-86; www.casablancatula.com; Pasaje Hidalgo 11; r from M\$330; (P) (Q)) This pleasant option right in the heart of Tula is actually, contrary to what its name suggests, a pinkish color, and is located at the end of a narrow pedestrian street opposite the restaurant of the same name. The 36 comfortable rooms all have TV, bathroom and free wi-fi. Parking access is around back, via Zaragoza.

Hotel Lizbeth (☎ 732-00-45; www.tulaonline.com/hotellizbeth; Ocampo 200; s/d M\$450/495; (P) (Q)) The Lizbeth is friendly and relaxed, with a motel feel and just moments from the bus station (turn right when you leave). The clean and comfortable rooms, with shared balconies and free wi-fi, are fine, although those with tiled floors smell much better than the carpeted ones.

our pick Hotel Real Catedral (☎ 732-08-13; www.tulaonline.com/hotelcatedral; Zaragoza 106; s/d/ste incl breakfast M\$550/650/950; (P) (Q)) Another up-market addition to Tula's accommodation scene, the Real Catedral is tasteful, central and comfortable. Many of the inside rooms lack natural daylight, though, so it's far more preferable to splash out on one of the lovely suites with small balconies and views onto the street below. There's a great selection of black-and-white photos of Tula in the lobby.

Best Western Tula (☎ 732-45-75; www.bestwesterntula.com; Zaragoza s/n; r M\$822; (P) (Q) (Q)) Opened in 2006, the business-friendly Best Western has 18 stylish, comfortable rooms in the historic center. While it's still a rather bland place, it's small and friendly enough not to feel like an anonymous chain hotel.

Restaurant Casablanca (☎ 732-22-74; Hidalgo 114; mains M\$40-110; ☎ 10am-10pm; (Q)) The best place to eat in town is the friendly, though admittedly rather sterile, restaurant, which has a full traditional Mexican menu as well as a good buffet. It's about the only good option in town, and is just by the cathedral off the *zócalo*.

Getting There & Away

Tula's bus depot is on Xicoténcatl, three blocks downhill from the cathedral. To get to the town center from the main entrance, turn right, then immediately left on Rojo del Río and look for the church steeple atop the hill. First-class Omnibus buses go to/from Mexico City's Terminal Norte (M\$52, 1½ hours, every 30 to 40 minutes) and to/from Pachuca (M\$52, 1½ hours, hourly). AVM runs 2nd-class buses (M\$40) to the same destinations every 15 minutes. Buses to Mexico City can drop you at Caseta Tepotzotlán (M\$25) for the town center.

Getting Around

If you arrive in Tula by bus, the easiest way to get to the Zona Arqueológica is to catch a taxi (M\$25) outside the depot. From the center, 'Actopan' minibuses (M\$6) depart from the corner of Calle 5 de Mayo and Zaragoza, and pass within 100m of the site entrance. Alternatively, all Pachuca-bound buses will also stop outside the site on request.

TEOTIHUACÁN

☎ 594 / elevation 2300m

This complex of awesome pyramids set amid what was once Mesoamerica's greatest city is just 50km northeast of Mexico City and is the region's number-one draw. It's a huge site that compares in significance to the ruins of the Yucatán and Chiapas. Anyone lucky enough to come here will be inspired by the astonishing technological might of the Teotihuacán (teh-oh-tee-wah-kahn) civilization.

Set in a mountain-ringed offshoot of the Valle de México, Teotihuacán is known for its two vast pyramids, Pirámide del Sol and Pirámide de la Luna, which dominate the remains of the metropolis. Teotihuacán was Mexico's biggest ancient city and the capital of what was probably Mexico's largest pre-Hispanic empire. (See p47 for an outline of its importance.) Exploring the site is fascinating, although rebutting the indefatigable hawkers can be exhausting and crowds can be huge, especially in the middle of the day. As usual, going early pays off, especially as the midday sun can be unbearable when trying to cover the huge site.

The city's grid plan was plotted in the early part of the 1st century AD, and the Pirámide del Sol was completed – over an earlier cave shrine – by AD 150. The rest of the city was

developed between about AD 250 and 600. Social, environmental and economic factors hastened its decline and eventual collapse in the 8th century.

The city was divided into quarters by two great avenues that met near La Ciudadela (the Citadel). One, running roughly north-south, is the famous Calzada de los Muertos (Avenue of the Dead) – so called because the later Aztecs believed the great buildings lining it were vast tombs, built by giants for Teotihuacán's first rulers. The major structures are typified by a *talud-tablero* style, in which the rising portions of stepped, pyramid-like buildings consist of both sloping (*talud*) and upright (*tablero*) sections. They were often covered in lime and colorfully painted. Most of the city was made up of residential compounds, some of which contained elegant frescoes.

Centuries after its fall, Teotihuacán remained a pilgrimage site for Aztec royalty, who believed that all of the gods had sacrificed themselves here to start the sun moving at the beginning of the 'fifth world,' inhabited by the Aztecs. It remains an important pilgrimage site: thousands of New Age devotees flock here each year to celebrate the vernal equinox and soak up the mystical energies believed to converge here.

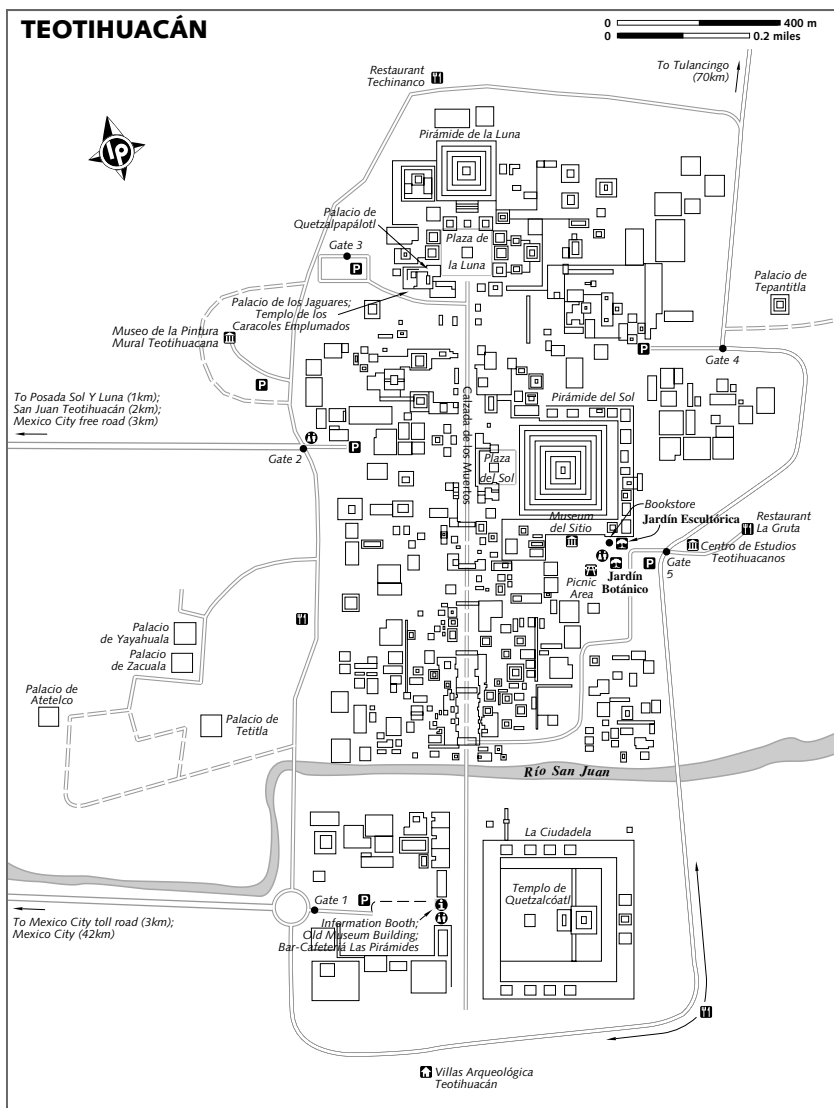
Orientation

Though ancient Teotihuacán covered more than 20 sq km, most of what there is to see today lies along nearly 2km of the Calzada de los Muertos. Buses arrive at a traffic circle by the southwest entrance (Gate 1); four other entrances are reached by the ring road around the site. There are parking lots and ticket booths at each entrance. Your ticket allows you to re-enter via any of them on the same day. The site museum is just inside the main east entrance (Gate 5).

Information

There's an **information booth** (☎ 956-02-76; ☎ 9am-4pm) near the southwest entrance (Gate 1). Free site tours by authorized guides (in Spanish only) may be available here if a sizable group forms.

Crowds at the **ruins** (admission M\$45; ☎ 7am-6pm) are thickest from 10am to 2pm, and it is busiest on Sunday, holidays and around the vernal equinox (between March 19 and March 21). Due to the heat and altitude, it's best to take it easy while exploring the expansive ruins. Bring a hat and water – most



visitors walk several kilometers, and the mid-day sun can be brutal. Afternoon rain showers are common from June to September.

Sights

CALZADA DE LOS MUERTOS

Centuries ago, the Avenue of the Dead must have seemed absolutely incomparable to its

inhabitants, who were able to see its buildings at their best. Gate 1 brings you to the avenue in front of La Ciudadela. For 2km to the north, the avenue is flanked by former palaces of Teotihuacán's elite and other major structures, such as the Pirámide del Sol. The Pirámide de la Luna looms large at the northern end.

LA CIUDADELA

The expansive, square complex called the Citadel is believed to have been the residence of the city's supreme ruler. Four wide walls, each 390m long and topped by 15 pyramids, enclose a huge open space, of which the main feature, to the east, is a pyramid called the **Templo de Quetzalcóatl**. The temple is flanked by two large complexes of rooms and patios, which may have been the city's administrative center.

The temple's most fascinating feature is the facade of an earlier structure (from around AD 250 to 300 – the temple was built some time in the following century), which was revealed by excavating the more recent pyramid that had been built on the same site. The four surviving steps of this facade (there were originally seven) are adorned with striking carvings. In the *tablero* panels, the sharp-fanged feathered serpent deity, its head emerging from a necklace of 11 petals, alternates with a four-eyed, two-fanged creature often identified as the rain god Tláloc, but perhaps more authoritatively considered to be the fire serpent, bearer of the sun on its daily journey across the sky. On the *talud* panels are side views of the plumed serpent.

MUSEO DEL SITIO

Continuing north along Calzada de los Muertos across the river toward the pyramids, a path to the right leads to the **site museum** (☎ 958-20-81; admission incl with site ticket; 🕒 7am-6pm), just south of the Pirámide del Sol. It's a refreshing stop midway through a site visit. Nearby are the **Jardín Escultórica** (a lovely sculpture garden with Teotihuacán artifacts), the **Jardín Botánico** (Botanic Garden), public toilets, a snack bar, picnic tables and a bookstore.

The museum is divided thematically, with explanations in English and Spanish. There are excellent displays of artifacts, fresco panels and an impressive large-scale model of the city set under a transparent walkway, from where the real Pirámide del Sol can be viewed through a wall-size window.

CENTRO DE ESTUDIOS TEOTIHUACANOS

Situated just outside Gate 5, this research center is home to the interesting **Museo Manuel Gamio** (☎ 965-15-99; admission free; 🕒 7am-4pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat & Sun), sponsored by the Instituto de Antropología e Historia (INAH), which

presents bimonthly cultural exhibitions, and has a permanent exhibition exploring the history of pulque, complete with a full-scale replica of a traditional *pulquería*, an elite establishment where nobles would ritually drink pulque, an alcoholic extract of the maguery plant.

PIRÁMIDE DEL SOL

The world's third-largest pyramid, surpassed in size only by Egypt's Cheops and the pyramid of Cholula (p227), overshadows the east side of Calzada de los Muertos. The base is 222m long on each side, and it's now just over 70m high. The pyramid was cobbled together around AD 100, from three million tons of stone, without the use of metal tools, pack animals or the wheel.

The Aztec belief that the structure was dedicated to the sun god was validated in 1971, when archaeologists uncovered a 100m-long underground tunnel leading from the pyramid's west flank to a cave directly beneath its center, where they found religious artifacts. It's thought that the sun was worshiped here before the pyramid was built and that the city's ancient inhabitants traced the origins of life to this grotto.

At Teotihuacán's height, the pyramid's plaster was painted bright red, which must have been a radiant sight at sunset. Clamber up the pyramid's 248 steps – yes, we counted – for an inspiring overview of the ancient city.

PALACIO DE TEPANTITLA

This priest's residence, 500m northeast of Pirámide del Sol, is home to Teotihuacán's most famous fresco, the worn **Paradise of Tláloc**. The mural flanks a doorway in a covered patio, in the building's northeast corner. The rain god Tláloc, attended by priests, is shown on both sides. To the right of the door appears his paradise, a garden-like Eden with people, animals and fish swimming in a mountain-fed river. To the left of the door, tiny human figures are engaged in a unique ball game. Frescoes in other rooms show priests with feather headdresses.

PIRÁMIDE DE LA LUNA

The Pyramid of the Moon, at the north end of Calzada de los Muertos, is smaller than Pirámide del Sol, but it's more gracefully proportioned – far more aesthetically pleasing and not nearly as hulkish. Completed around

AD 300, its summit is nearly the same height, because it's built on higher ground.

The Plaza de la Luna, located just in front of the pyramid, is a handsome arrangement of 12 temple platforms. Some experts attribute astronomical symbolism to the total number of 13 (made up of the 12 platforms plus the pyramid), a key number in the day-counting system of the Mesoamerican ritual calendar. The altar in the plaza's center is thought to have played host to religious dancing.

PALACIO DE QUETZALPAPÁLOTL

Off the Plaza de la Luna's southwest corner is the Palace of the Quetzal Butterfly, reckoned to be the home of a high priest. A flight of steps leads up to a roofed portico with an abstract mural, and nearby a well-restored patio has columns carved with images of the quetzal bird or a hybrid quetzal butterfly.

The **Palacio de los Jaguares** (Jaguar Palace) and **Templo de los Caracoles Emplumados** (Temple of the Plumed Conch Shells) are behind and below the Palacio de Quetzalpapálotl. The lower walls of several chambers off the patio of the Jaguar Palace display parts of murals showing the jaguar god in feathered head-dresses, blowing conch shells and apparently praying to the rain god Tláloc.

The Temple of the Plumed Conch Shells, entered from the Palacio de los Jaguares' patio, is a now-subterranean structure of the 2nd or 3rd century AD. Carvings on what was its facade show large shells – possibly used as musical instruments – decorated with feathers and four-petal flowers. The base on which the facade stands has a rainbow-colored mural of birds with water streaming from their beaks.

MUSEO DE LA PINTURA MURAL TEOTIHUACANA

On the ring road between Gates 2 and 3, this impressive **museum** (☎ 958-20-81; admission incl with site ticket; ☎ 9am-6pm) showcases murals from Teotihuacán, as well as reconstructions of murals you'll see at the ruins. Explanations of the exhibits are in Spanish only, but it's definitely worth a stop. Parking costs M\$2.

PALACIO DE TETITLA & PALACIO DE ATETELCO

Another group of palaces lies west of the site's main area, several hundred meters northwest of Gate 1. Many of the murals, discovered in the 1940s, are well preserved

or restored, and perfectly intelligible. Inside the sprawling Tetitla Palace, no fewer than 120 walls are graced by murals, with Tláloc, jaguars, serpents and eagles among the easiest figures to make out. Some 400m west is the Atetelco Palace, whose vivid jaguar or coyote murals – a mixture of originals and restorations – are in the Patio Blanco (White Patio) in the northwest corner. Processions of these creatures in shades of red perhaps symbolize warrior orders.

About 100m further northeast are Zacuala and Yayahuala, a pair of enormous walled compounds that probably served as communal living quarters. Separated by the original alleyways, the two structures are made up of numerous rooms and patios, but few entranceways.

Sleeping

The uninteresting town of San Juan Teotihuacán, 2km south of the archaeological zone, has a few good overnight options, which make sense if you want to start early at the site before the crowds arrive. However, if you're looking for a romantic weekend away, head for the pricier accommodation at the site itself.

Teotihuacán Trailer Park (☎ 956-03-13; teotipark@prodigy.net.mx; López Mateos 17, San Juan Teotihuacán; campsites per person M\$60, campers per person M\$75; (P) (Q)) Pitch a tent in town, on a peaceful street behind the 16th-century Jesuit church, a couple of blocks southwest of the plaza and bus depot. The large park has 24/7 hot showers and helpful, English-speaking owners.

Hotel Posada Teotihuacán (☎ 956-04-60; Canteroco 5, San Juan Teotihuacán; s/d/t M\$142/213/282; (P)) Despite looking like a bomb has hit it from the outside, the rooms at this centrally located posada are fine, smallish but clean. All rooms have TV and bathroom, and it's the cheapest hotel option around.

Hotel Posada Sol y Luna (☎ 956-23-68/71; www.posadasolyluna.com; Cantú 13, San Juan Teotihuacán; r/ste from M\$330/450; (P)) This well-run place has 16 fine though unexciting and rather sterile rooms, all with TV and ensuite bathroom. Junior suites have rather ancient Jacuzzis in them – not worth paying extra for unless you have rheumatism. It's at the east end of town, en route to the pyramids. Also a good place to get breakfast (from M\$60) for guests and non-guests alike.

Hotel & Motel Quinto Sol (☎ 956-18-81; www.hotelquintosol.com.mx; Av Hidalgo 26, San Juan Teotihuacán; s/d/t from M\$670/815/949; P ♻️ 🚰) Admittedly this is where most tourist groups stay and it's not exactly a boutique place, but the Quinto Sol is still the most comfortable option in town, with its excellent facilities including a decent-size pool and large, well-appointed rooms.

Villa Arqueológica Teotihuacán (☎ 55-5836-9020; www.teotihuacaninfo.com; r Sun-Thu/Fri & Sat M\$875/1000; ♻️ P 🚰) By far the best option in the area is this Club Med–run complex just outside the site grounds. While it's not cheap, the place has plenty of charm and the rooms are all cozy, clean and well furnished. Amenities include a heated outdoor pool, a lit tennis court, a playground, a billiards table, nice gardens and a refined French–Mexican bar–restaurant. A couple of one-bedroom suites have in-room whirlpools.

Eating

If you're going to eat on the site, it's usually a pricey and not particularly enjoyable experience. You're far better off bringing a picnic, although there are a few okay options to look out for. The most convenient place is on the 3rd floor of the old museum building near Gate 1, where the busy Bar–Cafeteria Las Pirámides provides panoramic views of La Ciudadela.

Restaurant Technanco (☎ 958-23-06; Teotihuacán ring road; mains M\$30-70; ☎ 10am–5pm) The interior won't blow you away and it's a fair walk from Gate 3 behind the Pirámide de la Luna, but this offers up excellent home cooking at reasonable prices. The small menu takes in local favorites from *tacos fritos* to enchiladas, authentic homemade *moles* and other flavorful traditional dishes. Ask the ebullient owner, Emma (nicknamed Maya), about her curative massage (from M\$30); call 24 hours in advance to arrange a temascal (indigenous Mexican steam bath) for up to 15 people (around M\$300 to M\$500).

Restaurant La Gruta (☎ 956-01-04/27; mains M\$200; ☎ 11am–6pm) This deeply odd restaurant has quite the strangest setting of any in Mexico: a vast, subterranean, dark cave just a short distance from Gate 5 (don't be put off by the sign on the path that says it's 500m away; it's a misprint). It's aimed squarely at tourist parties, and while the food is very good, it's pricey too – and served in a subterranean, dark cave. On Saturday and Sunday after-

noons, there's live music and folkloric ballet (cover M\$30). As you'd expect, all major credit cards are accepted.

Getting There & Away

During daylight hours, Autobuses México–San Juan Teotihuacán runs buses from Mexico City's Terminal Norte to the ruins (M\$28, one hour) every 15 minutes from 7am to 6pm. When entering the Terminal Norte, turn left and walk to the second-last desk on the concourse. Make sure your bus is headed for 'Los Pirámides,' not the nearby town of San Juan Teotihuacán.

Buses arrive and depart from near Gate 1, also making stops at Gates 2 and 3. Return buses are more frequent after 1pm. The last bus back to Mexico City leaves at 6pm; some terminate at Indios Verdes metro station, but most continue to Terminal Norte.

Getting Around

To reach the pyramids from San Juan Teotihuacán, take a taxi (M\$1.50) or any combi (M\$6) labeled 'San Martín' departing from Av Hidalgo, beside the central plaza. Combi's returning to San Juan stop at Gates 1, 2 and 3.

PACHUCA

☎ 771 / pop 320,000 / elevation 2425m

Scattered over a collection of steep, wide hills and crowned with a vast Mexican flag and an even higher statue of Christ, Pachuca is the unassuming capital of Hidalgo state. The charming, brightly painted town center is visible for miles around, although growth in recent years has sadly led to far-from-lovely urban sprawl developing beyond the candy-box houses of the old town.

Useful as a staging post for trips north and east into the dramatic Sierra Madre Oriental, Pachuca is a pleasant enough place to while away a few hours. Silver was unearthed nearby as early as 1534, and Real del Monte's mines still produce quite a respectable amount of ore. Pachuca was also the gateway through which *fútbol* (soccer) entered Mexico, introduced in the 19th century by miners from Cornwall, England. The Cornish population also gave the town its signature dish, meat pastries known as *pastes* (and recognizable to any Brit as a Cornish pastie, albeit with some typically Mexican fillings).

Orientation

The 40m-high Reloj Monumental (Clock Tower), built between 1904 and 1910 to commemorate the independence centennial, overshadows the north end of Pachuca's *zócalo*, Plaza de la Independencia, which is flanked by Av Matamoros on the east and Av Allende on the west. Guerrero runs parallel to Av Allende, 100m to the west. Some 700m to the south, Guerrero and Av Matamoros converge at the modern Plaza Juárez.

Information

ATMs are numerous around Plaza de la Independencia.

Internet (409 Matamoros; per hr M\$10; ☎ 9am-10pm) Facing the revolutionary monument in the small park 100m south of the *zócalo*.

Tourist Module (☎ 715-14-11; www.pachuca.gob.mx; Plaza de la Independencia; ☎ 10am-6pm) Inside the clock tower; may have free city maps.

Sights

CENTRO CULTURAL DE HIDALGO

This handsome, sprawling **cultural center** (cnr Hidalgo & Arista; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) is an oasis of calm at Pachuca's bustling heart. Formerly the Convento de San Francisco, the complex includes two museums and a gallery, a theater, a library and several lovely plazas. It's worth looking into the impressive (and still functioning) Parroquia de San Francisco as well. It's two blocks east and four long blocks south of Plaza Juárez. The highlight of the complex is the excellent **Museo Nacional de la Fotografía** (admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), which displays early imaging technology and selections from the 1.5 million photos in the INAH archives. The images – some by Europeans and Americans, many more by pioneer Mexican photojournalist Agustín Víctor Casasola – provide fascinating glimpses of Mexico from 1873 to the present.

MUSEO DE MINERÍA

Two blocks south and half a block east of the *zócalo*, Pachuca's **mining museum** (Mina 110; adult/student M\$15/10; ☎ 10am-2pm & 3-6pm Wed-Sun) provides a good overview of the industry that shaped the region. Headlamps, miners' shrines and old mining maps are on display, and photos depict conditions in the shafts from the early years to the present. There's a 20-minute English-language video program, and engaging ex-miners give tours hourly in Spanish.

LOOKOUT POINTS

For jaw-dropping vistas, catch a 'Mirador' bus (M\$6) from Plaza de la Constitución, a few blocks northeast of the *zócalo*, to the **mirador** on the road to Real del Monte. Even better panoramas can be seen from north of town, at the **Cristo Rey monument** on Cerro de Santa Apolonia. A cab (M\$30) from town is the best way to get here, or it's a steep 30-minute walk.

Tours

Trolley tours run by **Tranvía Turístico** (☎ 718-71-20; per person M\$45) depart hourly between 3pm and 6pm from the plaza's west side from Wednesday to Sunday. Guided 4½-hour trips to Real de Monte leave at noon on Saturday and Sunday.



Sleeping

Hotel Noriega (☎ 715-15-55; Av Matamoros 305; s/d M\$200/245; Ⓟ) The Noriega feels like it's a set for a spy movie; its large courtyard lobby oozes atmosphere. Rooms are total potluck, though, so have a look at a few rooms before checking in. Some are tiny and claustrophobic, while others are large and airy. TV is M\$20 extra, or you can watch *lucha libre* (wrestling) in the courtyard with the staff.

Hotel de los Baños (☎ 713-07-00, fax 715-14-41; Av Matamoros 205; s/d M\$235/295; Ⓟ) With its beautifully tiled old-world lobby stuffed with antiques, the Baños is certainly one of Pachuca's most striking places to put up. The 56 rooms are fairly crummy, with old fittings and a lack of natural light, although some are much better than others and all have cable TV, phones and clean bathrooms. Parking is an extra M\$30. It's a block southeast of the *zócalo*. **Hotel America** (☎ 715-00-55; Victoria 203; r M\$250) The best budget deal in town, the America is in a charming, quiet courtyard stuffed with plants and flowers and painted orange. Rooms are spacious and clean with small ensuite bathroom and TV.

Gran Hotel Independencia (☎ 715-05-15, www.granhotelindependencia.com; Plaza Independencia 116; s/d M\$420/460; Ⓟ) Set around a charming yellow-painted courtyard, its railings bedecked with plants and flowerpots, the Gran Independencia is central but surprisingly quiet. Rooms overlooking the square are louder but have good views. All rooms are large and fitted out with ensuite bathroom and TV.

Hotel Emily (☎ 715-08-28, 800-501-63-39; www.hotelemily.com.mx; Plaza Independencia; s/d/ste M\$500/550/720;

P   This is the town's smartest hotel, stylishly set out (albeit with some horrendous lobby furniture) on the south side of the *zócalo*. Rooms are very decent, with TVs, temperamental wi-fi and balconies. There's also a good restaurant, room service and English-speaking staff.

Eating

Pastes are available all over town, including at the bus station. Baked in pizza ovens, they contain a variety of fillings probably never imagined by Cornish miners, such as beans, pineapple and rice pudding. Especially popular is Pastes Kiko's, with its main branch next to Gran Hotel Independencia and several others throughout the town.

Mi Antiguo Café (Matamoros 115; breakfasts M\$45-80)

A friendly place to drink coffee with the locals, this busy café on the eastern side of the *zócalo* serves crepes, good espresso, breakfasts and a decent set lunch (M\$60).

Reforma (Matamoros 111; mains M\$70-110) Despite looking like a grand old-world place from the street, inside Reforma is as relaxed as can be and does a mean *huevos rancheros* at breakfast time. Just avoid the dreadful coffee.

Min La Blanca Restaurant Bar ( 715-19-64; Av Matamoros 201; mains M\$45-125) Pachuca's most famous eatery, this pastie specialist is the most atmospheric and friendly in town. *Pastes* here come with a variety of delicious fillings, but set breakfasts, salads and seasonal regional *antojitos* are also on the menu. This is also the best place to come for a drink in the evening.

Getting There & Away

There's a 1st-class bus service to/from Terminal Norte in Mexico City (M\$56, 1¼ hours, every 15 minutes), Poza Rica (M\$112, five hours, six daily) and Tampico (M\$264, eight hours, two daily).

Three scenic roads (Hwys 85, 105 and 130/132D) climb into the forested, often foggy, Sierra Madre Oriental. Buses serving nearby destinations, nearly all of which are 2nd-class, go frequently to and from Tula, Tulancingo and Tamazunchale, while several also go daily to and from Querétaro and Huejutla de Reyes.

Getting Around

Pachuca's bus station is 5km southwest of downtown, on the road to Mexico City. Green-striped *colectivos* marked 'Centro'

pass by Plaza de la Constitución (M\$6), a short walk from the *zócalo*; in the reverse direction, hop on along Av Allende. The trip by taxi costs around M\$30.

AROUND PACHUCA


Parque Nacional El Chico


 771

An easy and very lovely day trip from Pachuca takes you to the charming old mining village **Mineral del Chico**, located inside El Chico National Park – a reserve since 1898. The views here are wonderful, the air is fresh and the mountains have some great hiking, spectacular rock formations and beautiful waterfalls, making this a popular weekend retreat. Ask at the local hotels or the park's visitor centers for details about possible guided outdoor activities.

SLEEPING & EATING

Mineral del Chico is very much a weekender place and can feel like a ghost town during the week. However, rates are lower at hotels that are open and you'll have the surrounding woods almost entirely to yourself.

Hospedaje El Chico ( 715-47-41; Corona del Rosal 1; r M\$350) Located just up the hill from the bus stop, this small, 10-room homestay is the best budget option, with clean if unexciting rooms all with ensuite facilities. Larger master bedrooms cost an extra M\$200.

Hotel Posada del Amanecer ( 715-01-90; www.hotelesecoturísticos.com.mx; Morelos 3; r Sun-Thu M\$450, Fri & Sat M\$600) This 11-room adobe complex has spacious rooms on two levels beside a lovely patio. With no phones or TVs, it's a peaceful getaway. Rooms with fireplaces cost M\$100 extra, and full Mexican meal plans are available. Children under 12 stay free. Low-season rates are 25% less, and all rates include guided hiking and cycling tours. Massage, spa treatments and adventure activities like rock climbing are offered for an extra fee.

Hotel El Paraíso ( 715-56-56; www.hotelesecoturísticos.com.mx; r Sun-Thu from M\$800, Fri & Sat from M\$950;  ) Nestled inside large, well-maintained grounds at the base of the mountain, with a fast-flowing stream running nearby, El Paraíso certainly has a location worthy of its name. The large, modern rooms lack individuality or any great charm, but they're very comfortable and the hotel is the best in town.

There are several **campgrounds** (per car/campsite M\$30) with rudimentary facilities en route to Mineral del Chico between Km 7 and Km 10, plus a **trailer park** (RV hookups M\$100) just inside the park's main entrance gate.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Pachuca, blue-and-white *colectivos* to Mineral del Chico (M\$10) depart every 20 minutes from 8am to 6pm from Calle Hidalgo outside the Mercado Juárez (not to be confused with the market on Guerrero) on the corner of Avenida de la Raza.

Mineral del Monte

Two kilometers past the Hwy 105 turnoff for Parque Nacional El Chico, **Real del Monte** (officially known as Mineral del Monte) was the scene of a miners' strike in 1776 – commemorated as the first strike in the Americas. Most of the town was settled in the 19th century, after a British company commandeered the mines. Cornish-style cottages line many of the steep cobbled streets.

Mine tours (☎ 771-715-27-63; adult/child M\$140/100) descend 250m into some abandoned workings at weekends. The field opposite the Dolores mine was the site of Mexico's first soccer match; there's an English cemetery nearby.

The best place to stay is the charming and traditional 15-room **Hotel Real del Monte** (☎ 717-797-12-02/03; www.hotelesecoturisticos.com.mx; r Sun-Thu from M\$450, Fri & Sat from M\$600; 📞 📺), run by the same high-standard company as the two main hotels in Mineral del Chico.

Second-class buses depart Pachuca's terminal for Mineral del Monte (M\$9, 30 minutes, hourly) as well as *colectivos* (M\$7, 30 minutes, every 30 minutes) from the north-west corner of Plaza de la Constitución, north of the *zócalo*.

EAST OF MEXICO CITY

The views get seriously dramatic as you head east from the capital, the landscape peppered with the incredible peaks of Popocatepetl, Iztaccihuatl and La Malinche rising up to create perfect snow-capped volcanoes visible for miles around. The rugged Sierra Nevada offers scope for anything from invigorating alpine strolls to demanding technical

climbs. Unpredictable Popocatepetl, however, remains off limits due to volcanic activity.

The gorgeous colonial city of Puebla, Mexico's fifth largest, is the dominant regional center, a local transportation hub and a big tourist draw for its cathedral, culinary attractions and well-preserved history. The surrounding state of Puebla is predominantly rural, and home to approximately half a million indigenous people. This enduring presence lends Puebla a rich handicraft legacy, with products including pottery, carved onyx and fine handwoven and embroidered textiles.

Other towns in the region include Tlaxcala, the charming capital of the tiny state of same name, similarly famed for its rich pre-Hispanic and colonial history, and far-flung Cuetzalan, a real treat for anyone with their own transportation wanting to explore a charming, time-forgotten village amid beautiful and dramatic scenery.

PUEBLA

☎ 222 / pop 1.5 million / elevation 2160m

A bastion of conservatism, Catholicism and tradition, Puebla can sometimes feel as if the colonial era in Mexico never quite ended. For the most part this is a positive thing, giving Puebla its fantastic colonial center, a stunning cathedral and a wealth of beautiful churches, although it also contributes to the (quite unfair) Mexican stereotype of the *criollo poblanos* being snobbish and aloof.

The city is well worth a visit, with 70 churches in the historic center alone, more than a thousand colonial buildings adorned with the *azulejos* (painted ceramic tiles) for which the city is famous, and a long culinary history that can be explored in any restaurant or food stall.

A great deal of conservation and restoration has taken place in the Centro Histórico in the wake of the 1999 earthquake, which measured 6.9 on the Richter scale. For a city of its size, Puebla is far more relaxed and less gridlocked than you might expect. Its charming architecture and well-preserved colonial imprint in no way make the city feel like a museum piece, and part of its attraction is that it's so clearly a thriving city yet it still takes great pride in its past.

History

Founded by Spanish settlers in 1531, as Ciudad de los Angeles, with the aim of sur-

along Av Juárez, 2km west of the *zócalo*, is called the Zona Esmeralda.

Information

EMERGENCY

Cruz Roja (Red Cross; ☎ 235-86-31, 235-82-44)

Fire (☎ 245-73-92/77-99)

Tourist Police (☎ 800-903-92-00)

INTERNET ACCESS

Places to get online are abundant; most charge around M\$10 per hour.

Cyberbyte (Map p219; Calle 2 Sur 505B) Cheap international VoIP phone calls.

Internet Club (Map p219; Av 4 Pte) Between Av 5 de Mayo & Calle 3 Nte.

Red Cup (Map p219; cnr Av 2 Ote & Calle 4 Nte) Next to Holiday Inn. Good coffee.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital UPAEP (Map p219; ☎ 229-81-00/02/03; Av 5 Pte 715)

MONEY

ATMs are plentiful throughout the city. Banks on the *zócalo* and Av Reforma have exchange and travelers check facilities.

POST & TELEPHONE

Main Post Office & Telecomm (Map p219; Av 16 de Septiembre s/n)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Municipal Tourist Office (Map p219; ☎ 404-50-08/47; www.puebla.gob.mx; Portal Hidalgo 14; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat, 9am-3pm Sun) English- and French-speaking office (though the website's in Spanish).

State Tourist Office (Map p219; ☎ 246-20-44; Av 5 Ote 3; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-2pm Sun) Faces the cathedral yard. English-speaking staff.

Sights

CATEDRAL

Puebla's superbly impressive **cathedral** (Map p219; cnr Avs 3 Ote & 16 de Septiembre; ☎ 10.30-12.30pm & 4-6pm Mon-Sat), which appears on Mexico's M\$500 bill, occupies the entire block south of the *zócalo*. Its architecture is a blend of severe Herrerresque-renaissance and early baroque styles. Construction began in 1550 but most of it took place under Bishop Juan de Palafox in the 1640s. At 69m, the towers are Mexico's highest. The dazzling interior, the frescoes and the elaborately decorated side chapels are all awesome, and most

have bilingual signs explaining their history and significance.

ZÓCALO

Puebla's central plaza (Map p219), which was being renovated at the time of writing, was originally a marketplace where bullfights, theater and hangings transpired, before it assumed its current arboretum-like appearance in 1854. The surrounding arcades date from the 16th century. The plaza fills with an entertaining mix of clowns, balloon hawkers and ambulatory snack vendors on Sunday evenings. If you're in town on Thursday around 6pm, don't miss the patriotic changing of the flag ceremony, accompanied by the city's marching band.

MUSEO AMPARO

By far Puebla's best sight, this superb private **museum** (Map p219; ☎ 229-38-50; www.museoamparo.com; Calle 2 Sur 708; adult/student M\$35/25, free Mon; ☎ 10am-6pm Wed-Mon), housed in two linked 16th- and 17th-colonial buildings, is a must-see. The first has eight rooms loaded with pre-Hispanic artifacts, which are well displayed, with explanatory information sheets (in English and Spanish) of their production techniques, regional and historical context, and anthropological significance. Using a camera or video costs an additional M\$50.

The collection is staggering, not least because of the thematic continuity in Mexican design – the same motifs appear again and again on dozens of pieces. One obvious example is the collection of pre-Hispanic cult skeleton heads, which look eerily similar to those sold as candy during the Day of the Dead celebrations.

Crossing to the second building, you enter a series of rooms rich with the finest colonial art and furnishings from all over Mexico. This building contains many religious artifacts important to everyday colonial life and a fascinating colonial-era kitchen.

An audioguide (rental M\$10 plus a M\$10 deposit) delivers details about the pre-Hispanic area in Spanish, English, French, German and Japanese. Two-hour guided group tours are offered in English (M\$180) by request, and free two-hour tours in Spanish are given at noon on Sunday. The complex also houses a library, good bookstore, café with set lunches (M\$45) and an upmarket Talavera gift shop.

CENTRAL PUEBLA

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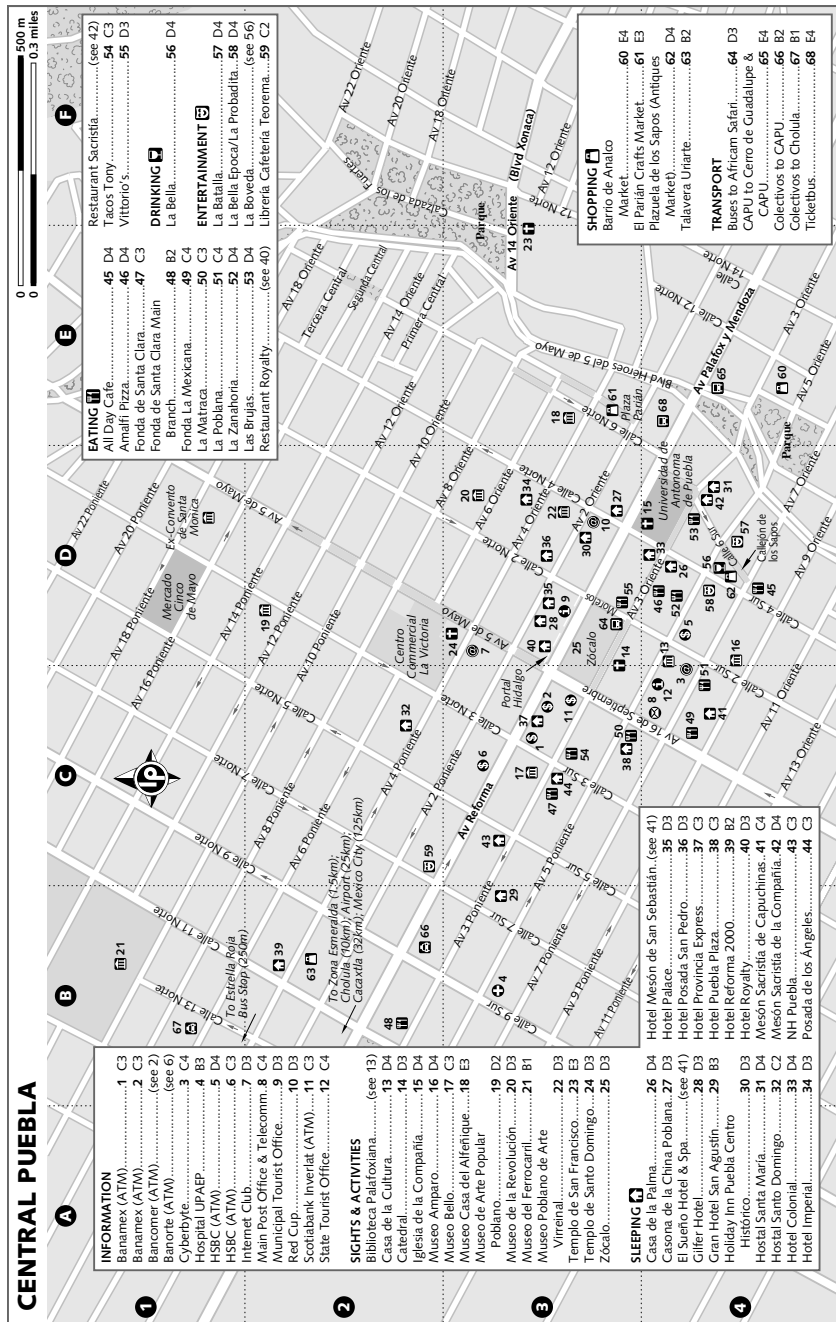
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TEMPLO DE SANTO DOMINGO

This fine Dominican **church** (Map p219; cnr Av 5 de Mayo & Av 4 Pte; admission free; ☒ closed 1-4pm Mon-Sat) features a stunning **Capilla del Rosario** (Rosary Chapel), south of the main altar, which is the main reason to come here. Built between 1650 and 1690, it has a sumptuous baroque proliferation of gilded plaster and carved stone, with angels and cherubim seemingly materializing from behind every leaf. See if you can spot the heavenly orchestra.

MUSEO POBLANO DE ARTE VIRREINAL

Opened in 1999, this top-notch **museum** (Map p219; ☎ 246-58-58; Calle 4 Nte 203; adult/student M\$15/10, free Tue; ☒ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) is housed in the 16th-century Hospital de San Pedro. One gallery displays temporary exhibits on the art of the viceregal period (16th to 19th centuries); another has temporary exhibits of contemporary Mexican art; and the last houses a fascinating permanent exhibit on the hospital's history, including a fine model of the building. The excellent library and bookstore have many art and architecture books in English.

CASA DE LA CULTURA

Occupying the entire block facing the south side of the cathedral, the former bishop's palace is a classic 17th-century brick-and-tile edifice, which now houses government offices, the **Casa de la Cultura** (Map p219; ☎ 232-12-27; Av 5 Ote 5; ☒ 10am-8pm) and the State Tourist Office (p218). Inside are art galleries, a bookstore and cinema, and a congenial café out back in the courtyard.

Upstairs is the **Biblioteca Palafoxiana** (☎ 246-56-13; www.bpm.gob.mx; adult/child M\$10/5, Tue free; ☒ 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun), housing thousands of rare books, including the 1493 *Nuremberg Chronicle*, with more than 2000 engravings.

IGLESIA DE LA COMPAÑÍA

This **Jesuit church** (Map p219; cnr Av Palafox y Mendoza & Calle 4 Sur) with a 1767 Churrigueresque facade is also called Espíritu Santo. Beneath the altar is a tomb said to be that of a 17th-century Asian princess, who was sold into slavery in Mexico and later freed. She was supposedly responsible for the colorful *china poblana* costume – a shawl, frilled blouse, embroidered skirt, and gold and silver adornments. This costume became a kind of 'peasant chic' in the

19th century. But *china* (*chee-nah*) also meant 'maidservant,' and the style may have evolved from Spanish peasant costumes.

Next door is the 16th-century **Edificio Carolino**, now the main building of Universidad Autónoma de Puebla.

MUSEO DEL FERROCARRIL

This excellent **railway museum** (Map p219; 11 Norte 1005; admission free; ☒ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) is housed in what was once Puebla's train station and the spacious grounds surrounding it. While the station building itself was being refurbished at the time of writing, the grounds are crammed full of defunct Mexican rolling stock, from ancient steam-powered monsters to relatively recent passenger carriages. You can go inside many of them, and one carriage contains an excellent collection of photos of various derailments and other disasters that occurred during the 1920s and '30s.

TEMPLO DE SAN FRANCISCO

The north doorway of this **church** (Map p219; Av 14 Ote; ☒ 8am-8pm) is a good example of 16th-century plateresque; the tower and fine brick-and-tile facade were added in the 18th century. In the north chapel is the mummified body of San Sebastián de Aparicio, a Spaniard who migrated to Mexico in 1533, and planned many of the country's roads before becoming a monk. Since he's now the patron saint of drivers, merchants and farm workers, his canonized corpse attracts a dutiful stream of thankful worshippers.

MUSEO DE LA REVOLUCIÓN

This pockmarked 19th-century **house** (Map p219; ☎ 242-10-76; Av 6 Ote 206; adult/student M\$15/10, free Tue; ☒ 10am-4:30pm Tue-Sun) was the scene of the first battle of the 1910 Revolution. Betrayed only two days before a planned uprising against the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, the Serdán family (Aguiles, Máximo, Carmen and Natalia) and 17 others fought 500 soldiers until only Aquiles, their leader, and Carmen were left alive. Aquiles, hidden under the floorboards, might have survived if the damp hadn't provoked a cough that gave him away. Both were subsequently killed. The house retains its bullet holes and some revolutionary memorabilia, including a room dedicated to female insurgents. Tours are available in English, German and Spanish.

MUSEO DE ARTE POPULAR POBLANO

Housed in the 17th-century Ex-Convento de Santa Rosa, this **museum** (Map p219; ☎ 232-77-92; enter at Calle 3 Norte 1203; adult/child M\$15/10, free Tue; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) is home to an extensive collection of Puebla state handicrafts. You must join one of the hourly guided tours (last one at 4pm) to see the fine displays of traditional indigenous costumes, pottery, onyx, glass and metal work. Tours are in Spanish, but there are occasionally English-speaking guides available. *Mole poblano* is said to have originated in the nunnery's kitchen.

MUSEO CASA DEL ALFEÑIQUE

This colonial **house** (Map p219; ☎ 232-42-96; Av 4 Ote 416; adult/student M\$15/10, free Tue; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) is an outstanding example of the over-the-top 18th-century decorative style *alfeñique*, characterized by elaborate stucco ornamentation and named after a candy made from sugar and egg whites. The 1st floor details the Spanish conquest, including indigenous accounts in the form of drawings and murals. The 2nd floor houses a large collection of historic and religious paintings, local furniture and household paraphernalia, although sadly all labeling is in Spanish only.

MUSEO BELLO

This **house** (Map p219; ☎ 232-94-75; Av 3 Pte 302; adult/student M\$15/10, free Tue; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) is filled with the diverse art and crafts collection of the Bello 19th-century industrialist family. There is exquisite French, English, Japanese and Chinese porcelain and a large collection of Puebla Talavera. Optional tours are available in English and Spanish for no charge.

Tours

El Ángel (☎ 273-83-00, 800-712-22-84) has 'tramway' tours (adult/child M\$75/35 for a day pass, M\$40/30 for one ride) carried out in a cunningly disguised bus that loops around Puebla's Centro Histórico hourly between 10am and 6pm every day, with separate trips to Cholula (adult/child M\$75/45) departing daily from the southeast corner of the *zócalo* around 11am. The ticket kiosk is opposite the cathedral on the south side of the plaza. Another full-day bus trip departs from Puebla's CAPU bus station for Teotihuacán (M\$250/150) at 7.15am, taking in the Exconvento San Agustín in Acolman before arriving back in Puebla at 8pm.

Ninety-minute double-decker Turibus tours (adult/child M\$100/50 for a day ticket, M\$75/35 for one tour) of Puebla's Centro Histórico depart every 40 mins daily between 9am and 7pm from in front of the State Tourist Office (p218). Multilingual commentary (English, French, German, Italian, Japanese and Spanish) is delivered via audio headphones. You can hop on and off all day long with the full-price tickets.

Festivals & Events

Starting in late April and ending in late May, the **Feria de Puebla** honors the state's cultural and economic achievements with cultural and music events. In early June, the **Festival del Mole Poblano** celebrates culinary triumphs at several of the city's storied eateries. Leaving no culinary stone unturned, the city's savvy restaurateurs promote a **Festival del Chile en Nogada** in late August. Puebla has also jumped on the **Día de Muertos** bandwagon, with a four-day citywide cultural program starting in late October.

Sleeping

Puebla's hotel scene is crowded and competitive, with a huge range of accommodation options and new arrivals constantly stirring things up. In recent years a slew of boutique three- and four-star hotels aimed at discerning travelers have entered the market, and for the most part standards are high.

Most hotels in the city can be spotted some way off with illuminated red 'H' signs over their entrance, although some of the newer generation are clearly seeking discretion and don't advertise quite so directly. It's worth searching online for special last-minute, seasonal and weekend package rates.

Most colonial buildings have two types of room, interior and exterior, with the former often lacking windows and the latter often having balconies exposed to a noisy street. Nearly all of Puebla's hotels that lack on-site parking have an arrangement with nearby garages.

BUDGET

Gran Hotel San Agustín (Map p219; ☎ 232-50-89, 800-849-27-93; Av 3 Pte 531; r without/with TV M\$170/210; Ⓟ) This fairly dingy place has perfectly fine rooms, but they're not the kind of place you'll want to do anything but sleep in.

Most are lacking natural light and creature comforts, and staff seem pretty indifferent.

Hotel Reforma 2000 (Map p219; ☎ 242-33-63; Av 4 Pte 916; s/d/t M\$200/250/350; 📶) This good-value option has comfortable rooms with TV, phone and ensuite facilities, but it's a little way from the heart of the old town. Built around a pleasant colonial-style courtyard, it has a relaxed and calm feel, although some of the rooms are very dark. Upstairs, exterior rooms with balconies are less dark but noisy.

Posada de los Ángeles (Map p219; ☎ 232-50-06; Av 3 Pte 301; s/d/q M\$200/250/350) This prettily painted colonial house has just six rooms and, while plumbing can be a little rudimentary, this is a great deal for this great location. Go for one of the two rooms that face the street and have charming balconies. The friendly family who run the hotel also run a restaurant at the front that serves food all day.

Hostal Santo Domingo (Map p219; ☎ 232-16-71; hostalstodomingo@yahoo.com.mx; Av 4 Pte 312; dm/s/d/t/q M\$100/250/290/350/445; 📶 ✕ 📺) This is Puebla's only real hostel, offering clean and safe mixed-sex dorms as well as a large range of private rooms. Those at the front of the building enjoy balconies and lots of daylight, and all have high ceilings. Noise from both the bar downstairs and the street can be a problem, but this is definitely a great place to meet other travelers and have fun. There's internet access for M\$8 per hour in the courtyard.

Hotel Provincia Express (Map p219; ☎ 246-35-57; Av Reforma 141; s/d M\$260/350; 📶 📺) Tile fetishists on a budget, look no further! This wonderful place has one of the most stunning traditional interiors in Puebla, and all at knock-down prices. Refitted in 2007, the rooms themselves are simple but modern and spotlessly clean, while the corridors and facade are superb.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Imperial (Map p219; ☎ 242-49-80, 800-874-49-80; www.hotelimperialpuebla.com; Av 4 Ote 212; s/d incl breakfast M\$380/480; 📶 📺) The Imperial is in quite a shabby state, but it's friendly and generally good value. Lonely Planet readers get a discount, making a double cost M\$400. Rooms are unexciting and a bit on the old side and the internet access is via an antique PC in the lobby, but the location is good and prices include breakfast.

Hotel Puebla Plaza (Map p219; ☎ 246-31-75, 800-926-27-03; www.hotelpueblaplaza.com; Av 5 Pte 111; s/d M\$382/499; 📶 📺) This charming place enjoys a

great location and has very comfortable rooms and good service. As with many colonial-style hotels, the rooms at the back are depressing, with little or no natural light, and it's worth paying extra for rooms on the street with little balconies. All rooms have TV, phone, private bathroom and free wi-fi.

Hotel Palace (Map p219; ☎ 232-24-30; hotel_palace_puebla@hotmail.com; Av 2 Ote 13; s/d/t M\$430/580/720; 📶 📺) The serviceable, if somewhat optimistically named, Palace largely caters to business travelers with comfortable rooms (if sometimes short on natural light), free parking and wi-fi in the lobby. The lively El Ranchito restaurant in the lobby is also good.



Hostal Santa María (Map p219; ☎ 405-98-90; www.suhostalsantamaria.com; Av 3 Ote 603; s/d incl breakfast M\$450/650; 📶) Built around a small, pink-painted courtyard, the Santa María has just five spacious rooms, all of which have some charm, even if some of the choices – such as the garish duvet covers or the cheap shower units – leave something to be desired. All the well-kept rooms have phone, cable TV, tiled bathroom and rustic furnishings, and all but one have balconies facing the street below (very loud on Friday and Saturday nights).

Gilfer Hotel (Map p219; ☎ 309-98-00; www.gilferhotel.com.mx; Av 2 Ote 11; s/d/ste M\$456/561/838; 📶 📺) Somewhat marooned in 1986, the Gilfer nevertheless continues to attract a loyal stream of customers, who come for the great location, large rooms and the excellent views you get from higher floors here. There are 92 simple yet comfortable rooms with safe, phone and satellite TV.

Hotel Royalty (Map p219; ☎ 242-02-02, 800-638-99-99; www.hotelr.com; Portal Hidalgo 8; s/d/t M\$465/566/645, ste M\$670-840; 📶 📺) Located on the *zócalo*'s north side, with an entrance off the arcade, the 45-room Royalty is a friendly, well-kept colonial-style place. The price hike here is for the superb location, and rooms are nothing special, but they're generally spotlessly clean and comfortable enough, although with the familiar natural daylight problems that haunt the city. The junior suites with cathedral views merit the extra pesos. Downstairs, the sidewalk restaurant-café is perfect for people-watching.

our pick Hotel Colonial (Map p219; ☎ 246-46-12, 800-013-00-00; www.colonial.com.mx; Calle 4 Sur 105; s/d/tr/q M\$590/690/790/890; 📶) This utter charmer is hard not to love, even though its size and good value has made it a magnet for tour groups.





Once part of a 17th-century Jesuit monastery and existing as a hotel in various forms since the mid-19th century, the place oozes heritage from its many gorgeously furnished rooms (half of the 67 rooms have retained colonial décor, and half are modern). There's a good restaurant, lobby wi-fi and a fantastic gilt-clad elevator complete with liveried porters. Noise from live music and the street can be a problem, but otherwise this is an excellent choice with an unbeatable vibe and location. Book ahead.

Casa de la Palma (Map p217; ☎ 246-14-37; www.casadelapalmapuebla.com; Av 3 Ote 217; r/ste from M\$825/1062;  ) This sumptuous conversion of a colonial town house to a boutique hotel is a winner. If you want to pretend you're a 18th-century *poblano* aristocrat, look no further than the Porfiriana suite, stunning for its sheer size and over-the-top rococo flourishes. Opened in 2007, this hotel was still in its early days when we visited. Small qualms such as patchy wi-fi coverage and a lack of breakfast options will no doubt soon be resolved.

TOP END

Hotel Mesón de San Sebastián (Map p219; ☎ 242-65-23; www.mesonsansebastian.com; Av 9 Ote 6; r M\$950, ste M\$1300-1500;  ) This boutique hotel gets top marks for being family oriented (a rarity in the world of designer bed sheets and ruthlessly selected *objets d'art*). Each of the 18 rooms is individually decorated with simplicity and named for a saint. The master suites are particularly stunning, yet all rooms have TV, phone, minibar and antique furnishings.

NH Puebla (Map p217; ☎ 309-19-19, 800-726-05-28; www.nh-hotels.com; Calle 5 Sur 105; r from M\$990;    ) This excellent and surprisingly affordable hotel is a new arrival on the scene, and very welcome it is too. Aiming itself equally at business travelers and pleasure seekers, there's a good mix of style and service while never becoming too stuffy. The rooms are large, sleek and almost boutique, with extremely comfortable beds, good views and access to the great rooftop bar and pool.





Hotel Posada San Pedro (Map p219; ☎ 891-57-00; Av 2 Ote 202; www.hotelposadasanpedro.com.mx; r/ste M\$1200/1500;    ) This classy old timer has been a reliable and comfortable base in Puebla for three decades. Although some of the rooms are not large and in some cases could do with some modernizing, there's a great vibe here, a charming courtyard and

pool, plus a good restaurant. Regular special offers see the room rates slashed by up to 50%.

El Sueño Hotel & Spa (Map p219; ☎ 232-64-23/89, 800-690-84-66; www.elsueno-hotel.com; Av 9 Ote 12; s/d M\$1400/1520, ste incl breakfast M\$1875-2340;   ) This impressive boutique place is an oasis of minimalist chic amid the colonial bustle of Puebla's old town. Its pride and joy is the fact that the 11 suites are thematically decorated, each after a different female Mexican artist (though the sleek, high-ceilinged, contemporary rooms have little to do with the artists themselves and seem to owe more to *Wallpaper Magazine*). Huge shower rooms, plasma screen TVs, wi-fi and full entertainment systems make this a very stylish and fun place to kick back.

Mesón Sacristía de Capuchinas (Map p219; ☎ 232-80-88, 800-712-40-28, in the US 800-728-9098; www.mesones-sacristia.com; Av 9 Ote 16; r incl breakfast M\$1600;  ) This wonderful boutique antique hotel has just six beautifully presented rooms all featuring luxurious four-poster beds and various carefully selected *objets d'art* scattered around. The romantic El Santuario Restaurant is open on guests' request and crafts inspired contemporary takes on traditional Mexican cuisine. Breakfast in bed is simply divine. Perfect for romance, this is one of Puebla's very best options.

Mesón Sacristía de la Compañía (Map p219; ☎ 242-35-54, 800-712-40-28, in the US 800-728-9098; www.mesones-sacristia.com; Calle 6 Sur 304; r/ste incl breakfast M\$1600/2000; ) The eight rooms in Mesón Sacristía's other Puebla property are set around a bright pink, somewhat eclectically decorated courtyard. The junior suites are actually just rooms, while the two master suites are bigger and worthy of the title. Admittedly some of the décor is an acquired taste, but the restaurant gets universally positive reviews and serves aromatic American breakfasts and refined *poblano* cuisine. The service is extremely good.

Holiday Inn Puebla Centro Histórico (Map p217; ☎ 223-66-00; www.holiday-inn.com/pueblacentro; Av 2 Ote 2; r/ste from M\$1750/2300;    ) In terms of individuality this has to be one of the least-typical Holiday Inns in the world – think gorgeous neocolonial lobby, sleek bar and minimalist rooms. Excellently located and professionally run, this is a very good choice for anyone looking for an upmarket, modern hotel.

Casona de la China Poblana (Map p219; ☎ 242-56-21; www.casonadelachinapoblana.com; cnr Calle 4 Nt & Palafox de Mendoza; ste M\$2225-4000; (P)) Puebla's latest boutique hotel has spared no expense – it's stunning and knows it. Shamelessly dubbing itself Puebla's 'most exclusive hotel,' China Poblana is certainly the priciest, with gorgeous suites decorated in a mixture of styles, a lovely courtyard and its Ekos restaurant with its super-stylish El Aposentillo bar.

Eating

Puebla's culinary heritage, of which *poblanos* are rightly proud, can be explored in a range of eateries throughout the city, from humble streetside food stalls to elegant colonial-style restaurants, although given the city's renown as a culinary center, it's surprising how few truly excellent restaurants there are. For something really special your best bet is the restaurants of the top Puebla hotels.

RESTAURANTS

Las Brujas (Map p219; ☎ 242-76-53; Av 3 Ote 407; mains M\$40-80) Near Callejón de los Sapos, this fantastic hipster café is popular with local students and serves up a mean plate of *tacos al pastor* and an endless stream of ice-cold beers. A great hangout with good live music in the evenings.

Casa Puebla (Map p219; ☎ 403-32-22; Portal Morelos 2; mains M\$40-90) This eccentric café features effigies of such luminaries as Fidel Castro, Marilyn Monroe, Gandhi and Napoleon sitting around drinking and smoking together on the walls. It's another popular place on the *zócalo* and does excellent breakfasts for around M\$60.

All Day Cafe (Map p219; ☎ 242-44-54; Ave 7 Ote; sandwiches M\$45) This great little joint just off the Plazuela de los Sapos serves up a great range of sandwiches, salads, pastries, coffees and cocktails all day long (as the name would suggest). It's housed in a bright little courtyard and makes a great pit stop when shopping for antiques and crafts.

Fonda La Mexicana (Map p219; ☎ 232-67-47; Av 16 de Septiembre 706; mains M\$45-100; ☎ 11am-8pm) This unassuming eatery serves a great *mole poblano*, plus a set lunch (M\$47) with a few options and other good-value Puebla and Oaxaca specialties.

Restaurant Royalty (Map p219; ☎ 242-47-40; Portal Hidalgo 8; mains M\$50-150) The smart café-eatery at Hotel Royalty (p222) has a breakfast buffet and popular outdoor tables where you can

watch the world go by for the price of a cappuccino. It also does well-prepared meat and fish dishes, and seasonal *poblano* treats such as *gusanos de maguey* (maguey worms).

Our pick Amalfi Pizzeria (Map p219; ☎ 403-77-97; Av 3 Ote 207B; pizzas M\$60-120) A new addition to the Puebla dining scene is this excellent pizzeria, a world away from the touristy feel of the *zócalo* and popular with local students. This pizza is undoubtedly the best in town, there's a good selection of wine, and there are other traditional Italian dishes available. There's also takeaway service.

Vittorio's (Map p219; ☎ 232-79-00; Morelos 106; mains M\$70-180) Despite being somewhat pricey, this Italian bar-restaurant on the *zócalo* is always busy with locals and visitors alike. The pizzas are good, and there's a great atmosphere and sidewalk seating, not to mention live music on Friday and Saturday.

Fonda de Santa Clara (Map p219; ☎ 246-19-19; www.fondadesantaclara.com; Av 3 Pte 920; mains M\$75-130) This classic *poblano* restaurant, founded in the 1960s by Alicia Torres de Araujo, focuses on local seasonal specialties, from maguey worms to grasshoppers. If you don't happen to be of the bug-eating persuasion, there's plenty of more standard *comida poblana* on offer, including enchiladas and chicken *mole*. This main branch, in a well-restored colonial mansion, is very festive since it attracts locals celebrating special occasions. It also has a gift shop full of Talavera items and typical sweets. There is a smaller branch at Av 3 Pte 307.

Restaurant Sacristía (Map p219; ☎ 242-45-13; Calle 6 Sur 304; mains M\$85-110; ☎ 8am-11:30pm Mon-Sat, 8am-6pm Sun) This award-winning restaurant, in the delightful colonial patio of the Mesón Sacristía de la Compañía (p223), is an elegant place for a meal of authentic *mole* and creative twists on rich *poblano* cuisine, or a cocktail or coffee and dessert in the intimate Confesionario bar. Live piano and violin soloists lend a romantic ambience most nights from around 9pm. If you like what you taste, inquire about their small-group cooking classes.

CHEAP EATS

Tacos Tony (Map p219; ☎ 240-94-31; Av 3 Pte 149; tacos M\$10-20) Follow your nose – or ring for delivery – for a torta or *pan árabe* taco (made with pita bread instead of tortillas), stuffed with seasoned pork sliced from a trio of enormous grilling cones.

PUEBLA'S UNFORGETTABLE SEASONAL TREATS

Puebla is rightly famous for its gastronomy (and especially for *mole poblano*, the classic spicy sauce you must seek out at a top restaurant while you're in the city to have really experienced Puebla). However, the city also has a range of unusual delicacies not likely to make it to your local Mexican restaurant any time soon. These are all seasonal, but any serious foodie should be brave and try whatever's cooking!

- **Escamoles** (March–June) Ant larvae, a delicacy that looks like rice, usually sautéed in butter. Delicious!
- **Gusanos de maguey** (April–May) Worms that inhabit maguey agave plants, fried in a drunken chili-and-pulque sauce.
- **Huitlacoche** (June–October) Corn mushrooms are an inky black fungus delicacy with an enchanting, earthy flavor. Sometimes spelt *cuitlacoche*.
- **Chiles en nogada** (July–September) Large green chilies stuffed with dried fruit and meat, covered with a creamy walnut sauce and sprinkled with red pomegranate seeds.
- **Chapulines** (October–November) Grasshoppers purged of digestive matter, then dried, smoked or fried in lime and chili powder.

La Poblana (Map p219; ☎ 246-09-93; Av 7 Ote 17; mains M\$15-30; 🕒 10am–6pm) Around the corner from the Museo Amparo, this small, friendly place whips up (and delivers) a dozen styles of authentic Puebla *cemitas* (a type of sandwich with meat and cheese).

Super Tortas Puebla (Map p219; ☎ 298-25-05; Av 3 Pte 311; tortas M\$14-55) Marinated chilies, carrots and onions spice up the basic breakfasts and super sandwiches at this cozy nook. Feeling lazy? Call for delivery.

La Zanahoria (Map p219; ☎ 232-48-13; Av 5 Ote 206; mains M\$20-40; 🕒 11am–10pm) This entirely meat-free godsend for vegetarians is a great place for lunch, moments from the *zócalo* and the Museo Amparo. The restaurant is split into two – the express service area (including a juice bar and a health food shop) in the front and the more relaxed service of the spacious interior colonial courtyard where everything from veggie *hamburguesas* to *nopales rellenos* (stuffed cactus paddles) are served up. Set meals are available for M\$50.

La Matraca (Map p219; ☎ 242-60-89; Av 5 Pte 105; mains M\$20-50) This cheap and pleasant place in an attractive colonial mansion's courtyard with live salsa music is a good place for a big breakfast (the all you-can-eat buffet is M\$43) or a filling lunch or dinner of traditional *poblana* classics.

Drinking

By day, students pack the sidewalk tables near the university, along the pedestrian-only

block of Av 3 Ote. At night, macho mariachis lurk around Callejón de los Sapos – Calle 6 Sur between Avs 3 and 7 Ote – but they're being crowded out by the bars on nearby Plazuela de los Sapos. These rowdy watering holes, especially **La Bella** (Plazuela de los Sapos s/n), are packed pretty much every night of the week. After dark, many of these places become live-music venues.

Entertainment

Check the Spanish-language online monthly **A dónde Puebla** (www.adondepuebla.com) for the low-down on cultural events. Or pick up the free biweekly *Andanzas* cultural guide at a tourist office. The weekly *Los Subterráneos*, a free tabloid supplement to the newspaper *Síntesis*, reviews alternative music in Puebla, Tlaxcala and Hidalgo.

our pick **Librería Cafetería Teorema** (Map p219; ☎ 242-10-14; Av Reforma 540; cover M\$15; 🕒 10am–2:30pm & 4:30pm–3am) One of our very favorite places in the city is this wonderful old-world bookstore-café that fills up in the evenings with a mixed arty-student-professor crowd. This is where to catch up with the local bohemian scene. There are different genres of live music each night from 9:30pm to 1am.

La Bella Epoca/La Probadita (Map p219; Av 5 Ote 209; cover M\$20-30) This eclectic hangout attracts a diverse crowd with live music most nights, ranging from dub, reggae and drum 'n bass to gothic and heavy metal.

Other nightspots:

La Batalla (Map p219; Calle 6 Sur 506) Favors karaoke and thumping dance music.

La Boveda (Map p219; Calle 6 Sur 503) Features rock and *rock en español*.

Puebla's student population has long made the clubs in Cholula its destination on Friday and Saturday night, meaning Puebla itself is quiet. Dancing hot spots include the disco **Portos Tropical** (Map p217; ☎ 284-06-11; Av Juárez 2923; 🕒 10pm-5am Wed-Sat), which features salsa and merengue.

Shopping

West of the Museo De Arte Popular Poblano, several shops along Av 18 Pte sell the colorful, handpainted ceramics known as Talavera. Designs reveal Asian, Spanish-Arabic and Mexican indigenous influences. Bigger pieces are expensive, delicate and difficult to transport. Smaller tiles fetch up to M\$50, quality plates upwards of M\$100. The finest Puebla pottery of all is the white ceramic dishware called *majolica*.

A number of shops along Av 6 Ote, east of Av 5 de Mayo, sell traditional handmade Puebla sweets, such as *camotes* (candied sweet potato sticks) and *jamoncillos* (bars of pumpkin seed paste). Stay away if you're allergic to bees!

A wonderful array of quirky antique shops dominates Callejón de los Sapos, around the corner of Av 5 Ote and Calle 6 Sur. Most shops open from 10am to 7pm. On Sunday, the **Plazuela de los Sapos** (Map p219) is the site of a lively outdoor antiques market. It's great for browsing, with a wonderful variety of old books, furniture and bric-a-brac.

Talavera Uriarte (Map p219; ☎ 232-15-98; Av 4 Pte 911; www.uriartetlalavera.com.mx; 🕒 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10:30am-5:30pm Sat, 11:30am-4:30pm Sun) Unlike most of Puebla's Talavera shops, Uriarte still makes pottery onsite, and it has a factory and showroom. Factory tours (M\$60) are offered Monday to Friday until 1pm in English and French, and later in Spanish as groups arrive.

El Parián crafts market (Map p219; Plaza Parián) Browse local Talavera, onyx and trees of life, as well as the sorts of leather, jewelry and textiles that you find in other cities. Some of the work is shoddy, but there's also some quality handiwork, and prices are reasonable.

Barrio de Anasco market (Map p219) Held on Sunday between Avs 3 Ote and 5 Ote, this major market across town is where flowers, sweets, paintings and other items are sold.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Aeropuerto Hermanos Serdán (PBC; ☎ 232-00-32; www.aeropuerto.puebla.com), 22km west of Puebla off Hwy 190, has daily flights to/from Guadalajara and Tijuana by Aero California, to/from Mexico City (except Sunday) and Monterrey (except Saturday) with Aeromar, and to/from Houston with Continental. It also has regular connections to Acapulco and Tijuana with Avolar.

BUS

Puebla's full-service **Central de Autobuses de Puebla** (Map p217; CAPU; ☎ 249-72-11; Blvd Norte 4222) is 4km north of the *zócalo* and 1.5km off the autopista. Tickets for most routes can also be purchased downtown via **Ticketbus** (Map p219; ☎ 232-19-52; www.ticketbus.com.mx; Av Palafox y Mendoza 604; 🕒 9:30am-5pm) inside the Multipack office.

Most buses to and from Puebla use Mexico City's TAPO, with additional half-hourly services to Terminal Norte. The trip takes about two hours. Three bus lines have frequent services: the deluxe line **ADO GL** (☎ 800-702-80-00; www.ado.com.mx) runs buses every 40 minutes (M\$104); **Estrella Roja** (ER; ☎ 800-712-22-84; www.estrellaroja.com.mx) runs 1st-class buses (M\$104) every 20 minutes and 2nd-class buses (M\$96) every 10 minutes; and **AU** (☎ 800-702-80-00; www.ticketbus.com.mx) offers 2nd-class trips (M\$96) every 12 minutes. **Estrella de Oro** (EDO; ☎ 55-5689-3955; www.estrelladeoro.com.mx) and **UNO** (☎ 800-702-80-00; www.ado.com.mx) also service this area.

From Puebla's CAPU, there's daily service to most everywhere to the south and east:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Cuernavaca	executive M\$180	3½hr	hourly (EDO)
	1st-class M\$140	3hr	hourly (EDO)
Huamantla	M\$20	1hr	hourly
Oaxaca	deluxe M\$212	4hr	4 daily (AU)
	1st-class M\$256	4¼hr	4 daily (ADO)
Cuatla	M\$100	2¼hr	hourly
Tlaxcala	M\$16	30min	every 10 min
Cuetzalan	M\$118	4hrs	hourly
Tehuacán	M\$70	2hrs	hourly
Veracruz	M\$184	3½hr	hourly

Frequent 'Cholula' *colectivos* (M\$6, 30 minutes) stop at the corner of Av 6 Pte and Calle 13 Nte in Puebla.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Puebla is 123km east of Mexico City by Hwy 150D (tolls total about M\$100). East of Puebla, 150D continues to Orizaba (negotiating a cloudy, winding 22km descent from the 2385m-high Cumbres de Maltrata en route), Córdoba and Veracruz.

Getting Around

Most hotels and places of interest are within walking distance of Puebla's *zócalo*. From the CAPU bus station, take a taxi to the city center (flat rate M\$50) – buy a ticket from the kiosk but beware of overpriced touts and take an official cab from the dispatch office. Alternatively, exit the station at the 'Autobuses Urbanos' sign and go up a ramp leading to the bridge over Blvd Norte. Once across the bridge, walk west (toward VIPS coffee shop) and stop in front of the Chedraui supermarket. From there, catch combi 40 to Av 16 de Septiembre, four blocks south of the *zócalo*. The ride takes 15 to 20 minutes.

From the city center to the bus station, catch any northbound 'CAPU' *colectivo* from Blvd 5 de Mayo at Av Palafox y Mendoza, three blocks east of the *zócalo*, or from the corner of Calle 9 Sur and Av Reforma. All city buses and *colectivos* cost M\$5.

AFRICAM SAFARI

One of Mexico's best places to see both native and exotic wildlife is this drive-through **safari park** (☎ 222-281-70-00, in Mexico City 55-5575-2731; www.africansafari.com.mx; Km 16.5 on road to Presa Valsequillo; adult/child M\$150/140; 🕒 10am-5pm; 📍). More than 3000 animals – among them rhinoceroses, bears and tigers – live in spacious 'natural' settings, and you can view them up close from within your car, a taxi or an Africam bus. It's best to visit first thing in the morning, when the animals are most active. **Estrella Roja** (☎ 222-273-83-00) runs daily round-trip buses from CAPU to Africam (adult/child M\$185/175, including admission and a four-hour park tour). Similarly priced Estrella Roja tours also depart from Puebla's *zócalo* daily at 11:30am.

CHOLULA

☎ 222 / pop 152,000 / elevation 2170m

Almost a suburb of Puebla these days, but far different in history and feel, the town of Cholula is home to the widest pyramid ever built, the Pirámide Tepanapa. Despite this

claim to fame, it's a surprisingly ignored place, largely because, unlike its contemporaries Teotihuacán or Tula, the pyramid has been so neglected over the centuries as to be virtually unrecognizable as a manmade structure. Indeed, the pyramid was so overgrown even when the Spanish arrived that they built a church on the top, not realizing that their 'hill' was actually a native religious site.

Cholula itself is dominated by the pyramid and its famous church, but it has a buzzing nightlife thanks to its big student population and plenty of good eating and accommodation options centered on the huge *zócalo*.

History

Between around AD 1 and 600, Cholula grew into an important religious center, while powerful Teotihuacán flourished 100km to the northwest. The Great Pyramid was added several times. Around AD 600, Cholula fell to the Olmeca-Xicallanca, who built nearby Cacaxtla. Sometime between AD 900 and 1300, Toltecs and/or Chichimecs took over, and it later fell under Aztec dominance. There was also artistic influence from the Mixtecs to the south.

By 1519, Cholula's population had reached 100,000, and the Great Pyramid was already overgrown. Cortés, having befriended the neighboring Tlaxcalans, traveled here at the request of the Aztec ruler Moctezuma. Aztec warriors set an ambush, but the Tlaxcalans tipped off Cortés about the plot and the Spanish struck first. Within a day, they killed 6000 Cholulans before the city was looted by the Tlaxcalans. Cortés vowed to build a church here for each day of the year, or one on top of every pagan temple, depending on which legend you prefer. Today there are 39 churches – far from 365, but still plenty for a small town.

The Spanish developed nearby Puebla to overshadow the old pagan center, and Cholula never regained its importance, especially after a severe plague in the 1540s decimated its indigenous population.

Orientation & Information

Buses and *colectivos* stop two or three blocks north of the *zócalo*. Two blocks to the south-east, the pyramid, with its domed church on top, is tough to miss. Banks are on the *zócalo*'s south side, and all change cash and have ATMs.



Gioconda Internet (Calle 3 Ote; per hr M\$15) West of the zócalo.

El Globo Lavandería (Calle 5 Ote 9) per kilo M\$10 – minimum 3kg – for machine wash-and-dry service.

Tourist Office (☎ 261-23-93; Portal Guerrero s/n; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat & Sun)

Sights

ZONA ARQUEOLÓGICA

The incredible **Pirámide Tepanapa** looks more like a hill than a pyramid, but it's still the town's big draw, and, with miles of tunnels veining the inside of the structure, it's no let-down. The **Zona Arqueológica** (☎ 235-94-24, 235-97-20; admission M\$37, Spanish/English guide M\$90/120; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun) comprises the excavated areas around the pyramid and the tunnels

underneath. You enter via the tunnel on the north side, which takes you on a spooky route through the center of the pyramid. Several pyramids were built on top of each other during various reconstructions, and over 8km of tunnels have been dug beneath the pyramid by archaeologists to penetrate each stage. From the access tunnel, a few hundred meters long, you can see earlier layers of the building. You don't need a guide to follow the tunnel through to the structures on the pyramid's south and west sides, but since nothing is labeled, they can be helpful in pointing out and explaining various features.

The access tunnel emerges on the east side of the pyramid, from where you can follow a path around to the **Patio de los Altares** on the

south side. Ringed by platforms and unique diagonal stairways, this plaza was the main approach to the pyramid. Three large stone slabs on its east, north and west sides are carved in the Veracruz interlocking scroll design. At its south end is an Aztec-style altar in a pit, dating from shortly before the Spanish conquest. On the mound's west side is a reconstructed section of the latest pyramid, with two earlier exposed layers.

The Pirámide Teapanapa is topped by the brightly decorated **Santuario de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios**. It's a classic symbol of conquest, but possibly an inadvertent one, as the church may have been built before the Spanish realized the mound contained a pagan temple. You can climb to the church for free via a path starting near the northwest corner of the pyramid.

The small **Museo de Sitio de Cholula** (Calz San Andrés; admission incl with site ticket), across the road from the ticket office and down some steps, provides the best introduction to the site: a cutaway model of the pyramid mound showing the various superimposed structures.

ZÓCALO

The **Ex-Convento de San Gabriel** (also known as Plaza de la Concordia), facing the east side of Cholula's huge *zócalo*, includes a tiny but interesting **Franciscan library** and three fine churches, all of which will appeal to travelers interested in antique books and early religious and Franciscan history. On the left, as you face the ex-convent from the *zócalo*, is the Arabic-style **Capilla Real**, which has 49 domes and dates from 1540. In the middle is the 19th-century **Capilla de la Tercera Orden**, and on the right is the **Templo de San Gabriel**, founded in 1530 on the site of a pyramid.

The excellent **Museo de la Ciudad de Cholula** (☎ 261-90-53; cnr Av 5 de Mayo & Calle 4 Pte; M\$20/10 adult/child; ☎ 9am-3pm Thu-Tue) is housed in a fantastically restored colonial building on the *zócalo*. The small but strong collection includes ceramics and jewelry from the Pirámide Teapanapa, as well as later colonial paintings and sculptures. Most interestingly, you can watch through a glass wall as museum employees painstakingly restore smashed ceramics and repair jewelry.

Festivals & Events

Of Cholula's many festivals, perhaps the most important is the **Festival de la Virgen de**

los Remedios, celebrated the week of September 1, with daily traditional dances atop the Great Pyramid. Cholula's regional **feria** is held during the following weeks. On both the spring and fall equinoxes, a **Quetzalcóatl ritual** is re-enacted, with poetry, sacrificial dances, firework displays and music performed on pre-Hispanic instruments at the pyramids. On **Shrove Tuesday**, masked Carnival dancers re-enact a battle between French and Mexican forces in Huejotzingo, 14km northwest of Cholula off Hwy 190.

Sleeping

With a clutch of good-value hotels and one real boutique favorite, Cholula makes a good alternative to staying in Puebla for those who prefer a laid-back pace. The town is also an increasingly popular base camp for climbing and trekking the east side of the Sierra Madre Oriental.

Hotel Reforma (☎ 247-01-49; Calle 4 Sur 101; s/d M\$180/200; ☎) If you're not completely put off by the crumbling exterior, you'll see that the interior fares much better – a charming pink-and-white painted courtyard divided into 11 simple but clean rooms, all with their own bathrooms and plenty of character. Overnight parking costs M\$20.

Plaza Santa Rosa Hotel (☎ 247-03-41, 247-77-19; psrosa_reserv@yahoo.com.mx; Portal Guerrero 5; s & d M\$400, t & q M\$500; ☎) Unusually located inside a shopping arcade just on the side of the *zócalo*, the Plaza Santa Rosa has 27 rather dark rooms, but they're spacious and comfortable with phone and TV. Parking and wi-fi are included in the price.

Casa Calli (☎ 261-5607; www.hotelcasacalli.com; Portal Guerrero 11; s/d M\$450/500; ☎) If you fancy a boutique feel on a budget, this excellent hotel is a great option. Right on the *zócalo*, the hotel contains 40 stripped-down, stylishly minimalist rooms, a good pool, free wi-fi, friendly staff and an Italian restaurant.

Villa Arqueológica Cholula (☎ 273-79-00, 800-514-82-44; Calle 2 Pte 601; r Sun-Wed M\$850, Thu-Sat M\$950, ste from M\$1200; ☎) This boutique 44-room Club Med property is within walking distance of the pyramid, across a large field of flowers. Rooms (most with one double bed and one single bed) are well furnished, and there are lush gardens, tennis courts, cozy fireplace-lit common areas and a good international restaurant.

our pick **Hotel La Quinta Luna** (☎ 247-89-15; www.laquintaluna.com; Calle 3 Sur 702; r incl breakfast M\$1650,

ste incl breakfast M\$1900-3200; (P) (☎) This rarefied hotel oozes colonial style and is popular with a wealthy weekend crowd. The six rooms occupy a thick-walled 17th-century mansion set around a charming garden and are a gorgeous mix of colonial antiques, contemporary art, plush bedding and wired amenities such as flat-screen TVs, DVD players and in-room wi-fi. There's a great library, and meetings with the featured artists are happily arranged. The excellent restaurant is open to non-guests who reserve.

Eating

Café Enamorada (mains M\$30-60; ☎ 9am-11pm) Facing the *zócalo*, this café is one of the most popular places in town, at least on weeknights and for its Sunday brunch buffet. There's live music most nights and decent doses of the usual sandwiches, tacos and quesadillas.

Güero's (☎ 247-21-88; Av Hidalgo 101; mains M\$35-80; ☎ 9am-11pm; ♿) Decorated with antique photos of Cholula, this is a lively, family-friendly hangout. Besides pizza, pasta and burgers, hearty Mexican choices include *pozole*, *cemitas* and quesadillas, all served with a delicious *salsa roja*.

Jazztlán (☎ 304-26-43; Morelos 419; mains M\$40-60; ☎ 6pm-2am Wed-Sat) Welcome to the home of jazz in Cholula. This fantastic restaurant has a small performing space where there's jazz four nights a week. Food ranges from tasty pizza to salmon muffins and a delicious garlic mushroom *cazulilita*.

Los Jarrones (☎ 247-10-98; Portal Guerrero 7; mains M\$45-90) Underneath the plaza's attractive arcade, this casual indoor/outdoor eatery serves set breakfasts and a wide menu of good-value regional dishes. There's a great terrace overlooking the plaza that is a favorite meeting point for young Cholulans.

El Rincón de Rivadavia (☎ 247-79-63; Calzada San Andrés 10; mains M\$45-120; ☎ 11am-10pm Tue-Sun) This friendly, classy restaurant is set in a sweet courtyard near the Pyramid. The menu is classic *poblan*o cuisine – try their *mole*, which they claim is the best in Cholula.

Comedor el Portón (☎ 247-02-73; Av Hidalgo 302; mains M\$60; ☎ 9.30am-midday & 1-6pm) The Portal is popular for its daily set menu (M\$55), which includes a choice of three soups, a main course (chicken, beef or vegetables), coffee and dessert. It's set in a pleasant courtyard with a skylight and attracts locals as much as tourists.

Drinking & Entertainment

La Lunita (cnr Calzada San Andrés & 6 Nte) is a fantastic family-run bar (with good food too), decorated with an incredible collection of old advertising posters and other knick-knacks. It makes for a great drinking spot in the shadow of the Pyramid.

Bar Reforma (cnr Av 4 Nte & Calzada San Andrés) Attached to Hotel Reforma, Cholula's oldest drinking spot is a classic, smoky corner abode with swinging doors, specializing in iceless margaritas and freshly prepared sangrias. After 9pm, it's popular with the university pre-clubbing crowd.

Tacos Robert (cnr 14 Oriente & Av 5 de Mayo) Across the street, this place, where the beer is cold and *fútbol* is always on the *tele*, is also popular with the pre-clubbing university crowd.

East of the pyramid on Calle 14 Pte, around the Av 5 de Mayo intersection, bars and discos compete for the short attention span of the university students (many of whom live across the street in a gated complex) after 10pm Thursday to Saturday. The most consistently popular club on this stretch is **Mandrágora** (cnr Calzada San Andrés & Calle 3 Sur; no cover), a cavernous dance hall with different music each night. Much of Cholula's nightlife is now to be found in warehouse-like *antros* and discos (where cover averages M\$50 to M\$150), a couple of kilometers east, near the university exit of the 'Recta,' as the Cholula-Puebla highway is known. Your best bet is to quiz students or ask a cab driver where the current hot spots are. Wherever you end up, dress to impress and come prepared to wait to get in.

Getting There & Away

Frequent *colectivos* to Puebla (M\$7, 20 to 30 minutes) leave from the corner of Calle 5 Pte and Calle 3 Sur. Estrella Roja runs hourly buses between Mexico City's TAPO and Puebla that stop in Cholula (M\$61) on Calle 12 Pte. There are also hourly buses from here to Mexico City's Benito Juárez airport (M\$155).

TONANTZINTLA & ACATEPEC

Tonantzintla is a few kilometers south of Cholula, off Hwy 190. The interior of Tonantzintla's **Templo de Santa María** (☎ 7am-2pm & 4-8pm) is among Mexico's most exuberant. Under the dome, the surface is plastered with colorful stucco saints, devils, flowers, fruit, birds and more – a great example of indigenous artisanship applied to Christian

themes. Tonantzintla celebrates the **Festival de la Asunción** (Festival of the Assumption) on August 15 with a procession and traditional dances.

Acatepec, 1.5km southeast of Tonantzintla, is home to the **Templo de San Francisco** (☞ 7am-2pm & 4-8pm), which dates from the 1730s. The brilliant exterior is beautifully decorated with blue, green and yellow Talavera tiles set in brick on an ornate Churrigueresque facade.

Autobuses Puebla–Cholula runs ‘Chipilo’ buses (M\$10) from Puebla’s CAPU bus terminal to Tonantzintla and Acatepec. In Cholula, pick them up on the corner of Calle 7 Pte and Blvd Miguel Alemán. Between the two villages, you can either walk or wait for the next bus.

POPOCATÉPETL & IZTACCÍHUATL

Mexico’s second- and third-highest peaks, Popocatépetl (po-po-ka-teh-pet-l, Náhuatl for ‘Smoking Mountain’; 5452m), also known as Don Goyo and Popo), and Iztaccíhuatl (iss-ta-see-wat-l; 5220m), form the eastern rim of the Valle de México, which is 43km west of Puebla and 72km southeast of Mexico City. While the craterless Iztaccíhuatl is dormant, Popo is very much active; a December 2005 explosion catapulted ash 5km into the sky. Between 1994 and 2001, Popo’s major bursts of activity triggered evacuations of 16 villages and warnings to the 30 million people who live within striking distance of the crater.

Mexico’s **Centro Nacional de Prevención de Desastres** (National Disaster Prevention Center; ☞ 24hr hotline 55-5205-1036; www.cenapred.unam.mx) monitors volcanic activity via variations in gas emissions and seismic intensity. Though almost entirely in Spanish, the website posts daily webcam photo captures and updates on conditions in English.

Historically, Popo has been relatively tranquil, with most activity occurring in the cooler winter months when ice expands and cracks the solidified lava around the crater rim. It’s had 20 eruptive periods during the past 600 years, but none have caused a major loss of life or property. The last really big blast occurred over a thousand years ago, and volcanologists estimate that there’s a 10% chance of one in the near future. At the time of writing, a crack team of scientists were continuing to observe Popo’s increasingly predictable outbursts with great interest. The good news is that fetching Iztaccíhuatl (White Woman), 20km north of

Popo from summit to summit, remains open to climbers.

Amecameca

☞ 597 / pop 32,000 / elevation 2480m

The sleepy town of Amecameca, 60km east of Mexico City, is the key staging point for an Izta climb. With volcanoes and 16th-century churches as a backdrop, it makes an appealing destination in itself. A lively market convenes daily next to the church, and there are ATMs and internet cafés around the plaza.

The 450,000-sq-meter **Parque Nacional Sacromonte**, 90m above Amecameca to the west, protects an important pilgrimage site built over a cave that was the retreat of the Dominican friar Martín de Valencia in the early 16th century. It makes a delightful acclimatization walk, with awesome views of the town spread out beneath the volcanoes. From the southwest side of the plaza, head out through the arch and walk down Av Fray Martín for two blocks until you see the stairs ascending the hill on your right. After hailing Mary, follow the stations of the cross uphill to the sanctuary.

Most climbers sack out at the unassuming **Hotel San Carlos** (☞ 978-07-46; Plaza de la Constitución 10; r M\$100), facing the plaza’s southwest corner, where the rooms are clean and spartan, but comfortable, and cost M\$50 more with TV.

From Mexico City’s TAPO, Volcanes and Sur run 2nd-class buses to/from Amecameca (M\$28, 1½ hours, every 15 minutes). To reach the plaza from Amecameca’s bus station, turn right and walk two blocks.

Hiking & Climbing

Izta’s highest peak is **El Pecho** (5220m). All routes require a night on the mountain, and there’s a shelter hut between the staging point at La Joya and Las Rodillas that can be used during an ascent of El Pecho. On average, it takes at least five hours to reach the hut from La Joya, another six hours from the hut to El Pecho, and six hours back to the base.

Before making the ascent, all climbers should contact the **Parque Nacional Iztaccíhuatl-Popocatépetl** (☞ /fax 597-978-38-29/30; <http://iztapopo.conanp.gob.mx>; Plaza de la Constitución 9B; entry fee M\$10; ☞ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat), on the southeast side of Amecameca’s *zócalo*. To arrange permission, call the office or submit a form that’s available online. All visitors must pay the M\$10 per day park entrance fee in advance

at the national park office in Amecameca, or on Sunday at Paso Cortés. Technically, you do not need permission to climb Izta, but if you're starting from Amecameca, you'll need the permit to pass the military checkpoint near Paso de Cortés (3650m), in the saddle approximately halfway between Popo and Izta. Alternatively, you can depart from the village of San Rafael, 8km north of Amecameca, a longer and more rigorous climb.

There are plenty of lower-altitude trails through pine forests and grassy meadows near Paso de Cortés, some offering breathtaking glimpses of nearby peaks. Trails begin at the La Joya parking lot 4km from Paso de Cortés. Again, you need to arrange a permit, which may be available on Sundays at the checkpoint when the in-town office is closed. *Colectivos* departing from Amecameca's plaza for Paso de Cortés cost M\$35. From the national park office, taxis will take groups to La Joya (40 minutes) for a negotiable M\$250 to M\$350.

Basic shelter is available at the **Altzomoni Lodge** (beds per person M\$25), by a microwave station roughly halfway between Paso de Cortés and La Joya. Request the keys at Paso de Cortés before hiking up, and bring bedding, warm clothes and drinking water.

CLIMATE & CONDITIONS

It can be windy and well below freezing any time of year on Izta's upper slopes, and it's nearly always below freezing near the summit at night. Ice and snow are fixtures here; the average snow line is 4200m. The ideal months for ascents are November to February, when there is hard snowpack for crampons. The rainy season (April to October) brings with it the threat of whiteouts, thunderstorms and avalanches.

Anyone can be affected by altitude problems, including life-threatening altitude sickness. Even Paso de Cortés is at a level where you should know the symptoms (see p1004).

GUIDES

Iztaccihuatl should be attempted *only* by experienced climbers. Because of hidden crevices on the ice-covered upper slopes, a guide is advisable. Besides the following reader recommendations, the national park office may have other suggestions.

Amecameca-based **José Luis Ariza** (☎ cell phone 597-9781335), a rescue-squad member who has scaled peaks throughout Latin America, leads climbers up Izta year-round. He charges

M\$1200 for one person and M\$600 for each additional person (transportation and equipment rental cost extra).

Mexico City-based **Mario Andrade** (☎ 55-1038-4008, 55-1826-2146; mountainup@hotmail.com), an authorized, English-speaking guide, has led many Izta ascents. His fee is M\$3800 for one person, less per person for groups. The cost includes round-trip transportation from Mexico City, lodging, mountain meals and rope usage.

TLAXCALA

☎ 246 / pop 85,000 / elevation 2250m

The capital of Mexico's smallest state is a delightful Mexican anomaly – despite being less than two hours from Mexico City, Tlaxcala is a delightfully calm and traffic-free place, especially at the weekend. It's charming and friendly, with a few sights worth seeing if you're passing through, though there's nothing that warrants a special detour here. Despite this, many people really fall for the town for its atmosphere and lack of tourists. As such, it's one of the capital's least discovered satellite towns.

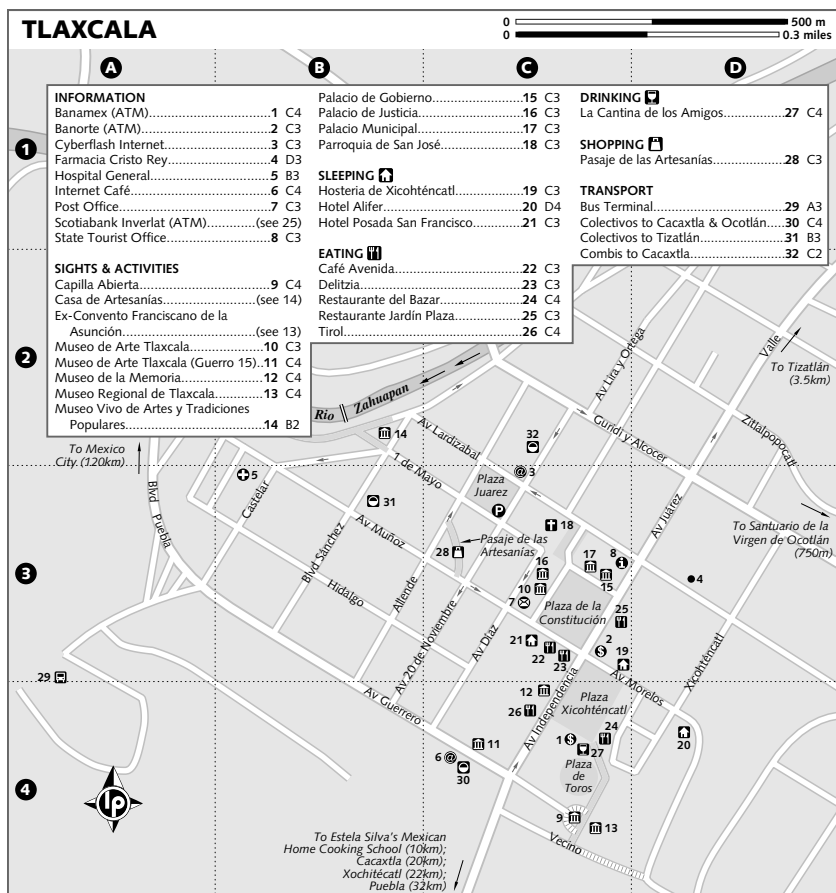
History

In the last centuries before the Spanish conquest, numerous small warrior kingdoms (*señorios*) arose in and around Tlaxcala. Some of them formed a loose federation that remained independent of the Aztec empire as it spread from the Valle de México in the 15th century. The most important kingdom seems to have been Tizatlán, now on the northeast edge of Tlaxcala city.

When the Spanish arrived in 1519, the Tlaxcalans fought fiercely at first, but ultimately became Cortés' staunchest allies against the Aztecs (with the exception of one chief, Xicotécatl the Younger, who tried to rouse his people against the Spanish and is now a Mexican hero). The Spanish rewarded the Tlaxcalans with privileges and used them to help pacify and settle Chichimec areas to the north. In 1527, Tlaxcala became the seat of the first bishopric in Nueva España, but a plague in the 1540s devastated the population and the town has played only a supporting role ever since.

Orientation

Two large central plazas converge at the corner of Independencia and Muñoz. The northern one, surrounded by colonial buildings, is



the *zócalo*, called Plaza de la Constitución. Coming by bus you'll arrive a ten-minute walk from the town center at the town's hilltop bus station.

Information

Several banks around the *zócalo* exchange dollars and have ATMs.

Cyberflash Internet (Av 20 Noviembre; per hr M\$15) Between Lardizabal & Guridi y Alcocer.

Farmacia Cristo Rey (Lardizabal 15; ☎ 24hr) Local pharmacy.

Hospital General (☎ 462-00-30/34-00; Corregidora s/n)

Internet Café (Av Guerrero; per hr M\$7) Between Díaz & Independencia.

Police (☎ 464-52-56/57)

Post Office (cnr Avs Muñoz & Díaz)

State Tourist Office (☎ 465-09-60 ext 1519, 800-509-65-57; www.tlaxcala.gob.mx/turismo; cnr Avs Juárez & Lardizabal; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun) English-speaking staff are keen to sell you tickets to bullfights, as well as to give out a good free map of the town and book you on tram tours of the town (M\$20, Friday to Sunday).

Sights

PLAZA DE LA CONSTITUCIÓN

Tlaxcala's shady, spacious *zócalo* is one of Mexico's most fetching. The 16th-century **Palacio Municipal**, a former grain storehouse, and the **Palacio de Gobierno** occupy most of its north side. Inside the latter there are vivid murals of Tlaxcala's history by Desiderio Hernández Xochitotzin. The 16th-century building on the

plaza's northwest side is the **Palacio de Justicia**, the former Capilla Real de Indios, built for the use of indigenous nobles. The handsome mortar bas-reliefs around its doorway include the seal of Castilla y León and a two-headed eagle, symbol of the Hapsburg monarchs who ruled Spain in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Off the northwest corner of the *zócalo* is the pretty-in-pink tile, brick and stucco **Parroquia de San José**. As elsewhere in the Centro Histórico, bilingual signs explain the significance of the church and its many fountains.

EX-CONVENTO FRANCISCANO DE LA ASUNCIÓN

This former monastery is up along a shaded path from the southeast corner of Plaza Xicoténcatl. Built between 1537 and 1540, it was one of Mexico's earliest monasteries, and its church – the city's cathedral – has a beautiful Moorish-style wooden ceiling. Next door is the **Museo Regional de Tlaxcala** (☎ 462-02-62; adult/student M\$37/free; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), with a large collection of religious paintings and a few pre-Columbian artifacts.

Just below the monastery, beside the 19th-century Plaza de Toros (bullring), is a **capilla abierta** with three unique Moorish-style arches.

MUSEO DE ARTE DE TLAXCALA

This new **art museum** (☎ 466-03-52; www.mat.org.mx; Plaza de la Constitución 21; adults/under 12/students M\$20/free/10, free on Sunday; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) is a fantastic addition to Tlaxcala's cultural scene. The main collection on the *zócalo* contains an excellent cache of early Frida Kahlo paintings, holds excellent temporary exhibits and has a good permanent collection of modern Mexican art. The smaller branch at Guerrero 15 (admission free) is interactive and aimed at children.

MUSEO DE LA MEMORIA

This modern **history museum** (☎ 466-07-91; Av Independencia 3; admission M\$10/5 adults/students, free on Tuesday; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) looks at folklore through a multimedia lens, and has well-presented exhibits on indigenous government, agriculture and contemporary festivals. Explanations are only in Spanish.

MUSEO VIVO DE ARTES Y TRADICIONES POPULARES

This popular **arts museum** (☎ 462-23-37; Blvd Sánchez 1; adult/student M\$6/4; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun)

has displays on Tlaxcalan village life, weaving and pulque-making, sometimes with demonstrations. Artisans serve as guides to the over 3000 artifacts on display. The café and handicrafts next door at the **Casa de Artesanías** are also worth a look.

SANTUARIO DE LA VIRGEN DE OCOTLÁN

One of Mexico's most spectacular **churches** (admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm) is an important pilgrimage site owing to the belief that the Virgin appeared here in 1541 – her image stands on the main altar in memory of the apparition. The classic Churrigueresque facade features white stucco 'wedding cake' decorations, contrasting with plain red tiles. During the 18th century, indigenous Mexican Francisco Miguel spent 25 years decorating the altarpieces and the chapel beside the main altar.

Visible from most of town, the hilltop church is 1km northeast of the *zócalo*. Walk north from the *zócalo* on Av Juárez for three blocks, then turn right onto Zitlalpopocatl. Alternatively, catch an 'Ocotlán' *colectivo* from near the corner of Avs Guerrero and Independencia.

TIZATLÁN

All that's left of Xicoténcatl's palace is preserved under a humble shelter: two altars with some faded frescoes of the gods Tezcatlipoca (Smoking Mirror), Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli (the Morning Star) and Mictlantecuhtli (Underworld). Next to the **ruins** (☎ 412-41-69; admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), Templo San Esteban has a 16th-century Franciscan **capilla abierta** and frescoes of angels playing instruments. The hilltop site is 4km north of town; take a 'Tizatlán Parroquia' *colectivo* from the corner of Blvd Sánchez and Av Muñoz.

Courses

Estela Silva's Mexican Home Cooking School (☎ /fax 468-09-78; www.mexicanhomecooking.com; courses incl accommodation US\$1200) offers an intimate five-day gastronomic course, with hands-on instruction in the preparation of classic Mexican dishes. Tuition includes all meals, drinks, live music, transfers from Puebla and a trip to local markets, plus six nights of B&B lodging in comfortable private rooms with fireplaces. Students' guests not partaking in the course can stay for US\$600. The bilingual lessons focus on the preservation of traditional French-inflected Puebla cuisine, and

are horribly touristy, but some can also be great value. Embroidered *huipiles* (sleeveless tunics) from Santa Ana Chiautempan, carved canes from Tizatlán, and amaranth candies from San Miguel del Milagro are sold along the pedestrian-only **Pasaje de las Artesanías** alley, which forms an arc northeast of the Muñoz/Allende intersection.

Getting There & Away

Tlaxcala's sprawling **bus terminal** (☎ 462-03-62) is just under 1km west of the central plazas. For Mexico City's TAPO terminal, ATAH runs 1st-class 'expresso' buses (M\$90, two hours) every 20 minutes in both directions until 9pm. Frequent 2nd-class Flecha Azul buses rumble to Puebla (M\$15) and Pachuca (M\$79).

Getting Around

Most *colectivos* (M\$4) passing the bus terminal are heading into town, although it takes no time to walk. To reach the terminal from the center, catch a blue-and-white *colectivo* on the east side of Blvd Sánchez.

CACAXTLA & XOCHITÉCATL

Cacaxtla (*ca-casht-la*) is one of Mexico's most impressive ancient sites for the simple reason that there are so many high-quality, vividly painted depictions of daily life on display within the site itself, rather than being relegated to a museum collection. The frescoes include a nearly life-size jaguar and eagle warriors engaged in battle. Located on top of a scrubby hill, the ruins were discovered only in 1975, when men from the nearby village of San Miguel del Milagro, looking for a reputedly valuable cache of relics, dug a tunnel and uncovered a mural.

The much older ruins at Xochitécatl (*so-chi-teh-catl*), 2km away and accessible from Cacaxtla on foot, include an exceptionally wide pyramid as well as a circular one. A German archaeologist led the first systematic exploration of the site in 1969, but it wasn't until 1994 that the pyramids were opened to the public.

The two sites, about 20km southwest of Tlaxcala and 32km northwest of Puebla, are among Mexico's most intriguing. Both can be toured without a guide, but the bilingual explanatory signs tend to be either sketchy or overly technical. A good, if rushed, alternative is the guided Sunday tour conducted by Tlaxcala state tourist office (p233). It may

be possible to hire a guide at the sites from Thursday to Sunday.

History

Cacaxtla was the capital of a group of Olmeca-Xicallanca, or Putún Maya, who arrived in central Mexico as early as AD 450. After the decline of Cholula (which they probably helped bring about) in around AD 600, they became the chief power in southern Tlaxcala and the Puebla valley. Cacaxtla peaked from AD 650 to 950, and was abandoned by AD 1000 in the face of possibly Chichimec newcomers.

Two kilometers west of Cacaxtla, atop a higher hill, the ruins of Xochitécatl predate Christ by a millennium. Just who first occupied the spot is a matter of dispute, but experts agree that whereas Cacaxtla primarily served as living quarters for the ruling class, Xochitécatl was chiefly used for gory Quecholli ceremonies honoring Mixcoatl, god of the hunt. That isn't to say Cacaxtla didn't hold similar ceremonies – the discovery of the skeletal remains of hundreds of mutilated children attest to Cacaxtla's bloody past.

Sights

CACAXTLA

From the parking lot opposite the site entrance it's a 200m walk to the **ticket office** (☎ 246-416-00-00; admission incl Xochitécatl M\$46; ☒ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), museum and restaurant.

From the ticket office, it's another 600m downhill to the main attraction – a natural platform, 200m long and 25m high, called the **Gran Basamento** (Great Base), now sheltered under an expansive metal roof. Here stood Cacaxtla's main civic and religious buildings and the residences of its ruling priestly classes. At the top of the entry stairs is the **Plaza Norte**. From here, the path winds clockwise around the ruins until you reach the **murals**.

Archaeologists have yet to determine the muralists' identity; many of the symbols are clearly from the Mexican highlands, and yet a Mayan influence from southeastern Mexico appears in all of them. This combination of styles in a mural is unique to Cacaxtla, and the subject of much speculation.

Before reaching the first mural you come to a small patio, of which the main feature is an **altar** fronted by a small square pit, in which numerous human remains were discovered. Just beyond the altar, you'll find the **Templo de Venus**, which contains two anthropomor-

phic sculptures – a man and a woman – in blue wearing jaguar-skin skirts. The temple's name is attributed to the appearance of numerous half-stars around the female figure, which are associated with the Earth's sister planet, Venus.

On the opposite side of the path away from the Plaza Norte, the **Templo Rojo** contains four murals, only one of which is currently visible. Its vivid imagery is dominated by a row of corn and cacao crops, whose husks contain human heads.

Facing the north side of Plaza Norte is the long **Mural de la Batalla** (Battle Mural), dating from before AD 700. It shows two warrior groups, one wearing jaguar skins and the other bird feathers, engaged in ferocious battle. The Olmeca-Xicallanca (the jaguar warriors with round shields) are clearly repelling invading Huastecs (the bird warriors with jade ornaments and deformed skulls).

Beyond the Mural de la Batalla, turn left and climb the steps to see the second major **mural group**, behind a fence to your right. The two main murals (c AD 750) show a figure in a jaguar costume and a black-painted figure in a bird costume (believed to be the Olmeca-Xicallanca priest-governor) standing atop a plumed serpent.

XOCHITÉCATL

From the parking lot at the **site entrance** (☎ 246-462-41-69; admission incl Cacaxtla M\$46; 🕒 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), follow a path to the circular **Pirámide de la Espiral**. Because of its outline and the materials used, archaeologists believe the pyramid was built between 1000 and 800 BC. Its form and hilltop location suggest it may have been used as an astronomical observation post or as a temple to Ehécatl, the wind god. From here, the path passes three other pyramids.

The **Basamento de los Volcanes**, all that remains of the first pyramid, is the base of the Pirámide de los Volcanes, and it's made of materials from two periods. Cut square stones were placed over the original stones, visible in some areas, and then stuccoed over. In an interesting twist, the colored stones used to build Tlaxcala's municipal palace appear to have come from this site.

The **Pirámide de la Serpiente** gets its name from a large piece of carved stone with a snake head at one end. Its most impressive feature is the huge pot found at its center, carved from a single boulder, which was hauled from

another region. Researchers surmise it was used to hold water.

Experts speculate that rituals honoring the fertility god were held at the **Pirámide de las Flores**, due to the discovery of several sculptures and the remains of 30 sacrificed infants. Near the pyramid's base – Latin America's fourth widest – is a pool carved from a massive rock, where the infants were believed to have been washed before being killed.

Getting There & Away

Cacaxtla is 1.5km uphill from a back road between San Martín Texmelucan (near Hwy 150D) and Hwy 119, the secondary road between Tlaxcala and Puebla. Driving from Tlaxcala, turn west off Hwy 119 just south of town and watch for a sign pointing toward Cacaxtla, 1.5km west of the village of Nativitas.

By public transportation from Tlaxcala, catch a 'San Miguel del Milagro' *colectivo* near the northwest corner of Av 20 de Noviembre and Av Lardizabal, which will drop you off about 500m from Cacaxtla. Alternatively, a 'Nativitas-TeXoloc-Tlaxcala' *colectivo*, which departs from the same corner, goes to the town of Nativitas, 3km east of Cacaxtla; from there, catch a 'Zona Arqueológica' *colectivo* directly to the site. Flecha Azul buses go direct from Puebla's CAPU terminal to Nativitas. Between Cacaxtla and Xochitécatl, take a taxi (M\$40), or walk the 2km.

LA MALINCHE

The long, sweeping slopes of this dormant 4460m volcano, named after Cortés' indigenous interpreter and lover, dominate the skyline northeast of Puebla.

The main route to the volcano is via Hwy 136; turn southwest at the 'Centro Vacacional Malintzi' sign. Before you reach the center, you must register at the entrance of the **Parque Nacional La Malintzi**. La Malinche, Mexico's fifth tallest peak, is snowcapped only a few weeks each year, typically in May.

Run by the Mexican Social Security Institute, the **Centro Vacacional IMSS Malintzi** (☎ 246-462-40-98, in Mexico City 55-5627-6900, 800-001-09-00; up to 6 people M\$420-480, up to 9 people M\$600-770; 📍) has a handful of rustic cabins at a frosty 3333m. This family-oriented resort has woody grounds and fine views of the peak. The recently remodeled cabins are basic but include TV, fireplace, hot water and kitchen

with refrigerator. It gets crowded from Friday to Sunday but is quiet midweek. Those not staying overnight can park here for a small fee. Camping is also a possibility.

Beyond the vacation center, the road becomes impassable by car. It's 1km by foot-path to a ridge, from where it's an arduous five-hour round-trip hike to the top. Hikers should take precautions against altitude sickness (see p1004).

Buses to the Centro Vacacional (M\$12, 8am, noon and 4pm daily) make the 26km run from downtown Apizaco (served by frequent buses from Puebla and Tlaxcala), departing from the corner of Av Hidalgo and Aquiles Serdán.

HUAMANTLA

☎ 247 / pop 46,000 / elevation 2500m

With its lovely old *zócalo* and a charming colonial center, Huamantla is a pleasant enough base for exploring La Malinche once you get past its sprawling new town, which isn't particularly attractive.

Besides La Malinche looming over the town, the most notable attractions are the 16th-century **Ex-Convento de San Francisco** and the 17th-century baroque **Parroquia de San Luis Obispo de Tolosa**. Opposite the church, the **Museo de Títere** (National Puppet Museum; ☎ 472-10-33; Parque Juárez 15; adult/child M\$10/5; ☎ 10am-2pm & 4-6pm Tue-Sat, 10am-3pm Sun; 🍷), displaying dolls and marionettes from all around the world, is a fun stop for the young and young at heart.

During August, Huamantla sees a few sleepless nights during its annual **feria**. The day before the Feast of the Assumption (August 15), locals blanket the town's streets with beautiful carpets crafted from flowers and colored sawdust. The Saturday following this event, there's a Pamplona-esque running of the bulls, similar to that in Spain – but more dangerous since the uncastrated males charge from two directions!

During the feria, rates double and rooms are reserved well in advance. If everything is full, you can always find a room in Puebla or Tlaxcala.

Hotel Mesón del Portal (☎ 472-26-26; Parque Juárez 9; r from M\$180; 🍷) Overlooking the central plaza, this place has been the standard choice for years, but its rooms are very shabby and stink of air freshener, which must be disguising something! With places like the Centenario popping up, this is definitely a last resort,

although its more expensive rooms at M\$260 are much better.

Hotel Centenario (☎ 472-05-87; Juárez Norte 209; s/d M\$200/250) This is much the best option in town – just a short walk from the *zócalo*, all 33 rooms are spacious with brand new bathrooms and wi-fi access. Staff are helpful, and there's a good coffee shop downstairs.

Oro and Suriano have frequent services from Puebla. ATAH runs frequent buses from Tlaxcala.

CANTONA

Given its isolation, a good distance from any town of significance, the vast and incredibly well preserved Mesoamerican city of **Cantona** (admission M\$24; ☎ 10am-5pm) is almost totally unknown to travelers. With 24 ball courts discovered, this is now believed to be the biggest single urban center in Mesoamerica, stretched over 12 sq km in an ethereal lava-bed landscape dotted with cacti and yucca and enjoying incredible views of Pico de Orizaba to the south.

The site was inhabited from AD 600 to 1000 and is of interest for two main reasons: unlike most other Mesoamerican cities, no mortar was used to build it, meaning all the stones are simply held in place by their weight; it's also unique in its design sophistication – all parts of the city are linked by an extensive network of raised roads connecting some 3000 residences. There are several small pyramids and an elaborate acropolis at the city's center. With good information panels in English and a newly completed access road, Cantona is now being promoted as a tourist attraction, although it's likely you'll be completely alone when you visit.

There's no public transportation here, but from Oriental, the nearest town, it's a 30-minute, well-signposted drive northeast. Count on paying M\$150 for a round trip in a taxi. If you have your own transportation, visiting Cantona makes for a good side trip en route to Cuetzalan. Bring your own food and water – it's a big site and there's nothing on sale here.

CUETZALAN

☎ 233 / pop 6000 / elevation 980m

One of the most exhilarating trips to take in this region is the gorgeous drive to Cuetzalan. Beyond Zaragoza turnoff, the road becomes dramatic, snaking up hills, around sud-

den hairpin bends and often giving superb views. At the end of it all is the remote town of Cuetzalan ('Place of the Quetzals'), one of the most charming and unspoilt towns in all of Mexico. Built on a precipitous slope, Cuetzalan is famed for its vibrant festivals and Sunday *tianguis*, which attract scores of indigenous people in traditional dress. The humidity hovers around 90%, and on the clearest days, you can see all the way from the hilltops to the Gulf coast, 70km away, as the quetzal flies.

Orientation & Information

From the south, the main road into town passes the bus depot before hitting the *zócalo*. The center is on a hillside, and from the *zócalo* most hotels and restaurants are uphill. None-too-shy kids will offer to guide you around the slick, marble-cobbled streets for a small fee.

No English is spoken at the **tourist office** (☎ 331-05-27/62, 800-000-11-22; ☹ 9am-4pm), at the Palacio Municipal on the east side of the *zócalo*, but it's got much-needed (although very unclear) town maps. The **information kiosk** (☹ Thu-Tue) at the entrance to town keeps slightly longer, if irregular, hours. Just west of the *zócalo*, **Banamex** (Alvarado) has an ATM. There's a cyber-lair called **Internet** (per hr M\$10) on the west side of the *zócalo*, and several others nearby.

Sights & Activities

Three structures rise above Cuetzalan's skyline: the plaza's free-standing **clock tower**, the Gothic spire of the **Parroquia de San Francisco** and, to the west, the tower of the French-Gothic **Santuario de Guadalupe**, with its highly unusual decorative rows of clay vases (*los jarritos*). Between Banamex and the bus depot, the **Casa de Cultura** (Alvarado) houses a free regional **museum** (☹ 10am-5pm).

Two lovely waterfalls, collectively called **Las Brisas**, are 4km and 5km northeast of town. Hail a *colectivo* behind the Parroquia de San Francisco heading for the village of San Andrés Tzicuilan, or walk west along the dirt road from the bus depot, keeping to the right when it forks, until you reach San Andrés. Kids will offer to guide you to the falls for a few pesos – probably a good idea to accept, as there are no signs and many trails in the forest. The natural swimming pools beneath the falls are enticing – bring your bathing kit. Parts of a 32km network of caves can be

explored at **Atepolihui**, accessible from the village of San Miguel, a half-hour walk from the end of Hidalgo.

Festivals & Events

For several lively days around October 4, Cuetzalan celebrates both its patron saint, St Francis of Assisi, and the start of the coffee harvest with the **Feria del Café y del Huipil** (Festival of Coffee and Huipiles), featuring hearty drinking, traditional quetzal dancing and airborne *voladores* (literally 'fliers'), the Totonac ritual in which men, suspended by their ankles, whirl around a tall pole.

Sleeping

Posada Jaqueline (☎ 331-03-54; Calle 2 de Abril 2; s/d M\$100/150) Jaqueline's 20 basic but clean rooms, overlooking the uphill side of the *zócalo*, are Cuetzalan's best in-town value. Some upstairs rooms share a balcony and have views over town.

Taselotzin (☎ /fax 331-04-80; www.laneta.apc.org/masealsuia/hotel1.htm; Yoloxóchitl, Barrio Zacatipan; dm/s/d M\$104/230/378; ☎) Just outside Cuetzalan, this hostel is run by an association of Nahua craftswomen who campaign for fair trade between locals and the outside world. It's an excellent initiative, and the hotel offers traditional massages, fair-traded handicrafts and herbal medicines. It has five fusty but cozy private rooms, with good views amid peaceful gardens, plus a surplus of dormitory-style cabins. The restaurant serves traditional local dishes, and horseback rides to waterfalls, caves and the pyramids can be arranged. Follow the right-hand fork past Cuetzalan's info kiosk off the Puebla road; watch for an inconspicuous sign on the right-hand side, about 300m downhill.

Posada Quinto Palermo (☎ 331-04-52; Calle 2 de Abril 2; s/d M\$350/450) Right next to Posada Jaqueline, the Quinto Palermo has the very best location in town, with a superb terrace giving sumptuous views over the *zócalo* toward the Caribbean Sea. With a bit of hard work this could be one of the best places in town, but at the moment it's sadly not – the 15 basic, stuffy rooms are being held hostage by bad color patterns and horrendous taste in art.

Hotel Posada Cuetzalan (☎ 331-01-54; www.posada.cuetzalan.com; Zaragoza 12; s/d M\$380/510; ☎) At the top of the town, this friendly, well-run place has three large courtyards and was completing an extension at the time of writing.

It has a swimming pool, a good restaurant featuring local fruit wines and liqueurs, two lovely courtyards full of chirping birds, and 35 well-kept rooms with tropical colors, tiled floors, lots of lightly stained wood and cable TV. It's 100m uphill from the *zócalo*.

Hotel La Casa de la Piedra (☎ 331-00-30, in Puebla 222-249-40-89; www.lacasadepiedra.com; García 11; s/d/ste M\$480/530/580; P) Two blocks below the *zócalo*, the 'House of the Stone' is hands down Cuetzalan's most atmospheric hostelry. All 16 rooms in the renovated yet rustic former coffee-processing warehouse have large picture windows and refinished wood floors. Upstairs, the two-level suites accommodate up to four people and boast expansive views of the valley; downstairs rooms are equally well decorated, with tiled bathrooms, rough stone walls, and one or two beds.

Gran Hotel (☎ 331-00-19; www.granhotelcuetzalan.com; García 1; r/t/q M\$350/510/560) Almost opposite the Casa de la Piedra, the Gran is its functional and rather sterile distant cousin. With 33 modern rooms, some with good views, the place is pleasant enough and well located, just off the *zócalo*, but otherwise totally unremarkable.

Eating & Drinking

Regional specialties, sold at many roadside stands, include fruit wines, smoked meats and herbal liqueurs.

Restaurant Yoloxochitl (☎ 331-03-55; Calle 2 de Abril; mains M\$30-40) This fantastic place is great value. The space is beautifully decorated and features two ancient jukeboxes playing an incongruous selection of 45s from the 1950s, with views over the cathedral. Besides salads, *antojitos* and meat dishes, it offers wild mushrooms pickled in *chile de chipotle*.

La Terraza (☎ 331-02-62; Hidalgo 33; mains M\$30-80) With its bright decorations and exotic indigenous theme, this extremely popular restaurant, housed in charming old colonial home, is a great place to sample the best of local produce. There's a large selection of breakfasts, *mariscos*, *quesadillas* and *platillos de la región*, and crawfish are the house specialty.

El Portal (☎ 331-00-48; Calle 2 de Abril; mains M\$35) You can't beat a cold beer and plate of *antojitos* here, Cuetzalan's best-located restaurant. With views over the *zócalo*, a loyal clientele and friendly family service, this is a winner. The menu of home cooking takes in lots of simple but tasty local specialties. Try the excellent *platillo especial El Portal* as a sampler.

El Zarzo (☎ 331-01-61; Morelos 3; mains M\$70-135; ☎ 5-10pm Tue-Sun) This quality pizza restaurant is located on the 1st floor of a steep, narrow side street a block from the *zócalo*. It's staffed by a friendly family and offers a good range of other Italian and local dishes in addition to its huge pizza menu.

Bar El Calate (☎ 331-05-66; Morelos 9B; shots from M\$5) On the west side of the *zócalo*, this is the place to sup homemade hooch – flavored with coffee, limes, berries, you name it – orange wine, and the all-curing *yolixpán*, a medicinal herbal brew consisting of *aguardiente* (fire water) tempered by honey.

Getting There & Away

Via buses (M\$110, four hours) travel between Puebla and Cuetzalan hourly from 5am to 7:30pm, with extra services on Sunday and the last bus to Puebla at 5:30pm. It pays to double-check road conditions and buy your return bus tickets in advance during the rainy season. There are six buses a day between Cuetzalan and Mexico City's TAPO bus station (M\$218, six hours).

YOHUALICHÁN

About 8km northeast of Cuetzalan, the last 2km via a steep cobblestone road, this ceremonial **pre-Hispanic site** (admission M\$27; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) has niche pyramids similar to El Tajin, which are in varying states of ruin. The site is impressive and well worth a visit, not least for the great views toward the coast and back to Cuetzalan from this side of the valley. The entrance is adjacent to Yohualichán's church and town plaza. To get here, board any *colectivo* (M\$6) out of Cuetzalan and walk 20 minutes down from the stop where there's a blue sign with a pyramid on it. Alternatively, ask around the bus depot for a *camión* (truck) passing by the pyramids.

TEHUACÁN

☎ 238 / pop 265,000 / elevation 1640m

This bustling and somewhat remote city, 120km southeast of the Puebla capital, has little to draw visitors to it, but if you happen to be passing through then an overnight stop or even just a break for lunch on its lovely shady *zócalo* is a fine idea. It's also a good place to shop for handicrafts at the *zócalo*'s Saturday market, and even as a possible weekend destination for some pampering at its upmarket Casas Cantarranas resort.

UNIQUE HOTEL ROOMS AROUND MEXICO CITY

- **Mesón Sacristía de Capuchinas** (Puebla; p223) Antique-stuffed, highly individual rooms make this Puebla's premier spot to bed down in style.
- **Hotel La Quinta Luna** (Cholula; p229) This colonial mansion-cum-boutique hotel is inspirationally designed, providing a super-glamorous hideaway.
- **Posada del Tepozteco** (Tepoztlán; p244) This fabulous classic 1930s hillside hotel's best room is 18, with its own Jacuzzi and fantastic private balcony.
- **Las Mañanitas** (Cuernavaca; p255) Treat yourself to one of the enormous suites at this establishment favorite – all have large private verandas overlooking the extraordinary gardens.
- **Hotel Casanueva** (Valle de Bravo; p270) This affordable hotel has cleverly designed rooms with well-chosen art and local crafts on display; the suite overlooking the *zócalo* has the very best views.

Orientation & Information

Coming from Puebla, the main road into town, Av Independencia, passes by the ADO bus station before reaching the north side of the *zócalo*, Parque Juárez. The main north-south road is Av Reforma.

Essential services surround the *zócalo*. On its northwest corner, the sleepy **tourist information kiosk** (☎ 10am-2pm & 4-7pm) has city maps.

Sights

Tehuacán is best known for its mineral water, which is sold in bottles all over Mexico; there are free tours of the Cadbury-Schweppes-owned **Peñafiel plant** (Av José García-Crespo; ☎ 9am-noon & 4-6pm Sat-Thu), 100m north of the Casas Cantarranas (p242).

The arid Tehuacán Valley was the site of some of Mexico's earliest agriculture. By 7000 to 5000 BC, people were harvesting avocados, chilies, corn and cotton. Pottery, the sign of a truly settled existence, appeared around 2000 BC.

The **Museo del Valle de Tehuacán** (admission M\$35; ☎ 10am-4:30pm Tue-Sun), three blocks northwest of the *zócalo* and inside the imposing Ex-Convento del Carmen, explains in Spanish some of the archaeological discoveries, and exhibits tiny preserved corn cobs thought to be among the first ever cultivated. There's also **Museo de Mineralogía** (adult/child M\$10/5; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun), a well-maintained geological museum, in the same complex.

Easily reachable from Tehuacán, the **Zapotitlán Salinas** zone of the **Reserva de la Biosfera de Tehuacán-Cuicatlán**, near the town of Zapotitlán Salinas, makes for a fascinating trip to another world. This small and highly unusual stretch

of desert divided between Puebla and Oaxaca state is a biological eccentricity caused by the Eastern Sierra Madres blocking moisture-carrying winds coming from the Gulf of Mexico. The cactus forest here is unique for its large number of endemic cactuses and for its rich bird life. Towering cactuses can be seen in some of Mexico's most ethereal landscape at 1480m of altitude. To get here, take a bus to Zapotitlán Salinas (M\$12, 30 minutes, every 20 minutes) from Tehuacán's bus station, and then take a taxi from Zapotitlán Salinas to the 'la zona de reserva' (M\$50). You'll need to organize the taxi to come and pick you up again later.

Festivals & Events

The Sunday closest to October 15 marks the start of the two-week **La Matanza** festival, when goats are slaughtered en masse. **Mole de cadaveras** (goat stew) is the regional specialty that results from the carnage.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Iberia (☎ 383-15-00/11; Independencia Ote 211; s/d/t M\$200/255/310; ☎ ☎ ☎) Just beyond the *zócalo* as you drive into town from the main road, this atmospheric place has a great lobby with a large courtyard bar and restaurants. The rooms are slightly less exciting – perfectly fine but lacking much natural daylight or charm.

Hotel Moniett (☎ 382-84-62; 2 Poniente 129; s/d/tw M\$260/290/330; ☎ ☎ ☎) This place has the feel of a motel, but it's central and good value for money, with clean and comfortable (if rather sterile) rooms. Service is friendly, although the deposit for the TV remote control really clarifies the type of hotel this is.

Hotel México (☎ 382-00-19; cnr Reforma Nte & Independencia Pte; s/d M\$500/560; P ♻️ 🚰) The best option in the center of town, the México has lots of charm, with 86 large, comfortable rooms and suites several courtyards, mineral water-fed pools and a good restaurant. It's a block northwest of the *zócalo*.

Casas Cantarranas (☎ 383-49-22; www.cantarranas.com.mx; Av José Gardi-Crespo 2215; s/d/ste M\$714/795/983; P ♻️ 🚰) By far the town's grandest hotel, Casas Cantarranas is a way from the town center, so is really only a good idea for those with their own transportation. The resort is set in large gardens with 55 very good, spacious, modern rooms in a self-enclosed complex with a huge pool plus a spa, gym, restaurant and bar. Staff are charming and speak English. Coming into town on Independencia, turn left onto Calle 1 Nte, continue until you reach Calle 18 Pte (after the third set of traffic lights) where you turn left and then turn right onto José Gardi-Crespo.

The lively *zócalo* is the place to head for a meal, and the best of the restaurants is **Plaza del Portal** (☎ 382-96-63; Calle 1 Sur 106; mains M\$30-60) where, as well as admirable breakfasts and full meals any time of the day, there's always seasonal local specialties to try. It's very popular with a local crowd who vie for the best seats on the terrace.

Getting There & Away

ADO (☎ 800-702-80-00; www.ado.com.mx; Av Independencia 137) has 1st-class buses to/from Puebla (M\$70, two hours, every 30 minutes), hourly services to/from Mexico City (M\$140, four hours), a daily 6:30pm bus to Veracruz (M\$128, four hours) and two daily buses to Oaxaca (M\$135, three hours).

SOUTH OF MEXICO CITY

A host of great destinations sit south of the Mexican capital, including mystical Tepoztlán, breathtaking Taxco and the superb complex of caves at Grutas de Cacahuamilpa. The main road south from Mexico City, Hwy 95, climbs from the smog-choked Valle de México into refreshing pine forests above 3000m and then descends to Cuernavaca, 'the city of eternal spring', a long-time popular escape from Mexico City and a home-away-from-home for many Americans and Chilangos who own second houses here.

The state of Morelos, which encompasses Cuernavaca and Tepoztlán, is one of Mexico's smallest and most densely populated. Valleys at different elevations have a variety of microclimates, and many fruits, grains and vegetables have been cultivated here since pre-Hispanic times. The archaeological sites at Tepoztlán and Xochicalco show signs of the agricultural Tlahuica civilization and the Aztecs who subjugated them. During the colonial era, most of the region was controlled by a few families, including descendants of Cortés. You can visit their palaces and haciendas, along with 16th-century churches and monasteries. Unsurprisingly, the campesinos of Morelos were fervent supporters of the Mexican Revolution, and local lad Emiliano Zapata (see boxed text, p249) is the state's hero. Those with an interest should head to Cuautla for everything Emiliano.

Mountainous Guerrero state boasts such utter gems as silver mine-cum-tourist mecca Taxco, one of the best-preserved colonial towns in Mexico, and the unforgettable caves at Grutas de Cacahuamilpa, which extend well over a kilometer into the hillside and contain chambers of almost unbelievable size and beauty.

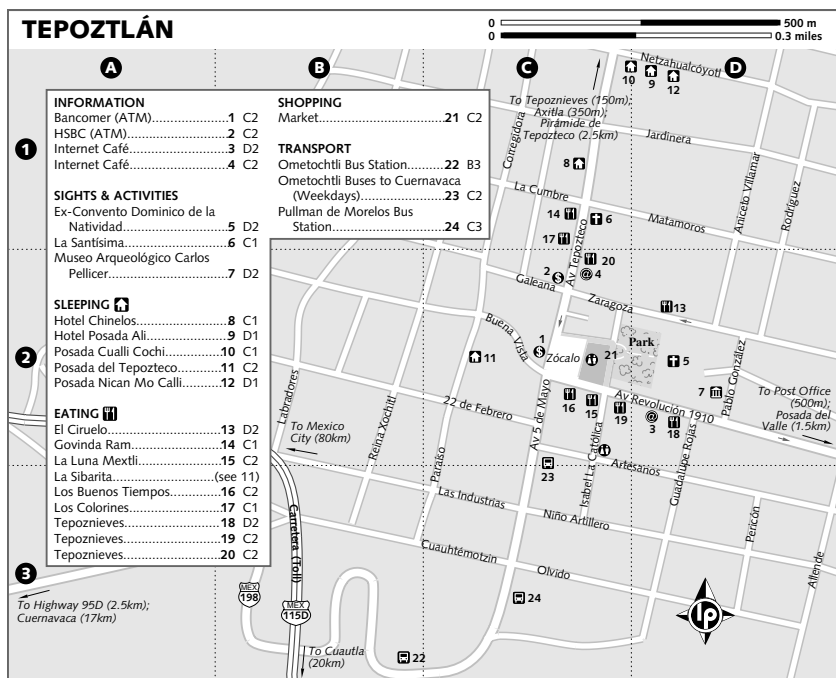
TEPOZTLÁN

☎ 739 / pop 15,000 / elevation 1700m

One weekend trip from the capital that rarely disappoints is that to gorgeous Tepoztlán, a wonderfully situated small town with a well-preserved historic center surrounded by soaring jagged cliffs just 80km south of Mexico City. As the birthplace of Quetzalcóatl, the omnipotent serpent god of the Aztecs, over 1200 years ago according to Mesoamerican legend, Tepoztlán is a major Náhuatl center and something of a Mecca for new-agers who believe the place has a creative energy. What is indubitable is that this *pueblo mágico* boasts an impressive pyramid, a great crafts market and a host of charming restaurants and hotels. It also retains indigenous traditions, with some elders still speaking Náhuatl and younger generations learning it in school, making it quite unlike most of the other towns ringing the Mexican capital.

Orientation & Information

Everything in Tepoztlán is easily accessible on foot, except the cliff-top Pirámide de



Tepozteco, a 2.5km strenuous hike away. Street names change in the center of town, eg Av 5 de Mayo becomes Av Tepozteco north of the *zócalo*. On the west side of the plaza, Bancomer and HSBC have ATMs. There are several internet cafés scattered around town.

Sights

PIRÁMIDE DE TEPOZTECO

The uncontested main sight in town is this 10m-high **pyramid** (admission M\$34, free on Sun; ☞ 9am-5:30pm), although it's actually some 400m *above* the town perched atop a sheer cliff at the end of a very steep path that begins at the end of Av Tepozteco. Built in honor of Tepoztécatl, the Aztec god of the harvest, fertility and pulque, the pyramid is more impressive for its location than for its actual size. Be warned that the path is exhausting. Heading off early is recommended to beat the heat (although on our last visit the ticket seller didn't turn up until 10am), and the 2km walk is not recommended to anyone not physically fit. At the top, depending on haze levels, you may be rewarded with a panorama of the val-

ley. Bring your own water, and good shoes are highly recommended. Video camera use is M\$35.

EX-CONVENTO DOMÍNICO DE LA NATIVIDAD

This **monastery** (admission free; ☞ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) and the attached church were built by Dominican priests between 1560 and 1588. The plateresque church facade has Dominican seals interspersed with indigenous symbols, floral designs and various figures, including the sun, moon and stars, animals, angels and the Virgin Mary.

The monastery's arched entryway is adorned with an elaborate **seed mural** of pre-Hispanic history and symbolism. Every year, during the first week of September, local artists sow a new mural from 60 varieties of seeds.

The 400-year-old complex was undergoing a major restoration at the time of writing; many murals from the 16th and 17th centuries have been meticulously restored. Upstairs, various cells house a bookstore, galleries and a **regional history museum**.

MUSEO ARQUEOLÓGICO CARLOS PELLICER

Behind the Dominican church, this **archaeology museum** (☎ 395-10-98; Pablo González 2; admission M\$10; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) has a small but interesting collection of pieces from around the country, donated by Tabasco poet Carlos Pellicer Cámara. The objects on display here are lively and vibrant, with mainly human figures but also including some animals. The stone fragments depicting a pair of rabbits – the symbol for Ometochtli, the leader of the 400 rabbit gods of drunkenness – were discovered at the Tepozteco pyramid site.

Festivals & Events

Tepoztlán is a hyper-festive place, with many Christian feasts superimposed on pagan celebrations. With eight *barrios* (neighborhoods) and an equal number of patron saints, there always seems to be some excuse for fireworks.

During the five days preceding Ash Wednesday (46 days before Easter Sunday), **Carnaval** features the colorful dances of the Huehuenches and Chinelos with feather head-dresses and beautifully embroidered costumes. On September 7, an all-night celebration goes off on Tepozteco hill near the pyramid, with copious consumption of pulque in honor of **Tepoztécatl**. The following day is the **Fiesta del Templo**, a Catholic celebration featuring theater performances in Náhuatl. The holiday was first intended to coincide with – and perhaps supplant – the pagan festival, but the pulque-drinkers get a jump on it by starting the night before.

Sleeping

Tepoztlán has a range of good accommodation options, but as a small town with lots of visitors, it can sometimes be hard to find a room during festivals and at weekends. If possible book ahead, although if you can't get a room, look out for weekend '*hospedaje económico*' signs around town. Typically hotels and guesthouses discount rates by up to 30% from Sunday through to Thursday.

Hotel Posada Ali (☎ 395-19-71; Netzahualcōyotl 2C; s/d M\$400/600; 📍) The best-value option in town, this is a friendly, family-run set-up with 13 good rooms, all with some element of attractive design, most with double bed and cable TV. There's a communal sitting room, *frontón* (jai alai) court and a small pool.

Hotel Chinelos (☎ 395-36-53, www.hotelchinelos.com; Av del Tepozteco 25; r M\$500; 📍) Named

after the famous dancers of Morelos, this 15-room hotel is excellently located and looks much better on the inside than it does from the street. The airy, spacious and super-clean rooms are set around a charming garden. During the week there's a M\$100 discount on the room cost.

Posada Cualli Cochi (☎ 395-03-93/78-28; Netzahualcōyotl 2; s/d M\$550/750; 📍) A standby option if Ali is full, the 10 rooms here are cramped and pretty charmless, but they're clean and have a TV and fan. One room even has a Jacuzzi, but it manages to remain singularly unappealing. There's a M\$100 discount on all rooms from Sunday to Thursday.

Posada Nican Mo Calli (☎ 395-31-52; Netzahualcōyotl 4A; s/d M\$850/1050, ste from M\$1000; 📍) This lovely place is just right for a romantic weekend away. With brightly painted public areas, a heated pool, stylish rooms (some with balconies and great mountain views) and plenty of animals hanging around, this is one of the best options in town.

Posada del Valle (☎ 395-05-21; www.posadadelvalle.com.mx; Camino a Mexititla 5; r M\$1725, r with spa packages M\$4800; 📍) This hotel has quiet, romantic rooms and a good Argentine restaurant. Spa packages include two nights at the hotel, breakfast, massages and a visit to the temascal (indigenous Mexican steam bath). Children under 16 are not allowed. It's 2km east of town – take Av Revolución 1910 east and follow the signs for the final 100m to the hotel.

ourpick Posada del Tepozteco (☎ 395-00-10; www.posadadeltepozteco.com; Paraíso 3; r from M\$1890, ste M\$2640-3900; 📍) This gorgeous hotel was built as a hillside hacienda in the 1930s and is the society hotel of choice for Tepoztlán. The 20 rooms are airy and individually decorated in a pared-down way, and most have great views over the town. In the age of boutique luxury, some of the rooms may be underwhelming, but the focus of this old-world place is its refined atmosphere, wonderful garden and pool. Angelina Jolie stayed in room 5 when she dropped by, and unsurprisingly the guest book contains many other famous names. Service is top-notch, and rates are discounted up to 20% from Sunday to Thursday – even more if you stay several nights.

Eating

Tepoznievros (Av Revolución 1910 s/n; scoops M\$10-20) This homegrown ice-cream emporium scoops out some 200 heavenly flavors, including exotics

like cactus and pineapple-chili. It's an obligatory stop and has a couple more branches on the road to the pyramid, plus many imitators around town.

Los Buenos Tiempos (☎ 395-05-19; Av Revolución 1910 No 10; pastries M\$10-30) Head here for the best pastries in the state – the smell drifting over the *zócalo* alone will probably bring you on autopilot. There's also good coffee and a lively social scene, and it's a great place to buy a pastry breakfast to take up to the pyramid with you.

Govinda Ram (cnr Av Tepozteco & La Cumbre; snacks & set meals M\$30-55; ♻) As if you needed it, here's proof that Tepoztlán is well and truly central Mexico's biggest hippie haunt. A Hindu-inspired vegetarian café, Govinda Ram does a range of snacks and full meals, including an excellent Ayurveda buffet, good coffee and warming evening meals.

Los Coloritos (☎ 395-01-98; Av Tepozteco 13; mains M\$60-90; ☎ 9.30am-9pm) Specializing in *la comida sabrosa* (simply put, 'tasty food'), this recent addition to the scene here is a big two-storey place, vibrantly painted and with a large menu of great Mexican home cooking.

Axitle (☎ 395-05-19; Av Tepozteco; mains M\$60-100; ☎ 10am-7pm Wed-Sun) This place is definitely the oddest in town, a Swiss Family Robinson-style sprawling tree house venue just off the pathway up the archaeological site amid the thick forest. There's a good selection of breakfasts available (M\$50) and a comprehensive Mexican and international menu. Avoid the coffee.

our pick La Luna Mextli (☎ 395-11-14; Av Revolución 1910 No 16; mains M\$50-190) Yet another beautifully decorated and adorned space, La Luna Mextli is stuffed with local art, including its own in-house gallery. The food here is also excellent and good value, from Mexican standards to an entire list of different Argentinean steaks and Argentine-style *parrillada* (mixed grill).

La Sibarita (☎ 395-00-10; Posada del Tepozteco; mains M\$90-150; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner daily) Tepoztlán's finest dining is to be had at the restaurant of its top hotel, the Posada del Tepozteco. Given the prestigious 'H' certification by the Mexican Tourist Board for its high standards, you're in for an excellent meal here, with a menu taking in mussels au gratin, chicken in wine and thyme, and beef filet in tamarind sauce – not to mention a superb wine list. Another favorite is the weekend brunch. It's best to reserve a table.

El Ciruelo (☎ 395-12-03; www.elciruelo.com.mx; Zaragoza 17; mains M\$115-196; ☎ 1-6pm Mon-Thu, 1-11pm Fri & Sat, 1-7pm Sun) Beautifully set out in a courtyard, this long-standing super-smart favorite serves an impressive upscale menu of dishes from *camarones al curry* and *salmón chileno a la mantequilla* to good pizzas, salads and international dishes. Reservations are recommended – ask for a table with views of the pyramid.

Shopping

Tepoz has a fantastic, atmospheric daily market that convenes on the *zócalo*, although it's at its fullest on Wednesday and Sunday. As well as the daily fruit, vegetable, clothing and crafts on sale, Saturday and Sunday sees stalls around the *zócalo* sell a huge range of handicrafts, including sarapes (blanket-like shawls), carvings, weavings, baskets and pottery. Shops lining adjacent streets also have interesting wares (some from Bali and India) at more upmarket prices. Popular local craft products are miniature villages carved from the cork-like spines of the pochote tree.

Getting There & Away

Pullman de Morelos/OCC (☎ 395-05-20; www.pullman.com.mx; Av 5 de Mayo 35) runs 1st-class buses to/from Mexico City's Terminal Sur (M\$63, 1½ hours, hourly 5am to 8pm). Frequent buses to Cuautla (M\$14, 15 minutes) depart from the Hwy 115D tollbooth just outside town. Pullman de Morelos runs free combis between the Av 5 de Mayo terminal and the gas station near the autopista entrance; from there, walk down the left (exit) ramp to the tollbooth.

Ometochtli direct (M\$18, 45 minutes) and 'ordinario' (M\$12, one hour) buses run to Cuernavaca every 10 minutes, 5am to 9pm. On Monday to Friday mornings, you can catch the bus downtown.

If driving north from Cuernavaca on Hwy 95D, don't get off at the Tepoztlán exit, which will dump you on the slow federal highway. Instead, take the subsequent Cuautla/Oaxtepec exit and follow the signs.

CUAUTLA

☎ 735 / pop 147,000 / elevation 1300m

Cuautla (*kwout-la*) can inspire or bemuse depending on your interests. It's got none of Tepoztlán's scenic beauty or the architectural merit of Cuernavaca, but it does have sulphur springs that have attracted people for centuries,

as well as serious revolutionary credentials. Cuautla was a base for one of Mexico's first leaders in the independence struggle, José María Morelos y Pavón, until he was forced to leave when the royalist army besieged the town in 1812. A century later it became a center of support for Emiliano Zapata's revolutionary army. However, if modern Mexican history and *balnearios* aren't your thing, there's absolutely nothing for you here – modern Cuautla is a perfectly pleasant town, but there's little to see and do save the above.

Orientation

Cuautla spreads north to south roughly parallel to the Río Cuautla. The two main plazas – Plaza Fuerte de Galeana, better known as the Alameda (a favorite haunt of mariachis-for-hire at weekends), and the *zócalo* – are along the main north-south avenue, the name of which changes from Av Insurgentes to Batalla 19 de Febrero, then to Galeana, Los Bravos, Guerrero and Ordiera, on its way south through town.

Information

Banks ATMs are plentiful around the plazas.

Cyber Foster (next to Tony's Pizzas on the *zócalo*; per hr M\$8)

Tourist office (☎ 352-52-21; 🕒 9am-8pm) On the platform of the old train station along Batalla 19 de Febrero. Upstairs, the Casa de Cultura runs a museum and hosts a full calendar of cultural events.

Sights

In 1911, presidential candidate Francisco Madrero embraced Emiliano Zapata at Cuautla's old **railroad station** (in the Ex-Convento de San Diego). Steam enthusiasts will want to come on Saturdays, when Mexico's only steam-powered train fires up for short rides from 4pm to 9pm.

The former residence of José María Morelos houses the **Museo Histórico del Oriente** (☎ 352-83-31; Callejón del Castigo 3; admission M\$27, free Sun; 🕒 9am-5pm Tue-Sun). Each room covers a different historical period with displays of pre-Hispanic pottery, good maps and early photos of Cuautla and Zapata.

The iconic rebel's remains lie beneath the imposing **Zapata monument** in the middle of Plazuela Revolución del Sur.

Cuautla's best-known *balneario* is the riverside **Agua Hedionda** (Stinky Water; ☎ 352-00-44; end of Av Progreso; adult/child M\$45/35; 🕒 6:30am-5:30pm;

♿). Waterfalls replenish two lake-sized pools with sulfur-scented 27°C waters. Take an 'Agua Hedionda' bus (M\$4) from Plazuela Revolución del Sur.

Other *balnearios* worth visiting include **El Almeal** (Hernández; adult/child M\$60/40; 🕒 10am-6pm; ♿) and the nicer **Los Limones** (Gabriel Teppa s/n; adult/child M\$40/30; 🕒 9am-6pm; ♿). Both places are served by the same spring (no sulfur) and have extensive shaded picnic grounds.

Sleeping

Hotel España (☎ 352-21-86; Calle 2 de Mayo 22; s/d/t M\$130/170/230; ♿) Despite having a deeply unimpressive exterior, the Hotel España is far nicer inside than you might expect, with a pretty orange-and-white painted courtyard and 30 spacious remodeled rooms with hot water, fan and TV. Prices go up at the weekend.

Hotel Colón (☎ 352-29-90; Portal Guerrero 48; s/d/t M\$140/180/260) The most central option in Cuautla is this 1970s timewarp on the *zócalo*. It's absolutely fine, but nothing more. The 20 simple, small rooms all have TV and hot water, but many of them lack daylight and charm.

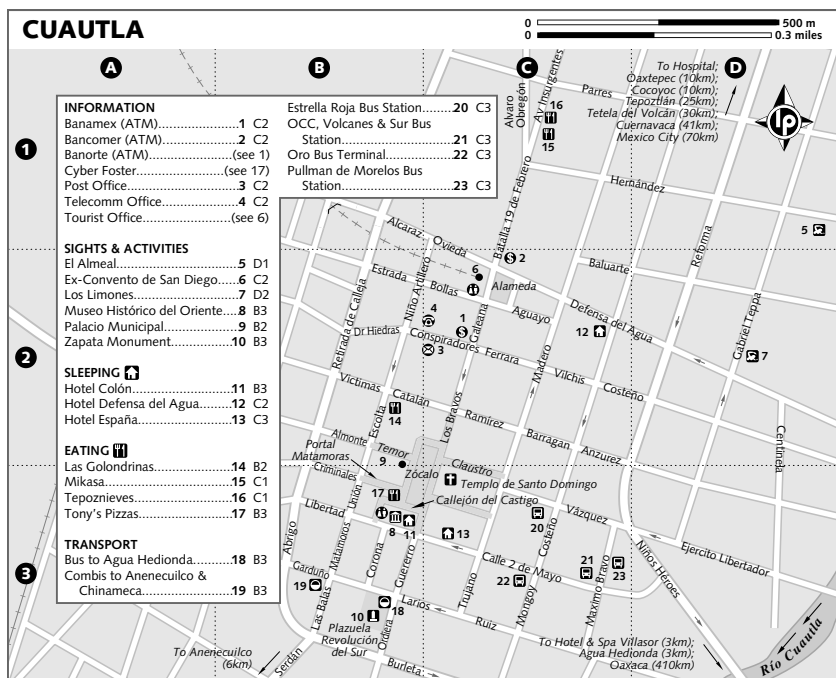
Hotel Defensa del Agua (☎ 352-16-79; Defensa del Agua 34; s/d/t/q M\$150/220/290/360; ♿) Cuautla's most appealing option is this modern, clean hotel set out in a motel style with a pool and spacious rooms with TV, phone and fan. There's a very handy Italian Coffee Company branch in the building for breakfast. Avoid rooms with windows facing the noisy street. Weekend specials lower rates by up to M\$100.

Hotel & Spa Villasor (☎ 352-65-21/61; www.hotelvillasor.com.mx; Av Progreso; s/d M\$390/510, ste M\$618-990; ♿) Out of town and located opposite the Agua Hedionda baths, this modern place has a large pool and comfortable rooms equipped with phone, fan and cable TV. With its own spa treatments, Villasor is the best option for relaxation, but it's not convenient for those without transportation.

Eating & Drinking

Tepoznieves (Av Insurgentes; scoops M\$10-20; 🕒 10am-6pm) This heavenly ice creamery has oodles of delicious tastes (some acquired) – sample one of the flavors with chili or alcohol.

Tony's Pizzas (☎ 352-67-30; Portal Matamoros 6 pizzas M\$60-200; 🕒 8am-midnight daily) This long-established place on the *zócalo* is a good bet for lunch. The pizzas are decent and there's a huge range available, while burritos and



burgers are even cheaper. In the evening this is a popular drinking spot, too.

Mikasa (☎ 352-51-02; Av Insurgentes; sushi M\$60) Cuautla is probably one of the last places you'd expect to find sushi, but you'll be pleasantly surprised by Mikasa, which serves a variety of Japanese dishes, including sushi, udon and teriyaki. Inspect the raw fish display before ordering – it's far from fine cuisine, but it's not bad for a small inland Mexican town.

Las Golondrinas (☎ 354-13-50, www.lasgolondrinas.com.mx; Catalán 19A; mains M\$80) This place could do with a little more money and effort from its owners, but it's still got the best setting in town, in a 17th-century building filled with water features and greenery. The house specialty is the range of *molcajetes* (various spicy stews cooked in a large stone mortar) as well as its excellent *platos fuertes* such as *lomo al mango* (pork loin cooked in mango). The place can be a little hard to find – walk down a passageway next to a yellow photo shop.

Getting There & Away

OCC (☎ 800-702-80-00; www.ado.com.mx), a 1st-class line, and Sur and Volcanes, both 2nd class,

share a bus depot at the eastern end of Calle 2 de Mayo. **Pullman de Morelos** (PDM; ☎ 352-73-71/81; www.pullman.com.mx) is across the street, with 1st-class service to Tepoztlán (M\$20, every 20 minutes 9am to 9:30pm). **Estrella Roja** (ER; ☎ 800-712-22-84; www.estrellaroja.com.mx), a 2nd-class line, is a block west, and 1st-class **Estrella de Oro** (EDO; ☎ 55-5689-3955; www.estrelladeoro.com.mx) is a block south from there.

Destination Fare Duration Frequency

Cuernavaca	M\$40	1½hr	every 20 min 5am-7:30pm (ER)
Mexico City	M\$74	2½hr	every 20 min (ER)
Mexico City (Terminal Sur)	M\$74	2hr	every 10 min (OCC)
Puebla	M\$100	2½hr	hourly 5am-7pm (ER, EDO)
Tepoztlán	M\$19	15 min	every 15 min (PDM)

CUERNAVACA

☎ 777 / pop 349,000 / elevation 1480m

There's always been a formidable glamour surrounding Cuernavaca (kwehr-nah-vah-kah), the high-society capital of Morelos state. With its vast good haciendas and sprawling

estates, it has in the past attracted everyone from the Shah of Iran to Charlie Mingus with its year-round warmth, clean air and attractive architecture.

Today this tradition continues, even though urban sprawl has put a decisive end to the clean air, and you're less likely to meet international royalty and great artists in the street and far more likely to see vacationing Americans and college students studying Spanish on month-long courses.

While Cuernavaca has lots going for it, including some fantastic boutique hotels, good nightlife and fascinating nearby pre-Hispanic sites, it's fair to say that it's not the most accessible destination for those just passing through. Many of its most beautiful buildings are hidden behind high walls in private estates, so unless you're well connected in Mexico City high society or able to spend several weeks getting to know the town, then you may come away underwhelmed. However, the city has a great atmosphere, and definitely merits a stop on your way through.

History

Around AD 1200, the first settlers in the valleys of modern Morelos developed a highly productive agricultural society based at Cuauhnáhuac ('Place at the Edge of the Forest'). Later, the dominant Mexica (Aztecs) called them 'Tlahuica,' which means 'people who work the land.' In 1379 a Mexica warlord conquered Cuauhnáhuac, subdued the Tlahuica and exacted an annual tribute that included 16,000 pieces of *amate* (bark paper) and 20,000 bushels of corn. The tributes payable by the subject states were set out in a register the Spanish later called the *Código Mendocino*, in which Cuauhnáhuac was represented by a three-branch tree; this symbol now graces Cuernavaca's coat of arms.

The Mexican lord's successor married the daughter of the Cuauhnáhuac leader, and from this marriage was born Moctezuma I Ilhuicamina, the 15th-century Aztec king, a predecessor to Moctezuma II Xocoyotzin encountered by Cortés. Under the Aztecs, the Tlahuica traded extensively and prospered. Their city was a learning and religious center, and archaeological remains suggest they had a considerable knowledge of astronomy.

When the Spanish arrived, the Tlahuica were fiercely loyal to the Aztecs. In April 1521 they were finally overcome, and Cortés

torched the city. Soon the city became known as Cuernavaca, a more Spanish-friendly version of its original appellation.

In 1529, Cortés received his somewhat belated reward from the Spanish crown when he was named Marqués del Valle de Oaxaca, with an estate that covered 22 towns, including Cuernavaca, and 23,000 indigenous Mexicans. After he introduced sugar cane and new farming methods, Cuernavaca became a Spanish agricultural center, as it had been for the Aztecs. Cortés' descendants dominated the area for nearly 300 years.

With its salubrious climate, rural surroundings and colonial elite, Cuernavaca became a refuge for the rich and powerful, including José de la Borda, the 18th-century Taxco silver magnate. Borda's lavish home was later a retreat for Emperor Maximilian and Empress Carlota. Cuernavaca also attracted many artists and achieved literary fame as the setting for Malcolm Lowry's 1947 novel, *Under the Volcano*.

Orientation

Most important sites, bus terminals and budget-conscious hotels are near Cuernavaca's Plaza de Armas. Hwy 95D, the Mexico City–Acapulco toll road, skirts the city's east side. If driving from the north, take the Cuernavaca exit and cross to Hwy 95 (where you'll see a statue of Zapata on horseback). Hwy 95 becomes Blvd Zapata, then Av Morelos as you descend south into town; south of Av Matamoros, Morelos is one-way, northbound only. To reach the center, veer left and go down Matamoros.

Information

BOOKSTORES

Sanborns (cnr Juárez & Abasolo) Upscale department store with a bilingual newsstand, popular bar and coffeeshop.

EMERGENCY

Ambulance (☎ 318-38-82)

Cruz Roja (Red Cross; ☎ 315-35-05/55)

Fire (☎ 317-14-89)

Tourist Police (☎ 800-903-92-00)

INTERNET ACCESS

There's also internet access at the Futura & Estrella Blanca bus station.

Copy@net (Av Morelos 178; per hr M\$12; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Sat, 11am-5pm Sun; ☎)

Cyber Gasso (per hr M\$7; ☎ 8am-10pm; ☎) Hidalgo (Hidalgo 40); Gutenberg (Gutenberg 198)

¡QUE VIVA ZAPATA!

A peasant leader from Morelos state, Emiliano Zapata (1879–1919) was the most radical of Mexico's revolutionaries, fighting for the return of hacienda land to the peasants with the cry '*¡Tierra y libertad!*' (Land and freedom!). The Zapatista movement was at odds with both the conservative supporters of the old regime and their liberal opponents. In November 1911, Zapata disseminated his *Plan de Ayala*, calling for restoration of all land to the peasants. After winning numerous battles against government troops in central Mexico (some in association with Pancho Villa), he was ambushed and killed in 1919. The following route traces some of Zapata's defining moments.

Ruta de Zapata

In Anenecuilco, 6km south of Cuautla, what's left of the adobe cottage where Zapata was born (on August 8, 1879), is now the **Museo de la Lucha para la Tierra** (Av Zapata; donation requested; ☎ 8am–9pm), which features photographs of the rebel leader. Outside is a mural by Roberto Rodríguez Navarro that depicts Zapata exploding with the force of a volcano into the center of Mexican history, sundering the chains that bound his compatriots.

About 20km south of Anenecuilco is the Ex-Hacienda de San Juan Chinameca (in a town of the same name), where in 1919 Zapata was lured into a fatal trap by Colonel Jesús Guajardo, following the orders of President Venustiano Carranza, who was eager to dispose of the rebel leader and consolidate the post-revolutionary government. Pretending to defect to the revolutionary forces, Guajardo set up a meeting with Zapata, who arrived at Chinameca accompanied by a guerrilla escort. Guajardo's men gunned down the general before he crossed the abandoned hacienda's threshold.

The hacienda, with a small **museum** (Cárdenas; donation requested; ☎ 9:30am–5pm), is on the left at the end of the town's main street, where there's a statue of Zapata astride a rearing horse. The exhibits (photos and newspaper reproductions) are pretty meager, but you can still see the bullet holes in the walls.

From Chinameca, Hwy 9 heads 20km northwest to Tlaltzapán, site of the **Cuartel General de Zapata** (Guerrero 67; donation requested; ☎ 9am–5pm Tue–Sun), the main barracks of the revolutionary forces. It contains relics from General Zapata's time, including the bed where he slept, his rifle (the trigger retains his fingerprints) and the outfit he was wearing at the time of his death (ridled with bullet holes and stained with blood).

From Cuautla, yellow 'Chinameca' combis traveling to Anenecuilco and Chinameca (M\$6) leave from the corner of Garduño and Matamoros every 10 minutes.

LAUNDRY

Nueva Tintorería Francesa (Juárez 2; ☎ 9am–7pm Mon–Fri, 9am–2:30pm Sat) Per kg M\$10.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital INOVAMED (☎ 311-24-82/83/84; Cuauhtémoc 305) In Colonia Lomas de la Selva, 1km north of town.

POST

Main post office (Plaza de Armas; ☎ 8am–6pm Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm Sat)

TELEPHONE

Telecomm (Plaza de Armas; ☎ 8am–6pm Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

There's an information booth in the cathedral and other kiosks around town, includ-

ing at most bus stations. Ask at these places for maps.

Municipal tourist office (☎ 318-75-61; <http://mac.cuernavaca.gob.mx/turismo>; Av Morelos 278; ☎ 9am–5pm) Also has a tourist police office.

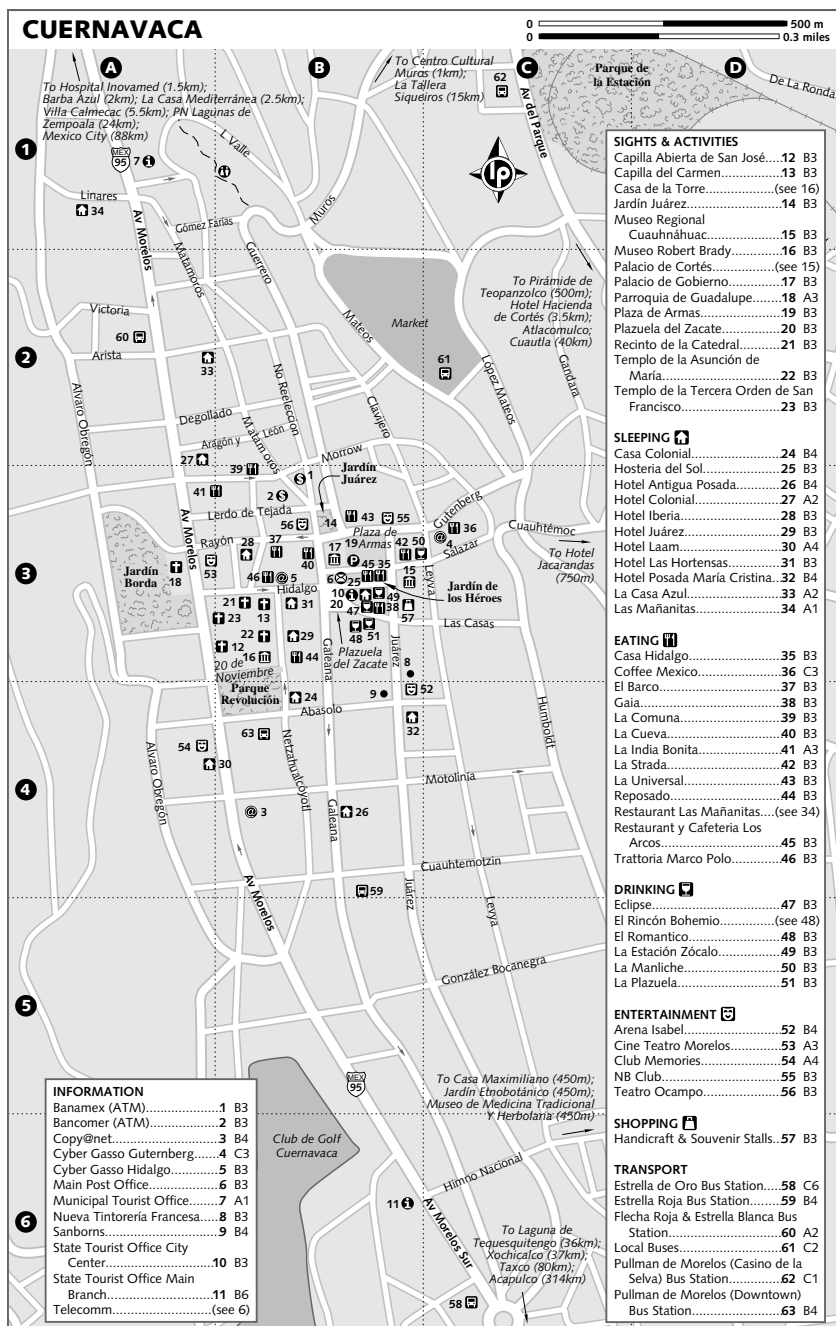
State Tourist Office (www.morelostravel.com;

☎ 8am–5pm Mon–Fri, Sat 10am–1pm) Main branch (☎ /fax 314-38-72/81, 800-987-82-24; Av Morelos Sur 187); City Center (☎ 314-39-20; Calle Hidalgo)

Sights & Activities

PLAZA DE ARMAS & JARDÍN JUÁREZ

Cuernavaca's **zócalo**, Plaza de Armas, is flanked on the east by the Palacio de Cortés, on the west by the **Palacio de Gobierno** and on the northeast and south by restaurants and roving bands of mariachis. Although you can't enter the Palacio de Gobierno, it is a nice spot to contemplate some attractive architecture



and enjoy the music. It's the only main plaza in Mexico without a church, chapel, convent or cathedral overlooking it.

Adjoining the northwest corner is the smaller **Jardín Juárez**, where the central gazebo (designed by tower specialist Gustave Eiffel) houses juice and sandwich stands, and hosts live band concerts on Thursday and Sunday evenings from 6pm. Roving vendors sell balloons, ice cream and corn on the cob under the trees, which fill up with legions of cacophonous grackles at dusk. Even more entertaining are the guitar trios who warm up their voices and instruments before heading to the cafés across the street to serenade willing patrons. You can request a ballad or two for around M\$75.

PALACIO DE CORTÉS

Cortés' imposing medieval-style fortress stands opposite the southeast end of the Plaza de Armas. Construction of this two-storey stone fortress-style palace was accomplished between 1522 and 1532, and was done on the base of the city pyramid that Cortés destroyed after taking Cuauhnáhuac, still visible from various points on the ground floor. Cortés resided here until he turned tail for Spain in 1541. The palace remained with Cortés' family for most of the next century, but by the 18th century it was being used as a prison. During the Porfirio Díaz era it became government offices.

Today the palace houses the excellent **Museo Regional Cuauhnáhuac** (admission M\$37; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun, last ticket 5.30pm), which has two floors of exhibits highlighting Mexican cultures and history. On the ground floor, exhibits focus on pre-Hispanic cultures, including the local Tlahaica and their relationship with the Aztec empire. Most labeling is in Spanish only, with a few well-translated exceptions.

Upstairs covers events from the Spanish conquest to the present. On the balcony is a fascinating mural by Diego Rivera, commissioned in the mid-1920s by Dwight Morrow, the US ambassador to Mexico. From right to left, scenes from the conquest up to the 1910 Revolution emphasize the cruelty, oppression and violence that have characterized Mexican history.

RECINTO DE LA CATEDRAL

Cuernavaca's cathedral stands in a large high-walled *recinto* (compound) – the entrance

gate is on Hidalgo. Like the Palacio de Cortés, the cathedral was built in a grand fortress-like style, in an effort to impress, intimidate and defend against the natives. Franciscans started work on what was one of Mexico's earliest Christian missions in 1526, using indigenous labor and stones from the rubble of Cuauhnáhuac. The first structure was the **Capilla Abierta de San José**, an open chapel on the cathedral's west side.

The cathedral itself, the **Templo de la Asunción de María**, is plain and solid, with an unembellished facade. The side door, which faces north to the compound's entrance, shows a mixture of indigenous and European features – the skull and crossbones above it is a symbol of the Franciscan order. Inside are frescoes rediscovered early in the 20th century. Cuernavaca was a center for Franciscan missionary activities in Asia, and the frescoes – said to show the persecution of Christian missionaries in Japan – were supposedly painted in the 17th century by a Japanese convert to Christianity.

The cathedral compound also holds two smaller churches. On the right as you enter is the **Templo de la Tercera Orden de San Francisco**. Its exterior was carved in 18th-century baroque style by indigenous artisans, and its interior has ornate, gilded decorations. On the left as you enter is the 19th-century **Capilla del Carmen**, where believers seek cures for illness.

MUSEO ROBERT BRADY

Let's face it, who wouldn't want to be independently wealthy and spend their life traveling around the world collecting gorgeous little things for their lavish Mexican mansion? If that option isn't open to you, visit this museum – easily Cuernavaca's best – and live vicariously. The one-time home of American artist and collector Robert Brady (1928–86), this **museum** (☎ 316-85-54; www.brady-museum.org; Netzahualcōyotl 4; admission M\$30; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), housed in the Casa de la Torre, is a wonderful place to spend time appreciating the exquisite taste of one man. Brady lived in Cuernavaca for 24 years after a spell in Venice, but his collections range from Papua New Guinea and India to Haiti and South America.

Originally part of the monastery within the Recinto de la Catedral, the house is a stunning testament to a man who knew what he liked. Every room, including the two gorgeous

bathrooms and kitchen, is bedecked in paintings, carvings, textiles, antiques and folk arts from all corners of the earth. Among the treasures are works by well-known Mexican artists including Rivera, Tamayo, Kahlo and Covarrubias, as well as Brady's own paintings (check out his spot-on portrait of his friend Peggy Guggenheim). The gardens are lovely too, with a very tempting (but off-limits) swimming pool in one of them and a little café in the other.

JARDÍN BORDA

Beside the 1784 **Parroquia de Guadalupe**, this extravagant **property** (☎ 318-82-50; Av Morelos 271; adult/child M\$30/15, free Sun; 🕒 10am-5:30pm Tue-Sun), inspired by Versailles, was designed in 1783 for Manuel de la Borda as an addition to the stately residence built by his father, José de la Borda. From 1866, Emperor Maximilian and Empress Carlota entertained their courtiers here, and used the house as a summer residence.

From the entrance, you can tour the house and gardens to get an idea of how Mexico's 19th-century aristocracy lived. In typical colonial style, the buildings are arranged around courtyards. In one wing, the **Museo de Sitio** has exhibits on daily life during the empire period and original documents with the signatures of Morelos, Juárez and Maximilian.

Several romantic paintings in the **Sala Manuel M Ponce**, a recital hall near the entrance, show scenes of the garden in Maximilian's time. One of the most famous paintings depicts Maximilian in the garden with La India Bonita, the 'pretty Indian' who later became his lover.

The gardens are formally laid out on a series of terraces, with paths, steps and fountains, and they originally featured a botanical collection with hundreds of varieties of ornamental plants and fruit trees. The vegetation is still exuberant, with large trees and semitropical shrubs, though there is no longer a wide range of species. Because of a water shortage, the baroque-style fountains operate only on weekends. You can hire a rowboat for M\$30 an hour, or take tea at the restaurant (mains M\$50 to M\$95) inside the entrance without purchasing a ticket.

CENTRO CULTURAL MUROS

Contemporary Mexican art and culture is celebrated at the city's best **art gallery** (☎ 310-

38-48; www.muos.org.mx; Guerrero 205, Colonia Lomas de la Selva; admission M\$30, free Tue & Sun; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), home to restored murals from Cuernavaca's Hotel Casino de la Selva and to a private collection of more than 320 paintings, sculptures, videos and photographs. Highlights include Frida Kahlo's *Diego en mi Pensamiento* and works by Rivera, Siqueros, Orozco, Tamayo and emerging modern artists.

PIRÁMIDE DE TEOPANZOLCO

This small **archaeological site** (☎ 314-40-46/48; cnr Río Balsas & Ixcateopan, Colonia Vista Hermosa; admission M\$34; 🕒 9am-5:30pm) is 1km northeast of the center. There are actually two pyramids, one inside the other. You can climb on the outer base and see the older pyramid within, with a double staircase leading up to the remains of a pair of temples. Tlahuicas built the older pyramid over 800 years ago; the outside one was being constructed by the Aztecs when Cortés arrived, and was never completed. The name Teopanzolco means 'Place of the Old Temple,' and may relate to an ancient construction to the west of the current pyramid, where artifacts dating from around 7000 BC have been found, as well as others with an Olmec influence.

Several other smaller platform structures surround the double pyramid. Near the rectangular platform to the west, a tomb containing the remains of 92 men, women and children mixed with ceramic pieces was discovered. They are believed to be victims of a type of human sacrifice in which decapitation and dismemberment were practised.

Catch a Ruta 4 'Barona' bus at the corner of Degollado and Guerrero, get off at Río Balsas, turn right and walk four blocks; or take a taxi to the site.

VOLUNTEERING

Por Un Mejor Hoy (www.hoycommunity.org) An excellent US-run non-profit organization based in Cuernavaca. Their aim is to mobilize the travel community to build bridges and assist local development through participatory trips. See their website to get involved.

Courses

Cuernavaca is a well-established center for studying Spanish at all levels, and has dozens of language schools. As such, standards are high, teaching is usually very thorough and

prices very competitive. The best offer small-group or individual instruction, at all levels, with four to five hours per day of intensive instruction plus a couple of hours' conversation practice. Classes begin each Monday, and most schools recommend a minimum enrollment of four weeks.

With so many teaching styles and options, prospective students should research the choices carefully. Contact the tourist office (p249) for an extensive list of schools. The following are among the most frequently and highly recommended:

Cemanahuac (☎ 318-64-07; www.cemanahuac.com)

Established in the 1970s, this place has an emphasis on language acquisition and social awareness, with many courses available taking in political and social issues in modern Mexico.

Center for Bilingual Multicultural Studies

(☎ 317-10-87, in the US 1800-932-2068, 1800-574-1583; www.bilingual-center.com) Part of the Universidad Internacional, the CBMS is accredited by the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Morelos and affiliated with many foreign universities.

Cetlalic (☎ /fax 313-26-37; www.cetlalic.org.mx) Emphasizes language learning, cultural awareness and social responsibility. Offers a large range of social justice programs including specially tailored gay and lesbian programs.

Cuauhnahuac Spanish Language Institute

(☎ 312-36-73; www.cuauhnahuac.edu.mx) The oldest language school in Cuernavaca helps students earn university language credits and members of the business and medical communities to develop language interests.

Encuentros (☎ 312-50-88; www.learnspanishmexico.com) Offers personalized programs to professionals and travelers wanting to learn Spanish.

Ideal Latinoamerica (☎ 311-75-51; www.ideal-school.com) Program immerses students in Spanish language and Mexican culture, while respecting the individual's pace and style of learning.

Spanish Language Institute (SLI) (☎ 311-00-63; www.asli.com.mx) All levels catered for, aimed largely at professionals. Offers vocational courses such as Spanish for airline personnel, Spanish for medicine, and Spanish and golf.

TLALOC (☎ 317-52-78; www.tlaloc.com.mx) Run by teacher Alfredo Martínez, TLALOC was set up to provide a better deal for teachers and other Mexican employees who, according to Alfredo, get a bad deal from many of the other local language schools. Wages are higher here, teachers get paid sick leave and medical care, and there's a strong volunteering aspect to courses here. Nevertheless, it's cheaper than many of the bigger schools, making it a great place to give something back as well as to learn Spanish.

Universal Centro de Lengua y Comunicación

(☎ 318-29-04; www.universal-spanish.com) Wide-ranging courses for all levels, aiming for quick learning in all fields. Study is combined with field trips and practical use in real-life situations.

Festivals & Events

Over the five days leading up to Ash Wednesday (falling late February or early March), Cuernavaca's colorful **Carnaval** celebrations feature parades and art exhibits, plus street performances by Tepoztlán's Chinelo dancers. From late March to early April, the city's **Feria de la Primavera** (Spring Fair) includes cultural and artistic events, plus concerts and a beautiful exhibit of the city's spring flowers.

Sleeping

There are some real gems among Cuernavaca's scores of hotels, although they tend to be the pricier options – a steady stream of upmarket boutique hotels have opened in recent years, and some of the best in the country are here, aimed squarely at weekend refugees from the capital. Budget hotels tend to be of poor quality (with some notable exceptions), while midrange places are thin on the ground. The town fills up with visitors from Mexico City at weekends and holidays, so it's best to arrive with prior reservations.

BUDGET

Hotel Juárez (☎ 314-02-19; Netzahuacóyotl 19; s/d without bathroom M\$200/250, s/d M\$300/350; ☎ ☎) This is unlikely to be anyone's first choice, but it's a cheap fallback. The rooms are basic and old, many lacking natural light, so it's deeply uncharming, yet it's very well located and has a great pool in its garden.

Hotel Colonial (☎ 318-64-14; Aragón y León 19; s/d/t M\$220/250/350) Another basic backpacker place that, while fine, is hard to recommend enthusiastically. Two people sharing one bed works out slightly cheaper than the prices listed, and upstairs rooms with balconies and tall ceilings are best.

Hotel Las Hortensias (☎ 318-52-65; Hidalgo 13; s/d M\$250/290) It's cheap and central, but beyond that there's little to recommend Las Hortensias, although there is an incongruously charming garden at its center. The rooms are very basic, small and charmless, although the rooms upstairs are better, with more light and fresh air.

Hotel Iberia (☎ 312-60-40; www.hoteliberia.com.mx; Rayón 7; s/d M\$290/370; (P)) Rooms may be a little small at this good-value student favorite. With iron bedsteads and matching fittings, the rooms have a modicum of style. Staff within the Talavera-tiled reception area are pretty indifferent, however.

ourpick Hosteria del Sol (☎ 318-32-41; Callejón de la Bolsa del Diablo; r without/with bathroom M\$300/400; (P)) The moment you enter this perfectly located little charmer it's clear what's wrong with most of Cuernavaca's other budget accommodation. Prices here are rock bottom, but everything is spotless and beautifully decorated in traditional blue and yellow tones. With just six rooms (half of which share facilities), it's best to ring ahead, although staff don't speak a word of English.

MIDRANGE

La Casa Mediterránea (☎ 317-11-53; www.lacasa mediterranea.com; Acacias 207, Colonia La Pradera; s/d incl breakfast M\$350/500; (P)) Excellent value for money – you'd be paying twice as much were it in the town center – and a gorgeous place in its own right. Popular with language students, the seven-room family home is 3km out of town but features large, well-maintained rooms and a friendly welcome.

Villa Calmecac (☎ 313-29-18; www.villacalmecac.com; Zacatecas 114, Colonia Buenavista; dm/d incl breakfast M\$450/650; (P)) Crafted from adobe and surrounded by organic gardens, this eco-friendly hostel is 7km from Cuernavaca's center. Yoga classes are offered, breakfast is an all-natural buffet and the bunks are in rustic-style rooms. It's 800m west of Hwy 95, a 20-minute ride from the corner of Av Morelos and Degollado on a Ruta 1, 2 or 3 bus (M\$7). Zacatecas is two blocks past the Zapata monument on the left. Visitors must check in before 9pm.

Hotel Antigua Posada (☎ 310-21-79; www.hotelantiguaposada.com; Galeana 69; r/ste incl breakfast M\$800/950-1100; (P)) This exclusive little hideaway boasts just 11 rooms behind its unpromising exterior, a short walk from the center of town. However, once inside there's a lovely courtyard and great service, and all the rooms are of very high standard, complete with wooden beams, rustic touches and full facilities including free wi-fi and valet parking.

Hotel Laam (☎ 314-44-11; www.laamhotel.com; Av Morelos 239; r M\$850; (P)) This new addition to the Cuernavaca hotel scene has the feel of a motel, but its rooms are comfortable, if a little

sterile, and some have huge terraces. It's set back from the main road so noise isn't a big problem, although the setting isn't exactly charming either. A small pool and delightful staff compensate for these shortcomings.

TOP END

La Casa Azul (☎ 314-21-41, 314-36-34; www.hotelcasazuul.com.mx; Arista 17; r/ste M\$850/1880; (P)) This 24-room boutique hotel is a short walk from the town center and has lots of charm, although the suites are a big price jump from the rooms and they aren't that much bigger. Originally part of the Guadalupe Convent, the hotel has soothing fountains, two pools, free wi-fi and a great selection of local arts and crafts throughout. The staff are delightful, the setting is tranquil and the decor is classic Mexican.

Casa Colonial (☎ 312-70-33, 800-623-08-43; www.casacolonial.com; Netzahualcōyotl 37; r/ste from M\$985/1215; (P)) One of the best places in town, the 16-room Casa Colonial oozes thought and style. Set in a charming garden around a large pool, this 19th-century mansion has been lovingly restored and cleverly updated, with beautifully furnished rooms, some of which feature saunas and fireplaces. The cheaper bungalows at the back are still of excellent standard.

Hotel Jacarandas (☎ 315-77-77/76, in Mexico City 55-5544-3098; www.jacarandas.com.mx; Cuauhtémoc 133, Colonia Chapultepec; r from M\$1400, ste M\$2600-4400; (P)) This large five-star place is designed for a true getaway from city life. Set in rambling grounds graced with lots of trees, exuberant gardens, a good restaurant and three pools of varying temperatures, this is a great – if pricey – weekend option. It's 2km east of the center.

Hotel Posada María Cristina (☎ 318-57-67, 800-713-74-07; reservaciones@maria-cristina.com; Juárez 300; r/ste from M\$1887/2900; (P)) This centrally located 16th-century estate is one of Cuernavaca's long-time favorites. Highlights include 20 tastefully appointed rooms in a nicely restored colonial building, the charming *nueva cocina mexicana* restaurant and bar Calandria, with its popular Sunday champagne buffet, and an inviting pool and Jacuzzi amidst lovely hillside gardens.

Hotel Hacienda de Cortés (☎ 316-08-67, 800-220-76-97; www.hotelhaciendadecortes.com; Plaza Kennedy 90; r/ste from M\$2350/3525; (P)) Built in the 16th century by Martín Cortés, who succeeded Hernán Cortés as Marqués del Valle de Oaxaca, this former sugar mill was renovated in 1980. It

boasts 23 rooms of various levels of luxury, each with its own private garden and terrace. There's a swimming pool built around old stone columns. Sadly though, we've heard from several guests that the rooms weren't in the best state when they visited. However, this is still an incredible place for a memorable night or two.

Las Mañanitas (☎ 362-00-00, in Mexico City 800-221-52-99, in the US 888-413-9199; www.lasmananitas.com.mx; Linares 107; ste incl breakfast Sun-Thu M\$2260-4642, Fri & Sat M\$2623-5061; 📞 📺 📺 📺) This utterly stunning place is where to head if you plan to impress someone. It's very much a destination hotel – you may not leave it for the whole weekend, after all – and so the fact that it's not in the exact center of town is irrelevant. The rooms are large, beautifully decorated yet understated, and many have large terraces overlooking the sumptuous private gardens, stuffed full of peacocks and featuring a heated pool. As you'd expect, it's home-away-from-home to Mexico's upper crust.

Eating

Cuernavaca has some great eating options, although, in a familiar pattern, it tends to be the upmarket options that really stand out.

BUDGET

La Comuna (☎ 318-27-57; Morrow 6; mains M\$20-30; 🕒 8am-9pm Mon-Sat) One of the friendliest places in town, La Comuna is decorated with handicrafts and serves up excellent organic coffee, as well as cheap beer, cocktails, pies, *tamales* and fruit salads with granola. Drop by for the daily buffet breakfast, a generous set midday meal, or to browse its small gift shop.

La Cueva (no phone; Galeana; mains M\$20-75; 🕒 8am-11pm) This sloped bar, which opens onto the bustling crowds of Galeana, serves up superb *pozole* (shredded meat and hominy in a delicious pork-based broth) and a range of other delicious snacks and light meals. This is a great place to come and eat with the locals at local prices. It's also an excellent place for breakfast, with a range on offer for just M\$25.

Coffee Mexico (Gutenberg 206; 🕒 8am-9pm) This independent little coffee shop is a great spot to recharge or get breakfast. There are delicious pastries on sale, and it's popular with language students and local students alike.

El Barco (☎ 313-21-31; Rayón 5F; mains M\$30-90; 🕒 11am-midnight) This popular, no-nonsense joint specializes in Guerrero-style *pozole*, the

all-curing Mexican version of matzo-ball soup. Small or heaping clay bowls are accompanied by fine oregano, mildly hot red chili, shredded lettuce, limes and chopped onions. Specify *pollo* (chicken) *maciza* unless you'd like your soup to include bits of fat, and *especial* if you enjoy avocado. For refreshment, there's ice-cold beer, pitchers of *agua de jamaica* (hibiscus water) and top-shelf tequilas.

MIDRANGE

Restaurant y Cafeteria Los Arcos (☎ 312-44-86; Jardín de los Héroes 4; mains M\$40-120) Right in the thick of things just off the Plaza de Armas, Los Arcos is a European-style café that makes for a great meeting place, with huge terrace that's nearly always packed. Whether you come for early-morning coffee, late-night cocktails or a meal in between, you'll find friendly and efficient service. There's also a *gelateria* serving up great ice cream. Happy hours run from 2pm until 4pm and again from 8pm to 10pm.

Trattoria Marco Polo (☎ 318-40-32; Hidalgo 30; mains M\$60-120, pizza M\$45-200; 🕒 1-10:30pm Sun-Thu, 1pm-midnight Fri & Sat) This handy little place does decent Italian dishes in an attractive setting just across from the cathedral. The pizza list alone is huge, and there's friendly service and a decent choice of wine as well. Try for a table by the balcony.

La Universal (☎ 318-59-70; cnr Gutenberg & Guerrero; mains M\$100) The Universal enjoys a strategic position on the corner of the two central plazas, with tables under an awning facing the Plaza de Armas. The people-watching is great, but you can find better eats elsewhere.

La Strada (☎ 318-60-85; Salazar 38; mains M\$70-150) On the corner of Salazar and the walking street also known as Callejón del Cubo, this inviting slice of Rome presents authentic Italian-Mediterranean cuisine in a covered interior courtyard. The napkins are linen, the wine cellar well stocked, the lettuce organic and the service attentive. Considering its location near the Palacio de Cortés, it's not too touristy. Romance fills the air Friday and Saturday nights, when there's live violin music and opera singing.

TOP END

Restaurant Las Mañanitas (☎ 314-14-66; Linares 107; breakfast M\$60-160, mains M\$400; 🕒 1-5pm & 7-11pm) The restaurant and bar of the town's most famous hotel (left) is open to all, and it shouldn't be missed if you want a memorable,

romantic dinner in ultra-smart surroundings. The menu has a heavy French accent, with dishes such as Entrecote Bourguignon and Royal Magret (duck breast), not to mention sumptuous deserts. Choose between tables inside the mansion or on the terrace, from where you can watch the wildlife wander around the emerald-green garden among fine modern sculptures. Reservations are recommended.

La India Bonita (☎ 318-69-67; Morrow 115; mains M\$75-150; 🕒 8am-11pm Tue-Sat, 9am-5pm Sun & Mon) Cuernavaca's oldest restaurant is also undoubtedly one of its most charming, set in a lovely courtyard, but with the option of indoor dining available. The staff are friendly, and the traditional Mexican menu with a twist is enticing – from *brocheta al mezcal* to *chile en nogada* (poblano pepper in walnut sauce). There's an elaborate Sunday buffet brunch, a full bar and live folkloric ballet Saturdays from 7pm.

Reposado (☎ 169-72-32; www.reposado.com.mx; Netzahualcóyotl 33; mains M\$80-165; 🕒 7pm-1am Tue-Sat, 4-11pm Sun) Synonymous with its celebrity chef Ana García, a local girl who has made a name for herself both in Mexico and the US with her promotion of Mexican *nouvelle cuisine*. Don't miss a chance to come to her charming, intimate restaurant and try her exciting, ever-changing menu of traditional Mexican cooking with innovations. The romantically candlelit tables are scattered throughout the colonial complex. There's a stylish cocktail lounge full of sofas in a loft overlooking the pool. Those really interested can arrange to stay in the small onsite hotel here and take cookery courses with Chef García – see the website for details.

our pick Casa Hidalgo (☎ 312-27-49, www.casa.hidalgo.com; Hidalgo 6; mains M\$160) Directly opposite the Palacio de Cortés with a great terrace and an even better upstairs balcony, this is one of Cuernavaca's most popular eateries and attracts a well-heeled crowd of local socialites and wealthy visitors. The menu is eclectic (try shrimp tacos with beans wrapped in banana skin, or braided red snapper and salmon in an orange-and-parsley sauce, for example). Super-friendly staff, a strong wine list and great views make this one of the best places in town for a meal.

Gaia (☎ 312-36-56, www.gaiarest.com.mx; Juárez 102; mains M\$190; 🕒 2pm-midnight Mon-Sat, 1-6pm Sun) This gorgeous, stylish place, located in a delight-

ful colonial building that was once the mansion of the 'Mexican Charlie Chaplin,' actor Mario Morenohas, has a very impressive international menu, with such dishes as linguini with shrimp in cilantro sauce and 'fish trilogy' served with tamarind and chili. Reserve a table with a view of the Diego Rivera mosaic that adorns the bottom of the swimming pool. Delivery and takeout are also available.

Drinking

There's buzzing nightlife in Cuernavaca, supported by a year-round student population that keeps places busy every night of the week. The most accessible bars are around Plazuela del Zacate and the adjacent alley Las Casas, where there's a selection of fun joints, most of which offer live music or karaoke, not making them great for a quiet beer. These places all open around sunset and typically don't shut their doors until around sunrise. There are no cover charges.

El Rincón Bohemio (Plazuela del Zacate) Popular with travelers and local students, there's live music every night, usually of the one-man-and-guitar variety, but this changes. Cheap beer deals keep people coming.

El Romántico (Plazuela del Zacate) Next door to El Rincón Bohemio, and with a very similar vibe.

Eclipse (Plazuela del Zacate) Across the road from El Rincón Bohemio and El Romántico, Eclipse has performers on two levels, folk on the bottom and rock on top.

La Plazuela (Las Casas) For those not into the guitar scene, this is the home of booming house and techno. Around the corner from the bars above.

La Estación Zócalo (cnr Blvd Juárez & Hidalgo) Opposite the Palacio de Cortés, this place attracts an even younger crowd with blaring rock music and two brightly colored but dimly lit dance floors.

Entertainment

Hanging around the central plazas is a popular activity, especially on Sundays from 6pm, when open-air concerts are often staged. Jardín Borda (p252) hosts recitals most Thursdays at 7pm.

NIGHTCLUBS

Better discos impose a cover charge of at least M\$50, but women will often be allowed in for free. Some discos enforce dress codes,

and trendier places post style police at the door. Things really get going after 11pm. Some recommended venues:

Barba Azul (☎ 311-55-11/55; Prado 10, Colonia San Jerónimo; 🕒 10pm-late Fri & Sat) Fab indoor gardens.

NB Club (☎ 318-89-29; Plaza de Armas) Large and centrally located.

Club Memories (☎ 318-43-80; Av Morelos 241; 🕒 10pm-late Wed, Fri & Sat) An upscale option.

THEATER

If your *español* is up to it, sample Cuernavaca's theater scene.

Cine Teatro Morelos (☎ 318-10-50; Av Morelos 188; tickets from M\$20) Morelos' state theater hosts quality film series, plays and dance performances. There's a full schedule posted out front and a bookstore and café inside.

Teatro Ocampo (☎ 318-63-85; Jardín Juárez 2) Near Jardín Juárez, this theater stages contemporary plays. A calendar of cultural events is posted at its entrance.

LUCHA LIBRE

Arena Isabel (☎ 318-59-16; cnr Juárez & Abasolo; adult/child M\$60/35; 🕒) Are you ready to rumble, *amigo*? Less highbrow diversions, namely *lucha libre* (a form of wrestling), go down here in the squared ring. Check out the good-versus-evil lineups on posters pasted up around town. *Lucha libre* is very popular with kids.

Shopping

Cuernavaca lacks distinctive handicrafts, but if you crave an onyx ashtray, a leather belt or some second-rate silver, peruse the souvenir stalls adjacent to Palacio de Cortés or around the Plaza de Armas at weekends.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Cuernavaca's main-line bus companies operate the following separate long-distance terminals:

Estrella de Oro (EDO; ☎ 312-30-55; www.estrelladeoro.com.mx; Av Morelos Sur 900)

Estrella Roja (ER; ☎ 318-59-34; www.estrellaroja.com.mx; cnr Galeana & Cuauhtemotzin)

Flecha Roja & Estrella Blanca (FR & EB; ☎ 312-26-26; www.estrellablanca.com.mx; Av Morelos 503, btwn Arista & Victoria) Futura services leave from here as well.

Pullman de Morelos (PDM; ☎ 318-69-85; www.pullman.com.mx) Casino de la Selva (☎ 318-92-05; Av del Parque s/n); Downtown (cnr Abasolo & Netzahualcōyotl)

Daily 1st-class and deluxe services from Cuernavaca include the following:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Acapulco	M\$265	4hr	every 2 hours (Futura)
Cuatla	M\$40	1¼hr	every 15min 6am-8pm (ER)
Grutas de Cacahuamilpa	M\$38	2hr	6 daily (ER)
Mexico City	executive M\$75	1¼hr	every 10 min (from Casino de la Selva)
	M\$65	4hr	every 1-2 hours (EB)
	deluxe M\$63	1¼hr	every 15 min 5am-11:15pm (PDM from Casino de la Selva)
Mexico City Airport	M\$125	2hr	every 10 min (PDM from Casino de la Selva)
Puebla	M\$140	2¾hr	hourly (ER & EDO via Autopista Siglo XXI)
Taxco	M\$52	1½hr	hourly (EB)
Tepoztlán	M\$18	30min	every 15min 6am-8pm (ER); also departs a bit later from the local bus terminal at the city market.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Cuernavaca is 89km south of Mexico City, a 1½-hour drive on Hwy 95 or a one-hour trip via Hwy 95D. Both roads continue south to Acapulco – Hwy 95 detours through Taxco, Hwy 95D is more direct and much faster.

Getting Around

You can walk to most places of interest in central Cuernavaca. Local buses (M\$6) advertise their destinations on their windshields. Many local buses, and those to nearby towns, leave from the southern corner of the city's labyrinthine market. Taxis serve most places in town for around M\$30.

To get to the Estrella de Oro bus terminal, 1km south (downhill) of the center, hop on a Ruta 20 bus down Galeana; in the other direction, catch any bus heading up Av Morelos. Ruta 17 buses head up Av Morelos and stop within one block of the Pullman de Morelos terminal at Casino de la Selva. All other depots are within walking distance of the *zócalo*.

XOCHICALCO

Atop a desolate plateau with views for miles around, Xochicalco (☎ 777-379-74-16; admission M\$45; 🕒 9am-5pm) is an impressive and relatively easy day trip from Cuernavaca that shouldn't be missed. It's large enough to make the journey worthwhile but not so well known as to be overrun with tourists. Note that a video permit costs M\$35.

A Unesco World Heritage Site and one of central Mexico's most important archaeological sites, Xochicalco (so-chee-cal-co) is Nahuatl for 'place of the house of flowers.'

The collection of white stone ruins, many still to be excavated, covers approximately 10 sq km. They represent the various cultures – Toltec, Olmec, Zapotec, Mixtec and Aztec – for which Xochicalco was a commercial, cultural or religious center. When Teotihuacán began to weaken around AD 650 to 700, Xochicalco began to rise in importance, achieving its maximum splendor between AD 650 and 900, with far-reaching cultural and commercial relations. Around AD 650, Zapotec, Mayan and Gulf coast spiritual leaders convened here to correlate their respective calendars. Xochicalco remained an important center until around 1200, when its excessive growth precipitated a demise similar to that of Teotihuacán.

The site's most famous monument is the **Pirámide de Quetzalcóatl**. Archaeologists have surmised from its well-preserved bas-reliefs that astronomer-priests met here at the beginning and end of each 52-year cycle of the pre-Hispanic calendar. Another sight not to be missed is the **Observatory** (ask the guard to turn on the lights), which takes you deep into an eerie and dank room through which a beam of sunlight falls.

Site signs are in English and Spanish, but information at the excellent, ecologically sensitive **museum**, 200m from the ruins, is in Spanish only.

Getting There & Away

From Cuernavaca's market, 'Cuaupepec' buses (M\$12) depart every 30 minutes for the site entrance. The last return bus leaves around 6pm. Alternatively, Pullman de Morelos runs hourly buses (M\$25) that will drop you off within 4km of the site, and Flecha Roja runs buses by the same intersection every two hours. From there it's a long, dull, uphill walk, or you can catch a shared taxi (M\$5) to

the site. Just try to flag down anything you can. On arrival, you'll need to walk round to the museum to buy tickets – you can't get them at the site itself.

TAXCO

☎ 762 / pop 90,000 / elevation 1800m

The first sight of Taxco (*tahss-ko*) across the steep valley as you approach it on the curvy road from Mexico City is enough to take your breath away. Scattered down a precipitous hillside surrounded by dramatic mountains and cliffs, its perfectly preserved colonial architecture and the twin belfries of its baroque masterpiece, Parroquia Santa Prisca, make for one of the most beguiling views anywhere in the central highlands.

Taxco, 160km southwest of Mexico City, has ridden waves of boom and bust associated with the fantastically wealthy silver deposits discovered here in the 16th century and then repeatedly until the early 20th century. With its silver now almost all gone, the town has fallen back on tourism to sustain it. On the one hand Taxco is a rare example of development being carried out in close association with preservation. On the other, the town can sometimes feel like it's given itself over to the tour groups a little bit too much. Any day of the week you'll find visitors wandering the narrow cobblestone streets, peering into the endless rows of silver shops, while at the weekends Taxco is often flooded with weekenders from Mexico City. The sheer noise of the countless Beetle taxis that serve the entire population of this steepest of towns can also be a problem. You'll need to chose your accommodation carefully if you want a quiet night.

Despite these reservations, Taxco is a fabulous destination and one of the best weekend trips you can do from Mexico City. Unlike many colonial-era towns, Taxco has not become engulfed by industrial suburbs, and its status as a national historical monument means that even new buildings must conform to the old in scale, style and materials.

History

Taxco was called Tlachco (Ball-Playing Place) by the Aztecs, who dominated the region from 1440 until the Spanish arrived. The colonial city was founded by Rodrigo de Castañeda in 1529, with a mandate from Hernán Cortés. Among the town's first Spanish residents were

three miners – Juan de Cabra, Juan Salcedo and Diego de Nava – and the carpenter Pedro Muriel. In 1531, they established the first Spanish mine in North America.

The Spaniards came searching for tin, which they found in small quantities, but by 1534 they had discovered tremendous lodes of silver. That year the Hacienda El Chorrillo was built, complete with water wheel, smelter and aqueduct – the remains of which form the old arches (Los Arcos) over Hwy 95 at the north end of town.

The prospectors quickly depleted the first silver veins and fled Taxco. Further quantities of ore were not discovered until 1743. Don José de la Borda, who had arrived in 1716 from France at the age of 16 to work with his miner brother, accidentally unearthed one of the region's richest veins. According to legend, Borda was riding near where the Templo de Santa Prisca now stands, when his horse stumbled, dislodged a stone and exposed the precious metal.

Borda went on to make three fortunes and lose two. He introduced new techniques of draining and repairing mines, and he reportedly treated his indigenous workers better than most colonial mines. The Templo de Santa Prisca was the devout Borda's gift to Taxco. His success attracted more prospectors, and new silver veins were found and played out. With most of the silver gone, Taxco became a quiet town with a dwindling population and economy.

In 1929, an American architect and professor named William (Guillermo) Spratling arrived and, at the suggestion of then US ambassador Dwight Morrow, set up a silver workshop as a way to rejuvenate the town. (Another version has it that Spratling was writing a book and resorted to the silver business because his publisher went bust. A third has it that Spratling had a notion to create jewelry that synthesized pre-Hispanic motifs with art deco modernism.) The workshop evolved into a factory, and Spratling's apprentices began establishing their own shops. Today, Taxco is home to hundreds of silver shops, many producing for export.

Orientation

While one of the joys of Taxco is getting lost while aimlessly wandering the pretty streets, it's actually a very easy place to find your way around. The twin belfries of Santa Prisca make

the best landmark, situated as they are on the *zócalo*, Plaza Borda. Nearly all of the town's streets one-way, with the main road, Av de los Plateros, being the only major two-way street. This is where both bus stations are located, and is the road for entering and leaving the town. The basic minibus route is a counterclockwise loop going north on Av de los Plateros and south through the center of town.

Information

Several banks around the main plazas and bus stations have ATMs. There are card phones near Plaza Borda, and quieter ones in nicer hotel lobbies. The tourist info stand at the Futura bus station has free city maps, and there are a huge number of internet cafés in Taxco.

Cruz Roja (Red Cross; ☎ 622-32-32)

Net X Internet (Ruiz de Alarcón 11; per hr M\$10) One of the better internet cafés.

Police (☎ 622-00-77)

Post office (Palacio Municipal, Benito Juárez 10)

Secretaría de Fomento Turístico (☎ 622-50-73; Av de los Plateros; ☎ 9am-3pm & 4-6pm) At north end of town. English- and French-speaking staff arrange guided tours of Taxco.

Sights & Activities

TEMPLO DE SANTA PRISCA

The icon of Taxco, **Santa Prisca** (☎ 9am-6pm) was a labor of love for town hero José de la Borda. The local Catholic hierarchy allowed the silver magnate to donate this church to Taxco on the condition that he mortgage his mansion and other assets to guarantee its completion. The project nearly bankrupted him, but the risk was well worth it – the resulting building is one of Mexico's most beautiful and striking pieces of baroque architecture. It was designed by Spanish architects Juan Caballero and Diego Durán, and was constructed between 1751 and 1758.

Perhaps Santa Prisca's most striking feature, best viewed side-on, is the contrast between its belfries, with their elaborate Churrigueresque facade overlooking the Plaza Borda, and the far more simple, constrained and elegant nave. The rose-colored stone used on the facade is extraordinarily beautiful in the sunlight – look out for the oval bas-relief depiction of Christ's baptism above the doorway. Inside, the intricately sculpted, gold-covered altarpieces are equally fine Churrigueresque specimens.

MUSEO GUILLERMO SPRATLING

This very well laid-out three-storey **history and archaeology museum** (☎ 622-16-70; Delgado 1; admission M\$27; 🕒 9am-6pm Tue-Sat, 9am-3pm Sun) is off an alley behind Templo de Santa Prisca. It contains a small but excellent collection of pre-Hispanic jewelry, art, pottery and sculpture from American silversmith William Spratling's private collection. The phallic cult pieces are a particular eye-opener. On the basement floor there are examples of Spratling's designs using pre-Hispanic motifs. The top floor hosts occasional temporary exhibits. Sadly for such a well-run museum, all the labeling is in Spanish only.

MUSEO DE ARTE VIRREINAL

This charming, rather rag-tag **religious art museum** (☎ 622-55-01; Ruiz de Alarcón 12; adult/student M\$20/15; 🕒 10am-5.45pm Tue-Sat, 10am-3.45pm Sun) is housed in a wonderful old house that is often referred to as Casa Humboldt, even though the famous German explorer and naturalist Friedrich Heinrich Alexander von Humboldt slept here for only one night in 1803! The museum hosts a small but well-displayed collection, labeled in English and Spanish. The most interesting exhibit describes restoration work on Santa Prisca, during which some fabulous material (including tapestries, woodwork altar pieces and rich decorative fabrics) was discovered in the basement, and there's also an interesting display on the Manila Galleons, which pioneered trade between the Americas and the Far East.

CASA BORDA (CENTRO CULTURAL TAXCO)

Built by José de la Borda in 1759, the **Casa Borda** (☎ 622-66-34; Plaza Borda; admission free; 🕒 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) serves as a cultural center hosting experimental theater and exhibiting contemporary sculpture, painting and photography by Guerrero artists. The building, however, is the main attraction. Due to the unevenness of the terrain, the rear window looks out on a precipitous four-storey drop, even though the entrance is on the ground floor.

TELEFÉRICO

From the north end of Taxco, near Los Arcos, a Swiss-made **aerial cable car** (one-way/round-trip M\$20/30; 🕒 7:45am-7pm) ascends 173m to the Hotel Monte Taxco resort (p263), af-

fording fantastic views of Taxco and the surrounding mountains. To find the entrance, walk uphill from the south side of Los Arcos and turn right through the Instituto de Artes Plásticas gate.

Courses

Taxco is a popular place for foreigners to come and study.

Centro de Enseñanza Para Extranjeros (CEPE;

☎ 622-34-10; www.cepe.unam.mx; courses from M\$4500) This branch of Mexico City's Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México offers intensive Spanish-language courses in the atmospheric Ex-Hacienda El Chorrillo. Advanced students may take additional courses in Mexican art history, geography and literature. CEPE can arrange lodging with local host families for M\$1400 to M\$2400 per month.

Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas (☎ 622-36-

90; www.enap.unam.mx) Next door, this school offers arts workshops from M\$1500 per month or M\$850 per semester.

Festivals & Events

Be sure to reserve your hotel in advance if your visit coincides with one of Taxco's annual festivals. Double-check exact dates of moveable feasts with the tourist office.

Fiestas de Santa Prisca & San Sebastián Taxco's patron saints are honored on January 18 (Santa Prisca) and January 20 (San Sebastián), when locals parade by the Templo de Santa Prisca for an annual blessing, their pets and farm animals in tow.

Jueves Santo The Thursday before Easter, the Eucharist is commemorated with street processions of hooded penitents who flagellate themselves with thorns as the procession winds through town.

Jornadas Alarconianas During this summertime cultural festival, which honors Taxco-born playwright Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, Taxco's plazas and churches host concerts and dance performances by internationally renowned performing artists.

Día del Jumil The Monday after Day of the Dead (November 2), the *jumil* – the edible beetle said to represent the giving of life and energy to Taxco residents for another year – is celebrated. Many families camp on the Cerro de Huixteco over the preceding weekend, and townsfolk climb the hill to collect *jumiles* and share food and camaraderie.

Feria de la Plata The week-long national silver fair convenes in late November or early December. Competitions are held in various categories (such as jewelry and statuary), and some of Mexico's best silverwork is on display. Other festivities include rodeos, concerts, dances and burro races.

Las Posadas From December 16 to 24, nightly candlelit processions fill Taxco's streets with door-to-door singing. Children are dressed up to resemble biblical characters. At the end of the night, they attack piñatas.

Sleeping

Taxco has a wealth of hotels, from large four- and five-star hotels to charming family-run posadas. It's always best to reserve ahead, and often essential at the weekend when the hordes arrive from Mexico City.

BUDGET

Casa de Huéspedes Arellano (☎ 622-0365; Los Pajaritos 23; dm per person M\$100, s without/with bathroom M\$140/160, d M\$180/220) There's a large variety of basic but clean rooms in this, Taxco's most backpackery option. The ground floor rooms are the very cheapest (s/d M\$100/150) as they have no balcony. Other rooms can sleep up to six people (M\$600), and most others have balconies. It's well tended, with lots of flowers, caged birds, a variety of rooms and ample terraces for relaxing.

Hotel Casa Grande (☎ 622-09-69; Plazuela de San Juan 7; s without/with bathroom M\$155/230, d M\$230/355; 📺) The basic rooms at the Casa Grande are very clean, and it's almost worth staying here just for the superb terrace overlooking the square. However, it's an extremely noisy place due to both the traffic and the music for La Concha Nostra (p264) downstairs. The apartments around the back are quieter, but also a bit run down. The one with three bedrooms (M\$530) is recommended.

Hotel Posada Santa Anita (☎ 622-07-52; hpsta54@hotmail.com; Av de los Plateros 320; s/d/t M\$250/350/400; 📺) Only two of the 25 rooms here have views; the others are rather dark, although the ones at the back are much quieter. Moments from the Futura bus station, Santa Anita is lacking in charm but makes up for it with value for money. All rooms have an en suite bathroom and most have TV.

MIDRANGE

Posada Los Balcones (☎ 622-02-50; posada_balcones@hotmail.com; Plazuela de los Gallos 5; s/d/t M\$300/450/550) This good-value, centrally located place has some surprisingly charming rooms, and – as the names suggests – many of these have balconies, which overlook the boisterous street below, just moments from Santa Prisca. All 15 rooms have TV and bathroom.

Hotel Santa Prisca (☎ 622-00-80; htl_staprisca@yahoo.com; Cena Obscuras 1; s/d/t M\$350/500/550; 📺) The 31-room Santa Prisca has very sweet, traditionally Mexican décor within the walls of a gorgeous old hacienda complete with courtyard garden. It has a great location too, right in the thick of things. Rooms are smallish, but most have breezy private balconies with good views. All have two beds, and newer, sunnier ones fetch a bit more. The parking lot is reached via a tunnel at the hotel's uphill end.

Hotel Meléndez (☎ 622-00-06; Cuauhtémoc 6; s/d M\$395/480) Street noise penetrates the exterior rooms at this reliable, family-run favorite. Upsides include its attractively tiled public areas, a sunny terrace, great views from the larger upper-level rooms and an unbeatable central location.

Hotel Emilia Castillo (☎ /fax 622-67-17; www.hotelemiliacastillo.com; Juan Ruiz de Alarcón 7; s/d/t M\$400/450/500) The 14 rooms here all have beautiful tiled bathrooms and are spotlessly clean. Owned by a famous family of silver workers, this intimate place offers colonial charm at reasonable rates. Sadly, it's in a noisy location – ask for a room at the back, but don't miss the views from the rooftop terrace.

Hotel Los Arcos (☎ 622-18-36; www.hotellosarcos.net; Juan Ruiz de Alarcón 4; s/d/ste M\$425/475/550; 📺) This rustic hotel is furnished in a traditional style and housed in a gorgeous 17th-century former monastery, full of character. All 26 rooms are charming, if not much more than basic, and the location is excellent.

Hotel Real de San Diego (☎ 627-23-30; realde sandiego@hotmail.com; Ave de los Plateros 169; s/d/t M\$440/500/560; 📺) Go for the rooms on the 2nd floor if you stay here – they're bigger and some have balconies. This place is on the main road into Taxco a short walk from the town center. There's a small pool, newly installed bathrooms in the rooms and cable TV.

Hotel Posada San Javier (☎ 622-31-77; posada sanjavier@hotmail.com; Estacadas 32; s/d from M\$460/490, ste M\$605-1405; 📺) This huge place is a combination of hotel and holiday apartments built around a very pleasant garden and pool. There are 22 rooms and numerous apartments in different corners of the complex. Rooms are comfortable but nothing special – the real attraction is the excellent location and pool.

Hotel Loma Linda (☎ 622-02-06; www.hotellloma linda.com; Av de los Plateros 52; s/d M\$410/480, Fri & Sat r M\$650; 📺) The rooms here are larger than

most, but it's not entirely conveniently located, perched as it is on the edge of a vast chasm, 1km north of town. At least the back rooms at this well-run motel have some good valley views. There's a restaurant, a heated pool, easy parking and cable TV in the 71 rooms, some of which have terraces.

our pick Hotel Mi Casita (☎ 627-17-77; www.hotelmi-casita.com; Altos de Redondo 1; s/d/ste/aptd incl breakfast from M\$550/650/700/750; ☒) This absolute gem has 12 beautifully and individually decorated rooms just moments from the *zócalo* and with great views over the cathedral. A colonial home run by a family of jewelry designers, this is one of the best bets in town, but bring your earplugs. The comfortable rooms feature original hand-painted bathroom tiles, and some have private terraces. Three rooms have rustic Talavera bathtubs, and all have fans and cable TV.

Hotel Agua Escondida (☎ 622-07-26, 800-504-03-11; www.aguaescondida.com; Plaza Borda 4; s/d M\$614/760; ☐ ☑ ☒) Facing the *zócalo*, the 'Hidden Water' has a couple of pools and a café-bar on a high terrace with unmatched views of Santa Prisca. The 60 comfy, if sterile, rooms (some remodeled, some not) have Mexican furnishings, cable TV and phone. Rooms with balconies overlooking the street suffer bad traffic noise – try for a room at the back. Prices rise at the weekend.

Hotel Victoria (☎ 622-00-04; www.victoriataxco.com; Nibbi 5-7; r/ste from M\$550/850; ☐ ☑) This odd place was totally deserted on our last visit, staffed only by a receptionist who seemed surprised to see us. Its 50 rooms are scattered along the hillside amid a dank, overgrown garden that feels more like a primordial forest. Rooms are large and of good quality, however, especially the suites with their huge balconies, although the bathrooms are a bit the worse for wear.

TOP END

Hotel Best Western Taxco (☎ 627-61-94, 800-561-26-63; www.bestwesterntaxco.com; Nibbi 2; s/d M\$999/1100, ste M\$1315-1515; ☐ ☒ ☑) If you're not looking for a particularly colonial vibe, this rather stylish and well-run Best Western is a good option. Large rooms with small bathrooms but the odd boutique flounce make for a comfortable stay right in the center of town. Upstairs rooms are larger but lack balconies. No matter; everyone enjoys access to the rooftop sun deck with 360-degree city views.

Posada de la Misión (☎ 622-00-63, 800-008-29-20; www.posadamision.com; Cerro de la Misión 32; s/d incl break-

fast M\$1500/1650; ☐ ☑ ☒) A short way from the town center on the top of a steep hill-ock, the large, rambling grounds of Posada de la Misión are an ideal weekend escape. The charming rooms (some of which have great balconies with breathtaking views of the town) are large, airy and bright. There's also a large pool and Jacuzzi under a beautiful mosaic of Cuauhtémoc, and an excellent restaurant with more stunning views. The hotel can be overrun with tour groups, although given the space available it's likely you could escape them.

Hotel Monte Taxco (☎ 622-13-00, 800-980-0000; www.montetaxco.com.mx; Lomas de Taxco; s/d from M\$1638/1735; ☐ ☑ ☒) This improbably located country club, accessible via a cable car (p261) from the edge of Taxco, is where to come and find the golfing classes. It's hard to see what all the fuss is about, though – the hotel is nothing special, and while good for views and a relaxed weekend away, the rooms are plain and somewhat neglected. Taxco itself is too much of an effort to get to – it'd be much better just drinking by the poolside. Use of the nine-hole golf course is extra.

Eating & Drinking

Many of the best spots in town to grab a bite are also a good place to down a drink.

Café Sacha (☎ 628-51-50; Juan Ruiz de Alarcón 1A; mains M\$40-80; ☐) This wonderfully decorated hangout enjoys low lighting, little balcony tables and free wi-fi as well as a collection of antique Lonely Planet guides to most of Central America. It's a good place to come any time of day – it can get lively in the evenings – while the good vegetarian selection and Thai and Indian specialties grab diners at other times.

La Hamburguesa (☎ 622-09-41; Plazuela de San Juan 5; burgers from M\$15; ☒ closed Wed) For a light meal or a quick lunch, try this popular place on the west side of Plazuela San Juan. It serves burger-and-fries combos and excellent enchiladas.

Pozolería Tia Calla (☎ 622-56-02; Plaza Borda 1; mains M\$20-40; ☒ 1:30-11pm Wed-Mon) There are no fine vistas or breezy *terrazas* here – just authentic, no-nonsense *pozole*, served up in Auntie Calla's basement. Pick your poison: chicken or pork. Pork comes loaded with *chicharrón* (fried pork skin), avocado and all the fixings. No matter your meat choice, the broth is always pork-based. The beer steins are chilled, and there's *fútbol* on the *tele*. What more could you ask for?

Café Borda (☎ 627-20-73; Plaza Borda 6; mains M\$40) This tiny place has the single best view of Santa Prisca going, and if you're lucky you can get the one balcony table and own it temporarily. Good breakfasts, strong coffee, sandwiches and Mexican *antojitos* are served here by the friendly family owners.

Del Convento (☎ 622-32-72; Estacadas 32; mains M\$40-105) For one of the best views in town, the restaurant of the Posada San Javier, with its vast roof terrace setting, is hard to beat. Come by for elaborate breakfasts, evening meals or cocktails.

Hostería Bar El Adobe (☎ 622-14-16; Plazuela de San Juan 13; mains M\$45-110) Views here are less captivating than at neighboring touristy eateries, but the interior décor is lovely and there's a bar full of cocktails. Specialties include Taxco-style *cecina* (salted strip steak) and shrimp-spiked garlic soup.

Sotavento (☎ 627-12-17; Juárez 12; mains M\$50-145) Next door to the Palacio Municipal, the Sotavento has a great terrace and a peaceful interior garden, as well as a good in-house art gallery. From breakfasts to cocktails, from *enchiladas de mole* to prime rib, it's all served up here.

Restaurant Santa Fe (☎ 622-11-70; Hidalgo 2; mains M\$55-90) In business for more than 50 years, Santa Fe is a favorite with locals, serving fairly priced traditional Mexican fare such as *conejo en chile ajo* (rabbit in garlic chili) and fresh shrimp. It offers four different set breakfasts, a hearty four-course *comida corrida* (set menu; M\$60) and three styles of *pozole* daily after 6pm. The walls are bedecked with photos of local patrons and some excellent black-and-white photos of ye olde Taxco.

La Casona (☎ 622-10-71; Muñoz 4; mains M\$60; ☎ 8am-8pm) Cheaper than its neighbor Del Ángel, La Casona is also less touristy, more relaxed and more traditional in its menu choices. There are equally superb views from the tables at the back, although our favorite table is the one you share with the skeleton smoking a cigar! The excellent *menu del día* is a winner for M\$80.

La Concha Nostra (☎ 622-79-44; Plazuela de San Juan 5; pizzas M\$60) On the second floor of the Casa Grande (p262), this popular pizza-and-pasta restaurant serves food and drink until 1am. You can watch the action on Plazuela San Juan from the balcony. Live rock music shakes the house every Saturday night.

Acerto (☎ 622-00-64; Plaza Borda 7; mains M\$90-190) This strikingly modern, sleek (and rather orange) conversion of a long-standing local favorite now functions as a restaurant, cocktail bar and internet café. The main attraction is the fantastic view across the Plaza Borda to Santa Prisca, although its delicious menu of salads, soups, *antojitos* and *moles*, and the superior cocktails are also good reasons to drop by.

Del Ángel Inn (☎ 622-55-25; Muñoz 4; mains M\$130-150) Expect tour groups and mariachi bands here, one of Taxco's most enduringly popular restaurants. Despite this, the superb views over the town from the 2nd-floor roof terrace are hard to beat, and food quality is good, with a range of Mexican and international cuisine on offer.

Bar Berta (Cuahtémoc; ☎ 11am-8pm) By rights Berta should be flooded with lost-looking tourists, but remarkably there's a clientele of tough-looking locals knocking back stiff drinks and watching *fútbol* instead. There's a tiny upstairs terrace for people watching over the *zócalo* should you not fancy the charming green-painted downstairs bar. Try a *Berta* (tequila, honey, lime and mineral water), the house specialty.

Shopping SILVER

There are several shops in the **Patio de las Artesanías** (Plaza Borda) building. **Pineda's** (☎ 622-32-33; Muñoz 1) is justly famous; next door, **Joyería Elena de los Ballesteros** (☎ 622-37-67; Muñoz 4) is another worthwhile shop.

Inside Hotel Emilia Castillo, the tableware in the showroom of **Emilia Castillo** (☎ 622-34-71; Ruiz de Alarcón 7) is a unique blend of silver and porcelain. For quantity rather than quality, trawl the vast, poorly displayed masses of rings, chains and pendants at the **Mercado de Artesanías Plata** (☎ 11am-8pm).

HANDICRAFTS

It's easy to overlook them among the silver, but there are other things to buy in Taxco. Finely painted wood and papier-mâché trays, platters and boxes are sold along Calle del Arco, on the south side of Santa Prisca, as well as wood carvings and bark paintings. Quite a few shops sell semiprecious stones, fossils and mineral crystals, and some have a good selection of ceremonial masks, puppets and semi-antique carvings.

Getting There & Away

The shared 1st-class Futura/Estrella Blanca and 2nd-class terminal, downhill from the main market, offers luggage storage. Turista services leave from this terminal as well. The 1st-class Estrella de Oro (EDO) terminal is at the south end of town.

Directo 1st-class departures include the following:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Acapulco	M\$168	4-5hr	7 daily (Futura)
Chilpancingo	M\$105	2-3hr	7 daily (EDO)
	M\$105	2-3hr	6 daily (Futura)
Cuernavaca	M\$50	1½hr	8 daily (EDO)
	M\$52	1½hr	hourly (Futura)
Mexico City (Terminal Sur)	M\$105	3hr	hourly (EDO)
	M\$105	3hr	5 (Turistar)
	M\$105	3hr	10 (Futura)

Getting Around

Apart from walking, combis (white Volkswagen minibuses) and taxis are the best way to navigate Taxco's steep and narrow cobbled streets.

Combis (M\$4) are frequent and operate from 7am to 8pm. 'Zócalo' combis depart from Plaza Borda, go down Cuahtémoc to Plazuela de San Juan, then head down the hill on Hidalgo. They turn right at Morelos, left at Av de los Plateros, and go north until La Garita, where they turn left and return to the *zócalo*. 'Arcos/Zócalo' combis follow the same route except that they continue past La Garita to Los Arcos, where they do a U-turn and head back to La Garita. Combis marked 'PM' (for Pedro Martín) go to the south end of town from Plaza Borda, past the Estrella de Oro bus station. Taxis cost M\$15 to M\$30 for trips around town.

Plaza Taxco shopping center has a large parking garage (M\$15 an hour, with cheaper 24-hour rates via most hotels). Access is off Av de los Plateros, via Estacadas. An elevator takes you up to the shopping center, on Ruiz de Alarcón next door to the Casa Humboldt.

PARQUE NACIONAL GRUTAS DE CACAHUAMILPA

One of central Mexico's most stunning natural phenomena is the **Cacahuamilpa caverns** (☎ 01-55; www.cacahuamilpa.conanp.gob.mx; tours adult/child M\$60/50; 🕒 10am-7pm, last ticket sold at 5pm), a must-

see for anyone visiting Taxco or Cuernavaca. The sheer scale of the caves is hard to conceive, with vast chambers up to 82m high leading 1.2km beneath the mountainside and containing stalactites and stalagmites that will blow your mind.

Sadly, though, the current visitor experience on offer is rather ho-hum – individual access is not allowed to the (perfectly safe) pathway, so visitors have to indulge the guides who lead each group (departures each hour on the hour) stopping off to point out various funny shapes (Santa Claus, a kneeling child, a gorilla) in the rock. Speleologists prepare to be appalled, and non-Spanish speakers might just be bemused, as the guides do not generally speak English. Thankfully, after the one-hour tour, you can wander back to the entrance at your own pace, although you're often virtually in the dark.

From the cave exit it's possible to hike down a path to the fast-flowing **Río Dos Bocas**, which runs through the mountainside. There are some tranquil pools to swim in, and the views alone are spectacular. Bring some bug spray.

Saturday and Sunday can be very crowded. There are restaurants, snacks and souvenir shops near the entrance.

Getting There & Away

The most comfortable way to get to the caves is to take any Toluca or Ixtapan bus from the Futura terminal in Taxco (M\$21, 45 minutes). Simply ask for a ticket to 'las grutas' – this is what the driver will call out at the crossroads where the road splits off to Cuernavaca. Get out here and walk the 350m downhill on the Cuernavaca road and the visitors center will appear on your right.

There are also direct Grutas combis (M\$15, 45 minutes) that depart every hour or two from the Futura bus terminal and stop at the visitor center. The combis are pretty cramped compared to the comfy Futura buses. The last combis leave the site around 5pm midweek, and 6pm on Saturday and Sunday; afterwards you may be able to catch a bus to Taxco at the crossroads or take a M\$50 taxi ride back to Taxco. **Estrella Blanca/Futura** (☎ 800-507-55-00; www.estrellablanca.com.mx) 1st-class buses arrive and depart the national park six times daily to and from Cuernavaca.

WEST OF MEXICO CITY

The area to the west of Mexico City is dominated by the large industrial and administrative city of Toluca, the capital of the state of México. While pleasant, Toluca is a place that overall has very little to recommend it to travelers, although there's enough to pass the time on an overnight stop if you're passing through.

The area's biggest draws are two wonderful but surprisingly different colonial gems: Malinalco, a sleepy and remote village with some fascinating pre-Hispanic ruins perched above it in one of the most picturesque settings imaginable, and Valle de Bravo, a cosmopolitan getaway favored by Mexico's elite and located on the shores of a large artificial reservoir a dramatic two-hour drive west of Toluca. The countryside surrounding Toluca itself is scenic, with pine forests, rivers and a huge extinct volcano, Nevado de Toluca, which shouldn't be missed for its two dramatic crater lakes.

TOLUCA

☎ 722 / pop 505,000 / elevation 2660m

Like many once-charming colonial Mexican cities, Toluca's development has created a huge ring of urban sprawl around what remains a very picturesque old town. The traffic problems alone can be enough to dampen the old town's charm, but those who make time to come here will find a pleasant, if rather busy, place in which you can easily spend a day exploring attractive plazas, lively shopping arcades and a number of art galleries and museums.

Toluca was an indigenous settlement from at least the 13th century. The Spanish founded the modern city in the 16th century, after defeating the resident Aztecs and Matlazincas, and it became part of Hernán Cortés' expansive domain, the Marquesado del Valle de Oaxaca. Since 1830, it's been capital of México state, which surrounds the Distrito Federal on three sides, like an upside-down U.

Orientation

The main road from Mexico City becomes Paseo Tollocan on Toluca's eastern edge, before bearing southwest and becoming a ring road around the city center's southern edge. Toluca's bus station and the huge Mercado Juárez are 2km southeast of the center, off Paseo Tollocan.

The vast Plaza de los Mártires, with the cathedral and Palacio de Gobierno, marks the town center. Most of the action, however, is concentrated a block south in the pedestrian precinct. Shady Parque Alameda is three blocks west along Hidalgo.

Information

The free Spanish-language monthly *Agenda Cultural* publishes a schedule of art, music and theater events.

Banks There are many with ATMs near Portal Madero.

Cruz Roja (Red Cross; ☎ 217-33-33)

Internet Café (Hidalgo 406; per hr M\$8)

Red Internet (Galeana 209; per hr M\$10)

State Tourist Office (☎ 212-59-98; <http://turismo.edu.mex.gob.mx>; cnr Urawa & Paseo Tollocan) Inconveniently 2km southeast of the center, but with English-speaking staff and good maps.

Tourist Information Kiosk (Palacio Municipal) Helpful kiosk with free city map.

Sights

CITY CENTER

The 19th-century **Portal Madero**, running 250m along Av Hidalgo, is lively, as is the commercial arcade along the pedestrian street to the east, which attracts mariachis after 9pm. A block north, the large, open expanse of **Plaza de los Mártires** is surrounded by fine old government buildings; the 19th-century **cathedral** and the 18th-century **Templo de la Santa Veracruz** are on its south side.

Just northeast of Plaza de los Mártires is **Plaza Garibay**. At its east end stands the unique **Cosmo Vitral Jardín Botánico** (Cosmic Stained-Glass Window Botanical Garden; ☎ 214-67-85; cnr Juárez & Lerdo de Tejada; admission M\$10; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun). Built in 1909 as a market, the building now houses 3500 sq meter of lovely gardens, lit through 48 stained-glass panels by the Tolucan artist Leopoldo Flores. On Plaza Garibay's north side is the 18th-century **Templo del Carmen**.

MERCADO JUÁREZ & CASART

The gigantic daily **Mercado Juárez** (cnr Fabela & Calle 5 de Mayo) is behind the bus station. On Friday, villagers swarm in to exchange fruit, flowers, pots, clothes and plastic goods. The market may be colorful, but it's also chaotic and not a great place to buy local handicrafts.

Nearby, you'll find quality arts and crafts in more peaceful surroundings at the state crafts store, **Casart** (Casa de Artesanía; ☎ 10am-7pm). There's a big range, and the crafts are often top-end pieces

TOLUCA

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SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Cathedral.....5 B1
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EATING

Hostería Las Ramblas.....17 C2
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Buses to Bus Terminal.....21 C2
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TO CENTRO CULTURAL MEXIQUENSE (4km): Nevado de Toluca (48km); Valle del Bravo (75km)

TO MERCADO JUÁREZ (1.5km): Bus Station (1.5km); Casart (1.5km); State Tourist Office (1.5km); Airport (14km); Hwy 15 to Mexico City (66km)

from the villages where the craft styles originated. Prices are fixed, and higher than you can get with some haggling in markets; gauge prices and quality here before going elsewhere to buy. Craftspeople, such as basket weavers from San Pedro Actopan, often work in the store.

CENTRO CULTURAL MEXIQUENSE

This large **cultural center** (State of México Cultural Center ☎ 274-1200; Blvd Reyes Heróles 302; admission M\$10, free Sun; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-3pm Sun), 4.5km west of the city center, houses three good museums (which all keep the same hours). It's no must-see, but still a worthwhile diversion for visitors interested in local arts and crafts, local archaeology and modern art. To get here it's easiest to take one of the plentiful local buses (M\$5) from outside the Mercado Juárez – just look for Centro Cultural on its destination board. The bus ride is a circuitous 20-min one. Get off by the large grass roundabout near the Monterrey University Toluca Campus, cross to the opposite side and the museum complex is through the gate and down the road.

The **Museo de Culturas Populares** has a wonderfully varied collection of México's tradi-

tional arts and crafts, with some astounding 'trees of life' from Metepec, whimsical Day of the Dead figures and a fine display of *charro* gear. There are also mosaics, traditional rugs, a loft and a gift shop.

The **Museo de Arte Moderno** is the least exciting museum of the three. It traces the development of Mexican art from the late-19th-century Academia de San Carlos to the Nueva Plástica and includes paintings by Tamayo, Orozco and many others, but frankly there's little to be excited about beyond the impressive spherical mural of people fighting against slavery, which makes up part of the building itself.

The **Museo de Antropología e Historia** is the stand-out museum, and presents exhibits on the state's history from prehistoric times to the 20th century, with a good collection of pre-Hispanic artifacts. It also traces pre-Hispanic cultural influences to the modern day in tools, clothing, textiles and religion. Sadly, nearly all the labels are only in Spanish.

OTHER MUSEUMS

The ex-convent buildings adjacent to the Templo del Carmen, on the north side of Plaza

Garibay, house Toluca's **Museo de Bellas Artes** (☎ 215-53-29; Degollado 102; admission M\$10; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Sat, 10am-3pm Sun), which exhibits paintings from the colonial period to the early 20th century. On Bravo, opposite the Palacio de Gobierno, are three museums: one dedicated to landscape painter **José María Velasco** (☎ 213-28-14; Lerdo de Tejada 400; admission M\$10; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun), another to painter **Felipe Santiago Gutiérrez** (☎ 213-26-47; Bravo Nte 303; admission M\$4, free Sun & Wed; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) and the last to multifaceted Mexican-Japanese artist **Luis Nishizawa** (☎ 215-74-65; Bravo Nte 305; adult/student M\$10/5; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Sat, 10am-3pm Sun).

Sleeping

Hotel San Carlos (☎ 21494-19, 214-43-36; www.hotel.sancarlostoluca.com; Portal Madero 210; s/d M\$300/400; 📍) There's a real attack of the 1970s when you enter the lobby of this hotel, located right in the thick of things within the Portal Madero. The equally time-warped rooms are spacious, clean and comfortable, with cable TV and private bathrooms.

Hotel Colonial (☎ 215-97-00; Hidalgo Ote 103; s/d M\$350/400; 📍) The rooms overlooking the busy main road are the best, but also the loudest, at this well-run and excellent-value hotel. The impressive lobby and friendly staff are other good reasons to come here. Rates include free parking nearby in a lot on Juárez.

El Gran Hotel (☎ 213-98-89; Allende 124; s/d M\$570/640; 📍) By far the best place in town, the modern, sleek Gran Hotel is a much-needed addition to Toluca's lackluster hotel scene. The smart rooms are airy and comfortable. Free wi-fi and a small gym complete the picture.

Hotel San Francisco (☎ 213-44-15; Rayón 104; s/d M\$700/900; 📍) While it might look like a classy business hotel in the lobby, the rooms at the San Francisco are rather neglected and feel a bit old and, as such, they seem pretty overpriced. All the 75 bedrooms here have two double beds in them, as well as TV, phone and bathroom.

Eating & Drinking

Toluqueños take snacking and sweets very seriously; join them in the arcades around Plaza Fray Andrés de Castro. Stalls selling *tacos de Obispo* (a sausage from Tenancingo) are easily found by following the crowds that flock around them. The contents of the arm-width sausages – barbecued chopped beef spiced

with *epazote* (wormseed, a pungent herb similar to cilantro), almonds and raisins – are stuffed into tortillas. Other stalls sell candied fruit and *jamoncillos*, and *mostachones* (sweets made of burned milk). Most eateries in the center are open from around 8am to 9pm.

La Gloria Chocolatería y Pan 1876 (Quintana Roo; snacks M\$10-50; 🕒 10am-11:30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-10:30pm Sun) You feel lucky just to be here, and you'll almost certainly be the only foreign visitor when you are. This wonderful, friendly, family-run snack spot and café serves up a tempting, changing menu of local cuisine, from *tacos al pastor* (spicy pork tacos) and *tortas* stuffed with oven-baked pork or shredded chicken bathed in red or green *mole poblano*.

La Vaquita Negra del Portal (sandwiches M\$15-35) On the northwest corner of the arcades, smoked hams and huge green-and-red sausages hanging over the deli counter signal first-rate *tortas*. Try a messy *toluqueña* (red pork chorizo sausage, white cheese, cream, tomato and *salsa verde*), and don't forget to garnish your heaping sandwich with spicy pickled peppers and onions.

Hostería Las Ramblas (☎ 215-54-88; Calle 20 de Noviembre 107D; mains M\$35-110) On a pedestrian mall, one of Toluca's best and most atmospheric places to eat and drink (there's a full bar) serves full breakfasts and a variety of ambrosial *antojitos*, including *sopes* (soup), *mole verde* and *conejo al ajillo* (liberally garlicked rabbit).

Getting There & Away

Toluca's Aeropuerto Adolfo López Mateos (☎ 213-15-44; www.aeropuertointernacionaldetoluca.com) is conveniently located off Hwy 15, near downtown, adjacent to the industrial zone and a group of business-friendly chain hotels. Domestic airline **Interjet** (www.interjet.com.mx) has Toluca as its hub, offering flights from all over Mexico for those wishing to travel cheaply to the capital.

Continental Express (☎ 800-900-50-00, in the US 800-523-3273; www.continental.com) shuttles to Houston, and a couple of other Mexican airlines have scheduled flights from here. There are frequent buses from the airport to both Mexico City and the capital's Aeropuerto Internacional, which take an hour or two, depending on traffic. A taxi from the airport to downtown Toluca runs around M\$12.

Toluca's **bus station** (Berriozábal 101) is 2km southeast of the center. Ticket offices for many

destinations are on the platforms or at the gate entrances, and it's fair to say it can be a confusing place.

There are frequent departures to Morelia (M\$200, every hour from gate 5), Valle de Bravo (M\$48, every 20 minutes from gate 6), Chalma (M\$28, every 5 minutes from gate 1), Cuernavaca (M\$64, every hour from gate 12), Taxco (M\$76, every hour from gate 12) and Ixtapan de la Sal (M\$36, every 20 minutes from gate 12). Shuttle buses to Tenango (where you can change for the *colectivo* to Malinalco) leave every 5 minutes (M\$8, from gate 9).

For Mexico City there are a range of services to Terminal Poniente. The 1st-class **TMT Caminante** (☎ 219-50-07; www.tmt-caminante.com.mx) line links the two cities (M\$38, one hour) every five minutes from 5:30am to 10:30pm, while the even plusher deluxe ETN services (M\$49, one hour) leave every half hour. From Toluca, TMT runs hourly direct service to the Mexico City airport from 4am to 10pm (M\$100, 11½ hours).

Getting Around

'Centro' buses go from outside Toluca's bus station to the town center along Lerdo de Tejada. From Juárez in the center, 'Terminal' buses go to the bus station (M\$5). Taxis from the bus station to the city center cost around M\$50; fares around town are considerably cheaper.

NEVADO DE TOLUCA

The long-extinct volcano Nevado de Toluca (also known as Xinantécatl), Mexico's fourth tallest peak at 4690m, lies across the horizon south of Toluca. A road runs 48km up to its crater, which contains two lakes, El Sol and La Luna. The earlier you reach the summit, the better the chance of clear views. The summit area can be snowy from November to March, and is sometimes good for off-piste cross-country skiing, but **Parque Nacional Nevado de Toluca** is closed during the heaviest snowfalls.

From the park entrance, a road winds 3.5km up to the main gate at an area called **Parque de los Venados** (entrance per vehicle M\$20; ☎ 8am-5pm, last entrance at 3pm). From there it's a 17km drive along an unsurfaced road up to the crater. Six kilometers from the crater, there's a gate, café and basic *refugio* (rustic shelter). From that point, the crater can also be reached by

a 2km hike via **Paso del Quetzal** (fee M\$2), a very scenic walking track. Dress warmly – it gets chilly up top.

Sleeping & Eating

Albergue Ejidal (campsite/dm M\$50/80) Two kilometers beyond Parque de los Venados, this community-run hostel has 64 bunk beds (sleeping bag required), hot water, a huge fireplace and a generator that runs on Saturday night. Ask an attendant at Parque de los Venados to open it up for you.

Posada Familiar (campsite/dm M\$50/100) Just beyond the Parque de los Venados gate, this basic, heavily used refuge has shared hot showers, a kitchen (without utensils) and a common area with a fireplace. Bring extra blankets.

Just below the summit (at 4050m), the basic **state-run shelter** (dm M\$60) has foam mattresses but no bathrooms.

On Saturday and Sunday, food is served at stalls around Parque de los Venados and at the gate near the summit. Midweek, bring your own food and water.

Getting There & Away

Buses on Hwy 134, the Toluca-Tejupilco road, will stop at the turnoff for Hwy 10 to Sultepec, which passes the park entrance 7km to the south. On Saturday and Sunday you should be able to hitch a ride for the 28km from the junction of Hwys 134 and 10 to the crater. From Toluca, taxis will take you to the top for upwards of M\$200, or there and back (including time for a look around) for a negotiable M\$400. Be sure to hire a newer taxi; the road up is very rough and dusty.

VALLE DE BRAVO

☎ 726 / pop 28,000 / elevation 1800m

With one of the loveliest colonial centers in Central Mexico, the *pueblo mágico* of Valle de Bravo is an utter charmer and a wonderful spot for an escape from Mexico City. A long, winding and occasionally stunning mountain road runs the 85km west from Toluca, taking you to shores of (artificial) Lake Avandaro, the result of the construction of a hydroelectric station.

The setting here is reminiscent of the northern Italian lakes, with thickly wooded, mist-clad hills and red terracotta roofing used throughout the town. Valle, as it's known, is famous for being the weekend retreat of choice for the capital's well-connected upper classes.

The views at the lakeside are stunning, but the beguiling and largely intact colonial center is arguably the real draw here. Boating on the lake is very popular as well, as are hiking and camping in the hills around the town. Valle is set up well for visitors. There's a tourist info kiosk on the wharf, and essential services, including ATMs and internet cafés, are found around the main plaza, a 10-minute walk uphill from the waterfront.

In late October or early November, the weeklong **Festival de las Almas** international arts and culture extravaganza brings in music and dance troupes from all over Europe and Latin America.

Sleeping

Valle's accommodation options are generally very good value, and there's a large choice of budget and midrange options.

Posada Anthurios (☎ 262-04-90; jugj39@hotmail.com; Calle 16 de Septiembre 419; s/d M\$250/350; (P)) An excellent budget option is this new family-run hotel just a short walk from the bus station. The bright, spotless rooms feature brand new bathrooms and overlook a small courtyard set back from the road.

Posada Los Girasoles (☎ 262-29-67; losgirasoles@valledebravo.com.mx; Plaza Independencia 1; s/d M\$400/500) The nine-room Girasoles overlooks the charming *zócalo* and offers spacious, clean and modern rooms complete with rustic touches such as exposed beams. The location is enviable and the staff charming.

our pick **Hotel Casanueva** (☎ 262-17-66; Villgrán 100; s/d/ste M\$680/880/2300) Hands down the best place in town, the Casanueva is on the *zócalo* next to several other hotels, but it's very different from them, with individually designed rooms decorated with tasteful arts and crafts. While calling it a boutique hotel is a slight exaggeration, this is definitely the most stylish in town. The suite sleeps four and is lovely. Many of the rooms have private balconies over the square.

Eating & Drinking

There are scores of restaurants and cafés along the wharf and around the *zócalo*; most upscale places open only Friday to Sunday.

El Lobo (Salitre s/n; mains M\$35-120; ☎ 10am-8pm) This friendly outdoor terrace across from the wharf is a popular local hangout. Try their delicious shrimp empanadas. Choose from three sizes and 10 degrees of hot sauce, and mix

several ingredients: shrimp, octopus, oyster, crab and sea snail. The beer is cold, and they also fry up fresh fish fillets a dozen ways.

Restaurante Paraiso (☎ 262-47-31; Fray Gregorio Jiménez de la Cuenca s/n; mains M\$75-160; ☎ 8am-11pm) With fantastic lake views and a huge menu full of seafood specialties and including a large selection of imaginatively cooked trout, this is definitely one of Valle's better upmarket choices. Reserve a table on the upper terrace to get the best views.

For a nice, breezy, equilibrium-challenging ambience, try a drink or a meal at either of the following:

Los Pericos (☎ 262-05-58; mains M\$65-150; ☎ 8am-11pm Thu-Tue)

La Balsa (☎ 262-25-53; mains M\$75-160; ☎ 8am-10pm Wed-Mon) A floating lakefront bar-restaurant.

Getting There & Away

Valle's remodeled bus terminal is on Calle 16 de Septiembre. Autobuses Zinacantepec run hourly 2nd-class *directos* until 5:30pm to Mexico City's Terminal Poniente (M\$100, three hours), all of which make a stop near Toluca's terminal. There is also a twice-daily service to Zitácuaro (M\$56). If driving between Toluca and Valle de Bravo, the southern route via Hwy 134 is quicker and more scenic than Hwy 1.

MALINALCO

☎ 714 / pop 7500 / elevation 1740m

The word has slowly got out about this *pueblo mágico*, but come soon and you'll still get to enjoy it without the weekend crowds that descend on its more easily accessible cousins. True, there are already a clutch of hippie stores with names like Gandhi and a couple of boutique hotels here, but for the most part life in Malinalco is a far cry from that in Tepoztlán.

The drive to Malinalco is one of the most enjoyable to be had in the area, with dramatic scenery south of Toluca lining the road. The village itself has a charming colonial core set around a well-preserved convent and two central plazas. There's an ATM on Hidalgo, on the convent's north side, and **Internet Quetzal** is on Progreso, to one side of the Palacio Municipal.

A short but bracing hike up the mountainside above Malinalco takes you to one of the country's few reasonably well-preserved **Aztec temples** (admission M\$37; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun, last ticket sold at 5pm), from where there are stun-

ning views of the valley and beyond. From the main square follow signs to the *zona arqueológica*, which takes you up the hillside on a well-maintained footpath with signs in Spanish, English and Náhuatl. The site itself is fascinating, and includes *El Paraíso de los Guerros*, a mural that once covered an entire wall, depicting fallen warriors becoming deities and living in paradise.

The Aztecs conquered the region in 1476 and were busy building a ritual center here when they were conquered by the Spanish. **El Cuauhcalli**, thought to be the Temple of Eagle and Jaguar Warriors – where sons of Aztec nobles were initiated into warrior orders – survived because it was hewn from the mountain-side itself. The entrance is carved in the form of a fanged serpent.

Temple IV, on the far side of the site, continues to baffle archaeologists. As the room is located in order to allow the first rays of the sun to hit it at dawn, there has been speculation that it was part of a Mexica sun cult, although other interpretations claim the temple was a solar calendar or a meeting place for nobles.

Near the site entrance, the **Museo Universitario Dr Luis Mario Schneider** (☎ 147-12-88; admission M\$10; 🕒 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) explores the region's history and archaeology in a beautifully set out modern space. The highlight is a mock-up of the full *El Paraíso de los Guerros* mural from the site and a replica of the Cuauhcalli chamber you aren't able to enter in the temple proper.

A well-restored 16th-century **Augustinian convent** (admission free), fronted by a tranquil tree-lined yard, faces the central plaza. Impressive frescoes fashioned from herb- and flower-based paint adorn its cloister. Just uphill from the plaza, the **tourist office** (☎ 147-13-63; www.malinalco.net; 🕒 8:30am-6pm Mon-Sat) is inside the Palacio Municipal on the 2nd floor.

Sleeping

Like other destinations near Mexico City, Malinalco is geared toward weekend visitors, which means you'll have no trouble finding a room Sunday to Thursday nights, but your dining options may be limited. Hotel reservations are recommended for Friday and Saturday.

The best of the bunch are two very stylish boutique hotels, the Mora and the Limón, both of which can be fiendish to find in the poorly signposted backstreets of Malinalco.

Neither is very conveniently located, and both are squarely aimed at drivers. Both make for a sublime weekend retreat, but neither is for children.

El Asoleadero (☎ 147-01-84; cnr Aldama & Comercio; s/d/q from M\$300/350/450; 📍) This old-timer offers excellent value for money if you're not looking for a boutique place to stay. The spacious and airy rooms, some with balconies, look over the quiet street, while views from the courtyard overlooking the pool are spectacular.

Villa Hotel (☎ 147-00-01; Guerrero 101; s/d M\$300/600) Hardly romantic, the friendly Villa has six rooms: some have cliff views while others (some with better beds) face the plaza. Some rooms were suffering from damp on our last visit. You get a M\$50 reduction if you don't have a TV in your room.

Hotel Santa Mónica (☎ 147-00-31; Hidalgo 109; r M\$350) Moments from the *zócalo* toward the archaeological zone, this is one of the better budget options, with clean rooms – all with private bathroom and TV – scattered around a pretty garden courtyard.

Casa Mora (☎ 147-05-72; www.casamora.net; Calle de la Cruz 18; ste M\$1800-2000; 📍) This beautifully appointed oasis is a hotel where you feel more like a house guest than a tourist. It's the pet project of a local artist, who maintains five beautiful rooms all of which enjoy an intimate and romantic atmosphere.

our pick Casa Limón (☎ 147-02-56; www.casalimon.com; Río Lerma 103; r/ste incl breakfast from M\$2100/2500; 📍) Malinalco's most famous hotel features beautifully styled, modern, minimalist rooms, enhanced with individually selected pieces of art and the odd antique. A slate swimming pool, classy bar and excellent restaurant complete the scene.

Eating & Drinking

For such a small place, Malinalco has some excellent dining, although some of the better restaurants open only for the *fin de semana* (Thursday to Sunday), when the out-of-towners come to visit. During the week there are plenty of eateries around the *zócalo* for a cheap meal.

Café La Fé (☎ 147-01-77; Guerrero; 🕒 11am-8pm Fri-Sun) Between the museum and *zócalo*, this coffee shop and juice bar is a great place for a drink after having scaled the cliffside to visit the Aztec ruins. Everything sold on site is 100% organic, including locally grown coffee beans.

Restaurant El Puente (☎ 147-17-43; Hidalgo 104; mains M\$40-90; ☎ 9am-10pm Mon-Fri, 9am-midnight Fri & Sat, 9am-7pm Sun) Just after the tiny bridge as you leave the *zócalo* for the ruins, this atmospheric colonial house has two smart dining rooms as well as a great back garden where you can try a selection of *antojitos*, pastas, soups and steaks.

Beto's (☎ 147-03-11; Morelos 8; mains M\$50-95; ☎ noon-8pm Tue-Sun) At Beto's you'll get the best seafood in town by a long way (the fresh trout is superb), as well as ice-cold beer served with salt on the rim. The friendly owner-chef couple will fuss over you until you're stuffed and then bring you a *beso de ángel* (coffee liqueur and condensed milk on ice, dusted with cinnamon) with the check.

Ehécatl (Hidalgo 10; mains M\$55-70; ☎ 9am-6pm; ⑦) A beautiful space with a gorgeously verdant courtyard, Ehécatl is named after the Aztec god of the wind and rain and is one of Malinalco's best choices. As well as good breakfasts (M\$40 to M\$50) and a large range of fresh fish, it also offers a complete list of traditional Mexican cooking.

Koi (☎ 147-16-21; Morelos 18; mains M\$140-170; ☎ 11am-10pm Fri-Sun) Fusion cookery has arrived in Malinalco via this very trendy (and not particularly cheap) restaurant. The exciting menu runs from *camarones al coco* to Pad Thai and fish tempura, all served within a minimalist space you'd frankly not normally expect to find in a Mexican village.

Casa Limón (☎ 147-02-56; Rio Lerma 103; mains M\$140-180; ☎ midday-10pm Thu-Sun) The restaurant of Malinalco's smartest hotel is also superb – a classy indoor/outdoor space with white tablecloths and silver service but a friendly atmosphere. Mains are classic international, from *coq au vin* to almond trout, and the wine list is superb.

Getting There & Away

Most public transportation to Malinalco goes via Tenancingo. There are three buses a day from Mexico City's Observatorio Terminal Poniente (M\$52, two hours). From Toluca there's a direct service to Malinalco on

Saturday and Sunday (M\$26, 90 minutes, three per day) or, the rest of the time, take a bus to Tenancingo and ask the driver to let you off for the *colectivo* to Malinalco (M\$15, one hour, every 20 minutes). If driving from Mexico City, turn south at La Marquesa and follow the signs to Malinalco.

CHALMA

One of Mexico's most important shrines is in the village of Chalma, 10km east of Malinalco. In 1533 an image of Christ, El Señor de Chalma, miraculously appeared in a cave to replace one of the local gods, Oxtéotl, and proceeded to stamp out dangerous beasts and do other wondrous things. The Señor now resides in Chalma's 17th-century church. The biggest of many annual pilgrimages here is for **Pentecost** (the seventh Sunday after Easter), when thousands of people camp out and perform traditional dances.

Tres Estrellas del Centro runs hourly 2nd-class buses (M\$34) from Toluca to Chalma. Several companies run 2nd-class buses from Mexico City's Terminal Poniente. There's also frequent bus service from Malinalco.

IXTAPAN DE LA SAL

☎ 721 / pop 20,000 / elevation 1880m

Ixtapan is known throughout Mexico for its curative waters, which have attracted visitors since the town was founded centuries ago by indigenous travelers from the Pacific coast who were amazed to discover salt water inland on their way to Tenochtitlan. Despite its long history, there's not much to see here, and the only reason to stop is to visit the **Spa y Parque Acuático** (☎ 143-30-00; adult/child M\$150/80; ☎ spa 8am-7pm, aquatic park 9am-6pm; ♿), a sprawling water park mixing curative thermal water pools with waterfalls, water slides, a wave pool and a miniature railway. Most foreign visitors stay adjacent to the *balneario* at the recently renovated **Ixtapan Spa Hotel & Golf Resort** (☎ 143-24-40, 800-904-7200, in Mexico City 55-5264-2613, in the US 800-638-7950; www.spamexico.com; s/d with meals from M\$1200/1500), popular with expat retirees and Mexican families from the Distrito Federal.

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