

Destination Mexico

Climbing a 1300-year-old Maya pyramid as parrots screech and howler monkeys growl in the sweaty emerald jungle around you. This is Mexico. Sliding from a palm-fringed sandy beach into the warm, turquoise waves of the Pacific. This, too, is Mexico. Dining on salmon enchiladas and chrysanthemum salad at a Mexico City fusion restaurant, dancing through the night at a high-energy Guadalajara nightclub, kayaking at dawn past a colony of Baja California sea lions – all these are unique Mexican experiences. Every visitor goes home with their own unforgettable images. Such a large country, straddling temperate and tropical zones, reaching 5km into the sky and stretching 10,000km along its coasts, with a city of 19 million people at its center and countless tiny pueblos everywhere, can hardly fail to provide a huge variety of options for human adventure.

Mexico is what you make of it. Its multi-billion-dollar tourism industry is adept at satisfying those who like their travel easy. But adventure is what you'll undoubtedly have if you take a just a few steps off the pre-packaged path. Activity-based tourism, community tourism and genuine ecotourism – the type that actually helps conserve local environments – are developing fast in rural areas. The opportunities for getting out to Mexico's spectacular wild places and interacting with local communities are greater than ever – from world-class canyoneering near Monterrey or cooking lessons in the Veracruz countryside to hiking the Oaxaca cloud forests and snorkeling the coral reefs of the Yucatán.

Mexico's cities still juxtapose manicured poodles and begging grandmothers, but are increasingly sophisticated places with slick restaurants and coffee houses, ever-better cultural and entertainment offerings, and parks and pedestrian areas where you can escape the grinding, polluting traffic. A hip, bohemian, student-based, artsy scene reveling in Mexico's thriving music and art currents has emerged in most cities. This creative country is enjoying a deserved resurgence of international acclaim and interest in its art, its movies, its design, its music and its cuisine. Even Mexico's hotels and inns have jumped aboard the ship of style and design. The country's lodgings are charming, tasteful and appealing, often designed using combinations of contemporary and traditional styles, and always with that bold use of color in which Mexico has long specialized.

Whether this burgeoning of creativity has anything to do with the political changes the country has seen since the dying years of the 20th century may be debated for a long time. Mexico at last threw off eight decades of 'one-party democracy' under the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) in 2000, when it voted Vicente Fox of the right-of-center PAN (National Action Party) into the presidency, in the first presidential vote held since the PRI itself had finally reformed the corrupt electoral system.

The Fox presidency disappointed most people on most scores. There are no easy panaceas for the deep-seated economic inequalities between one Mexican and another, and between Mexico and the US, nor to other problems such as the growing might of Mexico's ruthlessly violent drug gangs. Nevertheless, the Fox era did see an increasing opening and confidence in Mexican society, encouraged by the new regulations on electoral and governmental transparency.

FAST FACTS

Population:	107 million
Annual population growth:	1.15%
Area:	1.9 million sq km
GDP per person:	US\$7800
US share of Mexican exports:	85%
Adult literacy:	91%
Remittances to Mexico by Mexicans living in the US:	US\$24 billion (2006)
Cost of being smuggled across Mexico-US Border:	US\$1000-5000
Routine bribe to traffic police:	M\$50
Number of languages spoken:	50

Vicente Fox was succeeded in 2006 by a second PAN president, Felipe Calderón. Whether or not Calderón finds any answers that Fox and the PRI didn't, one certainty is that Mexicans' longer-term enduring qualities that contribute so much to the pleasure of visiting their country – their creativity, their warmth, their strong family and community bonds, their refreshingly relaxed pace of life – will outlive his six-year term of office.

Getting Started

Mexico is a great country for making plans as you go. You can just pick a spot on the map (or in this guidebook), hop on a plane or bus or get in the car, and enjoy choosing what to do when you get there. Accommodations for all budgets are easy to find, and transportation is plentiful and inexpensive. If you have limited time and specific goals, you can work out a detailed itinerary and reserve accommodations in advance. But be ready to change plans once you get there: Mexico offers so many wonderful things to see and do that you're guaranteed to want to fit more in. There'll always be that colorful local festival happening, or that beautiful unknown beach you hear about, or that great new horseback ride/boat trip/waterfall hike/crafts village. These are times to put the guidebook down and do your own exploring.

If this is your first trip to Mexico, especially if it's your first trip outside the developed world, be ready for more crowds, noise, bustle and poverty than you're accustomed to. But don't worry – most Mexicans will be only too happy to help you feel at home in their country. Invest a little time before your trip in learning even just a few phrases of Spanish – every word you know will make your trip that little bit easier and more enjoyable.

See Climate Charts (p966), Festivals & Events (p970) and Holidays (p971) for information to help you decide when to go.

WHEN TO GO

No time is a bad time to visit Mexico, though the coastal and low-lying regions, especially in the southern half of the country, are fairly hot and humid from May to September (these are the months of highest rainfall and highest temperatures almost everywhere). The interior of the country has a more temperate climate than the coasts. In fact, it's sometimes decidedly chilly in the north and the center from November to February.

July and August are peak holiday months for both Mexicans and foreigners. Other big holiday seasons are mid-December to early January (for foreigners and Mexicans) and a week either side of Easter (for Mexicans). At these times the coastal resorts attract big tourist crowds, room prices go up in popular places, and accommodations and public transportation can be heavily booked, so advance reservations are advisable.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- an adventurous palate (p91)
- all the necessary paperwork if you're driving (p986)
- any necessary immunizations or medications (p999)
- adequate insurance (p972)
- checking your foreign ministry's Mexico travel information (p968)
- clothes for Mexico's climatic variations and air-conditioned buses
- a flashlight (torch) for some of those not-so-well-lit Mexican streets and stairways, and for power outages
- a small padlock
- a mosquito net if you plan to sleep outdoors
- as much Spanish as you can muster
- a love of the unpredictable.

HOW MUCH?

One-person hammock

M\$200

Silver ring from M\$100

Local small-car rental per

day M\$500-600

2km city taxi ride

M\$30-40

Major museum or

archaeological site

M\$30-35

See also the Lonely

Planet Index on the Quick

Reference page inside the

front cover.

COSTS & MONEY

Your dollar, euro or pound will go a long way in Mexico. Assuming the peso's exchange rate against the US dollar remains fairly stable, you'll find this is an affordable country to travel in. Midrange travelers can live pretty well in most parts of the country on US\$75 to US\$125 per person per day. Between US\$40 and US\$70 will get you a pleasant, clean and comfortable room for two people, with private bathroom and fan or air-conditioning, and you have the rest to pay for food (a full lunch or dinner in a decent restaurant typically costs US\$15 to US\$25), admission fees, transport, snacks, drinks and incidentals. Budget travelers staying in hostels can easily cover the cost of accommodation and two restaurant meals a day with US\$40. Add in other costs and you'll spend US\$60 to US\$80.

The main exceptions to this are the Caribbean coast, parts of Baja California and some Pacific resort towns, where rooms can easily cost 50% more than elsewhere.

Extra expenses such as internal airfares, car rentals and shopping push your expenses up, but if you have someone to share expenses with, basic costs per person drop considerably. Double rooms often cost only a few dollars more than singles, and triple or family rooms only a few dollars more than doubles. Rental cars start at around US\$50 to US\$60 per day, plus fuel, and cost no more for four people than for one.

At the top end of the scale are a few hotels and resorts that charge over US\$200 for a room, and restaurants where you can pay US\$50 per person. But you can also stay in smaller classy hotels for US\$80 to US\$120 a double and eat extremely well for US\$40 to US\$50 per person per day.

TRAVELING RESPONSIBLY

Since our inception in 1973, Lonely Planet has encouraged our readers to tread lightly, travel responsibly and enjoy the magic independent travel affords. International travel is growing at a jaw-dropping rate, and we still firmly believe in the benefits it can bring – but, as always, we encourage you to consider the impact your visit will have on both the global environment and the local economies, cultures and ecosystems.

Environment

Mexico's fabulously varied environment is home to countless biological riches. Yet its forests are shrinking and many of its cities and rivers are terribly polluted. Large-scale tourism development can destroy coastal wetlands, strain water resources and overwhelm sewage systems. But as a traveler your interaction *can* be beneficial. Ask questions about the local environmental situation, and give your business to hotels, guides and tour operators with avowedly sustainable practices. Instead of ripping up the terrain and scaring every living creature on an ATV convoy, take a birding or kayaking trip with a guide who wants to show you nature without disturbing it.

Our GreenDex (p1052) is a quick-reference tool to listings and reviews in this book of tourism businesses, programs and sites with particularly sustainable credentials.

Culture

Mexico's diverse regional cultures, with their folklore, traditional dress, fiestas, sense of community and beautiful handicrafts, are strong and resilient, yet communities can stand only so much emigration by their men forced to look for work in Mexico City or the US, and only so much homogenizing outside influence. Travelers can help fortify Mexican culture by visiting community

museums, buying local crafts, demonstrating that they value local customs and traditions, or supporting community tourism programs.

Getting There & Around

Many tourists have no option but to fly to Mexico, with an inevitable contribution to greenhouse gases. Carbon offset schemes can at least help to neutralize that effect – see the boxed text on p984. Getting around Mexico you'll inevitably use motor vehicles unless you're a very committed cyclist. The country's passenger rail system died in the 1990s. But once you're based in a place for a few days, you can get out on your own feet or maybe horseback or a bike, or ride the metro systems in the three big cities. The more you focus your explorations on specific areas, the less carbon dioxide you'll emit.

See Accommodations (p959) and Getting Around (p989) for tips on places to stay and how to travel around in Mexico.

Tourism in Mexico

International tourism brings more than US\$1 billion per month into Mexico, and without it even more Mexicans would be heading north to the US to look for work. But profits from many big businesses don't stay in Mexico and social balances can be disrupted as villagers flock to work in resorts.

If you give your business to smaller-scale local enterprises – family-run hotels or restaurants, individual artisans, community tourism schemes – more of your money will end up with the local people who need it most, and you won't exacerbate the alienating 'them and us' effect that mass tourism can have.

Interaction

Looking for small-group or individual activities, and ways to do things *with* Mexicans rather than simply pay them money, enables more meaningful interchange. In any case, truly local guides will always have that much more interesting knowledge to impart.

Going beyond the well-trodden path is another way to spread the benefit. More and more small Mexican communities are now welcoming tourists, and you'll experience more of real, unpredictable Mexican life if you get away from pre-packaged experiences.

As you go, you can let people know that the outside world values and respects things many Mexicans have and many others don't, such as strong family and community bonds, age-old traditions and closeness to nature.

Volunteer work can be another great way of interacting. Through this book we try to highlight volunteer opportunities, and you'll find an overview of possibilities on p980.

See the Language chapter (p1007) for some basic Spanish words and phrases.

For More Information

Ecotravel.com (www.ecotravel.com) Has a sizable directory of ecologically responsible accommodations and operators in Mexico.

International Ecotourism Society (www.ecotourism.org)

Mexican Adventure and Ecotourism Association (www.amtave.org) Sixty member organizations and companies around the country.

Mexiconservación (www.mexiconservacion.org) Has an online Green Guide to the Mexican Caribbean.

Planeta.com (www.planeta.com) Multifarious ecotravel and sustainable tourism resource, with a strong Mexico emphasis.

responsibletravel.com (www.responsibletravel.com) Promotes tourism for the benefit of local people and the environment as well as for tourists, and lists sustainable holidays in Mexico.

Transitions Abroad.com (www.transitionsabroad.com) Magazine and web portal helping people meet and interact with people from other countries, designed as an 'antidote to tourism.'

TOP 10



GREEN MEXICO

These ecotourism and community tourism programs and sites will be thrilled to be on your itinerary. See our GreenDex (p1052) for businesses and projects that put sustainability first.

- 1 Expediciones Sierra Norte (p723)
- 2 Servicios Ecoturísticos La Ventanilla (p774)
- 3 Área de Protección de Flora y Fauna Cuatrociénegas (p389)
- 4 The forests of southern Veracruz – sites like Ruíz Cortines (p704), Las Margaritas (p708), Miguel Hidalgo (p708) and Mateo López (p708)
- 5 Sierra Madre Oriental – Reservas de la Biosfera El Cielo (p423) and Sierra Gorda (boxed text, p651)
- 6 Turtle conservation centers – La Pesca (boxed text, p421), Grupo Ecologista Vida Milenaria (p674), El Tortuguero (p479), Campamento Tortuguero (p855) and Isla Mujeres Turtle Farm (boxed text, p877).
- 7 Las Guacamayas (p847)
- 8 Reserva de la Biosfera Sian Ka'an (p904)
- 9 Reserva de la Biosfera Ría Celestún (p934)
- 10 Reserva de la Biosfera Calakmul – ecotourism among the jungles and Maya ruins of the biosphere reserve (p955)

FIESTAS

If you build one or more of these events into your trip, you'll really get a special taste of Mexico. See p970 for further information.

- 1 Carnaval, Feb/Mar, best in Veracruz (p689), Mazatlán (p434), La Paz (p303)
- 2 Semana Santa, Mar/Apr, best in San Miguel de Allende (p635), Pátzcuaro (p569)
- 3 Noche de los Rábanos, December 23, Oaxaca (p725)
- 4 La Morisma, late Aug, Zacatecas (p589)
- 5 Festival Internacional Cervantino, Oct, Guanajuato (p619)
- 6 Fiestas de Octubre, Oct, Guadalajara (p531)
- 7 Día de Todos los Santos and Día de Muertos, Nov 1 and 2, nationwide (p71)
- 8 Día de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, Dec 12, Mexico City (p166), Monterrey (p404)
- 9 Vernal and autumnal equinoxes, late Mar and Sep, Chichén Itzá (p937)
- 10 Las Jornadas Villistas, July 20, Hidalgo del Parral (p377)

MOVIES

Prepare your imagination for Mexico with some of these Mexican and non-Mexican movies set in the country – and see p83 for more on Mexican cinema.

- 1 *Traffic* – directed by Steven Soderbergh (2000)
- 2 *Amores Perros* (Love's a Bitch) – directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu (2000)
- 4 *Y Tu Mamá También* (And Your Mother Too) – directed by Alfonso Cuarón (2002)
- 5 *El Crimen del Padre Amaro* (The Crime of Father Amaro) – directed by Carlos Carrera (2002)
- 6 *Frida* – directed by Julie Taymor (2002)
- 3 *El Violín* (The Violin) – directed by Francisco Vargas (2007)
- 7 *7 Días* (7 Days) – directed by Fernando Kalife (2005)
- 8 *Los Olvidados* (The Forgotten Ones) – directed by Luis Buñuel (1950)
- 9 *El Mariachi* – directed by Robert Rodriguez and spawning two major quasi-sequels (1992)
- 10 *Apocalypto* – directed by Mel Gibson (2006)

TRAVEL LITERATURE

In the Sierra Madre Ben Biggers chronicles a year among the Rarámuri of the Copper Canyon in this amusing and well-informed book.

Into a Desert Place Self-confessed couch potato Graham Mackintosh takes a 3000-mile walk round the coast of Baja California.

The Lawless Roads Graham Greene wandered through Mexico to Chiapas in the 1930s, a time of conflict between Catholics and an atheistic state.

Narcocorrido Elijah Wald's fascinating book is both travel narrative and an investigation of a popular song genre built around the travails of ordinary folk involved in drug-running on Mexico's northern border.

Sliced Iguana: Travels in Unknown Mexico British writer Isabella Tree takes peyote with the Huicholes and meets the matriarchs of Juchitán in this warm, perceptive account of Mexico and its indigenous cultures.

Time Among the Maya Ronald Wright investigates the Maya concept of time and their tragic modern history

A Visit to Don Otavio Sybille Bedford's witty and lyrical tale of travels in the now-vanished Mexico of the 1950s is still surprisingly relevant.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Many websites listed in this guidebook are in Spanish, though there are many websites in English that will equip you with plenty of up-to-the-minute info.

Lanic (<http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/mexico>) Best broad collection of Mexico links, from the University of Texas.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Succinct summaries on travel in Mexico; the popular Thorn Tree bulletin board; travel news; and great links to the best travel resources elsewhere on the web.

Mexico Connect (www.mexconnect.com) Goldmine of articles, forums and information on everything under the Mexican sun.

Mexico Online (www.mexonline.com) News, bulletin boards and lots more.

Mexperience (www.mexperience.com) Wide-ranging practical guide to Mexican travel.

Planeta.com (www.planeta.com) Great articles and listings for anyone interested in Mexican travel or the Mexican environment.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

BAJA ROAD TRIP

One to Four Weeks

The Transpeninsular Highway from the Mexico–US border to Los Cabos forms the route of an all-time classic Mexican road trip. Start off by getting a feel for the famous border buzz of **Tijuana** (p276). Next, head down to sample the surf and wines of **Ensenada** (p283) before moving south to watch the whales from close quarters on **Laguna Ojo de Liebre** (p292). Cross the Vizcaíno desert to the leafy oasis of **San Ignacio** (p294) and check out the ancient rock art of the **Sierra de San Francisco** (p295). Follow this up by hitting the Sea of Cortez for diving or kayaking in the waters off either **Mulegé** (p297) or **Loreto** (p299). Further south, cosmopolitan **La Paz** (p302) provides access to brilliant beaches and the spectacular marine life of **La Ventana** (p307). Try snorkeling or diving the coral reef of uncrowded **Cabo Pulmo** (p307) before hitting the towns of Los Cabos at the foot of the peninsula – the tranquil **San José del Cabo** (p308) and the frenetic party scene of **Cabo San Lucas** (p311). Slip away to artsy **Todos Santos** (p315) for a change of pace, not to mention some of Baja California's best surf.

This 1800km trip along the world's second longest peninsula takes you from surf beaches to colonial missions, across cactus-strewn deserts and into waters teeming with spectacular marine life. In a hurry you can do it a week; to savor it, find a month.



LANDS OF THE MAYA

Three Weeks

From the pre-packaged attractions of **Cancún** (p867) slip over to beach-fringed **Isla Mujeres** (p874) for some fine snorkeling or diving. Then head up to **Isla Holbox** (p879), where you can lie back in a hammock or snorkel with whale sharks. Moving west, stop at the relaxed colonial town of **Valladolid** (p941) en route to the world-renowned Maya and Toltec pyramids of **Chichén Itzá** (p937). Next stop: **Mérida** (p914), with colonial architecture, classy museums, fine food and great shopping. Mérida makes a good base for trips to magnificent **Uxmal** (p925) and other Maya sites along the **Ruta Puuc** (p930). Move to the Gulf coast to chill out and watch flamingos at the sleepy fishing village of **Celestún** (p934). Continue to historic **Campeche** (p947), and then southwestward to the state of Chiapas for the fabulous ancient Maya sites of **Palenque** (p831) and **Yaxchilán** (p845), and the soulful mountain town of **San Cristóbal de Las Casas** (p811), surrounded by highly traditional modern Maya villages. Return across the south of the Yucatán Peninsula and visit some of the region's most fascinating, remote ruins such as sprawling **Calakmul** (p955) and secluded **Río Bec** (p958). Back on the Caribbean coast, take kayaking, fishing or mangrove trips through the remote **Reserva de la Biosfera Sian Ka'an** (p904) before you reach **Tulum** (p895), which has one of Mexico's most perfect beaches and most spectacularly sited Maya ruins. From Tulum you can visit the major Maya ceremonial center of **Cobá** (p901) and take a guided snorkel or dive tour of the amazing underwater caverns of **Cenote dos Ojos** (p894). Wind up your trip with a stop at chic **Playa del Carmen** (p882), a great base camp for the superlative diving and snorkeling on the island of **Cozumel** (p886).



The lands of the ancient and modern Maya extend over Mexico, Guatemala and Belize. In Mexico alone they encompass countless natural marvels, fabulous beaches and busy cities and resorts, as well as timeless temples. Allow three weeks to do justice to this 3200km circuit.

BEACHES, CITIES & TEMPLES

One Month

This magnificent classic journey leads travelers south from Mexico's colonial heartland to its glorious Caribbean beaches. Start by exploring fascinating **Mexico City** (p120), including a visit to the awesome pyramids of **Teotihuacán** (p209). Then head east to colonial **Puebla** (p216) before crossing the mountains southward to **Oaxaca** (p713), a lovely colonial city with Mexico's finest handicrafts at the heart of a beautiful region with a large indigenous population, and the ancient Zapotec capital, **Monte Albán** (p737).

Cross the Sierra Madre del Sur to one of the sun-baked beach spots on the Oaxaca coast, such as **Puerto Escondido** (p752), **Mazunte** (p773) or **Zipolite** (p768). Then move east to **San Cristóbal de Las Casas** (p811), a beautiful highland town surrounded by intriguing indigenous villages, the lovely jungle lake **Laguna Miramar** (p829) and **Palenque** (p831), perhaps the most stunning of all Maya cities, with a backdrop of emerald-green jungle.

Head northeast to colonial **Mérida** (p914), the Yucatán Peninsula's cultural capital and the base for visiting the fine Maya ruins of **Uxmal** (p925) and those along the **Ruta Puuc** (p930). Next stop is **Chichén Itzá** (p937), the Yucatán's most awesome ancient Maya site. From there, head directly to **Tulum** (p895) on the Caribbean coast, a Maya site with a glorious beachside setting, and then make your way northward along the Riviera Maya toward Mexico's glitziest resort, **Cancún** (p867). On the way, halt at hip **Playa del Carmen** (p882) and take a side trip to **Cozumel** (p886) for world-class snorkeling and diving.

This 2800km, one-month adventure takes you from the center of Mexico through Oaxaca and Chiapas states – with their colorful indigenous populations, pre-Hispanic ruins and dramatic scenery – to the ancient Mayan cities and Caribbean beaches of the Yucatán Peninsula.



PACIFIC DREAMS

Four to Six Weeks

Mexico's Pacific coast is a glittering sequence of busy resorts, pristine jungle-lined beaches and every grade of coastal dream in between. A great approach to the coast is from **Chihuahua** (p367) via the awesome **Barranca del Cobre** (Copper Canyon; p341), with its dramatic railroad and spectacular hiking.

Spend an evening sipping margaritas on the lively plaza in **Mazatlán** (p427) before venturing to the ancient island of **Mexcaltitán** (p442) and the wildlife-rich lagoons of laid-back **San Blas** (p442). Then it's on to nightclubs, gourmet food, whale-watching and shopping in **Puerto Vallarta** (p453).

Isolated beaches abound on the Costalegre, home to some of the world's most luxurious resorts. Spend a day snorkeling here at **Playa Tenacatita** (p468), and don't miss the street tacos in **San Patricio-Melaque** (p468). Hang out at tranquil **Playa Maruata** (p482), the most beautiful beach in Michoacán, or rent a beach-bum bungalow at the quaint surfer haven of **Barra de Nexpa** (p482). Surf, snorkel and take romantic sunset walks in **Troncones** (p485) before hiring a fishing boat in **Zihuatanejo** (p489).

Pick up the pace to hit the discos, see the cliff divers and learn a little Mexican history in **Acapulco** (p501). **Puerto Escondido** (p752) has A-grade surf and a lively little after-dark scene. To end your trip, lie back in a hammock at the low-budget paradise beaches of **Mazunte** (p773) or **Zipolite** (p768), or relax at the resort of **Bahías de Huatulco** (p776), set along a string of beautiful, sheltered bays.



The entire trip from Chihuahua to Huatulco involves 3200km of travel, including 670km by rail at the outset, and can take up to six weeks if you stop in every recommended place. Some travelers approach the coast through Nogales and Hermosillo instead of Chihuahua. Several cities along the way have airports, so it's easy to shorten the route if you wish.

ROADS LESS TRAVELED

GULF COAST MEANDER

Two Weeks

Inland from industrial Tampico, the Huasteca region harbors an astonishing 376m-deep sinkhole, the **Sótano de las Golondrinas** (p664), and **Las Pozas** (p665), a surreal fantasy land created by an English eccentric. Near Papantla are the spectacular pyramids of **El Tajín** (p672), the greatest monument of the Classic Veracruz – witness the spectacular *voladores* rite of the indigenous Totonac people, with four men ‘flying’ from the top of a single vertical pole.

Beaches on the **Costa Esmeralda** (p674) are mostly empty outside holiday times. Nearby **Tlapacoyan** (p675) is a center for white-water rafting on rivers rushing down from the Sierra Madre Oriental. Inland, **Xalapa** (p677) is an urbane university city with one of Mexico’s best archaeological museums. The 5611m dormant volcano **Pico de Orizaba** (p699) is the country’s highest peak – a steep, though not technically difficult, challenge for mountaineers.

The most vibrant city on the Gulf coast is **Veracruz** (p684), the historic maritime gateway to Mexico and a fun-loving city with a wild pre-Lent carnival. Southeast from here is **Los Tuxtlas** (p708), an area of green hills, beaches, scattered rainforest, lakes and incipient community ecotourism. The southern hinterland of the Gulf of Mexico was also the heartland of the ancient Olmec culture, whose heritage is best seen at the **Parque-Museo La Venta** (p792) in Villahermosa, capital of steamy Tabasco state. Tabasco has some little-known Gulf beaches, such in and around **Paraíso** (p798), and is also home to the vast wetlands of the **Reserva de la Biosfera Pantanos de Centla** (p802).



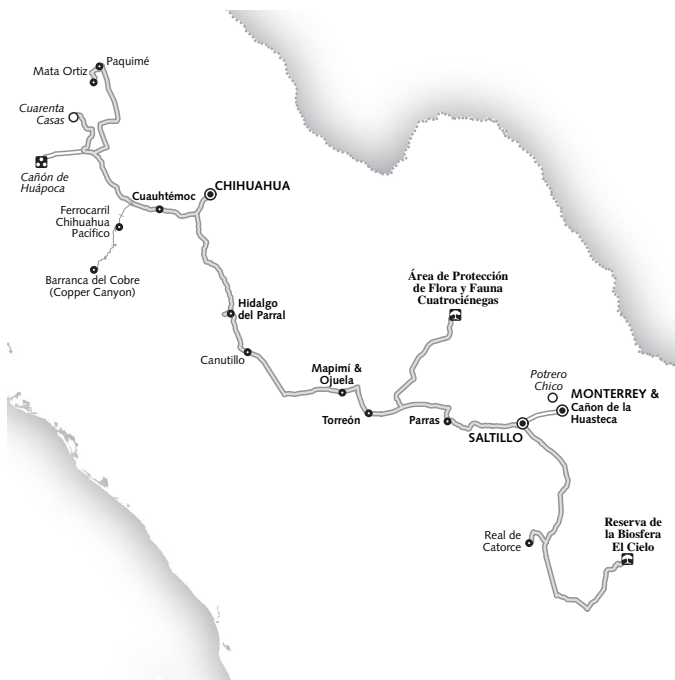
NORTHERN ESCAPE

Three Weeks

Awesome natural configurations, adrenalin-charging adventures and bizarre discoveries await intrepid travelers in the remoter reaches of Mexico's north. Make the pre-Hispanic desert trading settlement **Paquimé** (p363) your first port of call. From here, visit the renowned potters' village **Mata Ortiz** (p365). Then head south to the pre-Hispanic cliff dwellings amid the forests of the Sierra Madre Occidental at **Cuarenta Casas** (p366) and the **Cañón de Huápoca** (p367).

Move southeast to **Cuauhtémoc** (p374), where you can board the **Ferrocarril Chihuahua Pacífico** (p341) to explore the spectacular **Barranca del Cobre** (Copper Canyon; p341). Next, follow the footsteps of legendary revolutionary Pancho Villa through **Chihuahua** (p367), **Hidalgo del Parral** (p375), **Canutillo** (p378) and **Torreón** (p378).

En route to Torreón, visit **Mapimí** (p379) and the ghost town of **Ojuela** (p379), the heart of a once-booming mining area. Head northeast across the deserts from Torreón for (what else?) a spot of swimming and snorkeling at the bizarrely beautiful oasis of the **Cuatrociénegas reserve** (p389), then go south to quaff a *copa* of desert wine at **Parras** (p395). Move on to laid-back **Saltillo** (p390), with its Churrigueresque cathedral and first-class desert museum. Drop into **Monterrey** (p396) if by now you're missing a little urban sophistication, and head to the nearby **Cañón de la Huasteca** (p410) and **Potrero Chico** (p411) for some top-class climbing, canyoneering, rappelling and zip-lining. Then turn south to magical **Real de Catorce** (p608), a former silver-mining center coming back to creative life. For one more natural marvel, head east for some hiking and bird-watching in the cloud forests of the **Reserva de la Biosfera El Cielo** (p423).



INHERITORS OF ANCIENT TRADITIONS

Three Weeks

Mexico possesses some of the American continent's most colorful and distinctive traditional cultures, directly descended from people who were here long before Europeans arrived. A good place to make contact with the Nahua people, related to the ancient Aztecs, is the hill village of **Cuetzalan** (p238), north of Puebla. The largest indigenous populations are concentrated in southern Mexico. The Zapotecs and Mixtecs of Oaxaca state are wonderful artisans in ceramics, textiles, wood and much more – see their wares at bustling markets and in city stores. The city of **Oaxaca** (p713) stages the country's most exciting celebration of indigenous dance, the annual Guelaguetza festival in July. In the remote highlands of **Chiapas** (p803), Maya groups such as the Tzotziles and Tzeltals cling to mysterious, age-old religious, social and medical practices, and their colorful traditional costumes, still worn daily, are complex works of art and symbolism.

In Veracruz state, the Totonac people regularly re-enact ancient rituals with their spectacular *voladores* rite, 'flying' from a tall pole at places like **El Tajín** (p672). The Huicholes from the borders of Jalisco, Nayarit and Zacatecas in western Mexico make an annual pilgrimage across the mountains and deserts to seek the cactus that bears the powerful hallucinogen peyote, essential to their religion and their highly colorful art, near the remote town of **Real de Catorce** (p608).

In the northwest the Rarámuri, who dwell in the rugged canyons of the **Barranca del Cobre** (Copper Canyon; p341), are famed for their amazing long-distance running feats, while the Seris of Sonora, found in places like **Bahía de Kino** (p327), are celebrated for their beautiful ironwood carvings.



TAILORED TRIPS

WORLD HERITAGE

Mexico's 27 Unesco World Heritage listings feature three natural sites, including **El Vizcaíno** (p292) and **Sian Ka'an biosphere reserve** (p904). The rest are cultural listings, with pre-Hispanic sites being prominent: the towering pyramids of **Teotihuacán** (p209); the exquisite Maya architecture of **Palenque** (p831), **Uxmal** (p925), **Chichén Itzá** (p937) and deep-in-the-jungle **Calakmul** (p955), as well as the maze-like northern trading center **Paquimé** (p363); the old Zapotec capital **Monte Albán** (p737); the outstanding rock art of Baja California's **Sierra de San Francisco** (p295); and the curious niched pyramids of **El Tajín** (p672) near the Gulf coast. The magnificent stone architecture of colonial Mexico is represented by the historic centers of **Mexico City** (p120), **Oaxaca** (p713), **Puebla** (p216), **Guanajuato** (p613), **Morelia** (p556), **Zacatecas** (p585), **Querétaro** (p643) and **Campeche** (p947), while the historic and architectural heritage of early Christian missionaries in Mexico is recognized in the Unesco listing of **Jalpan** (p653) and the other **Franciscan missions** (p653) in the Sierra Gorda. Mexico's contribution to 20th-century art and architecture is marked by the **UNAM university campus** (p157) in Mexico City, Guadalajara's **Instituto Cultural de Cabañas** (p526), which contains the mural masterpieces of José Clemente Orozco.



BIOSPHERE RESERVES

Biosphere reserves are protected natural areas that aim to combine conservation with sustainable human economic activity. Sustainable tourism schemes in these reserves provide opportunities to get out into some of the most pristine, spectacular and remote areas of Mexico. The country has some 40 biosphere reserves (*reservas de la biosfera*) totaling well over 100,000 sq km and encompassing huge ecological variety, from the northern deserts of **Bolsón de Mapimí** (p380) to the southern forests of **Montes Azules** (p829) and **Calakmul** (p955). The coastal wetland reserves of **Sian Ka'an** (p904) on the Caribbean, **La Encrucijada** (p856) on the Pacific, and **Ría Celestún** (p934) and **Ría Lagartos** (p945) on the Gulf of Mexico all harbor bountiful wildlife and developed infrastructure for visitors. Not far from Sian Ka'an is the large coral atoll reserve of **Banco Chichorro** (p906). **El Vizcaíno** (p292) in Baja California encompasses both deserts and lagoons where gray whales calve, while the **Volcán Tacaná reserve** (p860) protects a towering, forest-clad volcano on Mexico's border with Guatemala. **El Triunfo** (p854), high in the mountains of Chiapas, has spectacular birdlife including the iconic resplendent quetzal. The **Mariposa Monarca reserve** (p563) in central Mexico protects the breeding grounds of millions of magnificent monarch butterflies. The **Sierra Gorda reserve** (boxed text, p651) and **El Cielo** (p423) reserves are transition zones between Gulf lowlands and the heights of the Sierra Madre Oriental, with great diversity of birds, plants and other wildlife.



ON THE BEACH

Mexico has peerless *playas* for every taste. Baja offers prime surf at **San Miguel** (p284), **Los Cerritos** (p316) and **Costa Azul** (p311), great kayaking at **Mulegé** (p297) and **Espíritu Santo** (p303), or just party time at **Cabo San Lucas** (p311).

Over on the mainland Pacific coast, you can make a beeline for the lagoon-backed beaches of **San Blas** (p442) before hitting **Puerto Vallarta** (p453), with its beach parties and marine wildlife. Slow down on the nearly empty beaches of the **Costalegre** (p468) or soak in the rolling waves of **San Patricio-Melaque** (p468).

There more's top surf at **Barra de Nexpa** (p482), **Boca de Pascuales** (p480) and **Troncones** (p485). Revive on the soothing bay at **Zihuatanejo** (p489) before you take on high-energy **Acapulco** (p501).

On the Oaxaca coast, the 'Mexican Pipeline' has spawned a fun surfer-traveler scene at **Puerto Escondido** (p752), or you can simply stroll the sands and lie back in a hammock at the backpacker haven of **Zipolite** (p768).

On the Yucatán Peninsula's Caribbean coast it's always party time at **Cancún** (p867) while **Playa del Carmen** (p882) is the hip beach town to hang out in. Offshore, **Isla Mujeres** (p874) provides relaxation and some good snorkeling, or head to **Cozumel** (p886) for world-class diving. **Tulum** (p895), with beachside Maya ruins, has one of Mexico's most beautiful beaches, with palm-fringed white sand. Or slip over to 30km-long **Isla Holbox** (p879), where you can snorkel with whale sharks, explore endless beaches or simply lie back in a hammock.



FOOD TRIP

Mexico City neighborhoods such as **Condesa** (p174) and **Roma** (p176) are the country's capital of *nuevo mexicano* (new Mexican) and fusion cuisine, but the city is also home to some incredible **market food** (p176).

Anywhere along the Pacific coast you are guaranteed to get fabulous fresh seafood. Bigger resorts like **Ensenada** (p283), **Mazatlán** (p427), **Puerto Vallarta** (p453), **Zihuatanejo** (p489) and **Acapulco** (p501) have a greater assortment of restaurants where you can enjoy finely prepared dishes. The humble fish tacos of **Baja California** (boxed text, p311) can be just as divine, and seafood snacks can even reign supreme inland, as at Guadalajara's legendary **Mariscos El Social** (p536). For delicious *pescado a la veracruzana* (fish in a tomato, onion and chili-based sauce) head over to the **Gulf coast** (p691).

Meat lovers will be happy in most of Mexico but especially the ranching country of the north, with the big steaks of **Chihuahua** (p367), the *cabrito al pastor* (roast kid) of **Monterrey** (p396), the *carne asada* (marinated grilled beef) of **Sonora** (p331), and flavorful *tacos al carbón* (with char-grilled meats or seafood) everywhere.

The colonial city of **Puebla** (p216) is home to Mexico's most famous *mole* (sauce) for meat, the chocolate-based *mole poblano*, but *mole* lovers have many further destinations to head for. The southern city of **Oaxaca** (p713) is famed for its seven varieties of *mole* (see boxed text, p726) and it will teach visitors how to make them – and other Mexican dishes – at its many cooking schools.



The Authors



JOHN NOBLE

Coordinating Author, History, The Culture, The Arts, Environment, Oaxaca State, Directory, Transportation

John has felt Mexico's pull since reading the story of Cortés and the Aztecs as a teenager in his native England. He first backpacked from Ciudad Juárez to Ciudad Cuauhtémoc, and he has been returning for extended visits ever since. An author on nine editions of this guide (seven as coordinating author), he has explored almost every part of the country. He loves Mexico's art, archaeology, history, music, languages, traditions, food, drinks, beaches, wildlife and stunningly varied landscapes, but most of all its charming people. John now lives in Spain, which provides yet another angle on what makes Mexico tick.

My Favorite Trip

I'll start with a few days in Mexico City (p120) to find out what's making the country tick this year. Then I'll head north to beautiful colonial cities like Querétaro (p643), Guanajuato (p613), San Miguel de Allende (p630) and the best of the lot, Zacatecas (p585). I'll continue north for a trip on the Ferrocarril Chihuahua Pacifico (p341) and a bit of hiking in the fantastic Barranca del Cobre (p341). Then, to follow north with south, back to Mexico City and on to gorgeous Oaxaca (p713). A few days there enjoying the artsy scene, the great food, the crafts villages and some hiking in the Sierra Norte (p747) – then it's time for Oaxaca's fabulous Pacific coast. Impossible to decide between Puerto Escondido (p752) and San Agustínillo (p772) so I'll have to go for a week in each (at least).



KATE ARMSTRONG

Northern Central Highlands

An Australian by birth but a Latina (she believes) in a former life, Kate has craved a return to Mexico since her most recent trip several years ago. She thought she'd struck gold when asked to cover the silver cities for this edition. She hiked in the Sierra Gorda, performed as a *mojiganga*, consumed kilos of quesadillas, and talked and danced her way through the magic of Mexico. At other times, she is a freelance writer, based (occasionally) in Australia. A Spanish speaker, she has contributed to *Bolivia* and *South America on a Shoestring* among other Lonely Planet titles.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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RAY BARTLETT

Baja California

Ray began travel writing at age 18 by jumping a freight train for 500 miles and selling the story to a local newspaper. Two decades later he is still wandering the world with pen and camera in hand. He has been published in *USA Today*, the *Denver Post*, *Miami Herald* and other newspapers and magazines, and recently appeared on PRI's *The World*. His Lonely Planet titles include *Japan*, *Mexico*, *Yucatán* and *Korea*. More about him can be found at his website, www.kaisora.com. When not traveling, he surfs, writes fiction, drinks way too much coffee and burns way too much midnight oil.



GREG BENCHWICK

Yucatán Peninsula

A former commissioning editor at Lonely Planet, Greg turned down a life of high-walled cubicle insanity to get back to his writing and rambling roots. He's rumbled in the jungles of Peru and Costa Rica, walked across Spain on the Camino de Santiago and challenged the peaks of Alaska and his native Colorado. He specializes in Latin American travel, sustainable travel and new media, and has written more than a dozen guidebooks on travel in Latin America. When he's not on the road, he develops his new-media companies www.monjimedia.com and www.soundtraveler.com. Some day he dreams of being a media magnate or a philosopher warrior poet – whichever comes first.



TIM BEWER

Central North Mexico, Northeast Mexico

While growing up, Tim didn't travel much except for the obligatory pilgrimage to Disney World and an annual summer week at the lake. He's spent most of his adult life making up for this, and has since visited over 50 countries, including many in Latin America. Most of his journeys into Mexico have been in the north, and he is genuinely perplexed at why the region is so often overlooked by travelers. He currently lives in Khon Kaen, Thailand.



BETH KOHN

Tabasco & Chiapas

Someday, Beth is going to make her San Francisco neighbors revolt. Why must she blast those *ranchera* and *norteño* songs while cooking dinner? And is it really necessary for her to sing along? But after spending time in Mexico for more than 20 years, she has a fine appreciation for green jungles with sopping waterfalls and noisy animals, as well as all the soulful songs the combi drivers play. A freelance writer and photographer, she last went south to check in on the world's tallest falls for Lonely Planet's *Venezuela*. You can see more of her work at www.bethkohn.com.



TOM MASTERS

Around Mexico City

Tom is a travel writer, journalist and documentary producer based in London. His first experience of Mexico was in the jungles of Chiapas on a two-week filming stint in Palenque. For this edition of *Mexico*, Tom covered the wonderful towns around Mexico City, particularly falling for Malinalco, Valle de Bravo and José Cuervo Black Medallion. You can read more of Tom's work at www.mastersmafia.com.



KEVIN RAUB

Northwest Mexico

Kevin Raub grew up in Atlanta and started his career as a music journalist in New York City, working for *Rolling Stone*. He has traveled extensively throughout Mexico, despite having stared down the barrel of a Federales' automatic weapon on one of his first trips through Northern Baja a few years back. He has previously co-authored Lonely Planet's *Brazil*. He currently lives in Los Angeles and Brazil and travels the world with one goal in mind: membership in the Travelers' Century Club before the age of 40. His country count stands at 56.



MICHAEL READ

Central Pacific Coast

Having never made good on his threat to set up housekeeping south of the border, Michael takes every opportunity to head south from his Oakland, California, home to delve deeper into Mexico's marvelous mysteries. After doing hard time pushing pixels around for LonelyPlanet.com, in 2003 Michael succumbed to a burning case of wanderlust and hit the road as a full-time travel writer. Since then he's contributed nearly half a million words to Lonely Planet guidebooks, including three editions of *Mexico* and *Puerto Vallarta & Pacific Mexico*.



JOSEPHINE QUINTERO

Mexico City

Josephine was married for many years to a Mexican-American with a large extended family, leading to a healthy exposure to mariachi music and margaritas. She made frequent trips to Mexico, visiting various Quintero relatives in DF, and continues to be enthralled by the heady mix of vibrant culture, wonderful people, fabulous food and all that history. She currently lives in Andalucía, Spain.



DANIEL C SCHECHTER

Mexico City

Definitely swimming against the tide, native New Yorker Daniel migrated *al otro lado* southward in 1994 to take a peso-salaried teaching post at a university in Mexico City. Shortly afterward, Mexico experienced its worst peso devaluation in decades. Rather than cut and run, Daniel found an even less lucrative job as an editor at Mexico's English-language daily newspaper, launching a midlife career as a writer and translator. After more than a decade in Mexico, Daniel and his wife Myra are back in the US, though the border is a reassuringly quick drive from their adopted city of Austin, Texas.



ADAM SKOLNICK

Western Central Highlands

Adam was diagnosed with travel obsession while working as an environmental activist in the mid-1990s. He has traveled to nearly 40 countries on six continents. He's been lost in the Amazon, scaled Kilimanjaro, backpacked through Mexico and Central America, toured baseball stadiums in Cuba, meditated with Hindu priests in Bali and Buddhist monks in Burma, and hiked through rainforest with devout Muslim farmers in Sumatra. A freelance journalist, he writes about travel, culture, health and the environment for several major American magazines. Between adventures he writes movies. Check out his travel blog at <http://blog.myspace.com/adamskolnick>.



CÉSAR G SORIANO

Central Pacific Coast

A Mexican-American born to a Guadalarajan father and Chihuahuan mother, César first caught the travel bug at age nine, when his family packed up the minivan for the two-day drive to Disney World. He pursued military and journalism careers, where he got more travel than he ever bargained for. A US Army veteran, he spent six cold months in Bosnia. More recently, César has regularly covered the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq for *USA Today*. He's visited 50 countries and counting, but returns to Mexico as often as possible to fill up on *mole poblano*. César and wife Marsha live in London where – despite what some believe – there is no real Mexican food.



ELLEE THALHEIMER

Central Gulf Coast

Her love of Latin America began during a high school language program in the Dominican Republic where she learned the virtues of trading in baggy corduroy pants and hoodies for tight jeans and big earrings. Since then her fascination with Latin America has deepened and brought her to Costa Rica, Mexico, Belize and Guatemala. Furthermore, she has explored Cuba, Argentina and Chile on her bike, her favorite way to travel. For Ellee, salsa dancing by night and riding by day constitutes the perfect marriage. Hence it pleased her to see that the gracious, sensuous, gorgeous central Gulf coast could uphold this holy matrimony. Ellee calls Portland, Oregon, her home.

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

David Goldberg, MD (Health) completed his training in internal medicine and infectious diseases at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New York City, where he has also served as voluntary faculty. At present, he is an infectious diseases specialist in Scarsdale, New York, and the editor-in-chief of the website MDTravelHealth.com.

Mauricio Velázquez de León (Food & Drink, Regional Cuisines of Mexico) was born in Mexico City, where he was given boiled chicken feet and toasted corn tortillas to sooth his teething pains. Mauricio has worked for a variety of newspapers and magazines, and his food writing has been widely published. He currently works in New York City as an editor, writer and father of twin toddlers, whose teething pains were soothed with toasted corn tortillas.

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