

Getting Started

Traveling in Mexico requires little planning. You can just get on the plane or bus or into your car and go! You'll rarely have trouble finding suitable accommodation on any budget, and travel by road or plane within Mexico is easy. If you have limited time and specific goals, work out a detailed itinerary and reserve accommodations in advance. If this is your first trip to Mexico, be ready for more crowds, noise, bustle and poverty than you might be 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.

WHEN TO GO

The tropic of Cancer cuts across Mexico just north of Mazatlán, so this stretch of coast is officially tropical. The driest months, when it may not rain at all, are from November to April. These months are also the coolest, with temperatures averaging a comfortable 26° to 29°C.

The hottest months, May to October, are also the wettest, and the hottest and wettest of all are June, July and August. Rainfall increases as you move south from Mazatlán toward Acapulco, with Acapulco receiving twice as much rain as Mazatlán. The Oaxaca coast is drier but closer in average rainfall to Acapulco than Mazatlán. May to October are also extremely humid, and it's generally more humid the further south you move.

The peak holiday periods are July and August, mid-December to early January, and a week either side of Easter. At these times, resorts attract big tourist crowds, room prices go up, and rooms and public transport are heavily booked, so reservations are recommended. November to April are reliably dry, warm, blissful and popular months for travel among North Americans and Europeans.

See climate charts (p280) for more information.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Adequate insurance (p284)
- All the necessary paperwork if you're driving (p295)
- Waterproof sandals if you'll be boating
- Clothes to cope with Mexico's climatic variations and air-conditioned and non-air-conditioned rooms (and buses)
- Any specific toiletries you require, including contact-lens solutions and contraceptives, as these can be difficult to obtain in Mexico; also consider carrying a copy of prescriptions for any medications you will take with you – this might save you from scrutiny at customs
- A flashlight for some of those not-so-well-lit streets and stairways – and for power outages
- An inconspicuous container for money and valuables, such as a small, slim wallet or an under-the-clothes pouch or money belt (p281)
- Sun protection: a hat, sunglasses and sunscreen
- A small padlock
- A small Spanish dictionary and/or phrasebook
- A backpack for carrying it all – you can make it reasonably theft-proof with small padlocks; a light daypack, too, is useful

TOP TENS

Adventures

Adventure tourism is a burgeoning industry, with countless options for outdoor enthusiasts, including the following:

- Surfing the big Pacific waves at Puerto Escondido (p247)
- Volunteering with sea-turtle ecologists in Playa San Francisco (p143)
- Bird-watching on tropical Laguna de Manialtepec (p253)
- Boating through tropical mangroves to La Tovar (p132)
- Mountain biking in the hills overlooking Bahía de Banderas (p75)
- Sharing the seas with whales or dolphins on Bahía de Banderas (p74)
- Scuba diving in the gorgeous waters of Manzanillo (p164)
- Going after marlin, sailfish or other fierce fighters from a Zihuatanejo charter boat (p190)
- Exploring the superb hilltop ruins and tombs of Monte Albán (p240)
- Cloud-forest hiking in the gorgeous Biosphere Manantitlán (p165)

Festivals & Events

You'll really catch the Mexican mood at these events.

- Torneo Internacional de Pesca, a big-money international fishing tournament, rouses Barra de Navidad (p160) from its slumber in late January
- The commemoration of Father José María Mercado livens up San Blas (p133) on January 31 with a parade, a march by the Mexican navy and fireworks
- Carnaval (Carnival), the week leading up to Ash Wednesday, in late February or early March, is celebrated most vividly in Mazatlán (p118)
- Semana Santa (Holy Week), Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, is particularly colorful in Puerto Vallarta (p77) and Acapulco (p211)
- The Fiesta de San Pedro Apóstol, held on June 29, celebrates the patron saint of fishing and brings a beautiful pageant to the ancient shrimping village of Mexcaltitán (p130)
- Guelaguetza, held in Oaxaca city (p230) on the first two Mondays after July 16, is a brilliant feast of Oaxacan folk dance
- The Sinaloa Fiesta de los Artes brings a series of cultural events to Mazatlán's beautiful Teatro Angela Peralta from late October through mid-November (p118)
- The Festival de los Artes, Film Festival and Gourmet Festival dominate the cultural calendar in Puerto Vallarta (p77) each year in November
- Día de Muertos (p231; Day of the Dead) is a big event in Oaxaca city, with music and dance at the main cemetery on November 2
- The festival for the Virgen de Guadalupe (p211) is celebrated by all of Mexico on December 11 to 12, but it's particularly vivid in Acapulco

The water on Mexico's Pacific coast is perfect for swimming all year long. Diving and snorkeling can be good year-round, but visibility is usually highest (except during plankton blooms) in the dry winter months. Fun surf can be reasonably expected year-round, but waves are biggest from May through to November. Deep-sea fishing, also practiced all year, has its own species-specific seasons (see p48). Bird-watchers often prefer winter visits, when birds migrate down to the coastal lagoons from North America. Whale-watching is best from January to March.

TOP TENS

Must-See Movies

Mexico has inspired Mexicans and non-Mexicans alike to make great films here.

- *The Night of the Iguana* (1964) If you've been skeptical as to whether Puerto Vallarta was ever really a humble fishing village, this enjoyable Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton romp by director John Huston will set you straight.
- *Y tu mamá también* (And Your Mother Too; 2001) Alfonso Cuarón's terrifically entertaining road movie made a star of Gael García Bernal.
- *Frida* (2002) Atmospheric Hollywood Kahlo biopic starring Salma Hayek.
- *Amores perros* (Love's a Bitch; 2000) Alejandro González Iñárritu's raw, groundbreaking movie of modern Mexico City life.
- *Traffic* (2000) Steven Soderbergh's cross-border drug movie with Michael Douglas, Catherine Zeta-Jones and Benicio del Toro; don't watch this the night before you leave for Mexico.
- *Puerto Escondido* (1992) Wry, funny travel-and-crime movie directed by Italy's Gabriele Salvatores.
- *Viva Zapata!* (1952) Marlon Brando and Anthony Quinn star in Elia Kazan's romanticized version of the revolutionary's life.
- *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948) Bogart gets gold fever in Huston's greed-stoked adventure.
- *El Mariachi* (1992) Legendary low-budget action film, shot by Robert Rodriguez in two weeks for US\$7000, about a wandering musician (Carlos Gallardo) who gets mixed up in mob violence.
- *Scooby Doo and the Monster of Mexico* (2002) Scooby, Shaggy and the gang head to Mexico to prevent the ghoulish El Chupacabra from disrupting the Day of the Dead celebration.

COSTS & MONEY

On Mexico's Pacific coast, a frugal budget traveler can pay about US\$20 to US\$35 a day by camping or staying in budget accommodations and eating two to three meals a day in the cheapest restaurants. Add in other costs (snacks, purified water, entry to archaeological sites, long-distance buses etc), and you'll be up to US\$35 to US\$50 a day. If you share rooms, costs per person drop considerably.

In the midrange you can live well for US\$50 to US\$70 per person per day. In most places two people can easily find a clean, modern room with private bathroom and TV for US\$30 to US\$50.

At the top of the scale are hotels and resorts charging anywhere from US\$100 to US\$300, and restaurants where you pay US\$30 to US\$50 per person. However, you can still get a plush room for US\$50 to US\$75 and eat well for US\$20 to US\$40 per person per day.

These figures do not take into account expenses such as internal fares or car rentals – not to mention heavy tequila consumption, disco admissions and shopping, which you should certainly budget for.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Few travel books stick solely to the subject of Pacific Mexico, but several books deal with the country as a whole and make great reading on any trip to Mexico.

Expatriate memoirist Tony Cohan rambles around Mexico to 'see how the puzzle of old and new fit together' in *Mexican Days: Journey into the Heart of Mexico* (2006). In the style of *Mexican Days* (2000), Cohan deftly travels the literary territories of history, contemporary life and old-fashioned journalism.

HOW MUCH?

Coco frío (fresh coconut)
US\$1

Internet per hour US\$1-2

Corona beer US\$2

Street taco US\$0.50-1

Local small car rental
US\$50-60

'The 1990s saw the release of some excellent new English-language novels set in Mexico.'

The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, Politics (2003) is a massive compilation of articles, essays, poetry and photographs providing an encompassing introduction to the history and culture of Mexico.

British writer Isabella Tree takes peyote with the Huicholes and meets the matriarch of Juchitán in *Sliced Iguana: Travels in Unknown Mexico* (2001), a warm, perceptive account of Mexico and its indigenous cultures.

The People's Guide to Mexico by Carl Franz (12th edition, 2002) has for 30 years been an invaluable, amusing resource for anyone on an extended trip. It doesn't attempt hotel, transport or sightseeing specifics but does provide a great all-round introduction to Mexico.

Carlos Castaneda's *Don Juan* series, which reached serious cult status in the 1970s, tells of a North American's experiences with a peyote guru in northwestern Mexico.

The 1990s saw the release of some excellent new English-language novels set in Mexico. Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* is the laconic, tense and poetic tale of three young latter-day cowboys riding south of the border. James Maw's *Year of the Jaguar* takes its youthful English protagonist in search of the father he has never met, from the US border to Chiapas – a book that catches the feel of Mexican travel superbly.

For information on Mexican literature, see p37.

INTERNET RESOURCES

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

LonelyPlanet.com (www.lonelyplanet.com) Succinct summaries on travel in Mexico; the popular Thorn Tree bulletin board; travel news.

Lords of the Earth (www.mayalords.org) A fascinating repository of research into Mexico's ancient civilizations.

Mexican Wave (www.mexicanwave.com) 'Europe's gateway to Mexico,' a treasure trove of travel, culture and food-related material.

Mexico Connect (www.mexconnect.com) Packed with news, message and chat boards, accommodation information, articles and an endless variety of other content and links.

Mexico Tourism Board (www.visitmexico.com) Worth a peek.

Mexperience (www.mexperience.com) Full of valuable information for travel to and within Mexico.

Planeta.com (www.planeta.com) Great articles and listings for anyone interested in Mexico's ecology.

Tomzap's Pacific Coast of Mexico (www.tomzap.com) For fun, quirky and extensive information about the coasts of Jalisco, Colima and Oaxaca.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

BUMMING AROUND ON BAHÍA DE BANDERAS

One Week / Puerto Vallarta & Around

Spend up to three days in **Puerto Vallarta** (p63). Stroll on **Isla Río Cuale** (p72) in the morning, along **Playa de los Muertos** (p69) in the afternoon, and along the **malecón** (p75) at dusk, noting the grand **public sculptures** (p75).

Spend a day **mountain biking** (p75), **horseback riding** (p74) or **scuba diving** (p73). Or shop for **Huichol crafts** (p93) and hit the **art galleries** (p95). Sample the robust **cuisine scene** (p85) and an explosive **dance club** (p91).

Head south to **Mismaloya** (p104) for its fine beach and the stellar snorkeling around **Los Arcos** (p105), a marine park and ecological preserve. Amble into Mismaloya village for **tequila tasting and demonstrations** (p104), or for lunch in a **jungle restaurant** (p105).

From nearby **Boca de Tomatlán** (p106) catch a water taxi to **Yelapa** (p107) and sleep in an elegant candlelit hotel. Next morning rent a horse or hike to beaches or waterfalls.

Alternatively, head north to the understated pleasures of **Bucerías** (p97), or get back to basics in the fishing village of **La Cruz de Huanacaxtle** (p100). You might even make it to **Punta de Mita** (p102) for some **surfing action** (p102).



If you've only got a week, there's no reason to leave the sunny embrace of Puerto Vallarta's beautiful Bahía de Banderas; this trip is a mere 74km.

THE BEST OF THE PACIFIC COAST Three Weeks / Mazatlán to Acapulco

Get your bearings in **Mazatlán** (p109), lingering only long enough to enjoy a romantic evening on Plazuela Machado. Heading south, develop a taste for idleness in the ancient fishing village of **Mexcaltitán** (p129). From **San Blas** (p130) head by boat into gorgeous mangrove wetlands or sharpen your surfing skills on Bahía de Matanchén. Why not lose a few days on the beautiful cove at **Chacala** (p137) or witness a baby-turtle release in **Playa San Francisco** (p143)?

Empty your wallet of pesos in **Puerto Vallarta** (p63), enjoying world-class dining, shopping and an all-around good time. Pause for a week of Spanish instruction in beautiful **La Manzanilla** (p153) or head to **Barra de Navidad** (p158) to relax with a book or venture by boat into the lagoon. Drop in to **Manzanillo** (p162) for some world-class scuba diving or just to enjoy the ambience of the newly gussied-up downtown waterfront.

Continue south into the wilds of Michoacán, stopping first at gorgeous **Playa Maruata** (p174), where black sea turtles come ashore nightly in season. At laid-back **Barra de Nexpa** (p174) assume the life of a surfer dude while enjoying world-class waves.

Continue your beach-happy existence in Ixtapa at tiny **Barra de Potosí** (p196), a quiet gem of a town with good scuba diving and opportunities for ecotourism. You should be wonderfully well-rested by now, and ready for the bright lights and resort-town decadence of **Acapulco** (p203).

This madcap 1409km long-haul journey appeals to never-say-die road warriors with time to spare and living to do. You'll get your fill of fun, sun and sand while getting up close and personal with the coast's most beguiling towns.



ROADS LESS TRAVELED

WANDERING AROUND OAXACA Two or Three Weeks / Oaxaca City & Back

Before seeking out roads less traveled, spend a few days on the streets of **Oaxaca city** (p224) enjoying the cuisine, first-class museums and galleries, and exemplary handicrafts shopping. Take a day trip to the ancient Zapotec capital of **Monte Albán** (p240), one of Mexico's most impressive ancient sites.

Head south on the spectacular, winding Hwy 175, climbing high into mountainous pine forests then dropping precipitously to **Pochutla** (p254), gateway to the beach towns of **Puerto Ángel** (p255), **Mazunte** (p263) and **Zipolite** (p258). All have wonderful beaches and ample accommodation.

The westerly coastal route of Hwy 200 leads to **Puerto Escondido** (p244), where the big draws are astounding waves and, naturally, amazing surf action. Nearby, **Lagunas Los Naranjos and Palmazola** (p254) boast abundant birdlife and a local crocodile population. Bird lovers will want to go even further, to the **Laguna de Manialtepec** (p253), where roseate spoonbills are common, and to the **Parque Nacional Lagunas de Chacahua** (p243), where mangrove-fringed islands harbor numerous exotics.

Backtrack to **Bahías de Huatulco** (p265), and take your pick of beautiful beaches backed by forest. Surfers will love the right-hand point break at **Barra de la Cruz** (p273). Continue on to the sweaty, low-country **Isthmus of Tehuantepec** (p273), where Zapotec culture is strong and gringos are few. Visit the towns of **Tehuantepec** (p274) and **Juchitán** (p275) and the ancient Zapotec fortress of **Guiengola** (p275). From here, return to Oaxaca city on Hwy 190.

Oaxaca's got it all: a beautiful and artistic capital, pre-Hispanic towns and a spectacular, varied landscape. This 750km expedition gets you deep into the thick of it and out again.



TAILORED TRIPS

TURTLE TRIPPING

Mexico's Pacific coast teems with sea turtles. Start your turtle tripping in **Playa San Francisco** (p142), home to the Grupo Ecológico de la Costa Verde, which offers volunteer opportunities and releases more than 25,000 hatchlings each year. In **Cuyutlán** (p170), the Centro Tortuguero operates a thriving turtle-release program. Head into the wilds of Michoacán, where at **Playa Maruata** (p174) black turtles come ashore nightly from June to December to lay their eggs. Turtle-spotting tours on Bahía Principal near **Puerto Escondido**



(p244) often sight the elusive loggerhead turtle. Once the site of large-scale turtle slaughter, today **San Agustín** (p261) is known for its turtle-viewing boat trips and ecotourism ethos. In nearby **Mazunte** (p263) is the Centro Mexicano de la Tortuga, a turtle aquarium and research center. And finally, on **Bahías de Huatulco** (p265) the area's dive sites feature frequent turtle encounters.

SURFING SAFARI

With powerful waves curling into the coast's sand-rimmed bays, it's no wonder the region has attained legendary status among surfers.

South of San Blas, **Bahía de Matanchén** (p132) receives amazingly long waves in September and October, while mellow but satisfying surfing can also be had at **Playa San Francisco** (p142) and **Sayulita** (p144). On the northern tip of Bahía de Banderas, **Playa El Anclote** (p102) offers a potent point break.

Continuing south, **Playa Boca de Pascuales** (p171) is a legendary spot with aggressive barrel swells up to 5m. Deep in Michoacán are more affable – but still challenging – waves at the gorgeous **Playa La Tida** (p173). A well-established scene in **Barra de Nexpa** (p174) celebrates point-break waves curling in from the left, some allowing rides as long as 150m.



Further south in Ixtapa, the beaches near **Troncones** (p179) feature more than a dozen breaks. But the most famous surfing locale on the Pacific Coast is **Puerto Escondido** (p247), where you'll find waves to challenge beginners and experts alike. The biggest of these, at Zicatela, offers serious punishment to all but the most experienced surfers. You have been warned!

Snapshot

In a country where nearly 35 million live on US\$2 per day, and another 35 million live on a just over US\$7 per day, poverty continues to be one of Mexico's most daunting problems. By any measure, the country's political and social institutions have failed to provide upward mobility for its neediest citizens. Against this backdrop, at a time when Latin America is swinging convincingly to the left, Mexico was preparing for its July 2006 general election as this book went to press. The outcome will replace outgoing leader Vicente Fox.

The race was expected to be closely contested, with the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN; National Action Party) and its candidate, Felipe Calderón, intent on winning the presidency a second time, and the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD; Party of the Democratic Revolution), now in coalition with the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM; Ecologist Green Party) and led by Mexico City mayor Andres Manuel López Obrador, equally dedicated to regaining the office it lost in the 2000 election.

With a campaign slogan of *Por el bien de todos, primero los pobres* (For the welfare of all, the poor first), the popular López Obrador had built a convincing advantage in opinion polls by proposing dramatic increases in social spending to attack pervasive poverty that he says has been exacerbated by Fox's pro-market reforms. Striking a nationalistic chord, he has signaled that he favors slowing down efforts to open the economy to foreign investors. López Obrador's opponent Felipe Calderón, in contrast, is known his for conservative business and social positions.

As you travel on Mexico's Pacific coast you may come into contact with extreme poverty, but by and large the region – and particularly its beach resorts – is fairly prosperous. Tourism, the second-largest employer in Mexico and one of the economic mainstays of the Pacific coast, keeps the local economies humming. This is particularly true in Sinaloa, Jalisco and Guerrero, home to the coast's three biggest resort towns: Mazatlán, Puerto Vallarta and Acapulco.

Most of the Pacific coast, however, relies heavily on livestock and agriculture, especially the states of Jalisco, Nayarit and Colima. Jalisco is Mexico's primary grain producer and Nayarit accounts for most of the country's tobacco production. Vegetable and tropical fruit crops are grown throughout Jalisco and Colima as well as in Michoacán, Guerrero and Oaxaca. Sinaloa's main export is shrimp.

Timber products have been a rapidly growing sector of the Pacific economy since the passage of Nafta (North American Free Trade Agreement) in 1994, which opened *ejidos* (peasant landholding cooperatives) to multinational corporations. The country's best coffee is produced in Colima and particularly in Oaxaca; in both states it forms a significant sector of the economy.

FAST FACTS

Population: 106 million

Mestizo population: 12.7 million

Type of government: federal republic

Dominant religion: Roman catholic (89%)

Dominant political parties: Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the National Action Party (PAN), and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD)

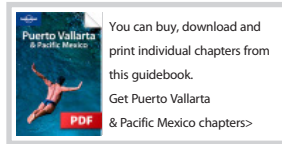
Literacy rate: 92% (US 99%)

GDP per person: US\$9666 (as compared to US\$43,555 per person in the US)

Foreign tourists entering Mexico per year: 20 million

Year that laws were enacted to protect sea turtles: 1988

Estimated number of sea-turtle eggs poached on Mexican beaches in 2005: 50,000



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