



TRAVEL + LEISURE

DESTINATION OF
THE YEAR

2022

Mexico

This past year, as we began taking our first steps back into the world, many of us sought destinations with a relaxed atmosphere, wide-open spaces, and plenty of sunlight. No place filled the bill quite like Mexico—but there's more to the country than breathtaking beaches and exclusive resorts. In the following pages, we celebrate its regional nuances and less-explored pockets, the beguiling cultures, crafts, and cuisines that make it so deserving of our annual award. Whether it's your first trip across the border or your 15th, what are you waiting for?

**EDITED BY SARAH BRUNING
AND PETER TERZIAN**



BEYOND THE BORDER, BEYOND THE OBVIOUS

ALEX TEMBLADOR on why now is the perfect moment to take a fresh look at our southern neighbor.

A FEW YEARS AGO, I was invited to spend the evening with a gallery owner in Los Cabos, on Mexico's Baja Peninsula. I was on vacation, and up until that point I had been doing what most visitors to Los Cabos do: I took a whale-watching tour, tried a few spa treatments, and soaked up the sun on the beach.

But soon I was ready for something different. I met Patricia Mendoza at her namesake gallery, which features work by

contemporary Mexican artists; together, we set off through the cobblestoned streets of San José del Cabo's Gallery District. Mendoza introduced me to artists like Ivan Guaderrama, who explained how his colorful pieces produce sounds when

touched, and Enrique Bascón, whose paintings examine Mexican society and politics with humor. Along the way, Mendoza and I had a glass of wine at H Bistro, where we discussed our respective family histories. I told her how,

although most of the Mexican side of my family has lived in the U.S. since the 1800s, my great-grandfather was born in Guadalajara.

Later, we returned to Mendoza's gallery, where we were served a multicourse meal by an up-and-coming Mexican chef. I was the only U.S. citizen at our table. The conversation switched effortlessly between Spanish and English, and we talked about art, culture, politics, travel, and life. I had been to Mexico countless times, but on that night, I connected with its people in a more sincere and significant way.

WARM WEATHER, inexpensive flights, and advertisements with shots of Spanish-colonial architecture have made Mexico the top international destination for U.S. travelers. We fly to the resort towns along the coast to escape, to relax, to be pampered; some of us venture to Mexico City for food and history. We go where our families and friends have gone, and where we're surrounded by people from our own country.

But Mexico is also home to diverse Indigenous cultures, complex belief systems, and breathtaking natural wonders such as petrified waterfalls, pink lakes, soaring mountains, and deep canyons. Many of us haven't gone beyond the beaches and pools. We haven't gotten to know our southern neighbor the way a good neighbor should.

Recently in the U.S., we've begun to openly discuss racism, colonialism, unconscious bias, and privilege, and to consider how they affect different aspects of our lives—including travel. We've reexamined what we thought we knew, and we've sought to understand the experiences of people different from us.

For me, this process of reflection and empathetic growth is the real reason travelers should visit Mexico in 2022. The border may physically separate our countries, but fearmongering, stereotyping, and divisive policies have pushed us

further apart. This year, we can take what we've learned in 2020 and 2021 and change that. We can choose to connect with the people of Mexico and learn what makes it so rich in culture, nature, and community.

On your next visit, you might walk through the stalls of Mexico City's El Chopo flea market and encounter the newest music and fashions from the country's punk and goth scenes. Or you might gain insight into the Indigenous peoples of Oaxaca by visiting the villages of Zapotec weavers. A short boat ride on the crocodile-filled Usumacinta River to the magnificent ruins of Yaxchilán will enrich your knowledge of Mexico's Indigenous history.

Visiting lesser-known Mexican destinations is one easy way travelers can get to know the place more intimately. Take it a step further by staying in locally owned hotels or vacation rentals, eating where Mexicans eat, shopping where Mexicans shop, and trying to speak Spanish—because it's the people who make a journey unforgettable, after all.

FOR MY NEXT TRIP to Mexico, I'm planning a visit to Guadalajara, the nation's second-largest city. It will be my ancestral heritage trip—and if I'm lucky, I'll meet a distant cousin. The cathedral will surely astound me, as will the bands in the Plaza de los Mariachis, but I'll also make a point of seeking out the locals, who call themselves Tapatios.

Perhaps I'll join a hiking group and explore the nearby canyon of Barranca de Oblatos. My fellow hikers may suggest the city's best restaurants for pozole, birria, *tortas ahogadas*, or *tejuino*, so the next day I'll gorge on those Tapatío specialties in between visits to high-end fashion boutiques and modern art galleries. I might learn about the Teuchitlán culture on a tour of the circular-stepped pyramids of Los Guachimontones. Whatever I do, I look forward to experiencing Mexico in a more meaningful way. 🌎

B A J A C A L I F O R N I A S U R

The Coast Is Calling

Away from the core of Los Cabos, **DAVID AMSDEN** encounters a more rugged side of Baja, where adventure and comfort go hand in hand.

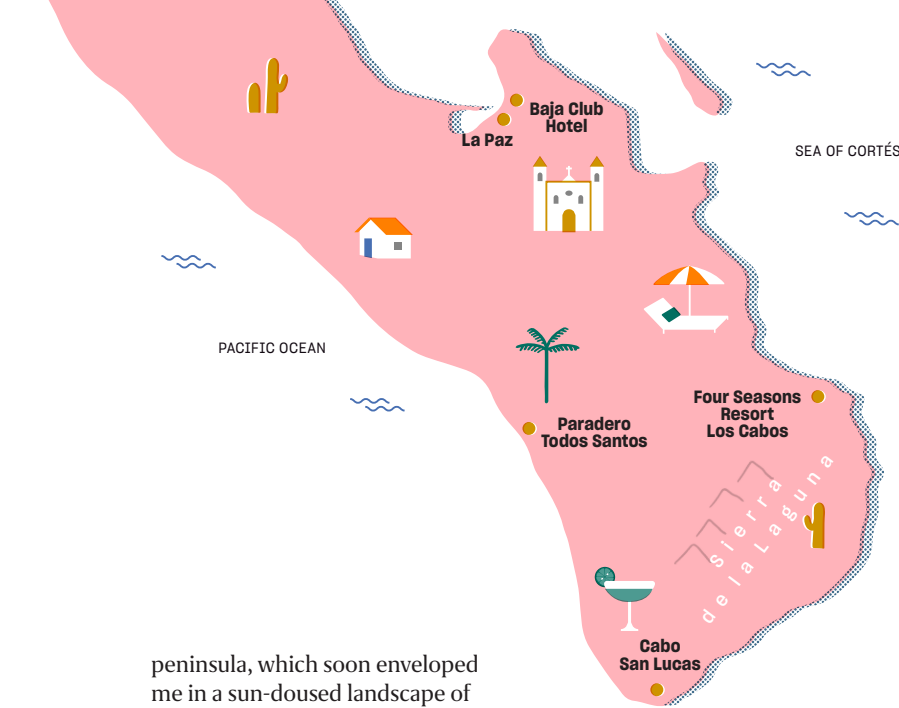
ON THE FIRST morning of my road trip through Baja California Sur, I found myself bobbing in a small boat off the coast of the state capital, La Paz. Pelicans skimmed the glassy surface. Dolphins made a frolicsome cameo alongside the hull, followed by dozens of stingrays, as if eager to flaunt the abundance of biodiversity that led Jacques Cousteau to christen these waters “the world’s aquarium.”

My affable guide, Said Estrada, who works with eco-outfitter Red Travel México, was confident that the windless morning meant we’d soon locate the largest known fish in the ocean: a whale shark. A generally elusive species, the speckled creatures can grow up to 40 feet long and congregate from late fall to late spring, when currents turn the area into a plankton buffet. Once we had spied a shark, we would dive in and, if all went according to plan, swim alongside it.

“You’ll see,” Estrada said, a proud lilt to his voice. “There is much more to Baja than being hungover in Cabo.” He was referring to Cabo San Lucas, the rollicking resort town at the southernmost tip of the peninsula, and the reason the region lingers in many minds as one where spring break springs eternal.

My education in the limitations of such thinking had begun the previous day. After flying in to Cabo, I rented a car and headed north along the western flank of the 775-mile-long

◀
The Four Seasons Resort Los Cabos at Costa Palmas has two miles of private beach lining the Sea of Cortés.



peninsula, which soon enveloped me in a sun-doused landscape of untrammelled splendor: cacti-dotted desert, jagged mountains, the emerald churn of the Pacific. Few cars, fewer people, no gaudy or glossy development.

The sensation of being transported to a time before civilization was so acute that it came as something of a shock when, 2½ hours later, I arrived in La Paz, a frenetic, industrious port city and

marine biology hub that butts up against the arresting turquoise waters of the Sea of Cortés.

Ecotourism has for decades been the economic engine of La Paz, thanks to Espiritu Santo Archipelago, a UNESCO-protected marine park where the sea teems with wildlife. The accommodations have generally catered to those looking for fuss-free quarters after a day of snorkeling with sea lions. My lodging, the Baja Club Hotel, offered a glimpse into how the city, like the region, has been slyly evolving to attract travelers who crave off-the-grid enrichment and, increasingly, refined places to stay.

The 32-room property is the latest offering from Mexico-based hotel brand Grupo Habita, and is constructed around a restored early-20th-century hacienda that faces the promenade skirting the bay. As I walked through the hulking wooden doors, the bustle of lowriders and lifted pickups outside gave way to hushed, unexpected elegance: terrazzo flooring, a library, a glittering pool tucked away in an interior courtyard, a spa, and a rooftop bar.

◀ The “Baja seafood pineapple” at Casa de Brasa, a restaurant at the Four Seasons.



The overall impression was less hotel than the residence of an eccentric, seafaring poet with very cool friends and a sizable trust fund—a jolting contrast to the dusty roads I’d spent the day traversing. It seemed an improbable base camp for adventures like swimming with sharks.

An hour into my excursion, a fierce wind had picked up, ruffling the surface with whitecaps. After another sharkless hour, Estrada was getting edgy. Visibility was now limited, and new conservation initiatives aimed at protecting the ecosystem regulated the number of boats allowed on the water, meaning our allotted time was running out. When Estrada turned back toward the harbor, however, he suddenly became animated. He leaped into the water, calling for me to follow him.

As I attempted to track with Estrada in the currents, I felt something immense below me—a nudge, delicate and spooky, against my hip. When I looked down, my vision filled entirely with the spotted skin of a shark the size of a small submarine; its dorsal fin, we later decided, had most likely been what grazed me. After it passed, I caught a glimpse of its full form, majestic and aloof, before it vanished into the murky blue—a surreal, magical encounter that set the mood for the next few days.

BACK ON LAND, I drove in a reflective trance a few miles north of the harbor, through a mangrove reserve and past escarpments of pink-tinged rock. I’d hoped to spend the afternoon at Playa Balandra, a circular bay of white sands and shallow, crystalline waters that routinely tops lists of Mexico’s most beautiful beaches. When I arrived, however, I was told it had reached capacity, according to local COVID-19 restrictions—a momentary pinch of disappointment that gave way, as so much does in Baja, to discovery.

Just a few minutes south, I pulled into Playa Pichilingue, a spit of

ILLUSTRATION BY ELENA BOILS. OPPOSITE: MODEL: GABY COLLADO. WARDROBE COURTESY OF NOMAD CHIC, TODOS SANTOS



The pool at the Baja Club Hotel, in La Paz.



▲ *The living room and central garden at Paradero Todos Santos.*

bone-white sand where I managed to squeeze in under any entry caps as one of only about 10 people. The afternoon dissolved over cold beers and a medley of tilapia, octopus, and shrimp simmered in a smoky tomato sauce at La Luna Bruja, the beach’s simple café.

That evening, I took in the sunset from the roof of the Baja Club before wandering away from the main drag to get a sense of a town that feels built for actual living, rather than visiting. I stopped at La Miserable, an unassuming bar with a slapdash courtyard, for what I thought would be a quick cocktail. Instead, it

turned into a languid, multi-hour affair thanks to my server, Attila Cocchi, a young, tattooed dude in a pageboy cap, who exuded laid-back warmth and insisted on giving me an extensive tutorial in mezcal.

“You know how you talk about the body of wine? Well, we talk about the legs of mezcal,” he explained, noting that proper mezcal has a higher alcohol content than what’s shipped to the United States. “The higher the proof, the better the legs. Good legs walk smoothly down the throat, while bad legs tumble down.”

I tried many, perhaps too many: piney, ashy, bright, citrusy. On Cocchi’s recommendation, I ambled a few blocks to Marinera Poke & Seafood, where the crudo of freshly

caught albacore and the shrimp gyoza with miso butter once more reminded me that the city, much like the waters surrounding it, rewarded those willing to go beneath the surface.

THERE IS A fantasy that, prior to this trip, had enjoyed heavy rotation in my personal daydream arsenal: driving down to Baja from my home in Los Angeles, getting lost and found, surrendering to vagabond clichés. Setting off the next morning into the interior of the peninsula, I got a taste of that experience as I drove through foreboding desert, where eagles and vultures circled overhead, before heading east into the Sierra de la Laguna on an adrenaline-spiking road of hairpin turns and hallucinatory vistas.

An hour and a half later, I was hugging the rugged coastline of the East Cape, imagining spending a few months living out of an RV under an assumed name—an admittedly absurd parallel life to be contemplating given that I was going to meet my girlfriend, Erin, at the Four Seasons Resort Los Cabos at Costa Palmas. Part of an ambitious development project, the hotel and golf club opened in 2019 and will eventually be joined by a new Aman resort, Amanvari. A marina, a yacht club, and lavish private residences are also on the way, turning this previously undeveloped stretch of coastline into a micro-haven for the jet set.

Located on eight acres, the Four Seasons is designed to feel like an oasis, with its tan, low-rise structures emerging, mirage-like, from sand dunes that have been impeccably groomed to appear ungroomed. Like all of the resort’s 141 rooms, our suite offered an unobstructed view of the Sea of Cortés, which has calm, swimmable waters. In addition to the staff, who were seemingly telepathic, the sense of privacy was astounding. Though the resort was close to full capacity, we had the feeling of being marooned.

In keeping with the spirit of Baja, the hotel encourages adventuring and arranges excursions as varied as hikes to a mountain waterfall, 4 x 4 off-roading through nearby dunes, deep-sea fishing, and snorkeling outings to Cabo Pulmo National Park, just south of the property. Erin and I opted for something mellower, a private sunset cruise, since our stay coincided with the annual migration of gray whales.

Though no whales surfaced as we watched the sky morph into a kaleidoscope of pale pinks, we delighted in a bottle of Moët Nectar Impérial—a decadent aperitif before dinner at Limón, one of the hotel’s five restaurants. Tables are set amid a lemon grove, and the majority of the food, including cauliflower with serrano pepper and pork ribs

slathered in a guajillo-chile purée, is cooked over a wood-burning grill.

“What is that?” Erin asked the next morning, gesturing toward the ocean as we sipped coffee on our terrace, having sunk into a euphoric delirium. What at first looked like a fountain on the horizon turned out to be a rare, electrifying display of Mobula rays—hundreds, maybe thousands, tossing themselves gracefully into the air.

Heading out onto the beach to get a closer look at a phenomenon that remains mysterious even to scientists, we walked onto a stretch of white sand where the ocean meets a freshwater lagoon. Blue herons stalked the low tide, wild horses grazed under swooping fan palms, crabs skittered across the sand—nature reminding us of its irrepressible grandeur even in the most manicured of environments.

WE CROSSED WEST through the mountains to spend the final leg of our trip near Todos Santos, a town

on the Pacific coast that has become a haunt for nomad surfers, intrepid wanderers, and bohemian expats. Our destination: Paradero Todos Santos, a new hotel that celebrates this lifestyle with a level of stagecraft squarely aimed at seducing even the most seasoned of influencers.

The approach itself felt cinematic, as we turned off the main highway and onto a dirt road, passing through farmland and fields of ancient cacti and into a compound of Brutalist concrete structures. The open-air lobby, with its minimalist furnishings and swooping hammocks, was referred to as “the community.” The outdoor spa, still being completed, included a temescal for various ceremonies geared toward spiritual cleansing. The half-moon infinity pool looked like it could double as a backdrop for experimental theater.

One of the staff members, all of whom floated about the grounds in alpaca ponchos and carried

▼ *From left: Chilaquiles rojos, a breakfast staple at Paradero; cocktails at the hotel bar.*



► Paradero's 35 suites are appointed with textiles and furnishings made by Mexican artisans.



Going Deeper in Baja California Sur

WHERE TO STAY

Baja Club Hotel

An early-20th-century hacienda has been transformed into a chic, 32-room boutique hotel with an intimate rooftop bar. bajaclubhotel.com; doubles from \$250.

Four Seasons Resort Los Cabos at Costa Palmas

Modern, minimalist architecture puts the focus on this beachfront resort's prime position overlooking the Sea of Cortés. fourseasons.com; doubles from \$1,000.

Paradero Todos Santos

Though the emphasis is on activities and excursions, this 35-suite hideaway has plenty to enjoy on site,

including a destination-worthy restaurant. paraderohotels.com; doubles from \$550.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Barracuda Cantina

Punchy tequila cocktails pair nicely with the Baja-style fish and shrimp tacos. barracudacantina.com; entrées \$2–\$11.

Hierbabuena

The menu leans on vegetables plucked from the restaurant's gardens. hierbabuenarestaurante.com; entrées \$14–\$25.

La Luna Bruja

This waterfront restaurant serves mixed-seafood platters and other local staples. fb.com/lalunabruja; entrées \$14–\$37.

La Miserable

Ask one of the bartenders about the artisanal mezcals on offer. fb.com/lamiserablelapaz.

Marinera Poke & Seafood

Asian-inflected options include bao, gyoza, and sashimi. instagram.com/marineramx; entrées \$5–\$13.

Tiki Santos Bar

Tostadas showcase fresh fish, including citrus-kissed yellowtail and tuna dressed in a creamy chile sauce. instagram.com/tiki_santos_bar; entrées \$5–\$12.

WHAT TO DO

Red Travel México

The La Paz-based adventure specialist can customize nature trips, including outings to swim with whale sharks. redtravelmexico.com.

themselves with casual authority, led us to our room, a rooftop suite of earth tones that featured a “sky net”—a hammock on the top floor, meant to encourage nighttime stargazing.

“I have the feeling,” Erin whispered, “that we’re maybe being initiated into a wellness cult.” Which, in some ways, is the point of Paradero, which bills itself as an “experience-inclusive” hotel. The activities-centric approach

gives it the feel of a summer camp for grown-ups. Erin and I chose two of the more physically demanding options. Expecting the kid-glove approach often favored by resorts, we were impressed at the arduousness of the excursions. A half-day biking trip took us through small villages and up steep hills overlooking the ocean.

Surfing was at nearby Playa de Los Cerritos, where I paddled out on my

own, watching Erin, an Iowan with an aversion to waves, catch a handful of grin-inducing rides with the help of her instructor, Martín Olea. These kinds of rugged outings contrasted with the experience of dining at the hotel—in the best way possible.

Chef Eduardo Ríos, formerly of Pujol, Mexico City’s temple of culinary prowess, elevates open-fire cooking into the realm of high art.

MEXICO THROUGH MY EYES

My favorite thing to do in Mexico City is to head downtown and walk by the used bookstores at Calle Donceles, a historic bookseller alleyway. There are more than a dozen; some of them have been there for decades. Afterward, it’s just a question of finding a coffee shop and sitting down to read your recent purchases while sipping a coffee with milk.

— *Silvia Moreno-Garcia is the New York Times best-selling author of Mexican Gothic, among other novels.*



BOOKSTORE: RODRIGO OJEDA

G U A N A J U A T O

First Blush

Just outside San Miguel de Allende, **DANIELLE BERNABE** finds a crew of dynamic winemakers reviving centuries-old traditions.

IT WAS AUGUST, the peak of harvest season, and Taylor Goodall was driving me to **Cava Garambullo** ([instagram.com/cava_garambullo](https://www.instagram.com/cava_garambullo); by appointment only). The small winery is 15 minutes north of San Miguel de Allende, where Goodall owns the five-bedroom **Hotel Amparo** ([hotelamparo.com](https://www.hotelamparo.com); doubles from \$180). Goodall's friends, Branko Pjanic and Natalia López Mota, the husband-and-wife team behind Cava Garambullo, had asked him to their vineyard to help crush grapes. Ahead of us, a roadrunner hurried across Route 51, disappearing into a landscape of pepper trees and cacti. Given that we were in wine country, I expected to see grapevines left and right, but there were none in sight.

"The region is less than twenty years old in the wine world, and some of the producers are really young," Goodall explained, easing my confusion. "It's kind of undiscovered right now." In town, this shows. Local wines are not common on menus, and most people order beer or tequila.

But now, as the area revives its wine heritage, that's beginning to change. Guanajuato—a state in the

central highlands of Mexico that's slightly smaller than Maryland—isn't recognized for its wine in the same way as Baja California's long-established Valle de Guadalupe. Visitors to San Miguel de Allende and the state's capital city, Guanajuato, are more likely to focus on art, architecture, and textile design.



▲ A wine tasting at Dos Búhos, a family-owned vineyard set on a former peach orchard.

► The sunny patio at Dos Búhos.



Yet viticulture is embedded in the soil, dating back to the 1520s, when the Spanish colonial government ordered vines to be planted across Mexico. Winemaking was later outlawed for anyone outside the clergy, but after the Mexican War of Independence in 1821, households began cultivating vineyards again.

Over the past two decades, more than 30 wineries have opened in the region—ranging from traditional to experimental—and today they form stopping points on Guanajuato's Ruta del Vino, which follows four paths across the state. This motley group of established and new vintners is rediscovering the rhythm of the land. Torrential rains fall during the harvest season, and temperatures swing fiercely from day to night, often by as much as 30 degrees. This type of stress defines the grapes' skin, sugar, and balance of acidity, resulting in wines that are charismatic and intriguing and that go down with great ease.

Arriving at Cava Garambullo, I spotted a small patch of vines (finally!) as Goodall slipped into the assembly line, handing off buckets of Pinot Noir grapes. In the adjacent barrel room, the winery dog—a hefty mastiff-Great Dane named Medo—watched López hand-label bottles of the 2019 Azumbre, a blend of Syrah, Grenache, and Cabernet Franc.

López and Pjanic do everything by hand. They liken the winery to a workshop where they've swapped conventional winemaking techniques for crafty experimentation, using grapes from various farms to create unfiltered natural blends.

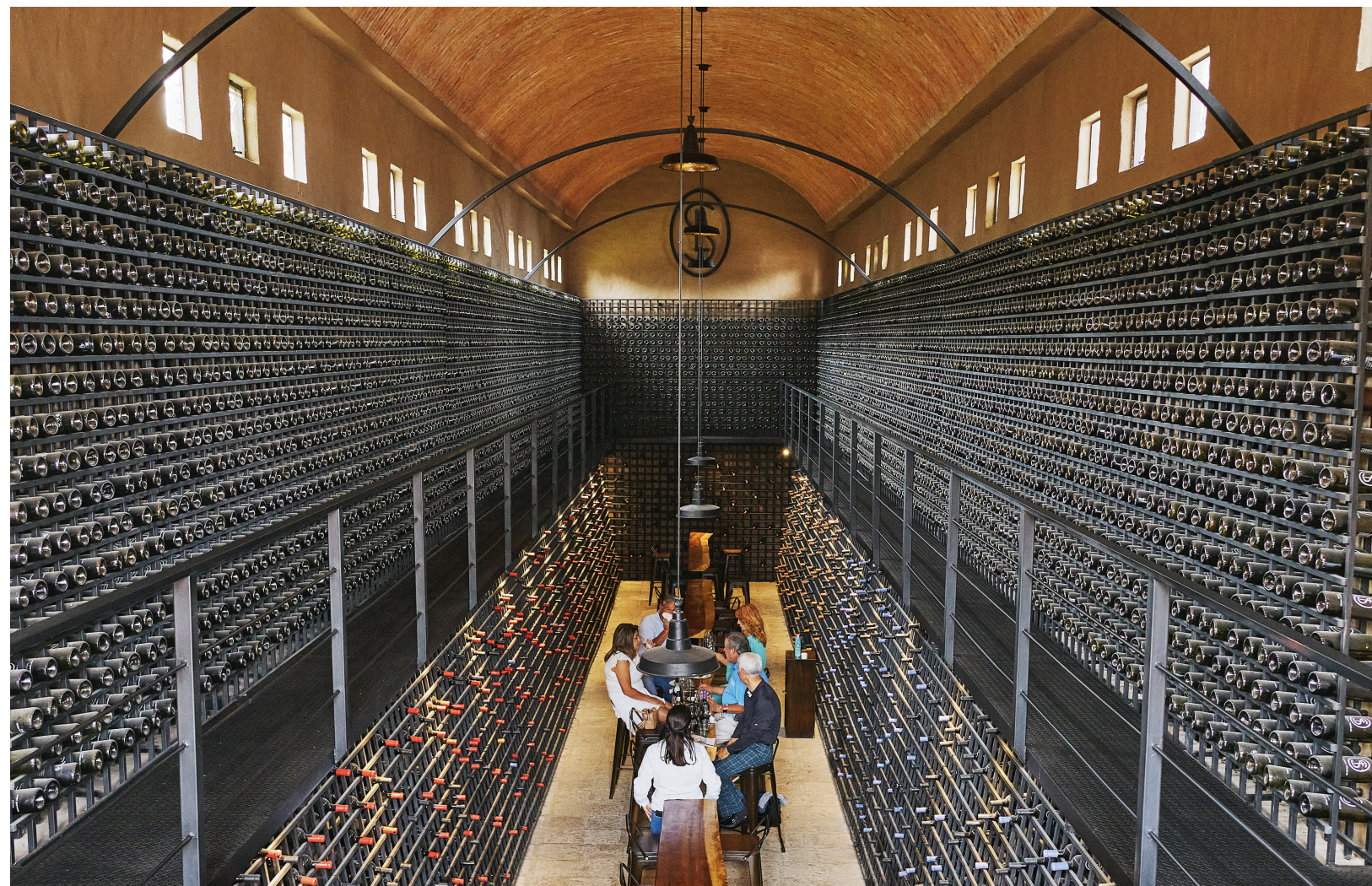


As I tasted the Azumbre, its many layers unraveled on my palate. López described the origins of the Cabernet Franc grapes. “They come from two different terroirs, thirty miles apart. It adds value for the visitors because they can taste wines from different micro-terroirs.”

At the nearby **Dos Búhos** (dosbuhos.com)—which means “two owls,” a nod to the feathered residents that nest near the on-site chapel—I swirled Sauvignon Blanc with a fragrance that carried vestiges of peach. “It’s been more than twenty years since we’ve had peaches growing on the farm,” manager Lucero Lagarde said nostalgically. “But they left their essence in the ground. It’s magic.” She led me to the vineyard for a sampling of rosé and a lesson in low-intervention wine. “One of the many beautiful things that comes from organic winemaking is that we trust nature.”

The following day, I swapped my sneakers for heels for an afternoon at two of the region’s more upscale establishments, **Viñedos San Lucas** (vinedossanlucas.com) and **Viñedo San Miguel** (vinedosanmiguel.com.mx). At San Miguel, which produces 150,000 bottles annually, I took a glass of Malbec and ambled through the olive trees and lavender bushes. The brick building that houses San Lucas is, at first glance, unassuming, but inside its walls lies a wonderland, where wine tasting in the two-story cellar is only an introduction to its equestrian and wellness pursuits.

During my lunch at San Lucas, I spun Bolognese around my fork as the sun flickered through the mesquite trees: Italian countryside meets central Mexico. Like the roadrunner, I had veered off the main route and disappeared into an evolving terroir—one with surprises around every cactus-lined corner. 🌵



▲ From far left: Bottles on display in the tasting room at Viñedo San Miguel; Viñedos San Lucas, a winery attached to a restaurant and 14-room hotel; Natalia López Mota and Branko Pjanic, owners of Cava Garambullo, with their dog, Medo.

◀ The tasting room at Viñedos San Lucas.

CHIAPAS

Deep Roots

Steeped in Mayan heritage, the country's southernmost state is Mexico at its most unexpected.

BY PILAR GUZMÁN

▼
A mural on the street in San Cristóbal de Las Casas.



AS I STOOD outside the Iglesia de San Juan de Bautista in the village of San Juan Chamula, I marveled at the artistry of the traditional dress worn by the congregants filing in. Women of every age showed off ornately embroidered black sheepskin skirts and sashes and blouses the color of Easter eggs. It was a reminder of Chamula's status as a stronghold of ancient Tzotzil and Tzeltal Mayan culture—and the resilience of its native communities, which were exploited and displaced after the arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century.

Shyly, I poked my head inside the church. The haze of copal incense smoke, flickering candlelight, and

the low hum of prayer drew me in. At first, the religious cues felt familiar enough. Worshippers knelt amid thousands of candles as rays of morning light streaked through windows into the cavernous space. But as my eyes adjusted to the dim glow, I realized everything else was unfamiliar. There were no pews, no crucifixes. Instead, saints with the iconographic power of Mayan deities lined the walls. Sewn onto their clothing were mirrors, which are thought to reflect the sins of onlookers and to serve as gateways to the spirit world for true believers.

Like most Indigenous groups in the largely agrarian southern state of Chiapas, the Chamulans believe they live at the center of the earth. Their religion, Mexican syncretism, worships the forces of nature, the animals of the jungle, and the planets in the sky. It's combined with a form of Catholicism that places John the Baptist above Christ. From my position at the back of the church, I watched a middle-aged shaman attend to a young boy whose head was wrapped in white gauze. Rocking back and forth, she took his pulse as his parents hovered, their eyes closed in prayer.

CHIAPAS IS ALMOST entirely forested, rising gently, and then precipitously, from the Pacific coastal jungles to the central highlands, before reaching 13,850 feet at the peak of the Sierra Madre de Chiapas. More than 25 percent of the state's roughly 4 million inhabitants are Indigenous, and most of its 12 ethnic groups trace their roots to pre-Columbian Mayan peoples.

Following Mexico's independence in 1821, a small landowning elite

The Mayan ruins of Yaxchilán, near the Mexico-Guatemala border.





▲
The walls of Sumidero Canyon rise 3,300 feet above the Grijalva River.



▲
Dishes from various stalls at Esquina San Agustín, a food hall in San Cristóbal's historic center.

replaced the colonial rulers, and most of the farmers (with the exception of those who joined farming collectives) transitioned from slavery to serfdom. Linked with Guatemala during the colonial era, Chiapas only became part of Mexico in 1824 and never attracted the kind of investment in

industry and infrastructure of other, more mineral-rich states.

Today Chiapas is, on paper, the country's poorest state, and yet I didn't come across a single panhandler—only a handful of vendors who asked for a “donation” when they hadn't succeeded in

closing a sale. Nor did I encounter a single unreturned smile. Unlike in densely populated cities to the north, I saw an almost familial sense of community everywhere I looked.

For travelers, Chiapas's isolation and rugged landscape are both a gift and a curse (there are no direct flights from the U.S., so most visitors connect through Mexico City). There's also a lingering wariness due to the legacy of the Zapatista anti-globalization uprising that paralyzed the Mexican government in 1994, for which the region has become synonymous.

But now, with more travelers interested in understanding Mexico's Indigenous heritage (and thanks to a few truly excellent hotels and restaurants), the region is being recognized for its cultural and creative offerings. In Chiapas, travelers will find a bewitching mix of ancient and modern culture that's distinct from any other in the country.

PLANNING A TRIP

If it's your first time in Chiapas, you'll need five to seven days to cover the region's dizzying trifecta of craftsmanship, nature, and archaeology—and have enough hang time in dreamy San Cristóbal de Las Casas, the state's third-largest (and arguably most beautiful) city. Plan to spend the first three or four nights in the San Cristóbal highlands, where you can take half- and full-day trips to visit weavers, ceramists, and markets. You can also witness ceremonies in the Indigenous municipalities of Zinacantán, Chamula, and Tenejapa.

San Cristóbal's historic center, meanwhile, offers abundant shopping, eating, and cultural experiences. It can also be a base for day trips to national parks and natural attractions like El Chiflón waterfall, where the



Jorge Gordillo, the chef at Tarumba, a restaurant in San Cristóbal. Below: The Maracuyá y Yerbabuena, a mezcal-based cocktail served at Hotel Bo.



Exploring Chiapas

SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS

Casa Lum

This hotel's restaurant is worth a visit for the octopus with cauliflower and chorizo. casalum.com; entrées \$12–\$17.

Centro Cultural de los Altos

Occupying an old convent, the city's main museum traces regional history from the pre-Hispanic era to the evangelization of the Indigenous people. sic.gob.mx.

DESTINATION OF THE YEAR 2022

Mexico

Eklektik

This shop has a nicely curated selection of local pottery and textiles, including women's and men's shirts, scarves, shawls, and bags. eklektik.com.mx.

El Tacoletto

Locals consider this the best taqueria in town. It's ideal for a quick lunch of *tacos al pastor*. 1 Belisario Domínguez; entrées \$3–\$10.

Hotel Bo

With its handmade furniture and local textiles, this hotel is one of those gems that puts a city on the map. hotelbo.mx; doubles from \$165.

Hotel Guayaba Inn

This tastefully appointed property feels traditionally Mexican, with its timbered ceilings and stucco construction, four-poster beds, and tile-lined bathrooms. guayabainn.com; doubles from \$91.

Maho Japones

In the historic center, you'll find the Esquina San Agustín, a food-hall-style collection of stylish restaurants and bars, including this outstanding sushi spot. mahojapones.com; entrées \$3–\$22.

Museo Jtatik Samuel

In addition to celebrating the life of Samuel Ruiz, the bishop of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, who championed land and human rights of Indigenous people, this museum houses some of the finest examples of textiles from the Oxchuc region of Chiapas. jtatik.org.

Nostalgia

Go for a *michelada*—prepared with a homemade tamarind mixture—at cocktail hour on the patio overlooking the public library. 13 Belisario Domínguez.

Tarumba

A small menu from chef Jorge Gordillo—who comes from a neighboring village—is served at Hotel Sombra del Agua. fb.com/tarumba.mx; entrées \$6–\$24.

Tierra y Cielo

Locals consider this her elevated spin on the classics, such as *quesadilla de tinga*, in a chic dining room. tierraycielo.com.mx; entrées \$5–\$6.

Xut El Restaurante

Casual Chiapan dishes like *chile relleno* and *chicharrón de queso* are served with flair, as is a regional take on a tuna tartare. 17A Dr. Felipe Flores; entrées \$5–\$13.

AMATENANGO DEL VALLE

Taller y Galería Artesanal

Juana Gómez Ramírez and her team of artisans produce some of the best ceramics in the country. They are known for their depictions of jaguars, which still populate the jungles of Chiapas. 185A 16 de Septiembre.

PALENQUE

El Huachinango Feliz

Seafood is made into phenomenal ceviche and soup and served in an airy dining room. Avda. Merle Green; entrées \$6–\$8.

Quinta Chanabnal

Run by an Italian-German scholar of Mayan hieroglyphics, this hotel gets high marks for its warm service and excellent food. quintachanabnal.com; doubles from \$139.

HOW TO BOOK

This trip was planned by **Journey Mexico**, which has a network of expert local guides and can arrange all the logistics for a customized itinerary. journeymexico.com; five-day trips from \$2,000 per person. —P.G.

main cascade drops 393 feet. It's hard to wrap your head around the region's extreme microclimates: on the same day you might need a puffer jacket in the morning as you set out from the San Cristóbal highlands and end up sweating through a tank top in the afternoon as you hike through the waterfall mist in El Arcotete National Park. You'll also want to make pilgrimages to the spectacular archaeological sites of Toniná and Palenque.

Though I had fantasies of renting a car and crisscrossing the region on my own, I quickly realized there was too much ground to cover. Even if you speak Spanish and trust your navigational skills, you will want the political, cultural, and historic context a skilled guide can offer. Which is why I enlisted the tour operator Journey Mexico, both for the deep knowledge of their seasoned local guides and for their help with logistics. Here's my suggested itinerary, broken down into regions.

TUXTLA GUTIÉRREZ

You will likely connect through Mexico City by plane to Chiapas's state capital, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, but will probably want to stay in the region's de facto cultural capital, San Cristóbal de Las Casas (about an hour's drive away). Take an early flight so you can hit the awe-inspiring—if touristy—Sumidero Canyon en route to San



▲ From left: A suite at Hotel Bo, in San Cristóbal de Las Casas; the jungle-fringed swimming pool at Palenque's Quinta Chanabnal.

Cristóbal. Formed 35 million years ago by cracks in the earth's crust and erosion by the Grijalva River, Sumidero is a showstopper on a par with Yosemite's El Capitan. If you have the energy after your flight, you can even hire a boat for a two-hour ride from Chiapa de Corzo along the

Grijalva—the waters of which reach eerie depths of up to 860 feet—to the Chicoasen Dam and back. A welcome reprieve from the heat, the boat trip takes you within arm's length of waterfalls, spider monkeys, ocelots, and crocodiles sunning themselves along the riverbanks.

MEXICO THROUGH MY EYES

For years we have been discovering the greater Baja Peninsula. An incredible culinary journey starts with a taco tour of Todos Santos—including stops at Barracuda Cantina, Santo Chilote, and TikiSantos. Then make your way north to Magdalena Bay, where you will find the best seafood in Baja, then to Concepción Bay, where you should take the **El Burro Baja Tour** (fb.com/elburrobaja tours) and go diving for fresh clams.

—Josh Kremer and Pablo Carmona, cofounders of Paradero Todos Santos

COURTESY OF EL BURRO BAJA TOURS



▲ French-born Anne-Sophie Guerinaud is an artist-in-residence at the Omorika workshop in San Cristóbal.

Chiapa de Corzo, about 30 minutes east of Tuxtla, is an iconic Spanish colonial town that's also worth a quick lap. The colonnaded square centers on a 459-year-old fountain that's dedicated to a group of Indigenous resistance fighters who are said to have jumped to their deaths in Sumidero Canyon rather than surrender to the invading Spanish army.

SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS

The city, which was a Spanish stronghold against Mayan freedom fighters in 1528, is quickly nipping at Oaxaca's heels as Mexico's artisan capital. With a growing number of stylish boutique hotels and destination restaurants, the place has graduated from a backpacker haven to a destination for the creative arts. Its colonial-style buildings, with their wooden colonnades and red-tiled roofs, as well as its cobblestoned pedestrian streets, have also helped to draw its growing community of artistic expats (as well as its left-leaning politics). In Chiapas, there's nowhere else like it.

San Cristóbal is easily navigated on foot, and I ducked in and out of museums, stores, and cafés without much planning. At night, the streets, bars, and restaurants came to life with locals and tourists. It felt like a college town, only for grown-ups, with its mix of tradition, political charge, and sense of optimism.

On my second day, I met Margarita Cantu while she was replenishing some pieces of her clothing line at the beautiful boutique inside Hotel Bo. The 40-year-old Monterrey, Mexico-born artist and designer works with some 150 weavers from nearby communities for her women's clothing and home-goods line, Omorika. After starting her career in fashion in New York City, she arrived in San Cristóbal 12 years ago for a monthlong stint to learn traditional weaving techniques—and never left. She told me it was “the mix of conflicts



The 115-foot-tall Misol Ha waterfall, in Salto de Agua, near Palenque.



and traditions that make every day interesting” that kept her in town.

AMATENANGO DEL VALLE AND ZINACANTÁN

About an hour’s drive south of San Cristóbal I visited the small town of Amatenango del Valle. It’s where Juana “Juanita” Gómez Ramírez has her studio-showroom, Taller y Galería Artesanal. She is something of a celebrity ceramist, known for her intricately painted sculptures of jaguars and fish, and her operation is a big source of employment in the community.

▲ *Sea bass and shrimp ceviche at Tierra y Cielo, in San Cristóbal de Las Casas.*

And in Zinacantán the next day, I visited the home of Catalina Pérez Hernández, who weaves textiles using the traditional backstrap loom (appointments with her are offered exclusively through Journey Mexico). Her shop has an impressive selection of embroidered textiles from the area, and for 100 pesos (about \$5), she will invite you back for lunch in her kitchen, where her sister makes the most delicious corn tortillas I

have ever eaten. She serves them with bowls of black beans, salsa, and raw onions, and each one is covered with embroidered linen. As in most places in the region, tortillas are made in the traditional manner, a laborious process that involves drying the maize on the husk and then cooking it overnight in lime water.

TONINÁ AND PALENQUE

One of my favorite parts of this trip was the drive from San Cristóbal to Toniná en route to Palenque. As I was winding my way down from evergreen forests to sultry jungles, the pine trees competed with banana trees for position along the road, the temperature rose, and every once in a while I was left stunned by the dramatic views.

The truly spectacular Toniná is an archaeological site etched into a hillside. The stepped pyramid presides over the lush Ocosingo Valley; inside, the ceremonial core features a labyrinth used in religious rituals.

Palenque, meanwhile, is a magnificent Mayan city of the Late Classic Period (around A.D. 600–900) that was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1987. Its temples and palaces were abandoned after the ninth century. You’ll see the delicate craftsmanship that went into the mythological reliefs in the Temple of Inscriptions; the building ingenuity of the elaborate civic, religious, and residential complex; and the architectural innovation of the palace’s pointed vaults.

After you’ve walked the site for a couple of hours, head to the parking lot. You can hire a guide to take you deeper into the jungle, where smaller, lesser-known temples are hidden among the flora. Seeing the sophisticated relics of Mayan civilization emerge from these wild, impossibly verdant surroundings is enough to take your breath away. 🌎



G U A D A L A J A R A

Creative Spirit

On a weekend jaunt to Jalisco's state capital, **ADAM ERACE** encounters vibrant food and design scenes propelled by an ambitious new guard putting modern spins on regional staples.

THERE'S A FOREST IN Guadalajara where the mud tastes like white chocolate and matcha. Crumbled pistachios climb over the mire like moss, making a bed for fuzzy sprouts of spearmint and peppermint and ripe blueberries as fat and glossy as sapphires. Red-capped meringue mushrooms shade the miniature woodland like beach umbrellas. They taste like pine.

"El Bosque" and the other bewitching desserts from Fernanda Covarrubias and Jesús Escalera, the pastry chefs at La Postrería, are among the many reasons to go to Guadalajara. The city is Mexico's second-largest in population and in business traffic, thanks to the vital tech industry that has turned it into the nation's answer to Silicon Valley. It's also the capital of Jalisco, the state famous for mariachi and tequila and the coastal resorts of Puerto Vallarta.

Despite all those distinctions, Guadalajara hasn't gotten its star turn with American visitors yet. My wife

and I wound up there, checking in to the chic Casa Habita in the leafy Lafayette neighborhood, because of a canceled flight.

"Can you believe you would have missed this?" asked my guide, Germán Salas, the next day as we walked through the neighboring city of Tlaquepaque, 15 minutes from downtown Guadalajara. Sweeping his

arm, he gestured to the breezy rooftop terrace of 1910 Cocina de México, then to the other colorful restaurants and shops along cobblestoned Calle Independencia, a pedestrian-only arts haven.

The sense that some benevolent conspiracy between the universe and a low-cost Mexican airline had rerouted us to Guadalajara had me pinching myself on more than one occasion. Like when I snatched the last lime croissant at Antonia Panadería, an improbable truce-broker between tropical humidity and laminated pastry. Or when I had the extravagantly spired Guadalajara Cathedral, the city's most iconic landmark, nearly all to myself.



Clockwise from top left: One of the colorful streets in Tlaquepaque, a suburb of Guadalajara; the mil hojas pastry at Alcalde, a restaurant in Guadalajara's Vallarta Norte neighborhood; the lobby at Casa Habita; the bandstand at Plaza de Armas; a mezcal Paloma at Casa Habita; the pastry case at La Postrería, one of the city's most inventive bakeries.

ILLUSTRATION BY ELENA BOILS



◀ Clockwise from left: A seating area inside La Postrería café; salsas at Birriería Las 9 Esquinas restaurant; leather pouches at the flagship boutique of designer David Luna.



Or while I was watching *abuelas* in white smocks and chef hats flit like finches around the tiled open kitchen at Birriería Las 9 Esquinas, where the ancestral specialty is *birra de chivo*—succulent braised young goat served in crocks of smoky consommé. Delirious, I stumbled out of that place

and onto a *plazita* where a man in a cream-colored cowboy hat was flexing his marbled jade accordion.

But back to Salas, who shared his story over 1910's deceptively meaty hibiscus tacos. He's Costa Rican, but married a Tapatío (a Guadalajara native) and followed her here.

Formerly a journalist moonlighting as a tour guide, he started his Tlaquepaque art walk in 2018, and it has become so popular he's now more of a tour guide who moonlights as a journalist. The man spoke in rapt metaphors: "Guadalajara is a pearl. Tlaquepaque is a fantasy."

I found the latter statement to be especially true. The city is a member of Mexico's Pueblos Mágicos, a national designation given to towns considered to have high cultural importance, as a way to help fund preservation efforts. The gorgeous old buildings of its Colonia Centro are inhabited by tamarind-taffy makers like Nuestros Dulces, craft merchants like Mona's, and artists like Sergio Bustamante, whose surreal humanoid sculptures' inverted-triangle heads represent the contours of Mexico. When Salas noticed my wife's tooled-leather handbag—something she bought half a decade ago in Todos Santos—he arranged for her to meet its designer, David Luna, whose flagship shop is coincidentally on nearby Calle Independencia.

Many people making interesting things happen in the city are locals who lived abroad and then came back. "I was eighteen when I left because there wasn't anything I wanted to learn from what was going on here," said Francisco Ruano, the chef behind Alcalde, widely regarded to be Guadalajara's best restaurant. "I was offered a really good position in Spain,

but I felt like I had to come back and do something of my own."

Ruano, who opened Alcalde in the Vallarta Norte neighborhood in 2013, calls his style *cocina franca* and uses simplicity and sincerity as his guiding principles. At dinner, that translated to dishes like *burrata* wreathed in purslane and peppermint leaves and a round, featherweight tamale in green-chile salsa, complemented by easygoing service and Baja reds.

Like Ruano, La Postrería's Covarrubias left Guadalajara to cook in Spain, where she met Escalera, who's from Utrera, near Seville. "We always had this dream to open a restaurant with just plated, Michelin-style desserts," she says. "Just go straight to the sweet place."

Housed in the old French restaurant where Covarrubias waited tables during college, their sweet place is a polished little laboratory with a rooftop garden, a demonstration classroom, and a coffee bar. Covarrubias, Escalera, and six pastry chefs work in tandem in the open kitchen, piping meringue kisses onto individual passion-fruit pies, molding mandarin cheesecakes into handheld *trompe l'oeil* oranges, and fussing over more than a dozen other complex desserts for either dine-in service or a takeout pastry case.

Covarrubias and Escalera started their venture in 2013, when they were just 24 and 26, respectively. They considered opening in Spain, but the pull to give something back to the city was greater. "In our circle of Mexican chefs, you always want to go work in another country because it feels like you made it," she said. "But if no one comes back, then nothing changes." ☯

A Weekend in Guadalajara

WHERE TO STAY

Casa Habita (casahabita.com; doubles from \$175) is a splurge by Guadalajara standards (especially for such snug rooms), but those extra pesos pay for an address in the picturesque Colonia Americana neighborhood and a relaxing little rooftop pool.

WHERE TO EAT

An ideal eating day in Guadalajara starts with choosing your favorites from the woven baskets of pastries at **Antonia Panadería** ([instagram.com/antonia_panaderia](https://www.instagram.com/antonia_panaderia)). Get acquainted with braised goat, one of Jalisco's regional specialties, during lunch at **Birriería Las 9 Esquinas** (las9esquinas.com; entrées \$4–\$6), situated on the prettiest *plazita* in the Centro Histórico. Don't miss **Alcalde** (alcalde.com.mx; entrées \$18–\$21) for chef Francisco Ruano's *cocina franca* or **La Postrería** (lapostreriagdl.com) for Fernanda Covarrubias and Jesús Escalera's fanciful desserts.

WHAT TO DO

Several of Guadalajara's cultural institutions, such as the Cathedral, Regional Museum, and Degollado Theater, are located around Plaza de Armas in the Centro Histórico. Spend an afternoon exploring one of the city's most enchanting suburbs on Germán Salas's walking tour "**Fall in Love with Tlaquepaque**" ([airbnb.com/experiences/596557](https://www.airbnb.com/experiences/596557)). Stops include **1910 Cocina de México** ([fb.com/1910cocinademexico](https://www.facebook.com/1910cocinademexico); entrées \$9–\$17), sweet shop **Nuestros Dulces** (nuestrosdulces.com), clothing-and-crafts shop **Mona's** (monasartesanias.com), **Orígenes David Luna** ([fb.com/origenesdavidluna](https://www.facebook.com/origenesdavidluna)), the extraordinary gallery **Sergio Bustamante** (coleccionsergio.com), and many others. Bookings are open for June 2022 and beyond. —A.E.



MEXICO THROUGH MY EYES

A vibrant destination with endless things to discover, Oaxaca is one of my favorite cities in the world. It's only a one-hour flight from Mexico City, my hometown. There is a small shop called **Xaquixe** (left; xaquixe.mx), where you can buy beautiful blown-glass objects. But I'm a proud *chilango*, and I'm always happy to be back in CDMX: **Fonda Margarita** ([fb.com/fondamargarita](https://www.facebook.com/fondamargarita); entrées \$3–\$4) offers delicious casual breakfasts. After a day exploring the city, stop by my bar, **Ticuchi** (ticuchi.mx), for a cocktail.

— **Enrique Olvera**, founder and co-owner of the restaurants *Pujol*, *Cosme*, and *Damian*, among others.

GLASS: COURTESY OF XAQUIXE GLASS STUDIO



T L A X C A L A

The Road Less Traveled

On a drive through Mexico's diminutive central state,

MICHAEL SNYDER finds a culinary and cultural bounty.

LARGELY OVERLOOKED BY both foreign and domestic visitors, Tlaxcala offers insights into Mexico's complex history that you won't find anywhere else. Located in the country's central plateau, or Altiplano, it's still mostly associated with one turbulent chapter: about 500 years ago, it was a highly organized city-state that allied with the Spanish in their attack on Tenochtitlán, center of the Aztec empire and the site of modern-day Mexico City.

Today, Tlaxcala's fertile valleys are studded with pre-Hispanic ruins, Baroque churches, rural communities that continue to use ancient agricultural techniques, and haciendas once dedicated to the production of pulque, the fermented agave drink.

This past September, I spent four days driving through most of the state, but any stretch of the trip can be isolated into a weekend break from Mexico City, which is about two hours away by car. You can also use any of the hotels as a base from which to make day trips to the other destinations.

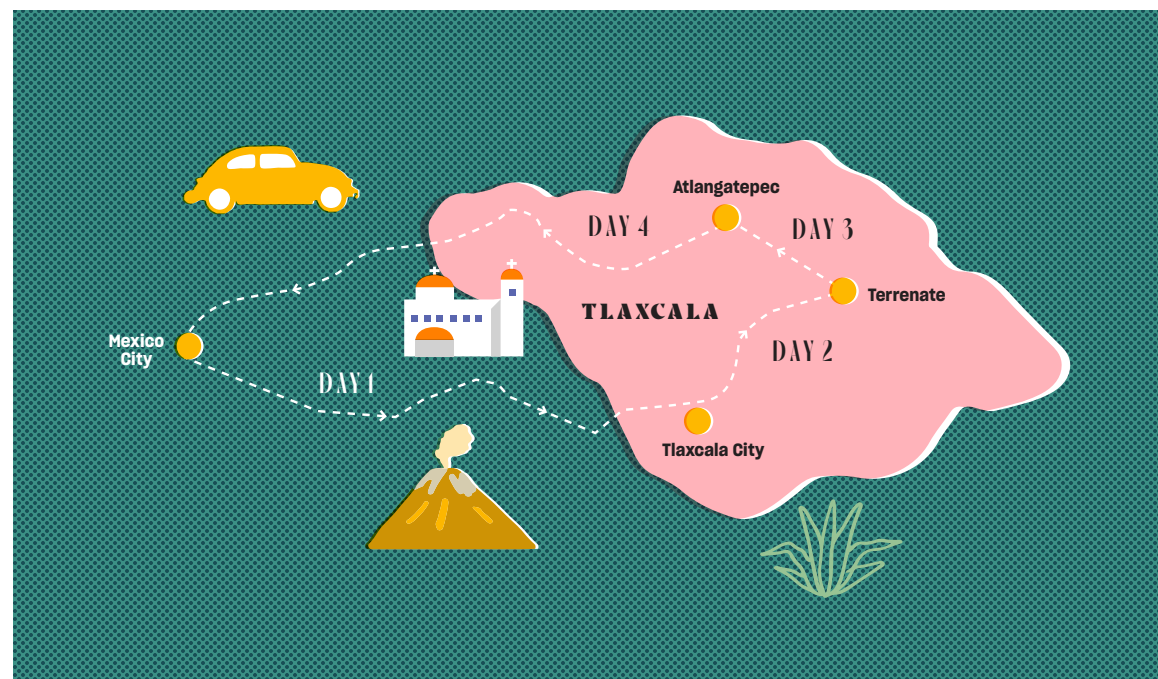


ILLUSTRATION BY ELENA BOILS

A view of the Tlaxcala countryside from Hacienda Tenexac, a bed-and-breakfast in Terrenate.



From left: Near the village of Ixtenco, members of the Baltazar family pick pumpkin flowers and corn; the harvested ingredients are used to make a traditional soup.

DAY 1: TLAXCALA CITY

Pick up a car in Mexico City and drive out over the foothills of Popocatepetl—one of the two great volcanoes in the capital's southeastern corner. Head toward Tlaxcala City, stopping en route to see the spectacular murals at Cacaxtla, an archaeological site with 1,000-year-old ruins.

Before delving into Tlaxcala's historic center, dotted with buildings from the 16th to 19th centuries, stop for breakfast at the Modernist **Mercado Emilio Sánchez Piedras** (entrance on Avda. Alonso Escalona). Taste quesadillas sold from baskets in the second-to-last aisle and homemade moles and adobos scooped from big, enameled pots a few paces away.

In the plaza behind the 18th-century **Parroquia de San José** (4 Calle 1 de Mayo), visit **El Compa** food cart for *tacos de canasta*, or “basket tacos,” a specialty of the nearby village of San Vicente Xiloxochitla. Then try the **Cacao Frank** food cart, where Doña Francisca Romero serves delicious *agua de barranca*, a foam-topped drink of toasted and ground corn, cacao, fava beans, cinnamon, and anise.

Once refreshed, walk over to the UNESCO-listed **Catedral de Nuestra Señora de la Asunción** (entrance via Plaza Xochitencatl) to see its majestic Baroque altarpieces and carved wooden ceiling in the Spanish Mudejar style, which combines elements of Gothic and Islamic architectures. Farther



uphill, the **Basilica of Ocotián** (*Privada del Norte*), begun in 1670, is a high point of the Tlaxcalteca Baroque style.

At the unassuming cantina **Piensa en Mi** (piensaenmimx.com), owners

Rodrigo Cruz Cruz and Sharim Cortés Holten serve artisanal beer and a rotating selection of snacks, like pitch-perfect birria and *chamorro* (braised pork shank). End the day at **Molino de los Reyes** (molinodelosreyes.com;



doubles from \$310), a charming eight-room hotel in an 18th-century wheat mill just outside of town.

DAY 2: TLAXCALA CITY TO TERRENATE

After beginning the day with simple, satisfying artisanal breads from Molino's wood-burning oven, drive east to Contla, a village known for textiles that has been absorbed into the city's sprawl.

Visit the workshop of fourth-generation weaver **Ignacio Netzahualcoyotl** (netzahualcoyotl.org). He and a small team of dyers and weavers craft contemporary rugs, shawls, and elaborate serapes using pedal looms. (Though usually associated with the northern city of Saltillo, serape weaving likely originated in Tlaxcala.)

From Contla, drive southeast to Huamantla. The town's central plaza is an ideal spot to grab a quick snack of ice cream and *mueganos*, the wheat-and-cane-sugar fritters.

Continue south to Ixtenco, a traditional Otomí community, for lunch in the humble kitchen of the Baltazar family, whose cooking has its roots in the milpa, a pre-Hispanic farming system built around the symbiotic relationship between corn, squash, and beans. (A visit can be prearranged with the help of culinary historian Irad Santacruz via direct message on Instagram at [@irad_santacruz](https://www.instagram.com/irad_santacruz).)

After lunch, drive north to the 17th-century **Hacienda Tenexac** (haciendatenexac.com; doubles from



◀ The stables of the 17th-century estate that is now Hacienda Tenexac.

▼ From left: Mushrooms with mole at the family-run restaurant Xoletongo, in Calpulupán; Francisco Molina, the chef at Evoka, a restaurant in Apizaco.

\$135), in Terrenate, which is still inhabited by descendants of the family that bought the property in the late 1800s. Spend a peaceful night in one of four rustic cabins and drink in the pastoral calm of a distant century.

DAY 3: TERRENATE TO ATLANGATEPEC

Following a nourishing breakfast prepared by Tenexac's charismatic steward, Paz Yano Bretón, join

her for a tour of the residential quarters, which are crowded with eclectic furnishings and keepsakes accumulated over the past 200 years. Spend the rest of the morning relaxing on the grass or strolling the hacienda's sprawling, wildflower-dusted grounds before heading west to the industrial city of Apizaco for lunch at **Evoka** (evoka.com.mx; *entrées* \$10–\$22). Chef Francisco Molina serves impeccable renditions of regional specialties—think heirloom-corn tostadas with whipped pulque butter or a delicate bean tamale nestled in a rich, oat-based mole—in an elegant, minimalist room endearingly out of sync with the spare concrete streetscape outside.

A short drive north takes you into open fields abutting the highlands of the Sierra Madre Oriental that separates the Altiplano from the





A guest room at JapōNeza Retreat with views of the Atlangatepec lagoon and La Malinche volcano.

Gulf of Mexico. A winding dirt road leads to the two-year-old **JapōNeza Retreat** ([fb.com/japoneza retreat](https://fb.com/japoneza-retreat); doubles from \$280), whose Japanese-influenced guest rooms open onto spectacular views of the Atlangatepec lagoon and the cone of La Malinche, a dormant volcano named for the guide and consort of Hernán Cortés, the Spanish military commander.

DAY 4: ATLANGATEPEC TO MEXICO CITY

Wake at dawn for a mild, 40-minute hike to the top of a hill behind the retreat. As the sun rises, marvel at the grandeur of Popocatepetl and its snowcapped twin, the dormant Iztaccíhuatl. After checking out, your next stop should be the town of Tlaxco for a breakfast of *enpipianadas* (tortillas stuffed with cheese and bathed in a pale-green pumpkin-seed sauce) at **La Casona de Don Agustín** (fb.com/lacsonadedonagustin; entrées \$6–\$18), which overlooks the tree-lined plaza.

From Tlaxco, head west through the Llanos de Apan, an agricultural region split between Tlaxcala and the neighboring state of Hidalgo that was once the heart of a lucrative pulque industry. If you're curious to get a more in-depth understanding of the beverage, visit **Hacienda Xochuca** (fb.com/haciendaxochuca; by appointment), one of the few in the region that still produce it.

Stop for lunch at **Xoletongo** (fb.com/xoletongotl; entrées \$4–\$20), a spartan, 60-seat dining room run by the family of chef Marcos Morales Muñoz. Its location on the edge of a dusty highway in the town of Calpulupan belies Morales's exquisite vegetable-forward tasting menu. On any given day, a feast might include crisp, ivory petals of delicate agave hearts or



seared trumpet mushrooms with a subtly warming mole made from *chicatanas* (flying ants).

Mexico City is only 90 minutes away by car—whether you head there or back toward the mountains for a few more days of quiet is up to you. 🌐

▲ Tlaxcala City, the state's capital, is home to a UNESCO-listed Franciscan convent and cathedral from the 16th century.



KATHERINE BURTON/COURTESY OF HABITAS BACALAR. OPPOSITE: LOESKIBOOM/ISTOCKPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES

B A C A L A R



▲
A waterfront guest room at Habitas Bacalar.

A Clear Path

Can three new boutique hotels serve as templates for turning the town of Bacalar—and its iconic lake—into Mexico’s most responsible tourism destination? **NILI BLANK** looks at how the sustainable vision is taking shape.

◀
Los Rápidos, a section of Lake Bacalar favored by swimmers.

STANDING ON a dock overlooking Lake Bacalar—nicknamed the Lagoon of Seven Colors—I finally understood why other travelers had told me this was the most beautiful place in Mexico. As I slipped into the crystalline fresh water, I noticed how it appeared to change from dark blue to lavender, depending on the depth of its limestone floor and the position of the sun.

Located in the state of Quintana Roo, just north of the Belize border, Bacalar hasn’t yet drawn the attention (or overdevelopment) of popular destinations farther north in the state, such as Cancún, Playa del Carmen, or Tulum. But interest

in the area is rising, thanks to the town’s laid-back vibe—and the extraordinary colors of the 26-mile-long lagoon.

And while many in this community of about 40,000 people see the benefits of inviting more visitors, they’re also fiercely protective of Bacalar’s natural wonders. In addition to the lake, these include seven cenotes, the water-filled sinkholes for which the Yucatán is famous, and stromatolites, living fossils thought to be among the first forms of life on earth. Scientists say maintaining the lagoon’s ecological balance is crucial to the organisms’ continued existence.

Clockwise from left: A swimming pool at the hotel Casa Hormiga; rice with vegetables and avocado at La Playita, a beach club and restaurant on Lake Bacalar; the lounge area at Casa Hormiga.



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: COURTESY OF CASA HORMIGA (2); COURTESY OF LA PLAYITA

Among those working to navigate these competing priorities are the eco-conscious hoteliers behind three new boutique properties. Mindful of the toll mass-market success has taken on other parts of Mexico, these hospitality pros are sourcing materials as locally as possible, employing staff from the region, and promoting soft-adventure activities that allow sustainability-minded travelers to connect with nature while minimizing their impact. This past September, I ventured to Bacalar from Mexico City to preview what's in store.

THE INTIMATE OASIS

Stepping through the carved wooden doors of **Casa Hormiga** felt like stumbling into a temple garden. Operated by Sofia Lynch and José María Padilla, an Argentine-Mexican couple who moved to the area in 2009, the 18-room hotel hides a clutch of thatched-roof concrete

buildings and two swimming pools among enormous palms and other endemic plants, like lush birds of paradise. At Casa Ritual, the hotel's on-site spa, therapies often incorporate regional customs and medicinal practices. My 2½-hour treatment began with a ceremonial cacao drink—a common tradition in the Yucatán—and ended with a rejuvenating herbal soak in water infused with basil, rosemary, lemongrass, and slices of grapefruit. The next day I bagged a spot at La Playita, a club on the lagoon that partners with Casa Hormiga. After my swim, the shaded restaurant patio was an ideal place to enjoy a plate of fish tacos and take in the spectacular view. casahormiga.com; doubles from \$396.

THE MODERN RETREAT

On arrival at **Habitas Bacalar**, I was ushered into the open-air reception area for a short intention-setting

meditation session. From there I followed a long gravel path lined with native gumbo-limbo trees to find the hotel's 35 A-frame cabins. While some face the lagoon and others the jungle, all of the accommodations have been built using the growing brand's signature low-impact modular construction to avoid any major modifications to the land. Siete, the on-site restaurant, features a mostly vegetarian menu with seasonal ingredients sourced from vendors in the Yucatán, while the wellness center specializes in Mayan-influenced treatments. It can also arrange activities including paddleboard yoga and aerial cross-training. ourhabitas.com; doubles from \$680.

THE HIGH-DESIGN HAVEN

Mexican starchitect Frida Escobedo has consistently garnered praise for using natural materials to create striking architectural projects, and her latest endeavor—the 22-room **Boca de Agua**, slated to open in October 2022—is already creating a buzz. Every detail of the hotel's design, including sapodilla wood certified by the Forest Stewardship Council and limestone sourced from only 31 miles away, has been chosen for its minimal environmental impact. And, as Mexico City-based cofounder Rodrigo Juárez told me, the hotel is also partnering with global nonprofit Saira Hospitality to offer professional hospitality training to the surrounding community to provide long-term, sustainable work opportunities. bocadeagua.com; rates not available at press time. 🌐