

# Mexico: Getting Started

**go** with the moment



# On the Road



## **JOHN NOBLE** *Coordinating Author*

The Copper Canyon (p297) is everything it's claimed to be for majesty and grandeur. Here I was doing



**KATE ARMSTRONG** In the artistic city of Guanajuato, I was lucky enough to meet two extraordinary artists, Felipe and Mika (p554). I was even luckier to meet one of their magnificent creations, a *mojiganga* (giant puppet) of Don Quixote. Don Quixote receives



**RAY BARTLETT** San Javier (p259) might be my favorite of Baja's missions. It's accessible, but still remote enough that you need to commit to going there on a long dirt road that can be impassable due to bad weather. But the ride, snaking through jagged mountains and offering indescribable views, is reward in itself. The mission stands as it did for centuries. The twisted bark of the ancient olive trees



**GREG BENCHWICK** One of the best parts of my job is discovering places that weren't included in the last edition of the book. This trip, chance led me to Xcacel-Xcacelito (p801), a turtle-nesting beach on the Quintana Roo coast. Aside from the top-notch volunteer program run here, the beach also has great snorkeling and a nearby cenote (a limestone sinkhole filled with rainwater).



**NATE CAVALIERI** Even though the ruins at Monte Alban are Oaxaca's archeological headliner, the ruins at Mitla (p670), dignified and spectacular despite having a Spanish colonial church and bustling Zapotec town built on top of them, were my favorite. Exhausted after wandering around agape all day, we lodged in the first hotel we could find. And got bedbugs. That particular hotel does not appear in the following guide.



**GREGOR CLARK** Pacific Mexico is pelican paradise. I spent countless mornings watching them fly in formation and dive for fish with wild abandon. In San Blas (p389), I even got to share a hotel with one – the owners rescued this injured baby 15 years ago and now he runs the place!



**JOHN HECHT** This guy obviously had too much to drink. Further ahead on a Xochimilco boat ride I saw an odd wood sculpture of a legendary weeping ghost woman. Later the *trajinera* (gondola) glided to an island with creepy dolls nailed to trees. That's the Mexico City (p95) I love, full of quirky surprises.



**BETH KOHN** There's a wooden suspension bridge that crosses over Las Nubes (p766), and it undulates, especially when your friends jump up and down on it like demented lunatics. On one side are dramatic views of the cascades, and beneath you are tempestuous rapids that would delight in swallowing you up.



**EMILY MATCHAR** Sampling Guadalajara's famous *torta ahogada* (p77; literally 'drowned sandwich'), a blisteringly spicy chili-soaked pork sandwich sold by street vendors across the city. Only masochists (and Emily) ask for it '*bien ahogada*'—totally immersed in spicy sauce. *Picante* (spicy)!

**FREDA MOON** One of the great joys of exploring the high country just outside of Mexico City (p183) is eating fresh-from-the-river trout that has been prepared in a traditional Mexican style. Here, *la trucha fresca* is stuffed with Oaxacan cheese, tomatoes and chilies.



**ELLE THALHEIMER** While high up on top of a radiant dune, diamond-white gypsum formations sparkled and rolled around me in the rare desert environment near Cuatro Ciénegas (p342). The energy of the place was so vibrant that I had to do the most dynamic yoga pose that the conditions allowed.

# Destination Mexico

The highlight of your Mexico trip might be climbing a 1300-year-old Maya pyramid as howler monkeys growl in the sweaty emerald jungle around you; or dining on salmon enchiladas and chrysanthemum salad at a Mexico City fusion restaurant; or dancing through the night at a high-energy Guadalajara nightclub; or kayaking at dawn past a colony of Baja California sea lions. Every visitor goes home with their own unforgettable images. Such a large country, straddling temperate and tropical zones, stretching 5km into the sky and along 10,000km of coastline, with a city of 21 million people at its center and countless tiny pueblos everywhere, can't fail to provide a huge variety of options for human adventure.

Mexico's multibillion-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 small step off the prepackaged path. Even as megabuck developments change city skylines and consume prime slices of coast, the opportunities for getting out to the wild places and local communities are developing too. Locally based tourism outfits, including genuine ecotourism operators – the kind that actually help conserve local environments – are waiting to take you hiking in the Oaxaca cloud forests, whale-watching off the Pacific coast or volcano-climbing in the central highlands.

Mexico's cities still juxtapose manicured poodles and begging grandmothers, but are increasingly sophisticated places with slick restaurants and coffee houses, ever-better entertainment offerings, and parks and pedestrian areas where you can escape the grinding traffic. A hip, artsy scene reveling in Mexico's thriving music and art currents has emerged in most cities. This creative country is enjoying a resurgence of international appetite for its art, movies, design, music and cuisine. Mexico's hotels and inns have jumped aboard the ship of style too: many are charming, tasteful and appealing places combining contemporary and traditional design, with that bold use of color in which Mexico has long specialized.

Creativity has burgeoned since the year 2000, when Mexico voted Vicente Fox of the PAN (National Action Party) into the presidency, finally throwing off eight decades of 'one-party democracy' under the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party). Though neither Fox (2000–06) nor his successor, Felipe Calderón, have found any easy panaceas for the deep economic inequalities between one Mexican and another, or between Mexico and the US, Mexicans now have a far greater confidence that their voices can be heard.

With its economy strung to the coat-tails of the US, Mexico felt the chill wind of recession in 2009; though production, and trade with the US, bounced back in 2010. But the Calderón years will be remembered most of all for the state's war on Mexico's brutal, increasingly powerful drug gangs. Calderón deployed 45,000 troops and federal police around the country to combat the mobs, bringing an explosion in intergang warfare, which accounted for most of the 14,000 drug-related killings between 2007 and 2009. Whether the strategy will succeed remains to be seen, but most Mexicans supported it, despite the violence and its economic effects. These included a dip in tourism, although tourists have rarely been affected.

## FAST FACTS

Population:	109 million
Annual population growth:	1.13%
Area:	1.9 million sq km
GDP per person:	US\$10,200
US share of Mexican exports:	85%
Adult literacy:	91%
Remittances to Mexico by Mexicans living in the US:	US\$21 billion (2009)
Number of languages spoken:	50

# 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.

Mexico has had some bad press in recent times over drug-gang killings, chiefly in towns near the US border. While there's no denying the reality of this violence, tourists have not been its targets and it mostly happens well away from places most travelers are likely to visit. You can check your foreign ministry's Mexico travel information (p872) for any current warnings.

## 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

See Climate Charts (p872), Festivals & Events (p876) and Holidays (p877) for information to help you decide when to go.

### DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- an adventurous palate (p76)
- all the necessary paperwork if you're driving (p889)
- any necessary immunizations or medications (p900)
- adequate insurance (p877)
- checking your foreign ministry's Mexico travel information (p872)
- 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

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.

## 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 well in most parts of the country on the equivalent of 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\$12 to US\$20), admission fees, transportation, snacks, drinks and incidentals. Budget travelers staying in hostels can easily cover the cost of accommodations and two restaurant meals a day with US\$40. Add in other costs and you'll probably spend US\$50 to US\$70.

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, Mexico has plenty of luxurious hotels and resorts that charge over US\$150 for a room, and restaurants where you can pay US\$40 or more 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 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 has grown 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 local economies, cultures and ecosystems.

We asked Ron Mader, creator of the influential ecotourism website **Planeta.com** ([www.planeta.com](http://www.planeta.com)) and a long-time Mexico resident, how he characterizes responsible tourism. His answer: 'It's treating others the way they wish to be treated. We are simply entering a place that is someone else's home. A growing number of travelers want their journeys to be less invasive and more beneficial to the local community. They want to better understand the culture of the places they visit. Travelers and locals are seeking ways of building constituencies with the shared goal of making tourism more responsible.'

## 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

### 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\$40-110

See also the Lonely  
Planet Index on the Quick  
Reference page inside the  
front cover.

# TOP 10



## GREEN MEXICO

These ecotourism and community tourism programs and sites will be thrilled to be on your itinerary. See our GreenDex (p950) for businesses and projects that are putting sustainability first in Mexico.

### FIESTAS

- 1 Pueblos Mancomunados (p674)
- 2 Reserva Mariposa Monarca (p501)
- 3 Las Guacamayas (p765)
- 4 Reserva de la Biosfera Sierra Gorda (boxed text, p584)
- 5 Parque Nacional Sierra San Pedro Mártir (p249)
- 6 Turtle conservation centers: El Tortugario (p424); Grupo Ecologista Vida Milenaria (p605); Campamento Tortuguero (p774); Isla Mujeres Tortugranja (p795)
- 7 Servicios Ecoturísticos La Ventanilla (p697)
- 8 CEDO (p280)
- 9 EcoGuías La Mancha (p606)
- 10 Tufted Jay Preserve (p381)

If you build one or more of these events into your trip, you'll really get a special taste of Mexico. See p876 for further information.

### MOVIES

- 1 Día de Todos los Santos and Día de Muertos, November 1 and 2, nationwide (box, p60), but especially around Pátzcuaro (p506)
- 2 Carnaval, February/March, best in Veracruz (p619), Mazatlán (p381), La Paz (p263)
- 3 Semana Santa, March/April, best in San Miguel de Allende (p569), Pátzcuaro (p506)
- 4 Guelagueta, late July, Oaxaca (boxed text, p654)
- 5 La Morisma, late August, Zacatecas (p525)
- 6 Festival Internacional Cervantino, October, Guanajuato (p554)
- 7 Fiestas de Octubre, October, Guadalajara (p470)
- 8 Día de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, December 12, Mexico City (p136)
- 9 Vernal and autumnal equinoxes, late March and September, Chichén Itzá (p845)
- 10 Las Jornadas Villistas, July 20, Hidalgo del Parral (p329)

Prepare your imagination for Mexico with some of these Mexican and non-Mexican movies set in the country – and see p70 for more on Mexican cinema.

- 1 *Amores perros* (Love's a Bitch) – directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu (2000)
- 2 *Y tu mamá también* (And Your Mother Too) – directed by Alfonso Cuarón (2002)
- 3 *Rudo y cursi* – directed by Carlos Cuarón (2008)
- 4 *El crimen del Padre Amaro* (The Crime of Father Amaro) – directed by Carlos Carrera (2002)
- 5 *Frida* – directed by Julie Taymor (2002)
- 6 *Traffic* – directed by Steven Soderbergh (2000)
- 7 *El violín* (The Violin) – directed by Francisco Vargas (2007)
- 8 *Norteados* (Northless) – directed by Rigoberto Pérezcano (2009)
- 9 *Los olvidados* (The Forgotten Ones) – directed by Luis Buñuel (1950)
- 10 *Luz silenciosa* (Silent Light) – directed by Carlos Reygadas (2007)

with avowedly sustainable practices. Instead of ripping up the terrain and scaring every living creature on a 4WD convoy, take a birding or kayaking trip with a guide who wants to show you nature without disturbing it.

Our GreenDex (p950) 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, and 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, p888. 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 (bike culture is on the rise in Mexico), 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. Ron Mader (see p23) says his best piece of advice for travelers who care about the Mexican environment is 'Think smart, travel slow.'

See Accommodations (p866) and Getting Around (p891) 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 paying 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 unpredictable, unmediated Mexican life if you get away from prepackaged 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 a great way of interacting. Through this book we try to highlight volunteer opportunities, and you'll find an overview of possibilities on p884.

**For More Information**

**Eco Travelling** ([www.ecotravelling.co.uk](http://www.ecotravelling.co.uk)) Information and tips on ways of moving with a minimal footprint.

**International Ecotourism Society** ([www.ecotourism.org](http://www.ecotourism.org)) Promotes responsible travel to natural areas and has listings of sustainable-tourism outfits in Mexico.

**Mexican Adventure and Ecotourism Association** ([www.mexicosagaz.org](http://www.mexicosagaz.org)) Nearly 60 active member organizations and companies around the country.

**Mexiconservación** ([www.mexiconservacion.org](http://www.mexiconservacion.org)) Has an online Green Guide to the Mexican Caribbean.

**Planeta.com** ([www.planeta.com](http://www.planeta.com)) Multifarious ecotravel and sustainable tourism resource, with a strong Mexico emphasis.

**responsibletravel.com** ([www.responsibletravel.com](http://www.responsibletravel.com)) Promotes tourism for the benefit of local people and the environment as well as for tourists, and lists responsible holidays in Mexico.

**Transitions Abroad.com** ([www.transitionsabroad.com](http://www.transitionsabroad.com)) Magazine and great web resource for cultural-immersion travel, responsible travel, and working, studying and living in other countries, conceived as an 'antidote to tourism.'

**TRAVEL LITERATURE**

**God's Middle Finger** Richard Grant risks his life to find out what's really going on in the Sierra Madre Occidental. Great stuff – but don't let it spook you! (Published in the UK as *Bandit Roads*.)

**In the Sierra Madre** Jeff Biggers spends a year living with the Rarámuri of the Copper Canyon. An informative and touching book.

**Tequila Oil** Hugh Thomson takes a tequila-inspired drive through 1970s small-town Mexico to sell his car in Central America – and returns 30 years later to find out more about the places he passed through.

**Sliced Iguana** Isabella Tree takes peyote with the Huichol and meets the matriarchs of Juchitán in this warm account of Mexico and its indigenous cultures.

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

**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.

**Tarahumara – Where Night is the Day of the Moon** Bernard Fontana's classic 1970s account of Rarámuri life, with beautiful photos by John Schaefer.

**INTERNET RESOURCES**

**About.com: Mexico Travel** (<http://gomexico.about.com>) Beginners' travel planner.

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

**Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) Succinct summaries on travel in Mexico; the popular Thorn Tree forum and other community stuff; travel news; and great links to travel services.

**Mexconnect** ([www.mexconnect.com](http://www.mexconnect.com)) Goldmine of articles, forums and information on everything under the Mexican sun.

**Mexperience** ([www.mexperience.com](http://www.mexperience.com)) Wide-ranging practical guide to Mexican travel.

**Planeta.com** ([www.planeta.com](http://www.planeta.com)) Great articles and listings for anyone interested in Mexican travel or the Mexican environment.

**Solutionsabroad.com** ([www.solutionsabroad.com](http://www.solutionsabroad.com)) Mainly geared toward expats in Mexico, but it has a lot of useful travel information, entertainment and culture listings and much more.

See the Language chapter (p909) for some basic Spanish words and phrases.

# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### BAJA ROAD TRIP

One to Four Weeks/Tijuana to Todos Santos

The Transpeninsular Hwy from the Mexico-US border to Los Cabos is a classic Mexican road trip. Get a feel for the famous border buzz of **Tijuana** (p237), then savor the surf and wines of **Ensenada** (p243) before moving further south to watch the whales on **Laguna Ojo de Liebre** (p252). Cross the Vizcaíno desert to the leafy oasis of **San Ignacio** (p253), and check out the ancient rock art of the **Sierra de San Francisco** (p253). Follow this by diving or kayaking in the Sea of Cortez off **Mulegé** (p255) or **Loreto** (p257). Further south, cosmopolitan **La Paz** (p260) provides access to brilliant beaches and the superb marine life of **La Ventana** (p265). Try snorkeling or diving the coral reef off uncrowded **Cabo Pulmo** (p265) before landing at the foot of the peninsula and sampling the tranquil **San José del Cabo** (p266) and the party scene of **Cabo San Lucas** (p269). Slip away to artsy **Todos Santos** (p272) for a change of pace and 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 in a week; to savor it, find a month.

## LANDS OF THE MAYA

### Three Weeks/Cancún to Isla Cozumel

From the prepackaged attractions of **Cancún** (p784) slip over to beach-fringed **Isla Mujeres** (p792) for some fine snorkeling or diving. Then head up to **Isla Holbox** (p796), where you can lie back in a hammock or snorkel with whale sharks. Moving west, stop at the relaxed colonial town of **Valladolid** (p849) en route to the world-renowned Maya and Toltec pyramids of **Chichén Itzá** (p845). Next stop: **Mérida** (p824), with colonial architecture, classy museums, fine food and great shopping. Mérida makes a good base for trips to magnificent **Uxmal** (p834) and other Maya sites along the **Ruta Puuc** (p839). Move to the Gulf coast to chill out and watch flamingos at the sleepy fishing village of **Celestún** (p842). Continue to historic **Campeche** (p854), and then head southwest to the state of Chiapas for the fabulous ancient Maya sites of **Palenque** (p750) and **Yaxchilán** (p764), and the soulful mountain town of **San Cristóbal de Las Casas** (p730), which is 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** (p863) and secluded **Río Bec** (p865). Back on the Caribbean coast, take kayaking, fishing or mangrove trips through the remote **Reserva de la Biosfera Sian Ka'an** (p815) before you reach **Tulum** (p808), which has one of Mexico's most perfect beaches and most spectacularly sited Maya ruins. From Tulum visit the major Maya ceremonial center of **Cobá** (p813) and take a guided snorkel or dive tour of the amazing underwater caverns of **Cenote Dos Ojos** (p801). Wind up your trip with a stop at chic **Playa del Carmen** (p798), a great base camp for the superlative diving and snorkeling on **Isla Cozumel** (p802).

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/Mexico City to Isla Cozumel**

This magnificent classic journey leads travelers south from Mexico's colonial heartland to its glorious Caribbean beaches. Start by exploring fascinating **Mexico City** (p95), including a visit to the awesome pyramids of **Teotihuacán** (p177). Then head east to colonial **Puebla** (p184) before crossing the mountains southward to **Oaxaca** (p643), a lovely colonial city with Mexico's finest handicrafts at the heart of a beautiful region with a large indigenous population. From Oaxaca visit the ancient Zapotec capital, **Monte Albán** (p665).

Cross the Sierra Madre del Sur to one of the sun-baked beach spots on the Oaxaca coast, such as **Puerto Escondido** (p678), **Mazunte** (p696) or **Zipolite** (p692). Then move east to **San Cristóbal de Las Casas** (p730), a beautiful highland town surrounded by intriguing indigenous villages, the lovely jungle lake **Laguna Miramar** (p772), and **Palenque** (p750), perhaps the most stunning of all Maya cities, with its backdrop of emerald-green jungle.

Head northeast to colonial **Mérida** (p824), the Yucatán Peninsula's cultural capital and the base for visiting the fine Maya ruins of **Uxmal** (p834) and those along the **Ruta Puuc** (p839). Next stop is **Chichén Itzá** (p844), the Yucatán's most awesome ancient Maya site. From there, head directly to **Tulum** (p808) 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** (p784). On the way, halt at hip **Playa del Carmen** (p798) and take a side trip to **Isla Cozumel** (p802) 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 Maya cities and Caribbean beaches of the Yucatán Peninsula.

## PACIFIC DREAMS

### Four to Six Weeks/Chihuahua to Bahías de Huatulco

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** (p322) via the awesome **Copper Canyon** (p297), with its dramatic railroad and spectacular hiking.

Spend an evening sipping margaritas on the lively plaza in **Mazatlán** (p375) before venturing to the ancient island of **Mexcaltitán** (p388) and the wildlife-rich lagoons of laid-back **San Blas** (p389). Then it's on to nightclubs, gourmet food, whale-watching and shopping in **Puerto Vallarta** (p399).

Isolated beaches abound on the Costalegre, home to some of the world's most luxurious resorts. Spend a day snorkeling here at **Playa Tenacatita** (p414), and don't miss the street tacos in **San Patricio-Melaque** (p414). Hang out at tranquil **Playa Maruata** (p426), the most beautiful beach in Michoacán, or rent a *cabaña* at the quaint surfer haven of **Barra de Nexpa** (p426). Surf, snorkel or take to horseback at **Troncones** (p428) before hiring a fishing boat in **Zihuatanejo** (p432).

Pick up the pace to hit the discos, see the cliff divers and learn a little Mexican history in **Acapulco** (p442). **Puerto Escondido** (p678) 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** (p696) or **Zipolite** (p692), or relax at the resort of **Bahías de Huatulco** (p698), set along a string of beautiful, sheltered bays.

From Chihuahua to Huatulco is 3200km, including 653km by rail, and can take up to six weeks if you stop in each recommended place. 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/Sótano de las Golondrinas to Reserva de la Biosfera Pantanos de Centla**

The Huasteca region harbors an astonishing 376m-deep sinkhole, the **Sótano de las Golondrinas** (p596), while in Xilitla you'll find **Las Pozas** (p597), a surreal fantasy land created by an English eccentric. Near Papantla are the spectacular pyramids of **El Tajín** (p603), the greatest monument of the Classic Veracruz civilization; also witness here the spectacular **voladores** (p604) rite of the indigenous Totonac people, with four men 'flying' from the top of a single vertical pole.

Beaches on the **Costa Esmeralda** (p606) are mostly empty outside holiday times. Nearby **Tapacoyan** (p606) is a center for white-water rafting on rivers rushing down from the Sierra Madre Oriental. Inland, **Xalapa** (p608) is an urbane university city with one of Mexico's best archaeological museums. The 5611m dormant volcano **Pico de Orizaba** (p629) is the country's highest peak – a steep, though not technically difficult, challenge for mountaineers.

The Gulf coast's most vibrant city is **Veracruz** (p615), the historic maritime gateway to Mexico and a fun-loving city with a wild Carnival. Past Veracruz city, **southeastern Veracruz state** (p629) offers green hills, beaches, rainforest, lakes and 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** (p713) in Villahermosa, capital of steamy Tabasco state. Tabasco hosts little-known Gulf beaches in and around **Paraíso** (p719) and the vast wetlands of the **Reserva de la Biosfera Pantanos de Centla** (p722).



This diverse 1700km, two-week trip along the little-traveled Gulf coast combines beaches, natural wonders and outdoor adventure with urban sophistication and some lesser-known highlights of Mexico's archaeological heritage.

## NORTHERN ESCAPE

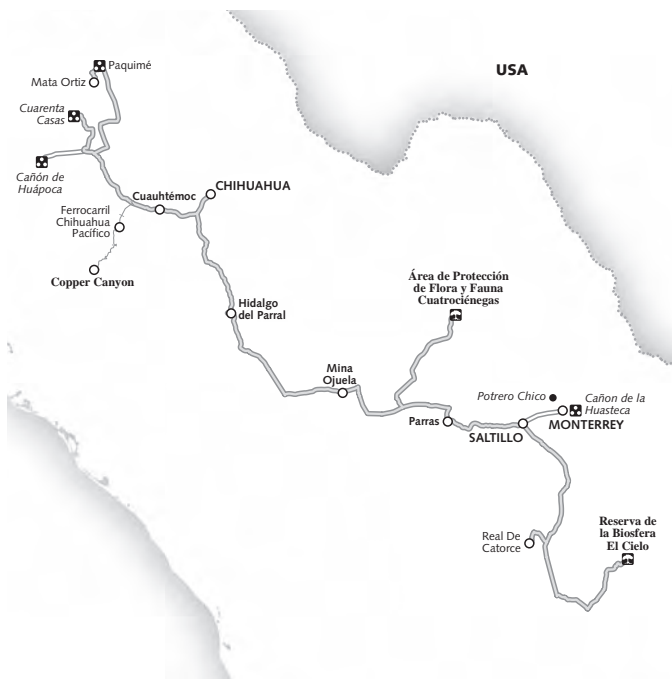
### Three Weeks/Paquimé to Reserva de la Biosfera El Cielo

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** (p318) your starting point. From here, visit the renowned potters' village **Mata Ortiz** (p320). Then head south to the pre-Hispanic cliff dwellings amid the forests of the Sierra Madre Occidental at **Cuarenta Casas** (p321) and the **Cañón de Huápoca** (p321).

Move southeast to **Cuauhtémoc** (p327), where you can board the **Ferrocarril Chihuahua Pacífico** (p298) to explore the spectacular **Copper Canyon** (p297). Next, follow the footsteps of legendary revolutionary Pancho Villa through **Chihuahua** (p322) and **Hidalgo del Parral** (p329).

Visit the old mine, ghost town and spectacular bridge at **Mina Ojuela** (p333), then head northeast across the deserts for (what else?) a spot of swimming and snorkeling at the bizarrely beautiful oasis of the **Área de Protección de Flora y Fauna Cuatrociénegas** (p342), then go south to quaff a *copa* of desert wine at **Parras** (p347). Move on to laid-back **Saltillo** (p343), with its Churrigueresque cathedral and first-class desert museum. Drop into **Monterrey** (p349) if by now you're missing a little urban sophistication, and head to the nearby **Cañón de la Huasteca** (p359) and **Potrero Chico** (p360) for some top-class climbing, canyoneering, rappelling and zip-lining. Then turn south to magical **Real De Catorce** (p543), a once-abandoned silver-mining center coming back to 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** (p370).

In three weeks, covering 3600km, you can experience the best of this weird and wonderful region of Mexico, from desert lagoons to the spectacular Copper Canyon and little-known ancient cultures to revolutionary history, with a spot of city life thrown in too.



## TAILORED TRIPS

### WORLD HERITAGE

Mexico's 29 Unesco World Heritage listings feature four natural sites, including **El Vizcaíno** (p251) and **Reserva de la Biosfera Sian Ka'an** (p815). The rest are cultural listings, with pre-Hispanic sites being prominent: the towering pyramids of **Teotihuacán** (p177), the exquisite Maya architecture of **Palenque** (p750), **Uxmal** (p834), **Chichén Itzá** (p845) and deep-in-the-jungle **Calakmul** (p863), as well as the mazelike northern trading center **Paquimé** (p318), the old Zapotec capital **Monte Albán** (p665), the outstanding rock art of Baja California's **Sierra de San Francisco** (p253), and the curious niched pyramids of **El Tajín** (p603) near the Gulf coast. The magnificent stone architecture of colonial Mexico is represented by the historic centers of **Mexico City** (p95), **Oaxaca** (p643), **Puebla** (p184), **Guanajuato** (p548), **Morelia** (p493), **Zacatecas** (p521), **Querétaro** (p576) and **Campeche** (p854), while the historic and architectural heritage of early Christian missionaries in Mexico is recognized in the Unesco listing of **Jalpan** (p585) and the other **Franciscan missions** (p585) in the Sierra Gorda. Mexico's contribution to 20th-century art and architecture is marked by the **UNAM university campus** (p128) in Mexico City, and Guadalajara's **Instituto Cultural de Cabañas** (p466), 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. Their sustainable tourism schemes provide opportunities to see some of Mexico's most pristine, spectacular and remote areas. Mexico recognizes 53 Unesco and national biosphere reserves (*reservas de la biosfera*) totaling over 130,000 sq km and encompassing huge ecological variety, from the northern deserts of **Bolsón de Mapimí** (p333) to the southern forests of **Montes Azules** (p772) and **Calakmul** (p862). The coastal wetland reserves of **Sian Ka'an** (p815) on the Caribbean, **La Encrucijada** (p776) on the Pacific, and **Ría Celestún** (p842) and **Ría Lagartos** (p853) on the Gulf of Mexico all harbor bountiful wildlife and infrastructure for visitors. Not far from Sian Ka'an is the large coral atoll reserve of **Banco Chichorro** (p818). **El Vizcaíno** (p251) in Baja California encompasses deserts, and lagoons where gray whales calve, while the **Volcán Tacaná reserve** (p779) protects a towering, forest-clad volcano on the border with Guatemala. **El Triunfo** (p773), high in the mountains of Chiapas, has spectacular birdlife, including the resplendent quetzal. Central Mexico's **Reserva Mariposa Monarca** (p501) protects the breeding grounds of millions of magnificent monarch butterflies. The **Sierra Gorda** (p584) and **El Cielo** (p370) reserves are transition zones between Gulf lowlands and the heights of the Sierra Madre Oriental, and boast a diversity of birds, plants and other wildlife.



## ON THE BEACH

Mexico has peerless *playas*. Baja offers prime surf at **San Miguel** (p246), **Los Cerritos** (p273) and **Costa Azul** (p273), great kayaking at **Mulegé** (p255) and **Espíritu Santo** (p261), and party time at **Cabo San Lucas** (p269).

On the mainland Pacific coast, you can make a beeline for the lagoon-backed beaches of **San Blas** (p389) before hitting **Puerto Vallarta** (p399), with its beach parties and marine wildlife. Slow down on the *tranquilo* beaches of the **Costalegre** (p414) or soak in the rolling waves of **San Patricio-Melaque** (p414).

There's more top surf at **Barra de Nexpa** (p426), **Boca de Pascuales** (p424) and **Troncones** (p428). Revive on the soothing bay at **Zihuatanejo** (p432) before you take on high-energy **Acapulco** (p442).

On the Oaxaca coast, the 'Mexican Pipeline' has spawned a fun surfer-traveler scene at **Puerto Escondido** (p678). Or stroll the sands or relax in a hammock at the backpacker haven of **Zipolite** (p692).

On the Yucatán Peninsula's Caribbean coast it's always party time at **Cancún** (p784), while **Playa del Carmen** (p798) is a hip beach town. Offshore, relax and go snorkeling at **Isla Mujeres** (p792), or head to **Isla Cozumel** (p802) for world-class diving. **Tulum** (p808), boasting coastal Maya ruins, has one of Mexico's most beautiful beaches, with palm-fringed white sand. Or slip over to 30km-long **Isla Holbox** (p796), where you can snorkel with whale sharks, explore endless beaches or simply laze in a hammock.



## FOOD TRIP

Mexico City neighborhoods such as **Condesa** (p145) and **Roma** (p146) are the country's capital of *nuevo mexicano* (new Mexican) and fusion cuisine, and the city is also home to some incredible market food.

You're guaranteed to get fabulous fresh seafood along the Pacific coast. Bigger resorts like **Ensenada** (p243), **Mazatlán** (p375), **Puerto Vallarta** (p399), **Zihuatanejo** (p432) and **Acapulco** (p442) have a great array of restaurants offering finely prepared dishes. The humble fish tacos of **Baja California** (boxed text, p268) can be just as divine. For delicious *pescado a la veracruzana* (fish in a tomato, onion and chili-based sauce) head over to the Gulf coast city that invented it, **Veracruz** (p615).

Meat lovers will enjoy most of Mexico, but especially the ranching country of the north, with the big steaks of **Chihuahua** (p322), the *cabrito al pastor* (roast kid) of **Monterrey** (p349), the *carne asada* (marinated grilled beef) of **Sonora** (p278), and flavorful *tacos al carbón* (with char-grilled meats or seafood) everywhere.

**Puebla** (p184) is home to Mexico's most famous *mole* (sauce) for meat, the chocolate-based *mole poblano*. But *mole* lovers can sate their appetites in other places. The southern city of **Oaxaca** (p643) is famed for its seven varieties of *mole* (see boxed text, p658); you can learn to make them at its many cooking schools.



# The Authors



## JOHN NOBLE

**Coordinating Author, Northwest Mexico,  
Central North Mexico**

John has felt Mexico's pull since reading the barely credible story of Cortés and the Aztecs as a teenager. An early backpacking trip took him from Ciudad Juárez to Ciudad Cuauhtémoc and he has been returning to Mexico ever since. Coordinating author of all eight editions of this guide since 1994, he has explored almost every part of Mexico. On many editions he was joined as an author by his wife Susan Forsyth, who died in 2008. John loves Mexico's art, archaeology, history, music, food, drinks, languages, traditions, beaches, wildlife and stunning landscapes – and most of all its charming people. He lives in Spain.



## KATE ARMSTRONG

**Northern Central Highlands**

An Australian by birth but a Latina (she believes) in a former life, Kate has visited Mexico several times. She knew she'd struck gold when asked to cover the silver cities for a second time for Lonely Planet. She hiked in the Sierra Gorda, attended every festival and concert possible, consumed kilos of quesadillas (until a nasty parasite brought her to her knees), and talked and danced her way through the magic of Mexico. At other times, she is a freelance writer, based (occasionally) in Australia. She has also contributed to *Bolivia* and *South America on a Shoestring* among other Lonely Planet titles.



## RAY BARTLETT

**Baja California**

Ray Bartlett has been to almost all Mexican states and now splits his time between homes in Cape Cod and Baja California Sur. He has worked on numerous guides for Lonely Planet and other high profile publications, including Public Radio International's *The World*, *USA Today*, the *Seattle Times*, the *Denver Post*, and LonelyPlanet.tv, and he is a regular guest on *Around the World Radio*, a syndicated travel show. When not working for Lonely Planet he surfs, hikes, dives, and snorkels in and around Baja. Reach him via his website: [www.Kaisora.com](http://www.Kaisora.com). Or just flag him down somewhere on the road.

### LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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### GREG BENCHWICK

#### Yucatán Peninsula

Greg first visited the Yucatán Peninsula on a family trip back in the early '80s. He's been coming back regularly ever since. When he's not writing about sustainable travel or Latin America, Greg loves to explore the wild areas of his native Colorado with his wife and their three-legged Turkish street dog. To see videos from Greg's adventures, check out his website [www.soundtraveler.com](http://www.soundtraveler.com).



### NATE CAVALIERI

#### Oaxaca State

Sometime between the parading brass bands, the tacos sprinkled with deep fried pork cracklings and a wobbly *mezcal*-making tutorial, Nate Cavalieri understood that, after many trips to Mexico, he had found his spiritual homeland in Oaxaca. Originally from Michigan, Nate Cavalieri has contributed 10 titles for Lonely Planet, including guides to Puerto Rico, Chicago, and his adopted home state of California.



### GREGOR CLARK

#### Central Pacific Coast

Gregor first visited Mexico on a summer volunteer project in the mountains of Oaxaca, bookended by multiday bus rides to and from San Francisco. He started falling in love with the country sometime during the bus's first rest stop in the Sonora Desert, eating *tamales* purchased bus-side from a local family, listening to the hum of nighttime Spanish voices and contemplating a sky full of incomparably brilliant stars. Twenty-five years later he still loves Mexico and was thrilled to return for this project. Gregor has written for Lonely Planet since 2000, including repeat stints in Brazil, Italy, Portugal and Uruguay, along with assignments in his twin home states of Vermont and California.



### JOHN HECHT

#### Mexico City

John headed down Mexico way 13 years ago to study Spanish at the University of Guadalajara. After a three-year stint in the mariachi heartland, and still speaking with a thick gringo accent, he decided to try his luck in the sprawling Mexican capital. There his newfound Chilango pals wasted no time in showing him the best watering holes, street eats and music venues. Back in those early Mexico City days, he launched a journalism career at an English-language newspaper, which led to his current freelance gigs as a travel and entertainment writer. He has co-authored Lonely Planet's *Mexico* and *Puerto Vallarta & Pacific Mexico* guidebooks.



### BETH KOHN

#### Tabasco & Chiapas

Beth has been sojourning in Mexico for over 20 years, and not just for the eye-popping ambrosia known as Chiapan coffee. This time around she reveled in solitary jungle waterfalls and misty highland evenings and braved bomb-volume thunderstorms and the predawn call-and-response of rowdy howler monkeys. A resident of San Francisco, she's also an author of Lonely Planet's *California* and *Yosemite, Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks* guides, and her last journey to Latin America was a *rumba* through Venezuela for *South America on a Shoestring*. You can see more of her work at [www.bethkohn.com](http://www.bethkohn.com).



### EMILY MATCHAR

#### Western Central Highlands

Emily's first trip to Mexico, at age 15, was not particularly auspicious (Yucatán resort populated entirely by German-speakers with a regrettable all-you-can-eat buffet). Subsequent trips were much nicer, fortunately. Her favorite part of the Western Central Highlands was the food (especially Morelia's Mercado de Dulces!) and the traditional handicrafts (everyone needs a straw pig, right?). In addition to writing for Lonely Planet, she writes about travel, adventure and food for magazines and newspapers. She can sometimes be found in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. See more of her work at [www.emilymatchar.com](http://www.emilymatchar.com).



### FREDA MOON

#### Around Mexico City

Freda fell for Mexico as a three year old while sailing the Sea of Cortez with her seafaring dad. She's since found herself sick and stranded in the deserts of Baja and the victim of extortionist mechanics – but has yet to grow weary. Instead, she – along with her fellow adventurer, Tim – opted for an extended honeymoon exploring every corner of the country. Along those many miles of pot-holed asphalt, she tested various renditions of Mexico's famed *mole* (a type of chili sauce), hiked to hot springs and was awed by folk art. A first-time Lonely Planet author, Freda's journalism and travel writing can be seen at [www.fredamoon.com](http://www.fredamoon.com).



### ELLEE THALHEIMER

#### Northeast Mexico, Central Gulf Coast

Ellee never stops learning from the *tranquilo* (calm) attitude and generous spirit which thrives in the Latin American cultures she has explored for over the last 14 years. And she seldom leaves a salsa or merengue undanced. Aside from freelance writing, Ellee is a yoga instructor, massage therapist and avid cyclist in Portland, Oregon. She has previously contributed to Lonely Planet's *Mexico*, *Caribbean*, *Pacific Northwest* and *USA* guidebooks, and she has authored *Cycling Italy*.

