

TRAVEL TO MEXICO

A QUICK GUIDE
BY ENRIQUE MARTINEZ



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Introduction

The name of Mexico derives from Nahuatl and means “Place at the Center of the Moon”. There are many theories about it, but it is the most widely accepted theory. It may not be in the center of the moon literally, but it is in the center of the world at least geographically speaking. That explains why we have a diversity of climates and ecosystems.

Mexico is a country rich in history and culture and is full of mysticism. It is a mix between antiquity and modernity dating centuries back to a period older than the Spanish Colony. Despite how much time has passed since then, the Spanish influence can still be seen in our architecture, our gastronomy, our traditions, and our culture in general.

Mexico is full of contrasts. One can travel through the country and find deserts, forests, rainforests, beaches, and mountains, not to mention the social contrasts that can be seen in each big city or small town. Those things are probably what attract millions of tourists each year. Just as a reference, about 50 million tourists visited Mexico in 2018. This places Mexico in the top ten list of the most visited countries worldwide.

Mexico is known for its delicious dishes, for its warm people, for its sense of humor, for its paradisiac beaches, for its love of soccer, for its religiosity, among many other things. Unfortunately, as always, not all things are positive. The Aztec country has had to face negative publicity for years. Despite that, tourism has been a thriving industry that contributes a significant amount of money to the national economy. Millions of tourists from all over the world have changed their minds after visiting for the first time, and many of them have even made it their home. There are numerous ex-pat communities in several parts of Mexico.

You may have never visited and wonder what it is like. There is so much information out there that it can be overwhelming. Don't worry. I tried to put together a

short guide for your review. I will cover some important aspects like transportation, food, lodging, important dates, etc. When traveling, it's important to always do some research. I hope you find this guide useful.

Geographical Location

Before going any further, do you know where Mexico is? When people think of America, they immediately think of the U.S., but America, or the American continent if you will, includes many other countries. Speaking of Mexico, it borders three countries:

- The U.S. to the north
- Guatemala and Belize to the south

Mexico borders the Pacific Ocean to the west and the Gulf of Mexico to the east. It comes at number 15th on the list of countries with the longest coastlines worldwide. Unlike what many Europeans believe, Mexico is not located in South America. It's actually a part of North America along with the U.S. and Canada. Due to its close location, most of Mexico's tourists are neighboring Americans. You can find them virtually anywhere in Mexico.



Political Divisions

Mexico has 32 states. Each state is divided into municipalities (*municipios*). The capital is Mexico City. After Mexico City, the two most important cities are Guadalajara and Monterrey.

Climate

Due to its geographical location, Mexico enjoys a fresh, tropical climate. We can divide the climate into two seasons: the dry season and the rainy season. The dry season runs from November to May, while the rainy season runs from June to October. Furthermore, in terms of rain, the wettest months are August and September.

Summers are hot, and winters are mild. Mexico rarely experiences any harsh winters except for the mountainous areas of Chihuahua, Durango, and Coahuila in the north. The temperature in most of the country typically ranges between 50°F and 90°F (10°C and 32.22°C) throughout the year.

Altitude also plays a major role. It is not rare to have cool mornings and warm afternoons. Such is the case of Mexico City at an altitude of 7,350 ft (2,240 m) above sea level.

Time Zones

Mexico has currently four time zones, although most of the country uses Zona Centro (GMT-6 or GMT-5 during Daylight Savings Time). The rest of the time zones are as follows:

- Zona Sureste (GMT-5) in Quintana Roo
- Zona Pacifico (GMT-7) in Chihuahua, Nayarit, Sonora, Sinaloa, and Baja California Sur

- Zona Noroeste (GMT-8) in Baja California Norte

Note the time zones listed above are expressed in standard times. They go back one hour during Daylight Savings Time (DST). Most of Mexico observes DST except for the states of Sonora and Quintana Roo.

Language

Mexico does not have an official language. Spanish is the de facto national language, which means it is the language used in education, business, and everyday life. However, nowhere in the Constitution is it specified that it is the nation's official language.

Around 92.7% of the population speaks only Spanish, while an additional 5.7% speaks both Spanish and an indigenous language. Only 0.8% claims to only speak an indigenous language. The most spoken indigenous languages are Nahuatl, Yucatec Maya, and Mixteco, but there are hundreds of others. So, don't worry. If you only speak Spanish albeit a little, you will be fine.

Currency



The Mexican peso (MXN) is the currency of Mexico. The peso is subdivided into 100 *centavos* (¢). The current denominations of coins are 5¢, 10¢, 20¢, and 50¢.

Regarding bills, the current denominations are 20, 50, 100, 200, 500, and 1000 pesos.

As of June 2020, 1 dollar is equivalent to 22 pesos approximately, while 1 euro is equivalent to 25.

Travel Requirements

This is one of the most critical aspects when visiting another country and should be one of the first things you should consider. Speaking of travel requirements, you should basically check two things: visa requirements and health requirements.

In the case of Mexico, generally speaking, you don't need a visa provided your reason for visiting is leisure (non-business related) and you live in one of the following countries or regions:

- The U.S.
- Canada
- Japan
- United Kingdom
- Schengen Area
- Pacific Alliance (Colombia, Chile, and Peru)
- Australia
- New Zealand

The stay limit is 180 days. If you are in doubt whether you need a visa or not, you can check it out [here](#). All of the countries listed require a visa to enter Mexico. If your country is not listed, all you need is a valid passport from your country.

There are no required vaccinations to enter Mexican territory. However, organizations such as CDC and WHO recommend you get some of them like hepatitis A, hepatitis B, typhoid, cholera, and rabies. Due to its tropical weather, some experts also recommend you get immunized against dengue, Zika, and malaria. Your best bet is to see your doctor and ask him directly.

Getting into Mexico

Chances are you will fly into Mexico if coming from afar. There are currently four major airlines in Mexico:

- VivaAerobus
- Volaris
- Interjet
- Aeromexico

Aeromexico is the largest airline with connections to almost every part of the world. The rest of the airlines fly mainly to the U.S. and a few locations in Canada and Latin America. The cheapest airline is VivaAerobus. If you live in the U.S., you might want to check it out.

For almost all international flights you will have to pass through Mexico City, Mexico's capital. It hosts Mexico's largest airport with flights to the U.S., Canada, South America, Europe, Asia, and Australia. You can check a more comprehensive list of airlines [here](#).

For those living in the U.S., you could also consider land travel. There are several bus companies connecting Mexico and the U.S. The three major ones are Greyhound, Turimex, and Omnibus Express. Greyhound focuses mainly on Texas and California, while Turimex and Omnibus Express cover other destinations in Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, among other southern states. Note you will likely have to make a connection if not coming from Texas or California and depending on your final destination.

There are no train routes into or out of Mexico.

Another option is sea travel. In this case, you would have to take a cruise. Major Mexican points of entry include Cozumel, Cabo, Acapulco, Mazatlan, and Puerto

Vallarta. Cruise companies include Carnival Cruise, Princess Cruises, and Royal Caribbean. They may not be the cheapest option and generally take more time.

Lodging

You will not have major troubling finding lodging in Mexico. There are numerous options for all budgets from luxurious hotels to modest local hotels and everything in between. You can find popular hotel chains such as Aloft, Best Western, Holiday Inn, Hyatt, Howard Johnson, Marriott, Sheraton, among others.

If you are traveling on a budget, you also have plenty of options. You can stay at a small local hotel, a bed and breakfast, or even a hostel. You can get a room for two people for as low as \$20 or \$30 with an average of \$50 per night. Prices in U.S. dollars.

Another great option is Airbnb. They are practically everywhere in Mexico. You can rent a single room, an apartment, or even a whole house. This is a great option if you are traveling with a numerous group.

There are many online platforms to look for lodging. You can try Expedia, Booking, or Hotels.com. It is advisable to secure your lodging when traveling during the peak season. When looking for lodging, consider the following factors:

- The number of people traveling with you
- Hotel location
- Services offered
- Price
- Reviews from other travelers

Many hotels offer amenities such as cable TV, Wi-Fi, and even breakfast. We are not talking about expensive hotels necessarily. Some amenities are sometimes included in the price you pay, while at other times you will have to pay extra. Always make sure of what's included before booking.

Transportation

An important part of planning a trip is knowing how you will move around. Is there any public transportation available? Should I rent a car instead? What is more cost-effective?

There is no standard answer in this regard. It will depend on your final destination, budget, and preferences. In some places like Mexico City, it's very easy to move from one place to another. You have plenty of options at your disposal: the subway, buses, a light rail line, taxis, Uber, and other digital platforms. In fact, if you are visiting Mexico City, it is preferable to use public transportation. Traffic can be a big problem, not to mention it can be hard to find parking.

Other major cities that have several transportation options are Guadalajara and Monterrey. Even Uber is not that expensive if you make the conversion to dollars or euros.

Speaking of Uber, it currently serves over 40 cities nationwide. There have been problems with taxi unions ever since Uber arrived in Mexico. If Uber is available at your destination, the only time I would advise against using it is when you are at the airport. There are no problems when using Uber to go to the airport, but it is preferable to take an airport taxi when leaving the airport.

When arriving at the airport, depending on your destination, there could be other means of transportation besides taxis or Uber. In Cancun, for instance, there are collective vans that take passengers to the various hotels along the hotel zone on Kukulcán Boulevard. In other cities, airlines like VivaAerobus offer shuttle rides to the local bus station, which is usually in the downtown area. The problem with this is you will probably still have to take a taxi from the bus station to your hotel if it is not within walking distance.

Airports are usually located on the outskirts of the city. That is why taxi fares to and from the airport are more elevated. Taxis normally charge between 200 and 400

pesos per ride. However, Uber is usually cheaper as long as there is no dynamic pricing in effect.

If you need to take a taxi in the city, avoid street taxis and get a *taxi de sitio* instead. These are basically taxis that have a fixed headquarters and are legally allowed to operate. Most taxis have a meter and charge a base fare + additional kilometer. Always ask the driver if he has a *taxímetro* (meter). In some cities like Veracruz, they do not use them but rather have fixed rates between locations. In that case, before boarding ask how much it is to go to your destination. Avoid any unpleasant surprises.

In the case of buses, the fare varies drastically between Mexican cities. It can be as low as 8 or 9 pesos or as high as 17 or 18 pesos. It is generally higher in the northern portion of the country in cities like Mexicali, Tijuana, and Monterrey. I'm talking about buses within the city, not buses to go from one city to another.

Almost all cities and towns have at least some form of public transportation. If you need to go from one city to another, you will most likely find at least a route that takes you. It is hard to give you an estimate since prices vary greatly. Major bus companies include Omnibus de Mexico, ETN, Grupo Senda, and ADO.



Mexico City metrobús

Eating Out

Finding where to eat should not be a problem. Many cities offer international dishes from popular cuisines like American, Italian, and Chinese. You can find known restaurants such as Pizza Hut, Domino's, KFC, McDonald's, Starbucks, etc. as well as local high-end restaurants and other cheaper options.

I strongly urge you to try the local food. You don't even have to go to a restaurant. When it comes to going out to eat, your options are endless. A good place to start is the local market. Every city and town has at least one. That is the most authentic you can eat anywhere. Portions are good and affordable. Depending on what you eat, you could look at 50-70 pesos per person. You should look into these places when traveling on a budget. Even if you are not, I recommend you go at least once.

There are more places you can try, of course. They go by different names such as *fonda*, *cocina económica*, or *cenaduría*. They are cheaper than restaurants and offer a more personalized service. They are also smaller and are usually run by families. It's not only about the food but the experience as well. Sometimes you can even speak with the cook while she/he is preparing your food.

In the case of *fondas*, many of them offer combos or *comida corrida* as we know it. It's basically a three or four-course meal that includes a simple soup, rice or pasta, a meat dish or *guisado*, and a simple dessert. They are only served for lunch. They run around 50 pesos per person.

Mexicans love to eat on the street. Don't be alarmed if you see food stands on every corner you pass by. You can find almost anything you could think of: hot dogs, burgers, pizza, tacos, corn on the cob, chips, nachos, ice cream, and a myriad of snacks. We know these places as *puestos*. They're very common in all Mexico. In several cases, they don't provide any seating, so be prepared for that.

Everywhere you go, you will see hot salsas and tortillas. They're the foundation of Mexican cuisine. Be cautious with the salsas since some of them can be really hot! We love that flavor, but we understand not all people are used to it.

Speaking of Mexican cuisine, it varies widely from region to region, and some dishes can have different names depending on where you are. Having said that, some of the most popular Mexican dishes are:

- **Tacos.** Tortillas stuffed with anything from beans to meat.
- **Gorditas.** A kind of thicker tortillas stuffed with meat, beans, or cheese and usually fried.
- **Tortas.** A kind of sandwich stuffed with meat, cheese, lettuce, tomato, onions, among other things.
- **Tamales.** Packets of corn dough stuffed with a salty or sweet filling.
- **Chile Relleno.** Poblano pepper stuffed with meat or cheese covered in an egg white batter and fried.
- **Mole.** A kind of sauce made of many ingredients like chocolate, pepper, fruit, and several spices. It can be spicy or sweet and is usually eaten with chicken.
- **Pozole.** A kind of soup or stew made of chicken or pork.



Mexican tacos



Typical Mexican breakfast



Pambazos, a kind of torta

Most Visited Destinations

According to the Mexican Chamber of Commerce, the most visited destinations in Mexico in 2018 were:

1. **Mexico City.** Mexico's political and cultural capital.
2. **Riviera Maya.** A favorite destination for honeymooners.
3. **Cancún.** White-sand beaches and superb nightlife.
4. **Los Cabos.** A contrast between the desert and the sea.
5. **Guadalajara.** Land of the mariachi and tequila.
6. **Puerto Vallarta.** A popular destination for American and Canadian retirees.
7. **Monterrey.** Mexico's third-largest city and industrial hub.
8. **Acapulco.** One of the first Mexican destinations to be set on the international spotlight. Famous worldwide for its divers.
9. **Nuevo Vallarta.** Beautiful beaches, lots of golf courses, and an extensive amount of wildlife.

10. **Mazatlán.** Famous for its beaches, its sea wall, its seafood, and Banda sinaloense music.



Monterrey



Guadalajara



Mexico City

Archaeological Sites

There were many ancient civilizations in Mexico like the Aztecs and Maya. Many of their remnants can still be seen today. Some of them are famous worldwide and even one of them is part of the list of Modern Wonders of the World.

Currently, there are 180 archaeological sites open to the public, but there are way more still waiting to be discovered and/or open to the public. No wonder Mexico is one of the countries with the most archaeological sites all over the world.

Some of the most popular archaeological sites in Mexico are:

- Teotihuacán
- Chichén Itzá
- Tulum

- Palenque
- Calakmul
- La Venta
- El Tajín
- Monte Albán



Chichén Itzá

In all of them, you can see impressive ruins and get a better idea of their religions and lifestyles. There were many similarities among the different civilizations back then. They shared languages and religions, for instance. They are a must-see when visiting Mexico.

Pueblos Mágicos

In 2001, the Mexican government launched a program called “Pueblos Mágicos” to promote tourism within the country. A *pueblo mágico*, or magical town as they are known abroad, is a locality with symbolic attributes, legends, history, transcendental facts, “everydayness”, in other words, it is a place where magic emanates from each of its cultural and social expressions.

There are currently 121 of them. They have to meet specific criteria to earn and preserve the title of *pueblo mágico*.

Each magical town is unique. Despite their smaller size compared to large cities, they have a lot to offer. You can find delicious food, beautiful handcrafts, millenary traditions, natural attractions, among many other things. They have a special charm to them like no other place.

Some of the most visited magical towns are:

- Orizaba, Veracruz
- Álamos, Sonora
- Atlixco, Puebla
- Zacatlán de las Manzanas, Puebla
- Bacalar, Quintana Roo
- Bernal, Querétaro
- Pátzcuaro, Michoacán
- Cuetzalan, Puebla
- Cuatro Ciénegas, Coahuila
- Taxco, Guerrero
- Real de Catorce, San Luis Potosí
- San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas



Pátzcuaro, Michoacán

Important Events

Mexicans love to party! There are many important celebrations throughout the year in all the country. Many of them revolve around religious events. However, whether the celebration is related to religion or not, you will always find delicious dishes, music, and games. They are events for the whole family.

Below are some of the most popular events:

- **Carnival of Veracruz.** This is the largest event of its kind in Mexico, but it is celebrated in various parts of the country. They elect a queen, have parades, music, good food, and the perfect ambiance to spend a good time with family or friends. It is celebrated in the week before Ash Wednesday.
- **San Marcos Fair.** Held in Aguascalientes, it is Mexico's largest fair with over 1,500 events including culinary competitions, fashion shows, theatrical performances, markets, among many other events. It takes place every year between April and May.
- **Guelaguetza.** An annual indigenous celebration with parades, traditional dances, sale of handcrafts, native food, and lots of fun. It takes place in Oaxaca every year in late July.
- **El Grito.** The night when Mexicans celebrate their independence from Spain. All cities and towns host a commemorative event in their regions on September 15. Locals dress up as the heroes of Independence and gather at the city hall to cry "*¡Viva México!*" (Long live Mexico!).
- **International Cervantino Festival.** A three-week festival with lots of music, theatrical performances, art, folklore, and much more. It takes place every year in Guanajuato City around mid-October.
- **Día de Muertos.** Also known as Day of the Dead, on this day Mexicans remember those who passed away. They set up altars with food, flowers, candles, and things the deceased loved. It is not a day of sadness but happiness.

Best Time to Visit

There is no such thing. The answer to this question is very subjective and depends on your budget and preferences. You will have to take into consideration how much you are willing to spend, how much you tolerate crowds, what kind of weather you are looking for, etc.

For instance, in terms of weather, the best time to visit is between the months of November and April, which is the dry season. If you visit during the rainy season, be prepared to face high temperatures. A few parts in Mexico can reach temperatures as high as 122°F (50°C). In other regions like the Yucatán Peninsula, you have to add the humidity factor. So, take this into consideration when planning your trip.

If you are conscious about savings, you have to avoid travel during the peak season. Generally speaking, the peak season in Mexico is:

- Mid-December through early January
- *Semana Santa* (the week before Easter)
- Mid-July through mid-August
- Long weekends and national holidays

In some cases, your options will be limited to the dates of special events. For instance, if you are planning to attend the International Cervantino Festival, you will have to adjust your plans accordingly.

Additional Tips

Many places in Mexico accept payments in dollars, especially in touristy areas. However, it is still a good idea to bring local currency with you. Exchange rates can be unfavorable. Avoid exchanging currency at the airport as they have the worst rates. Instead, visit a bank or *casa de cambio*. Just be advised that some banks require you to be an account holder.

If you need to rent a car, you can find international brands such as Hertz or Avis as well as smaller local companies. However, I do not recommend renting one unless you plan to visit several towns or cities during your trip. In places like Mexico City, driving can be tough, and you are better off without a car. Also, keep in mind Mexican car insurance is mandatory. Mexico does not accept liability insurance from American auto policies or credit card insurance.

For long stays, I recommend getting a local SIM card for calls and data. You can get one from Telcel, Movistar, or AT&T. They are cheaper than paying for roaming. All you need is an unlocked phone.

Speaking of electronics, the power plugs and sockets are of type A and B. The U.S. and Canada use the same type as Mexico. If coming from any other country, you might need to get a travel adapter. You can get one from Amazon or your local electronics store.

When eating at a restaurant, it is standard practice to tip 10% of the total. It is rare to tip over 15%, but it is really up to you. Waiters have low wages, so any tips are greatly appreciated.

Always bring some kind of identification with you. It is recommended to make a few copies and leave them at the hotel in case you lose your wallet or purse.

Many people speak English, but it is always a good idea to learn some Spanish. With so many options now, it is easier than ever. Do this for your own benefit and out of courtesy to your hosting country.

It is always recommended to get travel insurance when traveling abroad. We never know what may go wrong. You don't want to be stuck in a foreign country with no money, especially during times like a pandemic. Think about it as an investment, not an unnecessary expense. You can try World Nomads.

Last but not least, don't forget to bring some kind of antacid if you are not used to eating spicy food!

Conclusion

Traveling should be an enjoyable experience, and if we can avoid mistakes that others have made in the past, much better. However, do not be afraid to make any mistakes. It is all part of the experience.

With the correct planning and mindset, you can plan a memorable trip. It is important to understand that things will not always go as planned, though. There are things out of our control, and all we can do is adapt to the situation. However, planning ahead helps us minimize the effects of these situations. That is why it is important to always have a plan B just in case.

Here we covered some important points such as transportation, lodging, eating out, travel tips, among other things. You can apply these tips for traveling to Mexico and other countries.

This is by no means a comprehensive guide but is a good starting point. You can do more research on your own depending on your specific needs. Do not forget to visit my blog at <https://traveltomexiconow.com> for travel updates, tips, reviews, and much more! I hope you visit Mexico soon if you still have not done it. See you soon!