



WARM WELCOME

THE BEAUTY AND HISTORY OF SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE DRAW THOUSANDS OF US EXPATRIATES, MAKING THE COLONIAL MEXICAN CITY IDEAL FOR ENGLISH-SPEAKING VISITORS.

BY NECEE REGIS

The park Jardin Principal is a people magnet in the center of San Miguel's historic district.



San Miguel's sights include the cathedral Parroquia San Miguel Arcangel (left and right). Savor dishes like chicken-and-potato-stuffed *gorditas* (above) and *pozole* with shredded pork (facing page).



WINTER *travel*

EVERY TRIP has its unexpected delights. In San Miguel de Allende, a colorful colonial city in the rugged Mexican sierras, these moments arrived in sun and rain, bookends to a monthlong sojourn. On the first bright morning, I ate the best yogurt I had ever tasted. A friend and I had rented an apartment, and on our first grocery shopping expedition we discovered *crema*, a tangy, creamy substance we scooped into bowls and devoured with gusto. On a subsequent trip, I spotted *yogur* and realized our dream breakfast had actually been sour cream. Whoops.

Located about three hours north of Mexico City, 6,200 feet above sea level, this prosperous city of about 160,000 residents unfolds like a brightly colored quilt in a dusty tan and sage landscape. Named a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2008, the historic district boasts well-preserved 17th- and 18th-century buildings—with flowering courtyards, arched porticoes, and elaborate carved-wood doors—painted Venetian red, ocher, umber, mustard, cayenne, emerald, cerulean, and vermilion. When the sun rises, the city dazzles.

San Miguel is home to more than 17,000 expatriates, mainly from the United States, reportedly the largest concentration of expats in Mexico. Most shopkeepers and restaurateurs in the city center

speak some English, and that comes in handy if, like me, your Spanish skills are limited. I stayed for a month, but the city—accessed by two flights and a long shuttle ride—is an ideal destination for a weeklong sojourn when it's cold and gray in Boston.

AT THE HEART of the historic district, the Jardin Principal—referred to simply as “El Jardin”—is a raised park rimmed by laurel trees pruned like marshmallows. In the daytime, artists set up easels and paint amid street vendors. In the evening, townspeople, tourists, and mariachi

bands promenade beneath the illuminated turrets of the neo-Gothic cathedral Parroquia San Miguel Arcangel.

The warren of cobblestone streets surrounding El Jardin is dense with clothing boutiques, arts-and-crafts galleries, touristy trinket shops, cafes, restaurants, and markets. The best way to get about the city is to walk. For footwear that is sturdy as well as chic, head to one of three central locations for San Miguel Shoe (415-154-4702, smshoe.com), a family-run business selling sandals, slip-on flats, and ankle boots with rubber-like soles and colorful elastic straps. You'll need those shoes on the steep streets, steps, and tiny plazas that ascend to the best view at Cruz del Pueblo, a gigantic cross overlooking the city and distant mountains.

When you tire of walking, there's no need to rent a car: In-town taxis are abundant and inexpensive,

with daytime flat rates of 25 pesos (\$1.90) and 30 pesos (\$2.30) after dark.

San Miguel is known for its vibrant artisan community. A 10-minute stroll from the center, the sprawling Fabrica La Aurora (415-152-1312, fabricalaaurora.com) is a 19th-century former textile factory where you can spend a day touring art galleries, interior design stores, artist studios, and shops selling jewelry, clothing, crafts, books, and more. A garden cafe serves small bites and beverages, or enjoy lunch, dinner, or cocktails at two more formal venues.

We felt safe navigating the streets at night, though, as in any city, we paid attention to our surroundings. For evening entertainment, we attended English-language films, concerts, lectures, and other cultural activities at the library, Biblioteca de San Miguel Allende A.C. (415-152-0293, bibliotecasma.com). The events are relatively inexpensive, such as theater tickets for 150 pesos (\$11.50).

For the thrill of bargaining, head to the markets, where prices are often lower than in boutiques. The three-block-long Mercado de Artesanias, a walkway along Andador Lucas Balderas, is where vendors hawk local folk art and crafts, including metalwork, papier-mache, handblown glass, jewelry, leather, stained glass, pottery, and more.

The Shangri-La of markets, Tianguis del Martes (Tuesday Mar-

ket), is an open-air affair operating on the edge of the city every week from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Take a taxi (better than the bus) and prepare to be overwhelmed by phantasmagoric displays of fresh meats, produce, locally made honey (with bees in the jars), kitchenware, radios, used car parts, small electronics, toys, toiletries, new and used clothing, CDs, DVDs, candy, flowers, pinatas, hand-painted crafts, masks, live songbirds, and more, all on display under brightly colored tarps.

Don't be shy about eating at the market, where we found great options for under a dollar. We gorged on grilled blue corn *gorditas* stuffed with chicken and potatoes and served with a side of pickled slaw of cabbage, carrots, and onions.

Dining options in San Miguel range from food stalls to fashionable restaurants. We opted for places serving less expensive, indigenous foods. Several hole-in-the-wall spots merited more than one visit. At La Alborada (415-154-9982, travelbymexico.com/guan/laalborada), an inauspicious restaurant where Maria de Los Angeles cooks traditional recipes learned from her mother, we loved the *pozole* soup made with shredded pork in a spicy red sauce and served with a tortilla.

Amid the stalls selling fruits, vegetables, and flea market wares in Mercado de San Juan de Dios (six blocks from the El Jardin, on Indio Triste), low-cost restaurants—*fon-*

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das—serve foods the locals eat at home. We sampled *huaraches*, fried elongated ovals of corn masa with various toppings such as cheese, sausage, chicken, and *nopales* (prickly pear cactus leaves); battered chiles rellenos with beans and rice; and chicken in a mole sauce.

WE STAYED IN Colonia Guadalupe, one of the oldest neighborhoods in San Miguel. It merits exploring this less touristy part of the city. Our daily excursions involved trips to Via Organica (415-152-8042, viaorganica.org), an organic food market with a small cafe, and Black and White Boutique, also known as Marcia's (415-121-0118, shopgirl.mx), a store for men and women's clothing, locally made artisan crafts, and hats.

It's also worth visiting one of the hot-spring parks located about 6 miles from the city. We appreciated the sprawling lawn, restaurant, and three outdoor and underground pools at La Gruta (415-185-2162, lagrutasp.com) but preferred the simplicity of Escondido Place (415-185-2022, escondidoplace.com), where the scenic thermal pools lead

one to another. It cost 100 pesos (\$7.70) to enter; round-trip taxi was about 200 pesos (\$15.50).

If you aren't renting an apartment, which we secured through a friend, good hotel options in the historic district include Susurro (415-152-1065, susurro.com.mx), a B & B in a restored 18th-century home with lush gardens, from \$155; Casa de Sierra Nevada (800-701-1561, casadesierranevada.com), a collection of colonial mansions and a spa, from \$249; and Dos Casas (415-154-4958, doscasas.com.mx), a chic architect-designed boutique hotel, from \$300.

Daytime average winter temperatures are cool, 58 to 65 degrees, January through March. And though these months are usually dry, our last week was a blur of rain so drenching that stone channels, cut along the edges of streets, became gushing rivers. Soggy and housebound, we ventured out with a handful of origami boats for what unexpectedly became another highlight of our trip, even surpassing our decadent sour cream breakfasts. Standing in the rain, holding umbrellas and a video camera, we launched our paper armada on the swift-moving currents, whooping like children as the tiny ships sped away. ■

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GETTING THERE

FROM BOSTON, FLY TO MEXICO CITY (MEX) OR LEON (BJX), WITH ONE STOP TO CHANGE PLANES EN ROUTE. TRAVEL BY SHUTTLE (BAJIOGOSHUTTLE.COM) TO SAN MIGUEL. APPROXIMATE DRIVE TIME: ABOUT THREE HOURS FROM MEXICO CITY, ONE AND A HALF HOURS FROM LEON.



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