

Magnificent Mexico: the hoteliers, chefs and architects redefining Mexican cool



Mexico City's Palacio de Bellas Artes CREDIT: FOTOLIA

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In the basin of snuffed-out volcanoes that loom over the city, the Valley of Mexico appears in the darkness: a giant lake of electric lava below. As my plane descends, the glow turns into what looks like a black velvet cloak embroidered with multicoloured glass beads: the lights of 21 million people.

From the tips of its cathedrals to the bowels of its foundations, Mexico City is strikingly complex. Buried beneath the 7, 218ft-high metropolis lies the 14th-century Aztec kingdom Tenochtitlan: a city of canals five times the size of Tudor London. Layered on top of it, church upon temple, sits the colonial “City of Palaces” founded in 1519 as the capital of New Spain. And interlaced with them are works of the great modern Mexican architects who carry their ancestors’ creative DNA.



Museo Soumaya in Mexico City, by the Mexican architect Fernando Romero CREDIT: GETTY IMAGES

Mexico has experienced many post-colonial revolutions. Today, two centuries after Independence, there's another one, spurred on by innovative local chefs, hoteliers, architects, designers, eco-vintners and craft distillers who are redefining Mexican identity – many, like those national figureheads Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, reclaiming their indigenous roots. It is to experience this maverick energy that I am taking a road journey from Mexico City, now considered one of the safest in South America, to the colonial heartlands into the dynamic Bajío area, and up through the Western Sierra Madre mountains to the Pacific coast.

I am staying in Polanquito, the bohemian part of Polanco DF's luxury southern district, a placid enclave of boutiques and award-winning restaurants – Mexico is home to 10 of the 50 best in Latin America – where traffic obligingly stops on the grand avenidas when I step in the road. Here the well-heeled sip organic hot chocolate or saunter with chihuahuas through the adjoining Chapultepec Forest where gold Monarch butterflies flit like marigold petals through ancient woodland of silvery Montezuma cypress trees. The emperor's former garden is now one of the largest city parks in the world.



The courtyard of Chapultepec Castle CREDIT: FOTOLIA

Above this buried empire, two recently erected “pyramids” have established Polanco as the new luxury capital of Latin America. El Palacio de Hierro is a 253,000sq ft haute-fashion temple in an imposing Aztec-inspired complex designed by Javier Sordo Madaleno Bringas, son of Mexican modernist Juan Sordo Madaleno. And Museo Soumaya, Mexico’s very own Taj Mahal, is a dumbbell-shaped structure of hexagonal aluminium tiles built by telecommunications mogul Carlos Slim Helú in honour of his eponymous late wife. The gallery, which houses his art collection, is a family affair designed by his son-in-law architect Fernando Romero, with whom Norman Foster has partnered on Mexico City’s new airport, due to be the most sustainable one in the world.

But the true wonders of today’s Mexico City are independent-spirited, bijou and rooted in the past. “Today’s rock-star chefs are reinventing their grandmothers’ recipes,” 30-year-old food evangelist Juan Pablo Ballesteros tells me over a shot of Pox, a corn liquor once used by the Mayans for ceremonial purposes. The great-grandson of Rafael, who founded the classic Café Tacuba in 1912, owns the downtown restaurant Los Limosneros, a love letter to artisanal Mexico, with an ethos that’s organic, seasonal and anti-monopoly.



The Catedral de México in Zocalo CREDIT: FOTOLIA

“The Aztecs believed when you got drunk you released the 400 rabbits,” chuckles Ernesto, my lavishly cologned guide, also an opera singer, who I meet in the oldest part of the historic centre, the Zócalo, at Templo Mayor, the only excavated portion of Tenochtitlan. His theatrical persuasions bring the Aztec temple alive: I can almost see the feathers of the bird-serpent god Quetzalcoatl ruffle, and smell blood on the sacrificial stones of the world-class Anthropological Museum. That night, at Licorería Limantour, the best cocktail bar in Latin America, Majer Tejado, the first woman to win the title of best mixologist in Mexico, serves me a Jamaica Mescal with hibiscus-flavoured craft mescal in a terracotta jar. After my third, I have released several hundred rabbits and convince myself I’m drinking from a ceremonial Aztec urn.

The next morning, we drive to the UNAM university campus to meet Cuauhtémoc Medina, congenial chief curator of MUAC, Mexico’s answer to Tate Modern, whose art fairs are now firm fixtures on the international circuit. “The world has realised there’s more to Mexican art than just Frida and Diego,” he tells me as I experience the work of electronic artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: two copper conductors that pick up the rhythm of my heartbeat and send it flickering across 300 light bulbs on the ceiling.



Teotihuacan CREDIT: FOTOLIA

Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera were early collectors of pre-Columbian artefacts. I imagine Diego pop-eyed and portly, Frida as potent as a shot of tequila, wandering the pueblos of the Sierra Madre bartering for pottery, as we head an hour north out of the city to Teotihuacan. Built by an unknown Mesoamerican group in 100BC, and abandoned around 550AD, it is the most mysterious pyramid complex in Mexico. Vermilion flycatchers dart from nearby pine trees as we blast up in a hot-air balloon: the best way to see Teotihuacan's near-9,000-acre immensity. Eagles hover parallel to us as Ernesto points out the Pyramids of the Moon and the Sun below. "One giant big astrological clock," he explains, as we descend for an after-hours tour with archaeologist Professor Ramos.

I have a whole Mesoamerican city to myself and watch the dropping sun bathe the volcanic stone in tangerine light. At dusk, we head north again, passing through a ranch rearing fighting bulls, the roadside lined with barrel cactus as straight as carved jade columns. The stars are so close to the earth that Orion appears as if in a yoga pose on the horizon.

We break our journey in San Miguel de Allende, the most immaculate of the preserved colonial silver-mining cities, lined with cobbled streets and oxblood-coloured houses, in the mountainous state of Guanajuato. It was in San Miguel that the silver barons built their family homes away from the harsh realities of the mines and, in nearby Dolores Hidalgo that the War of Independence started in 1810. Today, San Miguel is a magnet for an international community of artists, but there are still Mexican gems to be found. At Fábrica La Aurora, a high-end art centre in a former textile factory, is the gallery and studio of Fernando M Díaz, who emerges with paint-splattered trainers worthy of a Jackson Pollock. He is 63, but his work comes straight from the heart of the new movement, a red sculpture in iron and steel incorporating Aztec motifs and another blue one featuring two round circles, the sign of rain god Tlaloc.



San Miguel de Allende CREDIT: FOTOLIA

The latter is also the emblem of Cuna de Tierra, an award-winning boutique eco-vineyard and organic farm that farms freshwater crayfish, near Dolores Hidalgo. With Guanajuato state's microclimate and fecund volcanic soils in the Sierra Madre, Cuna de Tierra produces world-class wines: it has won many contests in Europe and is a leader in the new Mexican wine movement here and in Baja California. "We are so proud," says Paco, Cuna's quixotic barrels expert. "Mexican wines once had a terrible reputation but that's changing. It's like Napa Valley 30 years ago."

My ears pop as we drive higher into the Sierra Madre towards state capital Guanajuato. Cyclists puff up the mountainside to the ruins of La Valenciana mine. Founded in 1558, it produced almost a third of the world's silver by the 18th century. Thankfully, my new guide, Alfredo, is driving: the route into the city – a Unesco World Heritage Site whose colonial glory is largely undiscovered by the outside world – involves labyrinthine underground tunnels, the legacy of the redirection of a river. I spend the next day photographing Churrigueresque churches, mansions in shades of turquoise, mustard and wild rose, and getting lost in a warren of alleys, peering through lace curtains as housewives mill fresh tortillas. Later, I sit outside the concert hall and the valley's acoustics act like a giant stone ear to the soprano voices rising into the night sky.



The bar at Villa Maria Cristina in Guanajuato

“Jalisco state is land of tequila, mariachi bands and charro riders,” Alfredo tells me as we head three hours west towards the state border next morning. We drive by shiny macho trucks, through ranches where rancheros sway on ambling palaminos. Yet Jalisco’s capital, Guadalajara, Mexico’s second city, is the epitome of cultured urban chic; it hosts FIL, the biggest book fair in Latin America, and the international film festival FICG. In Lafayette, the new hipster district, an art deco and modernist design haven, I hire a bike and explore the streets of white and peach bungalows, on which jacaranda blossom rains down. Pritzker Prize-winning architect Luis Barrigán’s early work is here: buildings created before he met Le Corbusier and fused modernist clean lines with Aztec primal colours, creating a blueprint for Mexico’s future generations.



Casa Fayette, a new boutique hotel in Guadalajara

Guadalajaran brothers Alberto and Hector, a delightful comic double act, are to be my guides to the red-earthed highlands of Jalisco and its boutique tequila distilleries. As the city disappears, we enter a strange landscape of neat rows of spiky blue agave where harvesters are digging up the giant pineapple-like fruit and hacking off its leaves with machetes.

We drive on into the bone-white midday sun, over bare, dry mountains, their peaks stubbled with an occasional pine. It takes two hours for my ears to decompress as we descend the Sierra Madre and pass through flowering sugar-cane plantations. In another hour we are at sea level in the lush Pacific state of Nayarit, driving along the coastal road of the Bay of Banderas, lined with coconut and mango stalls.



Imanta Resorts, Punta Mita

We pass the resort towns and head to the boutique retreat Imanta, on 250 acres of privately owned jungle on the exclusive Punta Mita coast.

I spend the next morning on top of the observation tower watching for humpback whales, then the afternoon riding bareback on the beach as my mare throws up powdery sand, and prehistoric-looking chachalaca birds swoop overhead. Soon time and history sink with the sun, and I am left alone with the primal breath of the Pacific and the fragile immortality of the stars. In so many ways, Mexico has changed. Here, though, it seems as though nothing has.

*A 14-day Mexican journey with **Brown + Hudson** (020 3358 0110) costs from £9,600 per person. This includes international and domestic flights, b&b accommodation in boutique properties, transfers, activities, guides and private tours with specialists, including a museum curator, a designer and a tequila expert.*