



Mexico

With Maya temples and Aztec pyramids, colonial cities and haciendas of the Spanish conquest, local markets, colourful fiestas, and mariachi bands, Mexico's cultural heritage is second to none. Tropical jungles lie alongside mountains and deserts, whilst the coast offers white sand beaches and azure-blue waters with excellent snorkelling and diving.

The road network around Mexico is good and overland combinations with Guatemala and Belize are possible.

Climate and when to go

Mexico is a year-round destination with higher temperatures in the rainy season of May to October. The hurricane season, generally around September, can affect the Caribbean coast. The area around the Sierra Madre, which extends from the US border down to Mexico City, has a more moderate climate with warm days and cool nights, although winter (December to February) can be cold.



Copper Canyon



Palenque



Campeche



Near Espiritu Santo, Sea of Cortés



Mexico City

Mexico City, founded in 1521 on the ashes of the Aztec island citadel of Tenochtitlán, is a modern and hectic sprawl, home to over 20 million people. It has excellent museums, galleries, markets, cathedrals and plazas surrounded by fine colonial architecture. A short drive away are the colourful floating gardens of Xochimilco, offering a glimpse of the original waterways on which the capital was founded, and the impressive Aztec ruins of Teotihuacán.



The Alameda, Mexico City

Oaxaca

Oaxaca, capital of Oaxaca state, was founded in 1521 on an earlier native site. The 'City of Jade' seamlessly blends its native and colonial past in fine stone buildings, set around the impressive Zócalo (main square), colourful markets and delicious regional cuisine. The Zapotec sites of **Monte Albán** and Mitla are nearby. Oaxaca's cultural roots are particularly evident during the Guelaguetza festival celebrated each July, a beautiful display of costume, music and dance performed by groups from the surrounding regions.



Oaxaca

CASA OAXACA




In central Oaxaca, a colonial boutique hotel with good-sized pool, excellent restaurant and large patio area. Daily yoga lessons on the rooftop terrace. An excellent base to visit the Monte Albán ruins and local markets.

HACIENDAS OF MEXICO

Each of these Starwood haciendas has a different character. All have lovely pools, a spa, horses and mountain bikes:

HACIENDA UAYAMÓN



 40 minutes from Campeche, founded in the 16th century as a cattle ranch, later a sisal plantation. 12 large, private casitas set in jungle with outside patio or sitting area.

HACIENDA SANTA ROSA



The smallest of the haciendas with 11 rooms, in the heart of a village. Rooms mainly in the original building which has been lovingly restored. Two pools, botanical gardens in the grounds. Ideal for families.

HACIENDA SAN JOSÉ



Spacious hacienda with 15 rooms spread out over large grounds. Relaxed atmosphere. Lovely chapel with 18th century murals, which still holds wedding services.

HACIENDA TEMOZÓN



The largest of the haciendas, with a slightly more formal feel. Wonderful veranda, spacious rooms, traditional tiled floors. Original plantation machinery in grounds.



DOS CASAS



In the centre of San Miguel de Allende. Colonial hotel with 5 unique rooms - the special honeymoon suite has its own private jacuzzi with views over the city. Very homely kitchen, breakfast can be prepared and eaten as you chat to the chef! Personal and friendly service.

IKAL DEL MAR



 In Xcalococo village, 30 minutes from Cancún on the Riviera Maya. Modern, secluded hotel with 30 villas nestled in tropical jungle, each with a private plunge pool, terrace, outside shower and minimalist, stylish interior. Snorkelling, diving, spa treatments, yoga, Maya ruins.

MAROMA



 15 minutes from Playa del Carmen. Formal yet relaxed Orient-Express hotel on a beautiful beach amidst 200 acres of jungle. Secluded and romantic with large grounds and stunning ocean views. Snorkelling, diving, spa treatments, tennis, Maya ruins.

The colonial heartlands

Heading north from Mexico City is El Bajío, a region of beautiful colonial cities built on the wealth of silver mines and renowned for their baroque architecture, ornate churches and pretty cobbled streets. The smallest and prettiest is **San Miguel de Allende**, a good base from which to explore the university town of Guanajuato and the restored 18th century missions outside Querétaro. The town of Zacatecas is carved into the slopes of Cerro de la Bufa. To the west, in the state of **Michoacán**, is the picturesque town of Pátzcuaro, most famous for its colourful 'Day of the Dead' celebrations on 1-2 November. Morelia is another charming colonial town, close to the El Campanario Ecological reserve which witnesses the spectacular annual migration of the Monarch butterfly from December to March.

Chiapas: San Cristóbal de las Casas and Palenque

Chiapas is Mexico's Maya heartland with the country's most enchanting ruin, **Palenque**, an eight square mile site still partially covered in vegetation and hidden in the rainforest, which stretches south towards the Guatemalan border. 4 hours' drive away, in the fertile Jovel valley, is the pretty colonial town of **San Cristóbal de las Casas**, rich in Indian culture. In the surrounding hills are mysterious Indian villages, like **San Juan Chamula** with its brightly-coloured church. Other attractions include the waterfalls and rapids of Agua Azul and Misol-Há, and the 1,000 metre deep Sumidero canyon, near Tuxtla.



Isla Holbox



Chichen Itzá

The Yucatán peninsula: Cancún, Mérida and Chichén-Itzá

Jutting into the Caribbean, the **Yucatán peninsula** sprang to fame in the 70's with the development of the Cancún beach resorts. With easy access, this is Mexico's most popular tourist destination (and a hire car is a practical way of making the most of a visit). Countless Maya ruins, of which **Chichén-Itzá** is the largest and most famous in the area, are just a short drive from the colonial city of **Mérida**. Alternatively, several elegant and historic haciendas have opened their doors to visitors and not only provide a glimpse of rural life, but make a comfortable base for visits to the area, including the charming colonial port of **Campeche**.

For the coast, whether you choose the lively resorts like Playa del Carmen or Isla Mujeres, or a secluded luxury hotel, stunning beaches and crystal-clear waters are guaranteed. Off the northern coast is **Isla Holbox**, a protected peninsula with idyllic beaches and excellent wildlife viewing (whale sharks are present from June to September).



Beach at Maroma



Izamal



The Pacific coast and Guadalajara

The Pacific coast is another ideal beach location, with year-round good weather. Although **Acapulco**, with over a million permanent residents, is Mexico's most famous Pacific resort, there are a number of exclusive hotels stretching north to **Puerto Vallarta** offering a more intimate and secluded experience. Away from the coast, **Guadalajara**, a modern metropolis built around a historic quarter, has several fine museums, and the town of Tequila with its 12 distilleries is just an hour away.



Copper Canyon



Dunes on the Sea of Cortés



Baja California and the Northern highlands

In the north-western corner of Mexico is the rugged desert peninsula of **Baja California**, a bony finger of land which averages only 80km in width and runs over 1,000km south to the exclusive beach resorts at Los Cabos. Bordered to the west by the Pacific and to the east by the **Sea of Cortés**, the peninsula is renowned as a paradise for marine life, notably sea turtles, dolphins and whales. Humpback, fin, blue and Bryde's whales are visitors to the Gulf of California, while the Pacific provides some of the last breeding grounds of the protected Pacific grey whales, almost hunted to extinction during the last century. **La Paz**, in southern Baja California, is a good base from which to organise whale-watching, sea kayaking, diving and surfing.

Mexico's northern highlands are dominated by the Sierra Madre mountains and the wonderful **Copper Canyon**, a vast network of gullies, gorges and mountains larger in scale (and far less visited) than the Grand Canyon. Access is by road from Chihuahua or, more impressively, along the famous *Chihuahua-al-Pacifico* railroad. The route cuts a dizzying trail from the Pacific coastline to the heights of the canyon, and beyond as far as the US border at El Paso.



Pacific coast



Train to Copper Canyon

MAJAHUITAS



Secluded lodge on the Pacific Coast, reached by road and boat from Puerto Vallarta. Simple solar-powered casitas dotted around a sandy cove. Evening meals tend to be eaten around a communal table. It is a perfect place to relax, snorkel or kayak. Part of the profits go to the indigenous community of Chacala.

HOTELITO DESCONOCIDO



Remote position 2 hours south of Puerto Vallarta. Solar-powered, candle-lit by night, half of the rooms set on stilts over water; the remainder reached by canoe across a lagoon. Good food, relaxing atmosphere, outstanding service, expansive stretch of sandy beach, good for birdwatchers or beach-lovers.



Mexico Itineraries

MEXICO CITY, SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS, PALENQUE, CAMPECHE, CANCÚN



A relaxed journey featuring many aspects of Mexican culture, including Indian villages, Maya ruins and Caribbean coast.

Mexico City

Days 1-2: Two nights at the Hotel Marqués Reforma, well-positioned for the nearby museums and parks.

Chiapas

Days 3-5: Fly to Tuxtla Gutiérrez and driven to the highland village of San Cristóbal de las Casas for 3 nights at the Hotel Flamboyant, full of character, with a pretty courtyard. Visit the

Indian village of San Juan Chamula with its colourful church.

Palenque

Days 6-7: A scenic 4-hour drive through mountainous valleys, visiting the waterfalls at Agua Azul, takes you to Palenque, where you spend 2 nights at the Hotel Ciudad Real, close to the town centre. Visit the spectacular temple ruins, surrounded by dense jungle.

Campeche

Days 8-11: Driven to Hacienda Uayamón, near the Edzná ruins, for a 3 night stay (see page 91), then continue north to the walled town of Campeche. Overnight at Puerta Campeche, in the cobbled streets in front of the old fort, and with an unusual pool flowing through lovely courtyard gardens.

Riviera Maya

Days 12-14: Fly from Campeche to Cancún and driven south for 3 nights at Ikal del Mar (see page 92). Return to Cancún airport for onward connections.



Hotel Flamboyant



Agua Azul



Ikal del Mar

SELF-DRIVE: OAXACA, MÉRIDA, CHICHÉN-ITZÁ, ISLA HOLBOX AND THE RIVIERA MAYA



Experience indigenous food in Oaxaca, Indian village culture and relax on the remote Isla Holbox, where Whale sharks can be seen from June to September.

Mexico City

Day 1: Spend your first night at the elegant Four Seasons Hotel, close to Chapultepec Park in the north zone of the city.

Oaxaca

Days 2-4: Fly to Oaxaca for 3 nights at Casa Oaxaca (see page 91). Visit the colourful markets, ruins, and numerous churches.

Mérida

Days 5-7: Fly to Mérida, collect a hire car, and drive 12km north to the beautiful Hacienda Xcanatún, an 18th century sisal-producing hacienda. Suites are set around tropical gardens, with 2 pools and a spa. 3 nights here gives you time to explore the nearby ruins and visit Mérida.

Chichén-Itzá

Day 8: Drive to Chichén-Itzá for a night at Hacienda Chichen, a peaceful hotel with a pool, used as a base by archaeologists investigating the ruins.

Isla Holbox

Days 9-11: Drive (4 hours) to the port at Chiquilá and take a 20-minute motorboat to Isla Holbox for 3 nights on the beach. Xaloc Resort has a pool, simple but comfortable bungalows, and activities include snorkelling, visits to the mangroves, and turtle and whale-watching trips (in season).

Riviera Maya

Days 12-15: Return by boat to the mainland and drive (3 hours) to Punta Maroma, 40 minutes from Cancún, for 3 nights at Maroma (see page 92), a stylish place to relax. Drop the car at Cancún airport before onward connections.



Hacienda Xcanatún



Hacienda Xcanatún



Hacienda Chichen



Xaloc Resort



COLONIAL CITIES, THE COPPER CANYON AND THE PACIFIC COAST



A wonderful blend of remote beaches, traditional culture and towering mountains.

Colonial Heartlands

Days 1-3: Driven from León airport to the colonial gem of San Miguel de Allende for 3 nights at the stylish Dos Casas (*see page 92*).

Copper Canyon

Days 4-8: Driven (2 hours) to Mexico City, fly to Los Mochis and continue by road to the sleepy colonial town of El Fuerte. Spend a night at

Hacienda El Fuerte, a charming hacienda full of character and bursting with antiques. The following day take the famous *Chihuahua-al-Pacifico* train into the Copper Canyon. Disembark at Bahuichivo for 3 nights at the Cerocahui Wilderness Lodge, perched on the edge of a canyon with fabulous views. Trails start outside the lodge and guided excursions into the heart of the canyons are included. Return by train to Los Mochis for a final night at the modern Hotel Santa Anita, within easy reach of the airport.

Pacific Coast

Days 9-13: Fly to Puerto Vallarta and driven 2 hours south for 4 nights' relaxation at Majahuitas or Hotelito Desconocido (*see page 93*). Return to Puerto Vallarta for onward connections.



Hotel Dos Casas



Hacienda El Fuerte



Cerocahui



KAYAKS, WHALES AND HIKING



A multi-activity group trip through northern Mexico combining kayaking on the Sea of Cortés, whale-watching, and hiking in the fabulous Copper Canyon.

Sea of Cortés kayaking

Days 1-4: Arrive La Paz, meet up with the rest of the group for a night at the colourful Hotel Angel Azul, with simple rooms set in a courtyard around a pretty garden. The following day, cross the Sea of Cortés by speedboat to the golden beaches and turquoise waters of Espiritu Santo island. Three nights camping in small tents pitched on the beaches. Each day is spent paddling to isolated coves and bays of this National Park.

La Paz

Days 5-6: Morning swim with a resident sea-lion colony before returning to La Paz for 2 nights and a full day to recover, at the Angel Azul.

Magdalena Bay whale-watching

Days 7-8: Driven to the village of López Mateos for 2 days whale-watching in Magdalena Bay, breeding ground of the endangered Californian grey whale. Return to La Paz in time for the overnight ferry across the Gulf of California.

Copper Canyon hike

Days 9-14: Early arrival in Topolobampo and transfer to El Fuerte for a night in the Hostería El Fuerte. The following morning take the wonderful *Chihuahua-al-Pacifico* train which winds its way up into the Sierra Madre Mountains and into the Copper Canyon. After a night in the Cerocahui Wilderness Lodge, start a 3 day hike into Copper Canyon. The trail is arduous but the views spectacular as you reach the top of the Urique valley. 2 nights are spent camping in simple farmsteads before descending for a well-earned night at the comfortable Hotel Rio Batopilas.

Days 15-16: A spectacular drive takes you out of the Canyon proper to the frontier town of Creel for a night at The Lodge at Creel. Continue by road to Chihuahua (4 hours) for a final night in the modern Hotel San Francisco, next to the central plaza and cathedral. Transfer to the airport for onward connections.

Whale-watching is best between January and April when grey whales gather in their breeding lagoons. Each element of the trip can be done as a separate unit and can also be run on a private basis.



Hotel Angel Azul



Preparing the kayaks



Sea of Cortés



Copper Canyon