



Andrew Harper's Hideaway Report[®]

A connoisseur's worldwide guide to peaceful and unspoiled places

The Charming and Authentic World of Colonial Mexico

WHEN MOST FOREIGNERS think of Mexico, the modern coastal resorts of Cabo San Lucas, Puerto Vallarta and Cancún come instantly to mind. But for the inquisitive traveler seeking a genuinely authentic and fascinating cultural experience, nothing quite compares to the romantic colonial heartland. In this peaceful and timeless corner of the world, age-old customs and traditions continue to thrive in beautifully preserved towns where contented inhabitants leisurely savor the everyday richness of life.

Showcases of color and celebration, our two favorite places are San Miguel de Allende and nearby Guanajuato, both tucked away in the cool mountainous highlands a half-day's drive northwest of Mexico City. These wonderfully picturesque towns feature a wealth of exquisite colonial architecture, reflected in a jumble of elegant mansions

and stately old churches dedicated to a myriad of patron saints. Narrow cobblestone streets come lined with festive traditional cafés, eclectic galleries, craft shops, stylish boutiques and alluring pastel dwellings centerpieced by flowering courtyards and splashing fountains.

A convivial sense of community is palpably evident, especially in the lively, tree-shaded central squares where residents and visitors come to linger and relax to the rousing and passionate sounds of mariachis and *northern*. Everyone seems to be a musician at heart, and fiestas are a regular occurrence. Then, too, skilled potters, woodcarvers, metalsmiths, cabinetmakers and weavers all feel at home here, creating an enchanting array of fanciful folk art and fine home furnishings that boggle the mind.

Expect a benign year-round climate, the months of November-May representing the driest time of year, with daytime temperatures typically in the 70s, dropping into the upper 40s at night from December-February. Access to the region is via the international airports at León, Morelia and Mexico City, where hotels can usually arrange the necessary transfers. If you prefer, our travel office can also develop a carefree customized itinerary for you, which can include a knowledgeable, full-time driver guide. For complete details, Tel. (800) 375-4685.

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San Miguel de Allende

DESIGNATED AS A NATIONAL HISTORIC MONUMENT more than 80 years ago, San Miguel de Allende has admirably retained its quintessential colonial character and looks much as it did in the 1700s. Narrow cobblestone streets thread the steeply sloped historic core, which is punctuated by splendid old churches and well-preserved 18th-Century mansions, many sheltering an eclectic variety of fascinating galleries, boutiques and restaurants. An animated, park-like central square (El Jardín) serves as the focal point for the pedestrian-oriented community that tempers its endearing provincial feel with a distinctively cosmopolitan flair. Indeed, much like Santa Fe, New Mexico, San Miguel has become one of North America's leading art colonies. As a result, the town has also attracted a loyal contingent of American and Canadian expats who relish the area's rich culture, pleasant climate, low-key Latin ambience, safe streets and respect for centuries-old traditions.

Comprised of several historic mansions interspersed with intimate courtyards (a brief stroll from El Jardín), **CASA DE SIERRA NEVADA** continues to be the best full-service lodging choice. The property was purchased by Orient-Express Hotels in 2006 and has just completed an extensive renovation of its 35 accommodations and most public facilities (the final project, a new spa and fitness center, to debut sometime in 2008). Individually decorated with regional arts and crafts, many of the suites feature working fireplaces and private terraces, the units in "Casa Limón" being closest to the 50-foot garden pool and newly restored El Centro restaurant. The hotel's largest suites are in the "Casa del Parque" annex, a beautifully updated colonial villa bordering Benito Juárez Park. Located a 10-minute walk (or short taxi ride) from the main hotel and central plaza, the structure also houses a noteworthy Mexican restaurant beneath the pink

colonnades of a fetching garden verandah. Junior Suite, \$355; Suite, \$435. Tel. (52) 415-152-7040 or Fax (52) 415-152-1436. Email: mail@casadesierranevada.com

On our latest incognito trip, we were also impressed with **THE OASIS**, a stylishly appointed and enviably situated new inn tucked down a side street two blocks from El Jardín. Imaginatively crafted from an 18th-Century courtyard residence, its four luxuriously equipped guest quarters feature Mexican/Moroccan décors and a host of unexpected amenities ranging from fireplaces and flat-screen TVs/DVDs to complimentary WiFi Internet access, same-day laundry service and in-room spa treatments. Request the larger "Nomad Suite" (actually a junior suite), with its soothing "water wall" and private patio. Breakfast is the only meal served, though the inn has a full-service bar and offers afternoon wine/cocktails on a panoramic rooftop terrace. For dinner, the gracious front desk can direct you to many superb restaurants only a short walk away. Double/Single, \$260, breakfast included; Nomad Suite, \$320. Tel. (52) 415-154-9850 or Fax (52) 415-154-9852. Email: info@oasisanmiguel.com

A fully staffed private villa is another alternative for families or couples traveling together. San Miguel offers a multitude of first-class selections, and rental rates are quite reasonable. To view some of our preferred properties, go to www.andrewharper.com and click on "Villas & Yachts," or call our travel office at (800) 375-4685.

San Miguel is blessed with many excellent restaurants where you can dine well and at relatively modest expense. Most of our favorite places are clustered within a few blocks of the central plaza and come enlivened with Mexican/Latin bands and talented guitarists. For a special night on the town and fine Mexican/Continental cuisine, reserve a table on the beguiling rooftop terrace of **La Capilla**, overlooking San Miguel's imposing and iconic neo-Gothic cathedral; another lively spot is **Mama Mia** (Umaran 8), which specializes in Italian/Continental fare; for innovative international fusion dishes, opt for **Nirvana** at the Casa Linda Hotel (Mesones 101); great steaks are the draw next door at **Tío Lucas**, a friendly bistro with a welcoming patio; and for the most sophisticated regional cuisine and arguably the best *chiles en nogada* on the planet, our choice would be **Bugambilia** (Hidalgo 42).

As we noted, the town is a shopper's paradise, featuring a treasure trove of galleries and craft studios selling all manner of folk art objects, fine art, copper/iron creations, ceramics, weavings, silver jewelry, handpainted furniture and colonial-era artifacts. In addition to the downtown stores, visit **Fabrica La Aurora**, a short taxi ride from El Jardín. Housed in a former 19th-Century cotton mill,

