

San Miguel de Allende

A UNESCO-listed colonial center.
Fascinating museums and a thriving arts
scene. Magical rooftop bars for drinking
in the views as well as the sunsets.
Is this the world's best city?

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ALLOY PHOTOGRAPHY / VEER



BRYAN BUSOVICK / THINKSTOCK

THE OLD-FASHIONED TROLLEY rumbles along San Miguel de Allende's cobblestone streets. "Look through those open doors!" exclaims our trolley tour guide. Hidden behind the street-front doors of this colonial Mexican town, we spy magnificent Baroque and neo-Gothic mansions built around garden courtyards with fountains; many now house boutique hotels, designer shops, restaurants and art galleries. We crane our necks to see inside, but too many beautiful buildings vie for our attention. San Miguel's entire historic center – more than 24 blocks – looks as if it popped right out of a fairy tale.

There's the Church of the Immaculate Conception, crowned by a cupola with Corinthian columns, beside a yellow convent on Canal Street. "In the 1700s, the enormously wealthy Canal family's young daughter wanted to be a nun, so she asked the King of Spain if she could build a convent for 72 nuns," our guide rattles off.

Look at La Parroquia Church with its pink neo-Gothic façade and soaring spires (supposedly built from a postcard of Gaudi's Sagrada Familia in Barcelona). And is that historic-looking hacienda really the swank new Rosewood hotel?

San Miguel de Allende is a Mexican city unlike any other. At 6,000 feet above sea level in the heart of Mexico, it has no beaches, but it makes up for that in spades with its art, architecture and culture. It's safe and the hot spot to visit right now. *Conde Nast Traveler* readers even voted it the best city in the world in 2013 for its



KEREN SU/CHINA SPAN / ALAMY

"great atmosphere, excellent restaurants, culture and ambience galore."

An important center along Mexico's old Spanish-colonial silver route, San Miguel is studded with well-preserved 17th and 18th century buildings. Most are painted orange, rust and pink. Colorful bougainvillea vines climb up walls, and little plazas and parks overflow with palm trees and laurels. When the sun sets and wrought-iron lamplights cast a golden glow, the town feels absolutely magical. If

you decided then and there you were never going to leave, you'd join good company.

Almost 20 per cent of San Miguel's 80,000 residents are expats, most from the U.S., Canada and Europe. They're an engaged, talented lot who paint, sculpt, make jewelry, offer art classes, run restaurants and beguiling boutique hotels, raise funds for restoration projects, teach Spanish and volunteer – turning San Miguel into a thriving cultural community.

Take Bill Le Vasseur. One moment, the former ad executive and his wife were building a retirement home here. The next, he founded the remarkable non-profit "Other Face of Mexico" mask museum, open by appointment. Bill invites us for a glass of wine at his B&B (which the retirement home morphed into). Turns out he's traveled all across rural Mexico to collect over 500 ceremonial masks used in dances and rituals.

San Miguel de Allende is a colorful tapestry of Mexican culture, guaranteed to fascinate.



PHOTO COURTESY ROSEWOOD HOTELS

Luna Rooftop Tapas Bar nails the rooftop bar experience in San Miguel de Allende. On top of the deluxe new Rosewood hotel – overlooking the Gothic-inspired La Parroquia church, twinkling lights and terracotta roofs – it’s hands-down the best place at sunset for stupendous views of the city. Bartenders mix up inventive cocktails like hibiscus and tamarind margaritas. The “Oasis San Miguel” even contains artisanal ice cubes made of green tea, lemon and Angelica. But wait until the sun sets before ordering Baja-style lobster tacos and other tapas. That’s because you’ll be totally transfixed by the changing light and colors as the sky first turns gold, then pink and finally a deep velvet purple. If you get chilly, heat lamps and blankets add cozy warmth as you settle back into down-filled cushions. Yes, it’s magic, pure and simple.

San Miguel is a feast for the senses: Colorful colonial streets, courtyard cafés, traditional Mexican musicians, a fascinating museum of masks, and the “Sistine Chapel of Mexico.”

On our fascinating tour of the museum, we see masks adorned with bull horns and boar bristles, and death masks with devil figures. One strange “mask” is a thick wooden belt with a football-sized horse’s head sticking out front – it symbolizes a Spanish general on horseback leading the Christian charge against Spain’s Moors.

Another day, we drive to the Sanctuary of Atotonilco with local Italian architect Roberto Burillo Eguia Lis. Dubbed the “Sistine Chapel of Mexico,” the interior walls and ceilings of this 18th century church are covered with sculptures of gilded virgins, inscriptions and vivid painted frescoes of horned devils, flowers and red-robed priests.

Images are being authentically restored to retain their centuries-old character “in a

way that doesn’t kill the ghosts,” Roberto explains. His and his partner’s work led to the Sanctuary and San Miguel being jointly designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008. And it’s from this church that heroic Father Miguel Hidalgo galloped off in 1810, starting the revolt that led to Mexico’s independence.

Beyond art and architecture, you can find serenity outdoors. Take El Charco del Ingenio on the town’s outskirts. Created by a private citizens’ initiative, this 67-hectare botanical garden and nature preserve is home to a sprawling array of cacti. (The man-size, Y-shaped cucharilla, over 300 years old, gets our vote as “most unusual.”) Miles of hiking trails wind through peaceful country overlooking a river-carved

valley floor, home to egrets and ducks. After a refreshing cactus juice, it’s only a scenic 15-minute walk back to town.

The town’s restaurants are a special treat. We eat excellent organic scrambled eggs at Café Contento – one of the owners was chef to former Mexican president Vicente Fox. In a lovely courtyard setting, The Restaurant is popular with expats (try the tuna tartare with wasabi, corn and avocado) and the cave-like La Grotta is our cozy refuge one rainy evening, with soul-satisfying, wood-oven pizza. We even tried fried grasshoppers – a popular local snack – crunchy! At sunset, rooftop bars are popular for drinking in the views as well as margaritas.

There’s more to do here too. Discover your inner child at a world-class toy museum. Strut your stuff at salsa dance classes. Simply soak up the colonial charm while wandering the colorful tangle of streets (fun to see residents pattering by on ATVs). San Miguel is also a great jumping-off point to explore other colonial jewels like Guanajuato, just an hour away. ♦

IF YOU GO Leon International Airport is a 90-minute drive from San Miguel de Allende, or take the excellent first-class bus from Mexico City or Guadalajara (a four-hour drive) – check ETN or Primera Plus. For information on visiting San Miguel de Allende, see: www.visitmexico.com/en/san-miguel-de-allende and www.visitsanmiguel.travel





OLD-WORLD ELEGANCE AT QUINTA LAS ACACIAS

BUILT IN THE 19TH CENTURY as a French-style mansion, Quinta Las Acacias is the picture of old-world elegance – mixing European antiques with colorful Mexican touches and hospitality.

A member of Mexico Boutique Hotels, it sits on a leafy cobblestone street a 20-minute walk uphill from the historic center of colonial Guanajuato. The original main house has six rooms with polished timbered floors and flowered wallpaper. But for more space, sound-proofing and king-size beds, book one of the ten newer larger suites – some traditional, some more modern – in separate stone buildings climbing up the hillside behind. The newest, sprinkled around a cactus garden up top, have views of the Guanajuato Mountains.

Each room is different. Our traditional suite was once a kitchen, featuring a built-in yellow-tiled stove and counter, huge copper chimney and a playful tequila bottle display. A tall beaten silver-framed mirror stood in one corner, and blue-and-white porcelain

lamps framed the bed. Wood-shuttered windows hid a teeny balcony. Thoughtful touches included free in-room WiFi, coffee maker and a vase of fresh red irises. Maids dressed prettily in pale pink dresses and white aprons kept our room impeccably clean (and tucked in the green budgies in the birdcage outside each night). Minor quibble: we found our bathroom with no windows a bit dark.

Breakfast (included in the rates) is served in the inn's wood-paneled dining room. Lace placemats and silverware enhance the gracious setting for fresh-squeezed orange juice, warm muffins and omelettes or apple crepes. For dinner, head to acclaimed Las Mercedes in Guanajuato for inventive Mexican cuisine (try their amazing Xoconostle cactus margaritas).

After checking out several hotels in Guanajuato, we're confident Quinta Las Acacias is the best place to stay in this charming UNESCO-listed town.



GEORGE MICALOV

COLONIAL LIVING AT CASA DE SIERRA NEVADA

CHECKING IN AT Casa de Sierra Nevada? Don't look for a regular hotel building. The 37 rooms and suites of this Belmond hotel are housed in different 16th to 18th century, colonial-style mansions sprinkled in the heart of UNESCO-listed San Miguel de Allende. The reception and restaurant was across the cobblestone street from our one-bedroom suite.

Rooms have high timbered or curved ceilings, talavera-tiled bathrooms, original paintings and stone, tile or hardwood floors. But each is individually decorated. Some have wood-burning fireplaces and freestanding beaten silver or copper tubs. Others have decks with unbelievable views of the colonial town's rose-hued rooftops and tolling bells of La Parroquia church. Organic lavender-scented bath products and free in-room WiFi are other nice touches.

We hit the jackpot with our suite, tucked away in "Casa Limon," built around a garden courtyard with a 60-foot pool surrounded by lawn. It had an indoor/outdoor shower and private walled courtyard with lounge furniture and a stone plunge pool (though too cool to use in January when we visited). Casa de Sierra Nevada's Laja Spa has a Temazcal (a type of stone sweat lodge) and offers shaman-led purifying rituals. And you can take cooking classes at Sazon, its highly-regarded culinary school.

The location is ideal. Just a couple of blocks from the Gaudi-inspired La Parroquia church and central square, it's an easy walk from shops, restaurants (great bakery around the corner!) and most of San Miguel's attractions. That's perhaps what we loved best about Casa de Sierra Nevada – instead of staying as guests in a could-be-anywhere hotel, we felt like we were living in an historic apartment (minus the kitchen) right in San Miguel.