

Mexico: Five Places We (Really) Love

By Becca Hensley



Tulum, Mexico.

Photo by Getty Images/CampPhoto

Climb to the top of an ancient pyramid, swim with whale sharks in the Pacific Ocean, or explore centuries-old colonial towns. From Frida mania and stylish city streets to culinary traditions and cultural treasures, [Mexico](#)'s largesse goes beyond palm-lined beaches and tony resorts.

“It’s the people – their smiles and warmth – that bring me back,” says Austin-based Virtuoso advisor Mauricio Hanna. A diverse, big-hearted country that treats visitors like family, Mexico invites you to visit soon.

Los Cabos

The area is called Land’s End for its location on the southernmost tip of the Baja Peninsula, but also for its otherworldly terrain – a cactus-mottled blanket of desert. “The contrast between the desert and the sea is breathtaking here,” says Hanna. Known as Los Cabos for the two cities ([Cabo San Lucas](#) and [San Jose del Cabo](#)) that bookend its 20-mile-long, resort-rich strip, this destination draws families, honeymooners, and water sports aficionados.

In the past, Los Cabos’ undeveloped shores attracted Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck (who visited to deep-sea fish, still a popular pastime) and a slew of old-Hollywood celebrities (like Bing Crosby and John Wayne) in search of a south-of-the-border hideaway.

Sequester yourself at the [Resort at Pedregal](#) in Cabo San Lucas, which Hanna finds “effortlessly luxurious.” Tucked amid cliffs and accessible via a tunnel through a mountain, Pedregal delivers tranquility just minutes from the town’s boutique- and bar-rife entertainment district. Composed of mini-villas and suites, the resort stretches along the beach in the shadows of towering cliffs, facing a tumultuous cobalt sea.

The hotel is a superior vantage point for spying whales from October through April, especially from the Ocean View Deluxe Terrace suites that corner the second and third floors. You can also stay busy with classes from tequila tasting to yoga. Don’t miss dinner at El Farallon, an alfresco restaurant hewed into the cliffs at the far end of the resort. With a celebratory champagne bar, your choice of fresh catch entrees, and the symphony of the sea’s crashing waves, eating here is sure to be a highlight.



Los Cabos, Mexico.

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Mexico City

Massive and vibrant, [Mexico City](#) excites the senses. Charismatic neighborhoods – especially in the historic center – offer accessibility and charm amid the fervent urbanity. As a European-style capital, Mexico City emits international savvy, but its fusion of cultures sets it apart. At the city’s core, old meets new, running the gamut from prehistoric Aztec relics in the Templo Mayor to Spanish Colonial churches marked by baroque facades near the main square, the Zócalo.

“The historic center of Mexico City contains perhaps the most extraordinary buildings, museums, and art in the world. Begin tours of the city at Palacio Nacional, where Diego

Rivera murals adorn the walls,” says Richmond-based Virtuoso advisor Caroline Wallace. She suggests lunching at El Cardenal, a gastronomic institution. “Be adventurous and try delicious escamoles [ant eggs] she urges.”

Allow plenty of time for such sites as the Palacio de Bellas Artes, Casa Luis Barragán, and Frida Kahlo’s Blue House. Other captivating outings include the enigmatic Teotihuacan Pyramids, lionized for the Pyramid of the Sun (tip: Visit early in the morning before the crowds), and the sixteenth-century Monastery of Acolman, the birthplace of the piñata according to legend, used by missionaries to convince locals of Christianity.

Base yourself at the recently refurbished [Four Seasons Mexico City](#), poised on the regal Paseo de la Reforma, near Chapultepec Park and the neighborhoods of Polanco and Condesa. Book the Premier Terrace Suite, which has Vermeer-like black-and-white floors and overlooks the shady courtyard.



Zocalo Square, Mexico City.

Photo by Getty Images/ferrantraite

San Miguel de Allende

Chicago-based Virtuoso advisor Adamarie King suggests visiting the UNESCO-listed, colonial-era mountain town of San Miguel de Allende during the week to avoid the weekend crowds.

“It’s one of the most charming of Mexican cities,” she says. “The architecture is authentic and well preserved.” Though beloved (and sometimes thronged) by expats and Mexican tourists alike, San Miguel de Allende summons former times in its quieter corners. Don’t be surprised to encounter burros delivering wood or carrying black-clad members of a funeral procession, their movements as soulful as a prayer. At siesta

time, the lush gardens of jacaranda and bougainvillea may be hauntingly silent.

“The shopping is fantastic in San Miguel,” says King, who likes to set up travelers with VIP tours at Fábrica La Aurora, San Miguel’s design center, where, she notes, “there are about 50 galleries, antique shops, furniture stores, and cafés.” King also proposes side trips to Guanajuato and Queretaro, nearby colonial towns. “Or, enjoy a picnic lunch and tasting at Bodega Dos Búhos, a stunning local winery,” she says.

Stay at [Belmond Casa de Sierra Nevada](#), which comprises several colonial mansions. Choose a deluxe one-bedroom suite, complete with copper bathtubs, Talavera tile, and terraces that sport views of La Parroquia, San Miguel’s signature neo-Gothic church. Take a cooking class at the hotel’s Sazon Cooking School, set in an ancient hacienda; local chefs lead students through the farmers market, then guide them in hands-on kitchen wizardry.

We also love: the [Rosewood San Miguel de Allende](#), a colonial-style hacienda which offers a multitude of classes – such as photography, painting, sculpture, jewelry making, and language lessons – to guests, reflecting the area’s history and culture of creativity.



A quiet corner in San Miguel de Allende.

Photo by © CPTM / Ricardo Espinosa-reo

Riviera Maya

“Travelers interested in learning about ancient cultures and civilizations will be delighted to learn that Mexico boasts 29,000 archaeological sites, including the focal point of Mayan civilization,” says New Jersey-based Virtuoso advisor Meredith Broder. Many of these historic sites can be found near the Riviera Maya, the Yucatán Peninsula beach district that extends south from Cancún to Tulum. A fusion of untamed jungle-scape

(complete with monkeys, long-nosed coatimundi, crocodiles, and jaguars) and pristine crescents of sand (including an array of lavish resorts), the Riviera Maya showcases and honors Mayan culture and a treasure trove of ancient artifacts and ruins – such as Tulum and Chichén Itzá.

Just offshore, the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef – one of the largest barrier reefs in the world – entices divers and snorkelers with more than 500 species of fish and 100 types of coral. In addition to splashing in the waves, swimmers can cool off in one of the area’s myriad cenotes, underground freshwater springs that were sacred to the Maya people.

Consider a stay at one of the hotels in Mayakoba ([Rosewood Mayakoba](#), [Andaz Resort Riviera Maya](#), [Banyan Tree Mayakoba](#)), a resort complex carved from a wild, dense mangrove forest. The hotels and beaches of Mayakoba – the name means “city on the water” in Mayan – are linked with a series of man-made, Venice-reminiscent canals. The resort’s award-winning green initiatives ensure abundant wildlife; the area is home to more than 200 species. Guests can traverse the property by boat, bicycle, or golf cart to explore its restaurants, a golf course, and a plethora of recreational activities, from archery to cooking classes. Be sure to dine in the expat-savvy community of Tulum down the road, known for such hard-to-reserve hot spots as quirky [Hartwood](#).



The beaches of Tulum, in Mexico’s Riviera Maya.
Photo by © CPTM / Ricardo Espinosa-reo

Cancún

One of the Caribbean’s most lauded and visited destinations, [Cancún](#)’s well-managed, resort-peppered Hotel Zone offers both pristine, snow-hued sandy beaches (bordering

startlingly turquoise waters) and a rowdy urban entertainment district that rivals the party power of Las Vegas (think all-night discos and high-end shopping).

“I love that you can find white-sand beaches, sophisticated resorts, and an energetic nightlife,” says Caroline Wallace. Cancún runs a glitzy gamut, with a range of experiences for families, honeymooners, girlfriend getaways, and business meetings. Ever-growing, it boasts stately marinas, gated communities, and new developments. In Cancún, tourists tend to enjoy beachside activities at their hotels, but many venture outside the city limits to explore other parts of the Quintana Roo region, such as Isla Contoy, a wilderness-rich national park, or lesser-known Isla Holbox for a whale shark swimming adventure. It’s close enough to the Riviera Maya to allow for trips to Mayan sites, such as Tulum, but Cancún boasts its own ancient wonders amid the Hotel Zone: El Rey Ruins and the Scorpion Temple, plus the beautifully curated Maya Museum, which holds a wealth of relics.

Close to the airport and near the strip’s buzz, but separate enough to ensure repose, NIZUC Resort & Spa is great for family trips or romantic getaways. “They position themselves as the gateway to the Riviera [Maya],” notes Meredith Broder, who also recommends The Ritz-Carlton, Cancún for its “club-level stays, nice beach, great service, and cabanas.”



Dining in Cancún, Mexico.