

# The Eye

Beach, Village + Urban Living in Mexico

May June 2025

Issue 148

FREE



In this Issue:  
Orizaba  
Puebla  
Cuernavaca  
CDMX  
Celestún  
Calakmul



Layne Ulmer Karla Mendez Mike Leon Lindsay Harder Erin May Brent May Leah Guzmán Hector Cisneros Bryan Paschke Mario Devcic

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# Editor's Letter

**"Mexico is not a country of the past but of the infinite future." – Octavio Paz**

So many people love Mexico these days. Mexico City was just named one of National Geographic's top eight food destinations for 2025. Travel shows are all over it and every other person you meet is planning a trip—or a move—south. Suddenly it feels like the whole world is cluing in to what many of us have known for a long time.

But when I moved here almost 30 years ago, that wasn't the general vibe. People thought I was a little nuts. I got a lot of questions: Is it safe? Are you really going to have your baby there? As if babies weren't born in Mexico every single day.

What I found then—and what I've continued to find, over and over again—is a rhythm of life that just made more sense to me. A different pace. A stronger sense of community. A culture where family matters, time isn't always money, and you can live well without rushing through your days.

While people back home were watching the headlines, I was living something very different. More grounded. More connected. Choosing to live in Mexico and exploring different parts of it has honestly felt like stepping through a portal into another way of being. A way that I'm profoundly grateful to have found.

Now, decades later, I feel like the rest of the world is finally catching up. And I get it. There's something magnetic about Mexico. It's not just the beaches (though they're great). It's the food, the traditions, the music, the layers of history. It's how different one region is from another—and how each one offers you something unique if you're paying attention.

Mexico just elected a female president—before Canada or the U.S., which is kind of wild when you think about it. For a country that so many associate with machismo, this is no small thing. For those who've only seen Mexico through the lens of headlines or resorts, this place continues to defy expectations.

In this issue of *The Eye*, we're highlighting some of the places in Mexico that might not be on everyone's radar. Our writers take you beyond the usual vacation spots and into towns and regions that offer something different—something real.

Mexico is not a one-size-fits-all destination. It's a living, breathing patchwork of languages, landscapes, and local flavors. It invites curiosity. It challenges assumptions. And even after all this time, it still surprises me. I hope this issue inspires you to get out there and explore.

See you in July,

**Jane**



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# Calakmul: A Maya Metropolis Rediscovered

By Randy Jackson

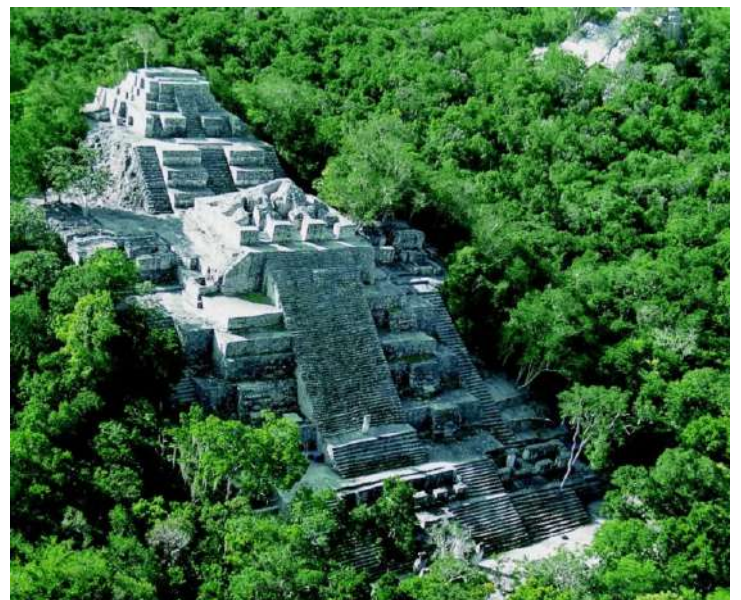
When thinking about visiting ancient Maya cities, locations like Palenque and Tikal often capture our imagination. Yet one of the largest and most powerful ancient Maya centers remains unfamiliar to many: Calakmul (Kah-lahk-**mool**), hidden deep within the dense jungles of Campeche near the Guatemalan border. This relatively obscure site dominated the Maya lowlands for centuries until its mysterious abandonment in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. Swallowed by the jungle for over a thousand years, Calakmul's towering pyramids and carved monuments now draw the attention of tourists, historians, and anthropologists alike. Though many of its restored structures stand as a testament to a once-thriving civilization, Calakmul today faces new challenges, caught at the intersection of modern development pressures and environmental controversy.

## A Short History of Calakmul

Calakmul began as a significant settlement about 300 BCE. It was built on low limestone hills in the lush jungle lowlands. It was surrounded by seasonal marshlands, which its inhabitants engineered into a sophisticated system of 13 water reservoirs. Among these was the largest reservoir in the Maya world, which still exists today.

At its peak, between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, Calakmul exerted considerable control and influence over much of the Maya region, forging alliances and dominating through conquest. For a time, this included control over its formidable rival, Tikal, in what is now Guatemala. Calakmul had over six thousand structures and covered an area of 70 square kilometres (27 square miles). It also had an extensive network of causeways, one of which extended 38 kilometres (24 miles). This network connected most of the cities and settlements of the central and lowlands of the Yucatán. Among its architectural wonders, Calakmul's main pyramid stands 45 metres (148 feet) tall. Over centuries, Calakmul produced exquisite art, including jade carvings, pottery, and mural paintings, reflecting high craftsmanship and cultural sophistication.

After flourishing for centuries, Calakmul succumbed to the broader patterns of decline that swept through the Maya Civilization. Much has been written about the possible causes of the Maya collapse, which took place around the 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. Environmental conditions of prolonged drought and deforestation were a significant underlying cause. Despite its sophisticated network of reservoirs, Calakmul was not immune to more serious ecological degradation and other factors contributing to the overall collapse of the Maya Civilization.



Archaeologists and historians point to several factors that led to the Maya Collapse. Structural changes in society and warfare compounded environmental stresses. Archaeological evidence shows a shift from a society ruled by kings to one ruled by a wider, fractious group of elites in the different Maya centres. This resulted in wars becoming more pervasive and deadly, involving common people in warfare. Previously, warfare was more ritualistic and conducted by a warrior class. Consequently, wars and their effects took men away from other tasks that supported an agricultural-based society. Monuments were no longer being built or maintained, and fields were no longer tended as common people lost faith in a society increasingly disintegrating into chaos and violence. Although the collapse took over a century, one can imagine the poignant image of the last person or family turning one final time to look at Calakmul's crumbling structures before walking away, leaving the jungle to reclaim it.

### Rediscovery and Modern Challenges

Approximately one thousand years later, in 1931, Cyrus Lundell, an American botanist, stumbled on the ruins of Calakmul during a survey looking for stands of the chicozapote tree, which is used in the production of chewing gum. This significant finding began a new era for Calakmul and its surroundings, which had become rich in biodiversity.

The Mexican Revolution had earlier set the stage for land reform, which would one day impact Calakmul. The 1917 constitution, Article 27, introduced *ejidos*—communal lands that could not be sold but could be worked collectively or individually. Decades later, under Presidents Adolfo López Mateos (1958-1964) and Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970), land redistribution based on *ejidos* was revitalized as part of a broader development and modernization agenda. This land reform impacted Campeche, including the Calakmul area.

Although indigenous people have always lived in this area in smaller numbers, the promise of free land for agriculture attracted landless poor peasants from all over Mexico. Once again, trees were being felled, animals were hunted in larger numbers, and land was cleared for agriculture. The Calakmul environment, once depleted beyond its ability to support the Maya civilization, was then, and is now, again under threat.

In response to the challenges stemming from increasing population, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) proclaimed the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve, stating that it was to protect the area's unique biological diversity and numerous ancient Maya ruins. Since this proclamation and a later UNESCO designation, tensions have existed between local campesinos and governmental officials. The campesinos viewed the land as a place to carve out a livelihood, whereas conservationists and government authorities argued for preserving the land in a natural state. Roads and tourist development have exacerbated the issue. In 1991, the campesinos were given responsibility to care for the reserve, and although this has improved some sustainability practices, issues between development and conservation continue. Amid these modern conflicts, the spirits of Calakmul roam the ruins like the howler monkeys.

### Visiting Calakmul

The most common route for those wishing to visit Calakmul is driving from Cancún, about 500 km (310 mi) away. Access is through the nearby town of Xpujil, Campeche, a center for numerous nearby ancient Maya ruins. To access Calakmul and the Calakmul Biosphere, there is a signed turnoff from highway 186 near Xpujil. Calakmul is 60 km (37 mi) from highway 186 on a mostly good, but narrow, forested roadway.

At Calakmul, the most significant and central structures have been partially restored, including some of the large pyramids and the acropolis. The site offers captivating Maya ruins that blend into the surrounding jungle, offering a unique experience of discovery and exploration amidst a backdrop of significant biodiversity—a setting befitting such a prominent city of the Maya world that mysteriously disappeared.

For contact and comments, email [box95jackson@gmail.com](mailto:box95jackson@gmail.com).

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# Orizaba: A Mountain Jewel in Veracruz

By Alicia Flores

Nestled in the heart of the mountains between Puebla and Veracruz lies Orizaba, a city that many travelers still overlook—but shouldn't. With its colonial architecture, cool climate, and surrounding natural beauty, Orizaba offers a unique mix of history, culture, and outdoor adventure that feels both surprising and welcoming.



The first thing you notice when you arrive in Orizaba is how green everything is. The city sits in a valley below the towering Pico de Orizaba—the tallest mountain in Mexico and the third-highest in North America. Known in Nahuatl as Citlaltépetl, or "Star Mountain," this dormant volcano dominates the horizon and adds a quiet majesty to the landscape. Even if you're not planning to climb it (which takes serious mountaineering experience), just knowing it's there changes the way you see the place. The mountain is more than a backdrop—it feels like a guardian.

The city itself is small but full of charm. The historical center is easy to explore on foot, with well-preserved 19th-century buildings, wide plazas, and iron-laced balconies that speak of a prosperous past. One of the best ways to start your visit is with the Teleférico de Orizaba—a cable car that glides from the city center up to Cerro del Borrego. The views are breathtaking, and once at the top, you can explore walking trails or visit the museum that explains the mountain's role during the French Intervention in the 19th century.

Back in town, Orizaba is proud of its art and culture. The Palacio de Hierro (Iron Palace) is a standout building designed by Gustave Eiffel—the same engineer who gave Paris its famous tower. This unique structure houses several small museums, including one dedicated to Mexican beer and another with a collection of masks from around the country. It's also a great spot to learn more about the local history, including the city's importance during the Porfirio Díaz era.



One of my favorite things to do in Orizaba is walk along the Río Orizaba. The river cuts through the town and is lined with walking paths, murals, and even small animal enclosures that



serve as a sort of open-air zoo. It's a peaceful place for a morning stroll or afternoon break, and the cool mountain air makes it feel refreshing even during the warmer months.

For more history and dining options, visit the Poliforum Mier y Pesado, or Iron Palace, an early 20th-century orphanage, then a school, then a retirement center, built in the French style. It has wonderful ironwork, beautiful gardens, and hosts cultural events. There are a couple of museums, one of which, the Museo del Traje, showcases traditional clothing. The restaurants lean to the upscale, but there are a couple of less expensive cafes. The Poliforum is located on Oriente 6, 1653, a couple of kilometers east of the historic center.

Food in Orizaba is hearty and delicious, shaped by the surrounding regions and the city's own traditions. Expect tamales wrapped in banana leaves, chiles rellenos in local-style sauces, and sweet treats like jamoncillo (a kind of milk fudge) and toritos—a strong local liqueur made from fruit and sugarcane alcohol. Markets and casual restaurants offer some of the best flavors, but you'll also find a growing number of cafés and bakeries run by young entrepreneurs bringing fresh energy into the culinary scene.



Because of its location, Orizaba makes a great base if you want to explore more of central Veracruz. Nearby towns like Córdoba or the coffee-growing region of Huatusco are perfect for day trips. But even if you don't leave the city, Orizaba offers enough beauty and history to keep you happily occupied.

There's something grounded and genuine about Orizaba. It's not polished like a resort town, and it's not trying to be something it's not. The people are warm, the pace is relaxed, and the air smells faintly of pine and distant rain. It's a place that doesn't shout to be seen, but rather invites you to slow down and notice.

If you find yourself looking for a lesser-known part of Mexico to explore—one that blends mountains, culture, and heart—Orizaba might just be your next favorite stop.



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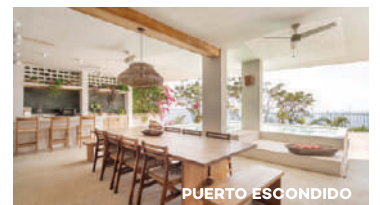
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# The Art of Belonging: How to Live Like a Local in Mexico City

By Carole Reedy

**F**amed author Maya Angelou once said: "I long, as does every human being, to be at home wherever I find myself."

Wherever we are, most of us yearn for connections, familiarity, and comfort. You can find these feelings even while traveling ... if you are armed with knowledge and savvy.

Here are some tips to assist you on your journey in one of the grandest cities of the world. If you have the luxury, allow yourself time to wander, absorb the culture, history, way of life, and routines of the locals.

Before the more practical recommendations, let's reflect on a philosophical perspective. Despite the hustle bustle of the city, take time to roam (or as my friends and I say "flaneur") through the neighborhoods (called *colonias*) that sprinkle the Valley of Mexico. Don't pack too much in a day, as traveling around the big city takes time and energy, too.

Enjoy the unexpected and unanticipated joys of the moment. Look up and around ... at the trees, sky, and skyscrapers. There are surprises around every corner. If you are fortunate enough to come in March, the jacarandas will be in full bloom. Be open to the people on the street and metro or while shopping. Unlike the French, Mexicans will welcome you even though your Spanish may be not quite correct, or even if it's nonexistent.

If you are like other visitors to this bewitching city, your memories will remain vivid long after you depart. Here are some practical ways to make your sojourn uncomplicated and rich.

## Greetings!

First impressions are said to be the most important, and none is more so than the first words out of your mouth when greeting someone on the street, entering a room or a store, or addressing a waiter.

Friends visiting Mexico City (*Ciudad de Mexico*) are often surprised at how, in this heavily populated city, people take the time to greet one another. Americans in particular have a tendency to always appear to be in a rush, speaking rapidly and without the formality of a greeting.

The first words out of your mouth when entering a room, a meeting, or store, or simply on the street, should be *buenos días* (good morning), *buenas tardes* (good afternoon), or *buenas noches* (good evening or night). Another useful phrase is just *buen día*, short for *que buen día* (literally, may it be a good day – Spanish loves the subjunctive).



A smile goes a long way and is always appreciated. Mexicans always take time for a formal greeting before the chatter begins!

## Time and pace

*No hay prisa* is a good motto to practice during your visit, be it for a week or a year. Literally the phrase means "there is no hurry." Although some actions and attitudes may be interpreted as "slow and lazy" by some foreign cultural standards, Mexicans are deliberate and formal in their manners, which is actually considerably more sane than the frenzied manners of many

foreigners.

Mexicans are patient. Often you will see lines of people waiting for a service. No one is yelling or complaining. People just wait and chat, somehow knowing that stress, and therefore raising their blood pressure, doesn't do anyone any good or make the line move any faster.

"Why is everyone always late?" They aren't. The concept of time is different south of the border. If you are invited to a party at 7 pm and show up at exactly 7 pm or, God forbid, earlier, you will be alone and your hosts may not even be dressed yet. It seems that guests stroll in when they want, and everyone thinks that is just fine. Not to worry. No one else will! You won't miss dinner. If you're invited for 8 pm, you may not eat until 11.

You may notice that if a business advertises its opening at 9 am, employees may not show up until 9:30 or so. Banks that open at 9 am (an institution you may think would be punctual) may open their doors on time but the employees will just be strolling in and preparing their desks for the day. Go with the flow.

Most entertainment events do not start exactly on time, but they do make an effort to begin within the half hour. Movies do begin on schedule, as do bullfights. When you're at a supposedly sold-out live concert and you look around 10 minutes before it begins, you may wonder where everyone is. Look around 20 minutes later, and you will see a full house. Arriving early is neither the norm nor fashionable.

*Ahorita* is the most confusing Spanish word for foreigners. Literally, it means RIGHT NOW. But it never actually does. It can mean anywhere from five minutes to two hours, or even tomorrow morning. If a worker tells you he will return *ahorita*, the fact is you don't know when that will be. Take it with a grain of salt. He may as well be saying "who knows?" If you do need a definite answer, ask a more definite question.

My Mexican friends know our northern habits, and therefore they do try to arrive close to the designated time when meeting me. You may not be able to change your lifelong habits, but wait patiently, and if you are on time by your standards, enjoy the ambience or, as I do, always carry a book with you!

### Transport, Traffic, and *La Hora Pico*

Mexico City has a fine public transport system used by millions of people every day. The most used and popular are the Metro (mostly underground) and the Metrobus, which is a bus with its own lane. Cars NEVER drift over to the Metrobus lane; the fine for disobedience of this law is huge. Ambulances are allowed though.

Both systems are easy, and both use the same card for entrance. The metro is 5 pesos and the Metrobus is 6 pesos (basically 25 cents in US currency). The cards are available at all metro stations. There are maps online. Plus, there are actually two apps, chock full of information: Metrobus CDMX and AppCDMX.

The most important information to keep in mind, however, is *La Hora Pico*, or rush hour. It is a horror in Mexico City, and even the person who experiences no form of claustrophobia may experience a small panic attack when you observe the crushing hoards in action on public transport.

The hours to avoid public transport or driving: weekdays 7 am to 10 am and then again 5 pm to 9 pm. This applies to all areas of the city. Arrive at your destination early and enjoy a cappuccino if need be.

Metrobus and Metro cars are clean and efficient. The first car of each transport train is designated for women, children, and the elderly. Please honor this, as all of us do.

City buses are available in many parts of the city. There are lots of bike lanes, and it appears more people use them daily. If you travel north in the city or far south you may see cable cars as public transport. In Ixtapalapa, the home owners paint creative designs on their roofs for the enjoyment of the cable car riders.

Do beware of bikes and motorcycles. They seem to believe traffic laws are not written for them, running red lights and essentially just doing as they please. Helmet laws are in effect.

If you are an Uber user, you should be quite content with the service here. The cars are clean and well maintained, unlike many taxis. The drivers are, for the most part, a delight and very often talkative, some speaking English. If you do speak some Spanish, this is a good way to practice. Strike up a conversation; they too enjoy practicing their English.

In every way, Ubers are better than taxis, including reasons of safety and the price of your journey. Do not enter a taxi that accepts only credit cards; it is a scam that will charge your card more than the actual price. I do have a taxi *sitio* (taxi stand) in my neighborhood that I trust, but for the most part Ubers are the better choice, an important factor being that you are not watching the meter run while sitting in traffic.

Ubers know the quickest and safest routes. You can call them right on the street as well as from a designated location.



### Banking

Here are a few money-saving and helpful tips about ATM withdrawals.

First of all, to avoid fraud, always use a bank ATM. A big money saver is to refuse the rate of exchange the bank ATM offers you when you enter your card. Most ATMs provide instructions in both Spanish and English. Just press NO when it reads "Do you accept this rate of exchange?" That way you will receive the exchange rate of your personal bank, which will be assuredly less.

It is best to do your cash withdrawals during weekdays. The ATMs run out of money on the weekends and especially during *puentes*, three-day weekends.

The cost of an ATM transaction also varies by bank, so if you are not happy with the rate at one bank, try another.

You will always get Mexican pesos at the bank ATMs. Should you need US dollars, you will need to visit a *casa de cambio* (money exchange).

### The Joy of Eating

With the more practical matters out of the way, let's end with a short discussion about Mexican eating habits and protocols.

The grand capital is replete with restaurants for every eating preference and idiosyncrasy. You may feel overwhelmed when you look online for your favorite. So, here are some general options to narrow down your choices.

**The meals.** Instead of breakfast, lunch, and dinner, all of México enjoys *desayuno*, *comida*, and *cena*.

*Desayuno* is eaten before 10 am. *Comida*, the main meal of the day, begins as early as 1 or 2 pm and is served until 4 or 5 pm. *Cena* is a light evening meal offered from 7 to 10 pm. This is the habit in Mexican homes. Restaurants often adapt to foreign timetables for eating, and since restaurant times may vary, best to check hours on line.

**Street food.** To eat or not to eat? My guests' favorite question, and my advice is benign: It is up to you. There are risks involved everywhere, but more so from street vendors. Often there is no running water in the *puestos de comida* (food stalls), and employees often handle money and food simultaneously.

The food is usually delicious, and it's certainly quite cheap. Millions of Mexican workers eat it every day. I confess to eating street taco *carnitas* occasionally, even though I may experience gastrointestinal backlash the next day.

**Market eating.** Everyone enjoys the huge buildings that house mountains of fruits, vegetables, meat, and often household items. There are also small restaurants inside the markets. One of my favorites is Mercado Medellin (located in Roma Sur on Campeche and Medellin streets). The market has two locations for restaurants, so be sure to ask one of the vendors where to go.

**Chains.** Here are some unexpected spots that serve great Mexican meals.

The most famous chain store that also houses a restaurant is **Sanborns**, owned by the world-famous entrepreneur Carlos Slim.

To this day, the distinct dress of the Sanborns waitresses is famous, going back more than a century ago. Collector and dealer of folk art and archaeological artifacts Francis Davis was invited to open a Mexican curio shop inside the Sanborns *Casa de los Azulejos*, located in Centro. Davis designed a uniform for the servers and according to some, it was loaded with typical Mexican references. It adds such charm to the restaurant.

Sanborns has a good variety of Mexican food which is quite tasty and traditional. There are Sanborns shops located all over the city. There you will find books, scarves, pharmaceuticals, jewelry, perfumes, and electronics, with the merchandise varying from store to store. It is a practical place to shop, and it is a legend.

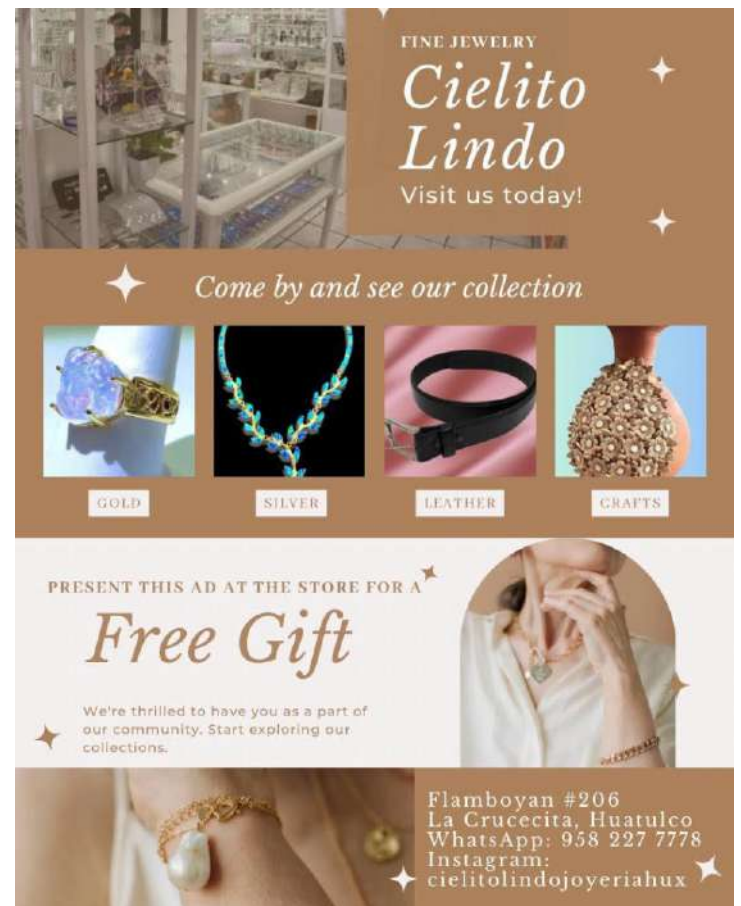
Another excellent chain for Mexican food is the **Bajío** restaurants. Like Sanborns, they are located all over the city. The food is outstanding with a good variety. I frequent the one in the Reforma 222 shopping center. Carnitas are a specialty.

**Tipping.** Waiters and waitresses receive very small salaries – thus they depend on tips. Some owners do not even pay a salary, the workers' only compensation being tips. Twenty percent is traditional if the service is good. So please tip your wait staff.

**Crème de la crème restaurant.** Since I'm always asked about this, I will reluctantly address it here. Based on the reaction of my visitors and reviews, the best upscale restaurant is Rosetta, located in Roma Norte, with the Rosetta bakery, located on the next block, as the choice for the best cafe. Definitely the best pastry is the cafe's *Mil Hojas*, covered at greater length in my article "Where the Locals Hang Out: The Unsung Treasures of CDMX" (February 2025).

Soak in the sunshine and joy of this city that is unlike any other.

*"One never reaches home, but wherever friendly paths intersect the whole world looks like home for a time."* Hermann Hesse



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# Sensory Sensitivity Meets Cultural Reality in Mexico

By Kary Vannice

**F**or the sensory sensitive traveler, Mexico can be a challenge. If you're planning to visit, or stay for a while, no doubt you're already anticipating the delicious spicy food, warm hospitality, and the vibrant colorful culture that Mexico is known for. But there are some very real sensory and cultural differences that some foreigners aren't prepared for until they come face to face with them. Being unprepared can turn something delightful into something disorienting or even disturbing, depending on your level of preparation and understanding. The key to truly enjoying Mexican culture isn't to try to change it to suit your comfort zone—but to shift your expectations and adapt to your surroundings.



Even if you don't identify as particularly sensory sensitive, Mexico may still throw you a few cultural curveballs, so knowing how to deal with them gracefully and respectfully in advance can mean you get to have a good time and you don't have to ask Mexico not to be Mexico.

It won't take long before you realize that most of Mexico is **loud** (at least by foreign standards). Whether it's music blasting from a nearby store or café, fireworks before sunrise for a saint's day celebration, or street vendors shouting their daily offerings through a loudspeaker—Mexico is a full-on auditory experience.

Celebration is a part of everyday life in Mexico. Music, fireworks, parades, and community gatherings often involve sound levels that would be considered noise violations in other countries. Most Mexicans aren't conditioned to need silence to relax, so there are no “quiet hours.” These sounds aren't disturbances—they're expressions of joy. It's Mexicans living their best life, and when foreigners insist on lowering the volume or making complaints, they are asking the locals to lessen their enjoyment of life.

But there are ways to cope. First, pay attention to daily rhythms—afternoon siesta often brings a lull and can be a great time to rest. If you see a party, join in instead of resisting. Mexicans are some of the most welcoming people on the planet and live by the ethos: *the more the merrier*. If you're sensitive to sound, invest in quality earplugs or noise-canceling headphones. And most important, accept that the noise isn't a cultural flaw—it's a feature.

Another sensory difference that might catch you off guard is personal space—or the lack of it. In many Mexican communities, people naturally stand closer together, touch more often, and greet others with a hug or kiss on the cheek, even if you've only just met. For someone from another culture, this can feel like an invasion of space.

The local culture places high value on connection and warmth. Touch is seen as a sign of respect and caring, not a threat to autonomy or an invasion of space. Physical closeness indicates trust. But, if you don't feel comfortable touching or even standing close to people you don't know, Mexico can be a challenge.

It's important to keep in mind that their perception of personal space is different from yours, so they genuinely won't understand your discomfort. Relax your body when your personal space is invaded and set gentle boundaries after you build rapport but do it with humor and kindness. Mexicans love to joke around and are quick to laugh if you keep things light. It can also help to simply observe the locals as they move in and around each other. You'll soon see that they are as warm with strangers as they are with family. You'll likely learn to appreciate the beauty and tenderness of these simple gestures.

Time might not have a sensory quality, but for many of us, punctuality is a deeply ingrained expectation. And in Mexico, this will likely present a greater challenge than either noise or touch. Time here is flexible, fluid ... and often late.

You may arrive at a dinner party “on time” and find you're the only person there for the first hour. A plumber who promised to arrive “a las diez” might show up at noon. In Mexico, time is more suggestion than commandment.

This isn't about disrespect. It's simply that Mexican culture prioritizes relationships over rigid scheduling. Things unfold when they unfold. Trying to force your sense of urgency onto that rhythm rarely works, and often backfires. Taking it personally is pointless. Complaining about it won't change deeply embedded cultural beliefs and ways of being. Complaining about lateness or feeling personally offended will only hurt you, because from a cultural perspective, no offense has occurred.

The best solution? Build in “buffer” time. Don't schedule back-to-back commitments counting on things to run on time. Use this time to your advantage by always carrying a book, podcast or magazine with you. It's a chance to loosen your grip on control and start living a little more in the moment, like the locals do.

If on your travels you find yourself wishing things were quieter, more spacious, or more “efficient” ... pause. Take a minute to recognize that the discomfort you're feeling isn't a sign that something is wrong with Mexico. It's a sign that your cultural expectations are being stretched.

Take a breath and remind yourself: this is the whole point of travel...growth, expansion, and understanding.

The most meaningful experiences come not from controlling your environment, but from surrendering to it. From witnessing a culture on its own terms, not yours. From *expanding* your comfort zone, not policing everyone else's.

Allow the experience with openness, curiosity, humility, and a willingness to be changed.

Because if you let it, Mexico will not only surprise you; it will transform you.

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INQUIRIES: [www.alma-huatulco.com](http://www.alma-huatulco.com)

From the archives:  
November 2015

# Twenty-Four Hours in Puebla

By Marcia Chaiken and Jan Chaiken

**M**any people who drive from the U.S. or Canada to spend the winter in southern Mexico either bypass Puebla or stay at a hotel on the periphery of Puebla and leave the next morning. If you are one of those travelers or simply want to dip your toes into an interesting colonial city, we suggest that next time you plan to spend at least 24 hours in Puebla. Whether you're interested in history, food, art, music, shopping, or simply strolling through picturesque streets and alleys, Puebla has it all.



Once you pin down your time and place for a concert, recital or other event, here are our suggestions for filling in the rest of the time. Walk across the street to the central plaza (*zócalo*) and check out the cathedral. You may get distracted by the amusing antics of children, performers and other visitors to the zocalo as well as the mix of the restrained classical and more flamboyant baroque architecture of the exterior of the cathedral. But be sure to go inside.

Puebla is located east of Mexico City, usually less than a two-hour drive, and northwest of Oaxaca, about a five hour drive. Whether you are in a car or a bus, the trip from either city is through breathtaking mountains. Coming from Mexico City, snow-capped volcanos announce the approach to Puebla, and the giant Popocatepetl is unmistakable on the frequent days when it puffs vapor high above its peak. Traveling northward from Huatulco, in addition to the route to Puebla through Oaxaca, there is a longer and costlier, but perhaps faster, route via high-speed toll roads – you start out by heading east from Huatulco.

Once you reach Puebla we suggest you first check into your hotel. We've found that hotels outside the central area are relatively less expensive, quieter and more comfortable than hotels located in the city center. Taxis to and from the center can cost just a little more than the paid parking lots downtown and, unlike Mexico City, can be safely hailed on the streets.

To help you plan your 24 hours, head first to the state and municipal tourist offices within a block of each other in the center of Puebla near the cathedral. They will have a list of music, art and other events for that day and, if you are there on a weekend or holiday, there will be many. Those sponsored by the government are often free – but plan to get to those events early since you will be competing with families who live in Puebla. We've attended concerts where families of three and four generations can fill an unofficial block of seats.

The tourist office can also provide maps of the city and help you locate the venues of events that are of interest. Places are easy to find in Puebla once you figure out that all the roads are numbered but divided into a grid centered on the *zócalo*. Streets (*calles*) run north and south and change name to Norte and Sur at Avenida Reforma. Avenues (*avenidas*) divide into east (*oriente*) and west (*poniente*) at 16 de Septiembre. Avenues north of Reforma are even numbered; south are odd numbered. Similarly, streets east of the *zócalo* are even, and to the west they are odd numbered. Thus, traveling east, after Calle 6 comes Calle 8.

Originally designed in the late 1500's but not structurally completed until 1690 and decorated a century or more later, the ornate interior with its fourteen chapels may well provide the feeling that you've been transported over the Atlantic to Spain. At the very least, the cathedral provides an insight into the extreme wealth the Church invested in succoring the early conquerors and colonists and the burden placed on the shoulders of the native population who provided the labor for the edifice. If your passion is colonial architecture, you may want to spend the rest of the time exploring some of the more than 60 buildings of that era in the vicinity. But we suggest that you sample other Puebla delights.

No trip to Puebla is complete without exploring Talavera and perhaps buying some. It is exquisite brightly-colored hand-painted pottery. If you're there on a weekday morning or early afternoon, head over to Uriarte (911



Avenida 4 Poniente) for a tour of their factory and drool over the magnificent items in the retail shop. If you're in Puebla on a weekend, we suggest you head east on 4th Avenue and explore some of the Talavera shops that cluster on streets surrounding the crafts market El Parián on 6th Street North. The market itself is great for buying inexpensive gifts – yes, they will bargain – but look for the stores that display credit card signs, since they are likely to carry true Talavera, not cheap imitations. The owners are usually more than eager to explain the differences in quality.

North of the crafts market you will find a lively enclave of artists' workshops that welcome visitors to view works in progress. The art is usually interesting and ranges from realistic to abstract; there is no pressure to buy any canvases. There are relaxing coffee shops and restaurants if you are in the mood for a substantial meal. But we suggest you wait until your main meal and be sure to have mole poblano elsewhere for comida (late lunch).

Puebla is famous for its mole (and poblano means "from Puebla"). It is unlike mole in Oaxaca or the rest of Mexico. There are two restaurants that allow you to sample a variety of moles, each more delicious than the last. They are Fonda de Santa Clara and El Mural de Los Poblanos, which as its name implies has a large colorful and amusing mural of famous people from Puebla.



Fonda de Santa Clara has two locations, one fairly near Uriarte (920 Avenida 3 Poniente) and the other closer to the zocalo (307 Avenida 3 Poniente). El Mural is also close to the zocalo (506 Avenida 16 de Septiembre). The staff at Santa Clara tend to push the specials, and we've found it's best to thank them but order the mole. Although the moles at these three venues are all delicious, the atmosphere varies.

The times we've been there, Santa Clara near Uriarte seemed to attract relatively large families; Santa Clara near the zocalo, tourists downstairs and lively groups in the upstairs rooms where live music is played on Sunday afternoon. El Mural appears to be a business people's favorite, quieter and a little more upscale than the Santa Claras. If you don't want to wonder afterwards whether you chose the best mole, you can order enchiladas 3 moles. For you fans of chiles en nogada, you can also try the Puebla version.

A quick sample of Puebla's many museums can best be achieved by a couple of hours in Museo Amparo, 708 Calle 2 Sur. We visit each time we are in Puebla, because the exhibitions change and every special exhibition we've seen has been engrossing. The permanent collection includes well over 1000 prize pieces of prehispanic art that are remarkably curated to give the visitor a glimpse into the culture and beliefs of the artisans. There are also exhibits of colonial and 19th century art and furnishings that make clear the opulence of the life of Poblanos for whom the cathedral was built.



Amparo functions as a cultural center, with programs for children and adults including storytelling, films, lectures and discussions (in Spanish, of course). Check their website for upcoming events: [www.museoamparo.com](http://www.museoamparo.com)

But we'll bet this will be the first of many trips to what the Spanish called "*Puebla de los Angeles*" for its many churches – there's much more to see and do!

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# Cuernavaca To-do List

By Julie Etra

## Robert Brady Museum

This almost overwhelming museum is located in the former home of Robert Brady, a wealthy American art collector who expatriated to Cuernavaca after being encouraged to visit Mexico—particularly Cuernavaca—by socialite and arts patron Peggy Guggenheim. She, along with other celebrities, became a lifelong friend. Born into a railroad-money family in the Midwest, Brady showed an early curiosity about art and, as a young adult with means, traveled extensively and began collecting.



In 1962, he purchased a deteriorated 16th-century monastery in Cuernavaca, which he restored and remodeled into a permanent residence. When he died in 1986, the home and its entire collection were donated to the municipality to be preserved as a museum, just as he left it. The collection is remarkable in both size and quality, with placards identifying the origin of each piece throughout the home. While much of the collection is Mexican, it's also wonderfully eclectic—featuring art from Africa (notably the Masai), Indonesia, New Guinea, the Pacific Northwest, Haiti, India, South America, and Alaska.

[www.museorobertbrady.com](http://www.museorobertbrady.com)

## Museo Regional Cuauhnahuac (Museo Regional de los Pueblos de Morelos)

“Cuernavaca” is a Spanish adaptation of “Cuauhnáhuac,” the original Nahuatl name used by the Tlaluicas and Xochimilcas (and to a lesser extent the Toltecs)—and no, it doesn't mean “horn of the cow,” as I once thought. To the Nahuatl, it meant “surrounded by trees.”



The building itself is extraordinary. Construction began in 1526, just five years after the fall of Tenochtitlan, (present-day Mexico City, 65 km (40 miles) to the north), and was completed in 1531. Often referred to as the Palacio de Cortés, it was the home of Hernán Cortés and his second wife, Juana Zúñiga. It looks part fortress, part palace, and has served many purposes over the centuries. After being badly damaged in the 2017 earthquake, it reopened on March 30, 2023, with updated exhibits and structural repairs.

Now a regional museum, it includes excellent pre-Hispanic artifacts, natural history exhibits (did you know Mexico has the greatest diversity of pine trees in the world?), and a replica *cuexcomate*—a pre-Hispanic corn storage structure unique to Morelos. The second-floor highlight is eight murals by Diego Rivera from 1930 titled *The History of Morelos: Conquest and Revolution*, which are impressively preserved. There are also two oil paintings from 1938 by Spanish painter Salvador Tarazona and a mural by him on the upstairs vault.

After the post-earthquake repairs, it reopened as the Museo Nacional de Los Pueblos de Morelos (the National Museum of the Peoples of Morelos); it has a facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/p/Museo-Regional-de-los-Pueblos-de-Morelos>).

## Jardín Botánico y Museo de Medicina Tradicional y Herbolaria (Botanical Garden and Museum of Traditional Medicine and Herbalism)

This peaceful four-hectare garden is located on the former El Olindo estate, once home to a 19th-century summer house built for Maximilian of Habsburg (briefly Emperor of Mexico from 1864 until his execution in 1867). Called Casa de la India Bonita (House of the Beautiful Indigenous Woman), it's now home to a lovely botanical garden focused on native and medicinal plants.



Although the museum (inside the summer house) was closed during our visit, the garden itself is thoughtfully divided by plant type. While some areas—like the medicinal plant section—could use a little extra care, most of the labels were still clear and informative. A standout was the cuajilote (*Parmentiera aculeata*), a small tree in the Bignoniaceae family. Its fruit and flowers grow directly from the trunk, and the fruit fibers were once used in making cuexcomates.

[https://sic.gob.mx/ficha.php?table=museo&table\\_id=736](https://sic.gob.mx/ficha.php?table=museo&table_id=736)

## Sunday Night on the Plaza de Armas

We had a great view of the plaza from a second-floor restaurant in a nearby shopping complex. After dinner, we joined the action below. There were the expected food carts (this is Mexico, after all), and we tried the local version of *gaspacho moreliano*—a fruit salad in a cup—called *excamocha*.



A group of mariachis played for 300 pesos per song, and we requested two. A payaso (clown) entertained children seated in bleachers with tricks, pantomime, and acrobatics, with kids eagerly joining in. Fun fact: there are professional clown schools in Mexico! If you're on Facebook, check out *Escuela de Payasos México*—it's a serious craft.

Meanwhile, a group of teenagers played a fast-paced hybrid of hacky sack and soccer, weaving through the crowd, while adults placed bets on the outcome. It was a joyful, chaotic scene.

## Xochicalco Archaeological Site and Museum

Just 30 minutes from Cuernavaca, this under-the-radar site is absolutely worth visiting. The modern museum building is thoughtfully designed to maximize natural light, reducing the need for artificial lighting.



Xochicalco, meaning “Place of the House of Flowers” in Nahuatl (*xochitl* = flower, *calli* = house, *-co* = place), was likely founded around 650 CE and thrived between 700–900 CE. Its mountaintop location wasn't just for defense—it was ceremonial.

According to our guide, about 500 elite residents lived in the religious center, with another 15,000 or so spread across the lower terraces. The city featured an astronomical observatory (closed during our visit), clever drainage systems, and a massive cistern. Around 900 CE, Xochicalco was destroyed by fire and largely abandoned, though a small population remained. It was later recolonized around 1200 by the Nahuatl-speaking Tlahuica people.

## Hacienda Vista Hermosa

We stayed at this restored hacienda after reading a glowing review in *The New York Times* last October. The article profiled several historic haciendas in central Mexico, but this one stood out for its history, location, and grounds.



Built in 1528 by none other than Hernán Cortés—he was granted the land as an *encomendero*—it was originally a sugar cane plantation. Like many haciendas, it was abandoned after the Mexican Revolution and agrarian reform, but has since been partially restored, likely in the 1990s (judging by the tilework, bathroom fixtures, and lack of air conditioning).

The property is stunning. With over 100 rooms, a huge pool that doubles as a fountain, stables with well-kept horses, and lush landscaping, it offers a charming (if slightly dated) getaway. We were lucky enough to get a private tour of the original dungeon—lit by cleverly designed skylights and with a hidden exit near the restaurant. Fun indeed.



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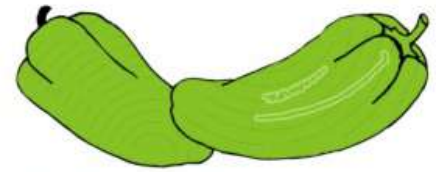
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## Cooking Classes

### Huatulco, Oaxaca



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**FIESTA-** Thursdays

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- Poblano & Nopal Empanadas
- Guacamole
- Jicama, Cucumber, and Orange Salad
- Ancho Reyes Margarita

**PIGS AND RUM-** Thursdays

- Cochinita Pibil (slow-roasted pork in achiote)
- Corn Cakes
- Pickled Onion and Habanero
- Nopal and Radish Salad
- Rum Horchata

**STREET FOOD-** Fridays

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- Pico de Gallo
- Handmade Tortillas and Sopes
- 2 types of Taco Fillings
- Tlayudas
- Jamaica Margaritas

**SEAFOOD-** Saturdays

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- Shrimp Mousse
- Baja-style Fish Tacos
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## FRIDAY NIGHT

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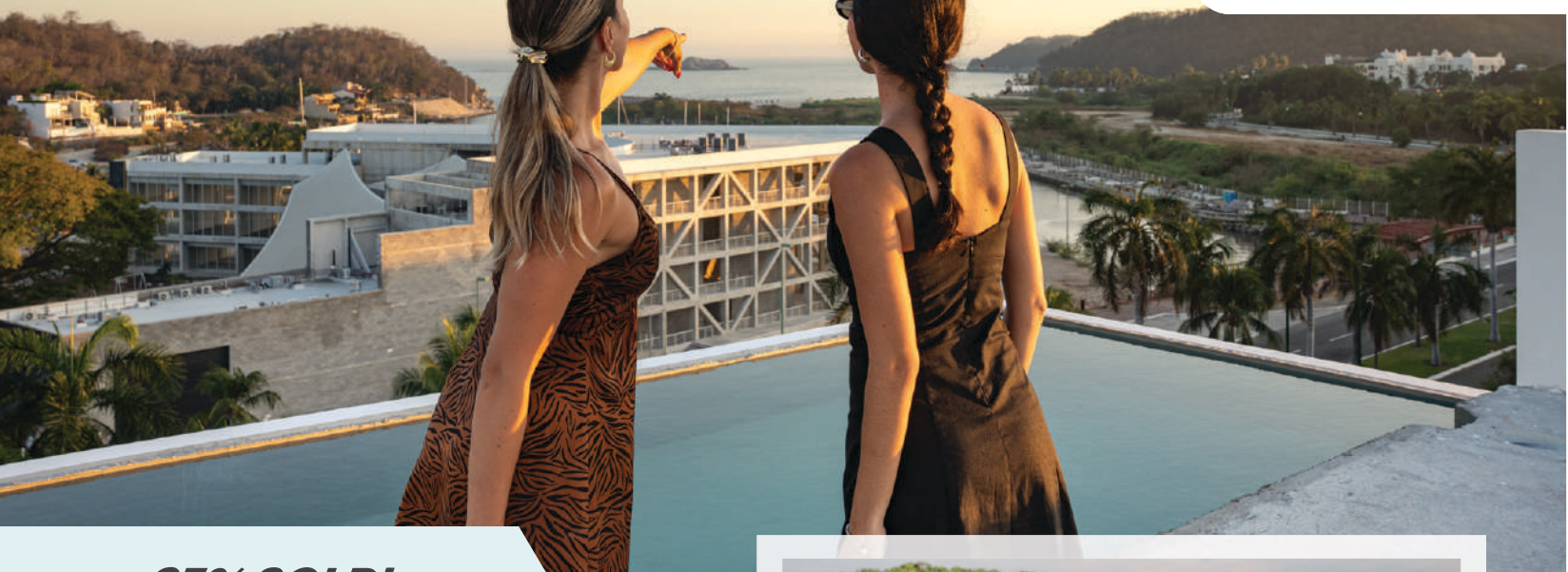
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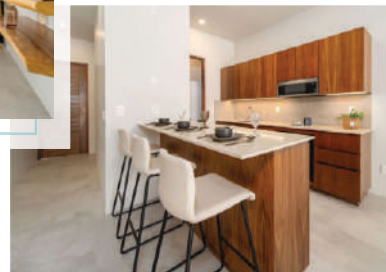
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# Celestún: Then and Now

By Deborah Van Hoewyk

If you haven't been to Celestún, you should go – and if you want an object lesson in how tourism can change a small fishing village, go twice, a couple of decades apart. (Not that Bahías de Huatulco doesn't represent how tourism changes a place!)

Celestún is the head town of the *municipio* (basically, a county) of Celestún, in Yucatán state; it's about 105 km (65 miles) west of Merida on the Gulf of Mexico. The Mexican Tourism Secretariat identified Celestún as a place to develop “low environmental impact” tourism, focused on the flamingo nesting sites in local lagoons.

## Celestún Then – 2001

When the idea of wintering in Mexico first took hold, a friend's father who spent his winters in San Miguel suggested that we could get a cheap charter flight to Cancún and explore the Yucatán.

We were neophytes at traveling in Mexico, our Spanish pre-beginner. Our previous, and only, trip had been in 1979, to Veracruz – where burros were staked out in the grassy sand dunes that stretched south to Boca del Rio, and to Jalapa, to visit my ex-pat friend teaching English at the University of Veracruz – pigs roamed the streets. Twenty years later, the sand dunes, the burros, and the pigs, not to mention the boat-up restaurant with drunken singers at lunchtime, were no more.

## Going to Cancún, Getting Out of Cancún

The cheap charter was doable, so off we went. At the time, it was possible to book just the flight and not an attached vacation at some glass-towered hotel on the beach. Not interested in Cancún itself, we left the airport in our rental car and headed for Mérida, the capital of the state of Yucatán.

On the road into the *centro*, hubby John kept saying, “When is this street going to get better?” We clearly didn't know then that most urban Mexican streets are crowded, dusty, noisy, frenetic. Right in the middle of it all, I said “We're here!!!” Hopping out of the car and over to a blank but beautiful hardwood door, I entered the quiet lobby of the Dolores Alba hotel. The Dolores Alba displayed its colonial heritage in a lovely arched and beamed dining room replete with chirping bird cages. No street noise. Parking was through a bigger hardwood door next door, but of course John had to circle through chaotic one-way streets to get there.

Then as now, Mérida, and Progreso, north down the road to the beach, had much to offer: colorful Mexican markets, colonial architecture, outlandish beach architecture – some other story. We were bent on Celestún to see the flamingoes – in late winter, it is the largest nesting site in the world, with 25,000 to 35,000 flamingoes. Back then, what little information there was appeared in the *Lonely Planet* guide, *Yucatán*. And Celestún was definitely a *Lonely Planet* experience.



## A Visit to Celestún

Driving from Mérida straight west on route 281, we crossed the bridge over a long, skinny lagoon, Ría Celestún, to “downtown” Celestún, located on the beach. A year earlier, in 2000, Mexico had declared the area a “biosphere reserve”; in 2004, UNESCO would make it an international biosphere reserve and the Ramsar Convention, an international wetlands preservation organization, would recognize it as being of international

importance. None of this ecological significance was yet evident to visitors.

On the advice of our *LP* guide, we found a hotel a block off the beach. Lunch was available on the beach – all you had to do was follow the giant black SUVs from Mérida churning their way through the “streets,” paths bulldozed through the sand. We also checked out how to visit the flamingoes, which entailed going down to the beach in the morning; when a given boat had enough passengers to make it worth their while, the voyage would begin.

By dinner time, the SUVs – and the restaurants – were gone. We drove hither and yon looking for food, ending up in a general store, where we found tinned *sardin*as, *saladitas*, and *cervesa*. Back at the hotel, we discovered that the only source of light to set up the sardine/saltine repast was a naked lightbulb about 8 feet up the wall. It did have a hanging string to turn it on and off.

The next morning, we went early to the *zócalo*, thinking surely there would be a restaurant. Not so much. Someone in the central market did offer coffee, which turned out to be *Nescafé de olla* – thinking Nescafé would be quick, I soon learned that, no, the *de olla* part is brewing it in a pot with a bit of brown sugar and cinnamon, and takes way more time than pouring boiling water over coffee granules. The time, however, allowed us to espy a turquoise door over in the far corner of the *zócalo*.

To which we proceeded after having our coffee, which was just enough time for the turquoise door to open and reveal a restaurant with a breakfast menu. “Oh, look,” I said, “Poffertjes!” Hubby is Dutch, and poffertjes are Dutch, wonderful little puffy buckwheat pancakes. My poffertje announcement caught the attention of the restaurant owners, a young couple from Delft in the Netherlands. They had come to Celestún a year before, promptly decided this was for them, went home for six months, sold everything they owned, and came back to open the restaurant with the turquoise door.

## The Main Attraction: Flamingoes!

Full of poffertjes, we went back to the beach. No one was there yet, so we sat on a driftwood log. Eventually five other people showed up, that was enough, so we helped push the boat down to the waves and got on. I don't recall that we had to wear life jackets. Not even sure that I recall life jackets at all!

From the beach, the boat captain found a tunnel cut through the mangroves to reach the lagoon. As we headed to where the flamingoes were supposed to be, he pointed out a crocodile perched on what appeared to be a log floating in front of the mangroves. Everyone rose up, sharply tilting the boat towards the water, to take pictures of the *crocodillo*. We continued on, until a faint coral line appeared along the far side of the lagoon – closer and closer until the line turned into thousands of flamingoes, heads down in the water, feasting on brine shrimp, tiny creatures that give the flamingoes their coral-pink colored feathers. It was an unforgettable sight.



After many, many (no doubt identical) flamingo photos, we set off on our return. The crocodillo was still there, turning lazily in the wind. Somehow the “log” looked more like a very large tire. When we coasted through tunnels hacked through the mangroves to reach our last stop, a petrified forest, I had enough Spanish to ask whether the crocodillo was *muerto*, and yes indeed it was dead as a doornail. Sort of a home-grown tourist attraction, although I didn't have enough Spanish to ask how they stuffed it.

On our way back to Cancún (via Chichen Itza), we first went along what's now called North Beach to inspect a beach house my sister had seen for rent. It was right on the beach, and we filed it away for future reference.

### Celestún Later – 2020

We never did rent the two-bedroom beachfront villa, but we did go back to Mérida (the Dolores Alba now has a large swimming pool where the dining room was, and is called “Doralba” – but still lovely and quiet), and again on to Celestún. Mérida is now a stop on the *Tren Maya*, the pet tourism-cum-poverty-alleviation project of Mexico's previous president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Despite local objections to the Mayan Train's negative ecological impacts, it has had a major impact on increasing tourism to the Yucatán peninsula - Mérida was the subject of a recent (Feb. 24, 2024) *New York Times* “36 Hours in ...” travel article.



The time we spent in Mérida in 2020 was more akin to the “36 hours” idea than what we did in 2001. Art museums, historic houses, beautiful parks (with ice cream!), and *paseo*-ing on a boulevard to choose among the upscale restaurants.

After several days of this, we and my sister got in our rental car and went down that same road (Route 281) to Celestún, crossed that same bridge and located our hotel at the beach. This time we had reserved our two rooms in a hotel with a patio, where we were often the only people having wine and cheese (no sardines, no saltines) in the evening. We could walk along the main street and pick a restaurant, or walk on the beach and pick a palapa serving what we call “beach food.”

### The Main Attraction: Ecotourism

This time, rather than take the boat tour to the big flocks of flamingoes, we went eco-touristing. The international recognition of the Riá Celestún biosphere and its wetlands (there's an adjoining reserve of wetlands at the south end of the biosphere that extends into Campeche state, Los Petenes).



We searched out the Guardianes de los Manglares Dzinintún – the Guardians of the mangroves that ring the Dzinintún lagoon. It was a little hit and miss, but we found them. There were a couple of guys hanging out in hammocks; by now, our Spanish was good enough to say we wanted to go on the tour, and ask whether there would be flamingoes. Yes, that was good, come back tomorrow morning, and we would find flamingoes.



The next morning, after a little confusion about who we were and what we wanted, we hiked a bit to get to a “canoe,” more of a flat-bottomed boat than a canoe (they now offer kayaks for self-propelled adventures). The captain poled the boat through the mangroves, which was a great experience, and we did find small groups of flamingoes in the open areas.

We then went out into the lagoon. The boat captain was having some difficulty poling across the lagoon to get to the dock (return trip was a hike through the mangroves). The captain was struggling to pole the boat towards the dock, so John jumped out to pull, and ended up waist-deep in pale gray mud. The captain was probably appalled, but didn't say a word! With that, my sister and I had no trouble getting out of the boat onto the dock.

On our hike back, mostly on a home-made boardwalk, every time we reached some clean water, the captain had John take off his pants and wash out the mud – it took three days of rinsing them with the hotel hose to finally get them clean.

### Developing Ecotourism in Celestún

According to recent (late 2024, 2025) reviews on Tripadvisor, the Guardianes have come a long way. You reserve in advance with a WhatsApp call, and a tuk-tuk type mototaxi picks you up at your hotel. There are bilingual guides (ask in advance), plus the boat captain. The guide points out birds and wildlife, talks about the work of the reserve, and explains how the Guardianes work with other ecotourism organizations around the world. The tour sounds the same – the presentation has been “modernized.”

([www.guardianesdelosmanglaresdedzinintun.com/](http://www.guardianesdelosmanglaresdedzinintun.com/))

There is also an ecotourism company called Sheartails Expeditions (the Mexican sheartail (*Doricha eliza*) is a hummingbird native to Mexico) that started in 2002, after we were there; it was badly damaged by Hurricane Milton in October 2024, but is again offering some tours for birdwatchers; one specialty is a firefly float through the mangroves. ([www.facebook.com/sheartailsexpeditions](https://www.facebook.com/sheartailsexpeditions))

## Local Salt Production

We also took a tour, although you can apparently drive there yourself, of the colored, mostly pink, salt pans (*charcas*). The Maya settled the area around Celestún around 1800 BCE; they produced salt via evaporation and traded it throughout their empire and with other pre-Hispanic civilizations.



Our guide explained the Celestún salt industry; in the early 1900s, the town of Real de Salinas (Royal Salt Mines) was the production site for “dye wood” (*Haematoxylum campechianum*, or logwood) – a hardwood that can produce red, purple, and blue dye, and for salt. The town of Real de Salinas is now in ruins, although people ride bikes out to see the “ghost hacienda.”

The salt industry that remains in Celestún is small, no longer a major source of income or employment for many of the nearly 7,000 people who live there. There is a women's cooperative society that produces and sells salts from the reserve (*Sociedad cooperativa salinas de la reserva*); the coop wholesales and resales *flor de sal*, coarse salt, table salt, and sea salt, which you can buy locally. There is a more commercial product sold by a Cancun company called *Gusto Buen Vivir* (The Taste of Good Living) – Celestún Flor de Sal Gourmet, “Harvested, Collected, Dried, and Packaged by Hand.” You can buy it on Amazon for \$30 USD for 26.5 ounces.

## Ecotourism, Tourism, and Celestún

In January 2025, the governor of Yucatán issued a UNESCO-sponsored publication, *Yucatán: Mosaicos de Experiencias*. UNESCO's goal is to strengthen the capacity of rural indigenous communities to design and manage their own “community-based tourism” (CBT) experiences; the tourism department of Yucatán state has a capacity-building program to help develop local CBT businesses as an alternative to the mass resort-style model (really, is the beach in Cancún much different from the beach in Phuket?). CBT gives communities the chance to benefit from tourism experiences they design themselves; the outcome is equitable development that brings market benefits to marginalized local peoples. Both the Guardianes de los Manglares Dzintintún and Sheartails Expeditions are listed among the 14 CBT “social enterprises” in the Yucatán Mosaic catalogue.



And how well is CBT holding up in Celestún? When we first went to Celestún, there were nearly 6,000 people there, although the population rose to 10,000 in octopus fishing season, which begins August 1 (Mexico is one of the world's largest exporters of octopus, and 98% of that octopus comes from the Yucatán). From 2000 to 2010, the population increased by less than 300 ( $\pm 5\%$ ), but from 2010 to 2020, it increased by almost 23%, to 8,389.



That population increase comes from migration in search of employment, a typical result of promoting a new tourism destination. Associate Professor of Anthropology Matilde Córdoba Azcárate has studied four tourism sites in the Yucatán, Celestún among them. Córdoba Azcárate looks carefully at how tourism exploits the places, people, and natural resources of any given location “in order to satisfy short-term consumer demands.” Like us, Córdoba Azcárate twice spent time in Celestún, first in the mid-1990s and then in 2002. In the 1990s, she found it was off the beaten path of tourism, but once Mexico defined the biosphere in 2000, and UNESCO recognized that, development started to accelerate. By 2002, the author found “all the trappings of modern tourism” – which limited access to the very natural resources Celestún was trying to merchandise, intensified social conflict, and increased crime and violence.

While development has increased the population, prosperity is not equally shared (please tip your hotel maid), there are not enough jobs to go around, there's exceedingly limited health care. According to Córdoba Azcárate, increasing tourism has benefited only a few people, and failed to deliver the “promised sustainable and inclusive economic growth.” In our experience in 2020, 18 years after Córdoba Azcárate's second visit, the situation may have improved – here's hoping that the Yucatán's CBT capacity building program for community-based tourism stays alive and well!

Córdoba Azcárate's book is *Stuck with Tourism: Space, Power and Labor in Contemporary Yucatán* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020).

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