

TRAVEL ↻

# *This Overshadowed Mexican City Is A Feast*



Winston Ross

**Guadalajara is a Mexican city unwarpd by the demands of American tourists, with idyllic year-round weather and world-class eateries at which no reservation is needed.**

Published Feb. 06, 2022 10:36AM ET

↻ Listen to article 17 minutes



*ditor's note: This is the latest in our series on underrated destinations, [It's Still a Big World](#).*

Thomas Fernandez Cortina's friends in Mexico City still tease him: "Do they have cinema in Guadalajara now?" It's an odd jab at a city of more than 5 million people, even from the vantage point of the country's four-times-larger capital. But to some, Guadalajara will always be a kid brother to Mexico's mightiest metropolis.

That suits the chef and owner of [Puerco Espada](#) just fine. For all its flair, Mexico City is crowded and (relatively) expensive, while Guadalajara has in the past five or ten years steadily risen from what tourists saw as a gritty industrial stopover that was often overlooked by travelers bound to Tequila, Puerto Vallarta or Lake Chapala into a sophisticated destination unto its own. Guadalajara is a Mexican city unwarped by the demands of American tourists, with idyllic year-round weather on the upswing, with world-class eateries at which no reservation is needed, with excellent food served for half the cost of mediocre restaurants in the resort towns of Cancun or Mazatlan. Swank, modern neighborhoods. And the best part: travelers can go days without hearing pushy Americans assuming everyone speaks English.

Founded in 1531 by a Spanish conquistador on the hunt for precious metals in northwest Mexico, the city was relocated no less than four times over the next nine years, at the resistance from indigenous tribes, whose members were captured by slave hunters during the early colonial period and treated miserably. At the agreement to end slavery, regional conflicts ended, and the village grew from 126 people to the modern metropolis it is today, thanks to the development of a rich blend of industry, agriculture, commerce, mining and trade. Today, it's home to some of Latin America's best universities, and a thriving tech hub, with offices of Intel, IBM and Oracle. Jalisco makes 60 percent of all computers produced in Mexico, and Guadalajara is the country's chief provider of software. Its residents are known as Tapatios, which recalls the name of a popular hot sauce created by Guadalajaran immigrants in California.



Tlaquepaque, and nearby Tonalá, are known for ceramics.

Winston Ross

The city has changed a great deal in the past decade or two. “Guadalajara is much more open now,” Cortina says, a reference to the Catholic, conservative culture that has since given way to more progressive and LGBTQ-friendly vibes. “For me, it’s one of the best cities to live in Mexico.”

With nonstop flights from major cities across the U.S. and sub-\$5 Uber rides anywhere in the city, Guadalajara is an easy place to navigate, especially with a bit of travel Spanish in tow. In the Lafayette neighborhood alone, several chic and modern hotels all lie within pleasant walks of one another. Two of the best include [Casa Habita](#), which stands out for its tranquil patios and ample outdoor furniture, and the [Rame Hotel Boutique](#), which lies on a quiet street, with rooms that open out to a sizable pool with high walls that block out the surroundings.

Both hotels are five to 15 minutes from a food tour as exciting and affordable as anywhere in the world. Guadalajara has long been famous for its street food, from the crispy pork carnitas sandwiches dunked in chili sauces and often eaten for breakfast to the many varieties of Mexican street corn, or elote, served in stalls across the city. Now, it’s about the booming restaurant scene. The most famous is [Alcalde](#), which many local chefs credit with convincing locals that higher-quality food should cost more. Adolfo Galnares, trained at the Culinary Institute of America, was happy to escape Mexico City’s high rent when he opened [Allium](#) in 2014. He and his wife, Maria Ortega, sourced high quality fish from local fishermen, but it took some doing to convince patrons they should pay more for it. Now, he says, “people finally understand the price is directly related to the quality of ingredients you use,” Galnares says, and his patrons come from all over the world for Allium’s inventive dishes, from the smoked beet puree with a puffed wild rice and arugula emulsion to the huitlacoche risotto, crafted with corn smut, grana padano and artisanal butter and cheese from Atotonilco. Every meal comes with a round of house-made sourdough from a starter the couple has kept alive for the past five years.

Innovative food is having a moment in Guadalajara largely because chefs are, like Galnares, seeking out a city that requires less investment and overall risk, to try something new. Mutante is another standout restaurant in the neighborhood, both for its leafy outdoor patio that feels like a secret garden and for its massive menu of Oaxaca grasshopper tacos, duck flutes, aguachiles and perfectly seasoned sashimi. For breakfast, it's palReal, a labyrinthian cafe that roasts its own coffee and serves up inventive twists on huevos rancheros and its own take on a torta ahogada. For a late lunch, get to Puerco Espada, for some of the best seafood in the city.



TK restaurant in Tequila makes some of the best birria — a stew for which Jalisco is renowned — in the region. And handmade tortillas, to boot.

Despite the competition from monopolistic breweries like Pacifico, Guadalajara has a thriving craft beer scene, too. One of the best breweries in town is Alejandro Magallanes' Loba, founded by . On any given night, there are nine kinds of beer on tap, one of them a surprisingly good low-gluten beer, the Lobita. Loba was named Best North American Brewery in the 2019 International Beer Challenge. And the food at the newly opened restaurant on the premises, UMHO, is top-notch, from the ceviche to the pulled pork sandwich.

Between meals, the Palacio de Gobierno in Plaza de Armas is worth a long walk, as is the nearby twin-towered Guadalajara Cathedral, and the giant indoor market, Mercado Libertad San Juan de Dios, which is another 11 minutes on foot. Only a few minutes further lies Hospicio Cabanas, one of the city's most vibrant and unique attractions, tucked into a former orphanage and featuring the murals of Jose Clemente Orozco. It was once a workhouse, hospital, orphanage and almshouse, and remained a hospital until 1980, when the Cabanas Cultural Institute occupied it. Orozco's frescoes can be found throughout the complex.

After a few days in the city, head to the volcanic valley that's home to the blue agave fields of Tequila, an hour's drive to the northwest. Aside from the obvious tours of the world's best known distilleries, it's a charming enough little town to wander with a cantarita, the juiced up version of a margarita, in hand. Casa Salles is far and away the best hotel option, partly for its luxury boutique digs that include a fine on-site restaurant and placid pool but also because it sits on a spacious lot next door to El Tequileno, which makes some of the finest spirits in the region. When the agave plants are cooking, sweet smells of sugary pina waft into the courtyard at Casa Salles, whetting the appetite for the informative on-site tastings available by reservation.

For the adventurous, guide Martin Gaytan Guzman leads scrambles down a steep cliffside to a series of waterfalls of the Rio Lerma that drop into the Chiquihuitillo Valley. The pool beneath the largest waterfall is the perfect temperature for a dip, most of the year, and while the hike is steep and a little dicey, it's short.

Back in the city, a \$6 Uber ride transports travelers to what was once a suburb of the Guadalajara and is now more of an outlying neighborhood within it, albeit with an entirely different feel: Tlaquepaque.

The town's beating heart is Calle Independencia, a pedestrian-only street lined with shops to buy ceramics, textiles and tequila. While much of the offerings along this avenue are lookalike Chinese imports, there's a union of 150 local artisans whose wares can be found here and there, especially in the artisan market next to Plaza Parian.



La Villa del Ensueno, a boutique hotel in Tlaquepaque, features colorful grounds and a tranquil pool.

There are a couple of great options for ceramics: Cantu is famous for its plethora of beautiful tiles, while Ceramica el Palomar has an entire room full of inexpensive “seconds,” pieces with small imperfections, about a block or so walk from La Villa Del Ensueno, a boutique hotel dripping with neocolonial charm around every intricately tiled corner. Family-owned El Patio is the best place for food, entertainment and a soup-sized bowl that makes up a cazuela, the area’s specialty concoction of citrus fruits, juices and tequila. Hit El Patio on one of the three afternoons each week when the restaurant hosts an all-female mariachi band that wanders through the restaurant, belting out perfect harmonies.