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## Mexico's Magic Towns

There are 111 pueblos mágicos in Mexico, each one designated as such for its enchanting beauty, architecture and centuries-old culture. Here are five magic towns—Sayulita, Todos Santos, Tulum, Isla Mujeres and San Sebastián del Oeste—that are easily accessible from major cities and resorts.

MAY 6, 2020 - BY [LISA KADANE](#), [MELANIE HAIKEN](#)



*Photo by Age Fotostock/Alamy*

My husband and I squeeze in to a taxi with another Canadian traveller in Puerto Vallarta. Our mutual destination is Sayulita, a beach town an hour from the city that entices tourists seeking

a slice of coastal Mexican paradise.

As the vehicle spirits us north on a winding road, the warm, humid air blowing in through the windows is a harbinger of the breezy beach day to come. Our cab companion—a Sayulita regular—raves about the town, and rattles off a list of must-dos that involve sailing trips, surf lessons and strong margaritas.

By the time the taxi drops us off in the main plaza, I'm on Sayulita time, an attitude adjustment aided by the town's chill vibe, the promise of cold cerveza and a gorgeous beach that immediately reels us in.

We've arrived in, and quickly fallen for, one of the country's *pueblos mágicos*, or magic towns. These are communities whose natural beauty, historic architecture and centuries-old culture enchant visitors. In Sayulita, we've stumbled upon one of these great open secrets, a stretch of sand that harkens back to the days before mass tourism, with a charming town to match.

There are 111 *pueblos mágicos* in Mexico, from Loreto to Valladolid (near Merida). Some towns have been given the designation for their Catholic missions and colonial architecture. Others, such as Tequila, the heart of the country's tequila industry, are deemed culturally significant. And some, like Tulum, with its Mayan ruins set against the turquoise Caribbean Sea, offer pre-Columbian historic sites and natural beauty.

Notably, a number of Mexico's most appealing magic towns happen to be located near major resorts and cities, making them easy to visit. Since discovering Sayulita, we have explored more. —LK

## Sayulita



*Sayulita Beach, photo by Erica Kuschel*

We'd heard whispers of Sayulita for years. The small town, located 40 kilometres north of Puerto Vallarta on the scenic Riviera Nayarit, has transformed from a sleepy fishing village

into a backpackers' paradise and expat magnet with a robust surf culture and ultra laid-back vibe. "Go now, before everyone finds out about it," a friend urged.

Everyone dreams of "discovering" the Mexican beach that time forgot, and pretty Sayulita Bay, strung between two headlands and blessed with a wicked surf break, fits this fairy-tale description. On a day trip from PV, my husband and I surrendered to the fantasy, rented a beach umbrella and two lounge chairs, ordered two biggie margaritas and splashed in the waves.

Our second trip to Sayulita a few years later reveals there's more to the town than day-drinking on its palm-fringed crescent of sand. We're inclined to pull a repeat beach day—more tourists have discovered Sayulita in the intervening years, but it's still easy to grab a choice patch of sand, especially if you arrive early.

Instead, we wander through the tangle of streets that leads up from the beach to Sayulita Plaza. They're strung with the rectangular fiesta flags in a rainbow of bright, tropical colours, that seem to adorn small Mexican towns year-round.

We browse tidy boutiques for sarongs and hammocks, jewelry and kitschy Day of the Dead dioramas. And we can't resist a late lunch of deep-fried mahi mahi drizzled with white sauce and rolled in delicate corn tortillas. We eat them while standing at a sidewalk bar accompanied by ice-cold *cervezas*, and watch a steady parade of expats-gone-native make their way to the beach, surfboards slung casually under toned arms. Dark tans indicate some of these beach bums have chosen to drop out of the rat race, and their contented attitude imbues Sayulita with an aura of possibility.

The town encourages me to contemplate the expat life. What would it be like to live in Sayulita for a winter, to take surf lessons, learn Spanish (at a language school here or in nearby San Pancho) or start work on that book? It's an appealing idea, but I decide to savour its alchemy over our short visit, and we leave wanting more. —LK

## Todos Santos



*Photo by Aurora Photos/Alamy*

We seek out Todos Santos on a day trip. Approaching the town in our rental car, the desert landscape of the southern Baja gives way to groves of green-topped palms and papaya trees heavy with fruit. It's a quiet oasis.

The small mission town has enticed expats and artists for decades. Nestled below the Sierra de la Laguna Mountains near Cabo San Lucas, on our visit, it's gearing up for the [Todos Santos Art Festival](#), one of several cultural events held annually in either February or March. Craft stalls are set up around an outdoor plaza and artisans display silver rings set on velvet



trays, tables laden with beaded animals and bead-glass figurines. Year-round, the town's many galleries carry such works by local craftspeople.

"A bracelet for your little girl?" a vendor asks as my daughter and I stroll past her booth. We admire the woman's delicate silver band inlaid with turquoise. It's tempting to ask, "¿Cuanto cuesta?" ("How much?"), but I'm not ready to begin negotiating for the item, so we smile and keep looking.

Adding to its mystique as a creative muse is the fabled [Hotel California](#). Impossible to miss in the centre of town, it is alleged to have inspired the 1976 Eagles song of the same name. It's easy to imagine that the lyrics relate to Todos Santos, through which a desert highway (Highway 19) passes. Though it also features a mission bell and several courtyards, alas, this pop-music connection is merely a legend.

From the plaza, the smoky smell of roasting chicken leads us to an open-air restaurant where we feast on chicken quesadillas and enchiladas. After lunch, we amble through the town's historic centre and stop at the Iglesia Nuestra Señora del Pilar, a Catholic mission built in 1733. Its pale yellow façade offers a striking contrast to the rustic red brick and terra cotta-hued stucco of neighbouring buildings. I'm smitten with this lovely place. —LK

## Tulum



*Mayan ruins, photo by Robert Harding/Alamy*

My daughters and I were on a day trip from Cancun when I first heard the call of Tulum. We were off to see the famed ruins of the same name, now preserved as a national park. After stopping in the village of Tulum for a quick lunch of buttery, toasted sandwiches known as tortas, we clambered among stone temples and visited the structure known as El Castillo, situated in view of swimmers frolicking in the turquoise waves of the Caribbean Sea. We

instantly decided to relocate to this tropical playground.

Many visits later, I arrive, as I always do, wondering whether the pull of the east coast of the Yucatán Peninsula's Riviera Maya will remain strong, the light as besotting, the lush landscape and layers of history as evocative. Tulum has, after all, been well "discovered," with food critics giddy over its expat chefs such as Hartwood's Eric Werner and stars like Drew Barrymore and Cameron Diaz tucking themselves into its five-star hideaways.

As I hop on my beach cruiser to make the 15-minute ride into town on what was once a dusty, pitted road, now a smoothly paved bike and walking path, it occurs to me that if development is inevitable—which, when it comes to jungle-shrouded Caribbean beach enclaves, it is—this magic town is doing it right.

Tulum is two destinations in one: the town, a low-slung grid of ochre, aqua and white stucco concealing brightly tiled courtyards, and the upscale eco-resorts and boutique hotels that line the sugar-sand beaches, many with thatched-roof palapas, hammocks and vine-draped gardens. You don't have to choose between the comfort of high-thread-count sheets and poolside loungers and the "real" Mexico from which travellers are so often isolated.

Parking my bike in front of my favourite *tortería*, I stroll the sidewalks lined with bakeries, juice stands and handicraft stalls, stopping for a Michoacán-style fruit popsicle, or *paleta*, made by hand from pureed fruit or exotic ingredients like pine nuts, hibiscus and cactus fruit. Listening to the backpackers strumming guitars outside one of the many family-run hostels, Tulum's magic surrounds me once again, and I know I'll be back. —*MH*

**Getting there:** [WestJet flies to Cancun](#) 16 times a week from Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton and Toronto.

## Isla Mujeres

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Photo by NATUREWORLD/Alamy

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Whether you're there to snorkel the rainbow-hued corals of [Garrafon Natural Reef Park](#) or to simply bask in the sun on an island where there are more golf carts than cars, Isla Mujeres is the essence of get-away-from-it-all relaxation and it's only a 15-minute ferry ride from Cancun's hotel zone. You can even watch the sun rise over the Caribbean (best spot: Punta Sur), then cross the island (to Playa Norte) at sunset to watch it set in all its fiery glory. Oh, and don't forget to stop by the turtle farm sanctuary. One more don't miss: the island's specialty, a charcoal-grilled fish dish called *tikin xic*, best enjoyed beachfront. It can take up to an hour to prepare, but that's sort of the point—on Isla Mujeres, you've got all the time in the world. —MH

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## San Sebastián del Oeste



*Photo by Brian Overcast/Alamy*

Built with the almost unimaginable wealth that poured from the gold, silver and lead mines in the surrounding Sierra Madre mountains, San Sebastián fairly bursts with colonial splendour, much of it perfectly preserved in stone architecture. Both a designated *pueblo mágico* and Unesco World Heritage Site, it enchants with cobblestone alleyways and walls thick with bougainvillea. Take time to admire the church's bright-blue vaulted ceiling and savour a meal at one of the restaurants surrounding the nearby main plaza with its colonial bandstand. And while most come for a day trip from Puerto Vallarta, staying in the town's elegant Spanish haciendas is the best way to appreciate its charm. —MH