

Why Your Next Trip to Mexico Should Go Beyond the Obvious Hot Spots

Now is the perfect moment to take a fresh look at our southern neighbor.

By Alex Temblador | November 09, 2021



CREDIT: JOAQUIN TRUJILLO

A few years ago, I was invited to spend the evening with a gallery owner in Los Cabos, on Mexico's Baja Peninsula. I was on vacation, and up until that point I had been doing what most visitors to Los Cabos do: I took a whale-watching tour, tried a few spa treatments, and soaked up the sun on the beach.

But soon I was ready for something different. I met Patricia Mendoza at her

namesake gallery, which features work by contemporary Mexican artists; together, we set off through the cobblestoned streets of San José del Cabo's Gallery District. Mendoza introduced me to artists like Ivan Guaderrama, who explained how his colorful pieces produce sounds when touched, and Enrique Bascón, whose paintings examine Mexican society and politics with humor. Along the way, Mendoza and I had a glass of wine at H Bistro, where we discussed our respective family histories. I told her how, although most of the Mexican side of my family has lived in the U.S. since the 1800s, my great-grandfather was born in Guadalajara.

Later, we returned to Mendoza's gallery, where we were served a multicourse meal by an up-and-coming Mexican chef. I was the only U.S. citizen at our table. The conversation switched effortlessly between Spanish and English, and we talked about art, culture, politics, travel, and life. I had been to Mexico countless times, but on that night, I connected with its people in a more sincere and significant way.

Warm weather, inexpensive flights, and advertisements with shots of Spanish-colonial architecture have made Mexico the top international destination for U.S. travelers. We fly to the resort towns along the coast to escape, to relax, to be pampered; some of us venture to Mexico City for food and history. We go where our families and friends have gone, and where we're surrounded by people from our own country.



But Mexico is also home to diverse Indigenous cultures, complex belief systems, and breathtaking natural wonders such as petrified waterfalls, pink lakes, soaring mountains, and deep canyons. Many of us haven't gone beyond the beaches and pools. We haven't gotten to know our southern neighbor the way a good neighbor should.

Recently in the U.S., we've begun to openly discuss racism, colonialism, unconscious bias, and privilege, and to consider how they affect different aspects of our lives—including travel. We've reexamined what we thought we knew, and we've sought to understand the experiences of people different from us.

For me, this process of reflection and empathetic growth is the real reason travelers should visit Mexico in 2022. The border may physically separate our countries, but fearmongering, stereotyping, and divisive policies have pushed us further apart. This year, we can take what we've learned in 2020 and 2021 and change that. We can choose to connect with the people of Mexico and learn what makes it so rich in culture, nature, and community.

On your next visit, you might walk through the stalls of Mexico City's El Chopo flea market and encounter the newest music and fashions from the country's punk and goth scenes. Or you might gain insight into the Indigenous peoples of Oaxaca by visiting the villages of Zapotec weavers. A short boat ride on the crocodile-filled Usumacinta River to the magnificent ruins of Yaxchilán will enrich your knowledge of Mexico's Indigenous history.

Visiting lesser-known Mexican destinations is one easy way travelers can get to know the place more intimately. Take it a step further by staying in locally owned hotels or vacation rentals, eating where Mexicans eat, shopping where Mexicans shop, and trying to speak Spanish — because it's the people who make a journey unforgettable, after all.

For my next trip to Mexico, I'm planning a visit to Guadalajara, the nation's second-largest city. It will be my ancestral heritage trip — and if I'm lucky, I'll meet a distant cousin. The cathedral will surely astound me, as will the bands in the Plaza de los Mariachis, but I'll also make a point of seeking out the locals, who call themselves Tapatíos.

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Perhaps I'll join a hiking group and explore the nearby canyon of Barranca de Oblatos. My fellow hikers may suggest the city's best restaurants for *pozole*, *birria*, *tortas ahogadas*, or *tejuino*, so the next day I'll gorge on those Tapatío specialties in between visits to high-end fashion boutiques and modern art galleries. I might learn about the Teuchitlán culture on a tour of the circular-stepped pyramids of Los Guachimontones. Whatever I do, I look forward to experiencing Mexico in a more meaningful way.