

A short daily flight from Houston drops you into Mexico's old-world town of San Miguel de Allende, where you can try your hand at everything from cooking to speaking Spanish

“IT'S JUST  
A TWO-HOUR  
ESCAPE  
TO ANOTHER  
WORLD”

**MORNING COMES SOFTLY OVER SAN MIGUEL**, as seen at left from atop a bell tower in one of the many old buildings that give the city its charm.

**THESE STREETS WERE MADE FOR WALKIN'.** Here's another narrow, colorful side street in San Miguel, a destination that needs no rental car.



**KIM AND DAVID PAUSE AT THEIR CENTRAL BASE CAMP**, Plaza Jardín, to contemplate their next meal.

I'VE CHOSEN A BENCH JUST OUTSIDE THE SHADE of the ficus trees to wait for the sun to show itself. Like the sun, or maybe with the sun, the local life of the Plaza Jardín (Garden Plaza) in Mexico's San Miguel de Allende is awakening. The stooped balloon man shuffles across the cobblestone street. Bright globes of blue, silver, orange, and yellow poking over his shoulder mimic the palette of colors painted on the stone and adobe walls lining the cityscape. A woman pushes a cart shakily over the stones to her corner where she'll serve fresh mango, pineapple, and papaya topped with yogurt in plastic cups. Beside me on similar benches, locals in jeans and cowboy hats or full-time American residents ("ex-pats") chat quietly or read the newspaper they just bought from the stacks on the wall encircling the plaza. Above us the fantastical spires of La Parroquia (Parish of San Miguel) stretch lazily into the increasingly blue sky.

None of this feels like home, yet I'm perfectly comfortable. If this is what they mean by culture shock, then bring it on, flip the switch.





### TRAVELER VS. TOURIST

Kim, our food editor, and I have come to San Miguel de Allende to experience the rhythm, sounds, tastes, and pace of a different culture. We're here as travelers, not tourists. We aren't looking for the nearest beach spa to relax us before Señor Frog's Happy Hour. By taking cooking and art classes, learning Spanish with a one-on-one tutor, dancing salsa, and staying open-minded to new customs, we hope to better understand this place and its people.

San Miguel easily lets us venture outside our comfort zones. In the central highlands, three and a half hours north of Mexico City, the 463-year-old town of about 80,000 people offers a rare mix of traveler-friendly accommodations, varied dining experiences, classes, and an authentic, old-world sensuality. The combination invites even the most cautious visitor to try the fresh grilled corn or *elote* (ay-LOH-tay) from a sidewalk stand, engage a resident with elementary Spanish in the Plaza Jardín,

or just act local by adopting the *tranquillo* (tran-KEE-yoh) approach to time and schedules.

I'm doing just that—sitting on a bench, losing track of time—when Kim finds me. She's glowing with excitement as she recounts her two-hour Spanish lesson at the Academia Hispánico Americana.

"We spoke Spanish the whole time," she says. "I asked him to take me to his favorite lunch place, Tortilán. We ate the best torta sandwiches and talked food, of course. But Javier wouldn't let me get away with English. He made me repeat the words until I got it right. You have to be willing to be corrected."

A lesson in itself. Tomorrow she'll have to put the words and short phrases to a street test when we tour the historic town of Dolores Hidalgo to look for pottery, furniture, and the exotic homemade ice cream we've been hearing about (see "So There I Was . . ." at cottageliving.com for more on the man who makes the ice cream).

### TRANQUILLO

It was the first word we learned from our airport taxi driver, Ray. In some places, one phrase says it all. As Ray passed police cars and introduced us to blinding hot sauces at our first lunch—a roadside truck stop of spicy home cooking—I was a bit confused about the San Miguel definition of *tranquillo*. Now, after a San Miguel week of new foods, new language, new customs, and a new pace, I think it's the most important word to know down here: relax, chill out, don't be shy. Try something new.

**PLAZA JARDÍN, FOREGROUND, AND LA PARROQUIA** glow after dusk, just right for a post-dinner stroll. Opposite, clockwise from top left: **DAVID AND REYNA**, our cooking instructor, walk home from the market, carrying ingredients for tamales, cactus cake, and chiles rellenos. **EX-PATS (WOMAN WITH GUITAR)** and locals mingle on the safe cobblestone streets radiating out from one of San Miguel's plazas. **STEP INTO A COVERED** market for a true Mexican experience of trinket shopping and eating fresh, cheap food made right behind the counter. **A COUPLE OF CABALLEROS** ride into the Plaza Jardín to pick up some supplies for their ranch outside town.





**PANADERIA LA COLMENA,** A BAKERY, opens its doors early, just after the fresh aroma leaks into the streets. Grab a pan, some tongs, and take your pick.



**NOPALE SALAD AT RINCÓN DE DON TOMAS**



**REYNA AND KIM**

## **EAT** Kim Sunée's Food Lover's Guide to San Miguel

As soon as we arrived at the airport in León, I started chatting up a Texas real estate developer who flies to San Miguel every two weeks. I didn't want to talk blueprints, just menus and where he loves to eat. A few locals also offered their favorites and by the time my luggage arrived, I had already scribbled down a week's worth of tasting notes.

Mexico truly is a feast for the eyes as well as the palate. The market *loncherías* are a good place to start. Because these lunch counters (which also serve breakfast) are usually crowded, the food is made fresh and fast. Our first market meal was a hominy stew called *pozole* (poe-TSOE-lay), enchiladas, and cinnamon-sweet coffee. Many of the vendors will whip up fresh fruit combinations, including mango, passion fruit, and the deep scarlet-colored prickly pear from the tips of the nopal cactus.

For breakfast, we loved El Correo's chilaquiles (crispy fried tortilla strips with or without eggs) and a choice of homemade red or green salsa. I also love Panaderia La Colmena. Step through the blue doors and do as the early morning locals: Pick a pair of tongs and a large platter and walk behind the counter to choose among pans of freshly baked sesame puff pastry twists, glazed doughnuts, croissants, and spicy tuna or sticky pineapple empanadas.

Tortas are a great lunch treat. My favorite of these sandwiches is the pulled pork or breaded chicken on two soft rounds of fresh bread.

If you want to experience some of the best home cooking, though, I encourage you to try the street food. Follow your nose. That sweet earthy aroma will lead you to a host of street vendors grilling *elote*, fresh ears of corn hot on a stick or kernels shaved into plastic cups (easier to eat) with a squeeze

of lime, a dusting of powdered chile, mayonnaise, and grated cheese. Not to be confused with *atole* (ah-TOE-lay), a thick corn-based creamy beverage. Warm and sweet, it will get you through a chilly morning.

### **TACOS AND FAJITAS**

Everyone told us about late-night tacos, but the first few nights, it seemed every corner vendor was offering hot dogs and hamburgers. We did eventually luck into an authentic Mexican taco experience. Take a five-minute cab ride to La Fogata taqueria, an open-air, late-night joint. You'll be mesmerized by the vertical turning spit of pork with a shining crown of whole fresh pineapple. Both are expertly shaved onto a hot tortilla for true *tacos al pastor*.

Locally made yogurt is also worth trying. Go to Bonanza grocery store on Hidalgo street. In the cooler you'll find rich and creamy yogurt with handmade labels stating simply Blackberry or Mango.

For any meal, Rincón de Don Tomas, on the corner of the main plaza (le Jardín) offers *cuisine typico*. When in season, try squash blossom soup, or refreshing Salad of Nopales (cactus) with olive oil, lemon, and *queso fresco*. Also choose housemade *mole amarillo* and fresh-squeezed carrot-orange juice.

### **TEQUILA TASTING NOTES**

Tequila, distilled sap of the agave plant (a succulent, not a cactus), was first made by the Conquistadors, who distilled a native drink called *pulque*. (We tried *pulque* at the market. This fermented yeasty froth is best consumed in the early hours before it has too much time to think about itself.)

# LOCALS TELL US

that the best fajitas are found at Café Olé Olé. Yes, But start with a margarita or two on the rocks and

there are several mounted bulls' heads and even a toro on the menu. ease your way into large sizzling platters of moist chicken and beef.



# PACK YOUR BAGS



## GET THERE

It's so easy it might as well be Cleveland. Continental has four daily flights from Houston to León International Airport (Aeropuerto del Bajío: BJX) outside the capital city of Guanajuato and 70 miles from San Miguel. You can arrange an airport pickup to/from your lodging in San Miguel. The ride can cost as little as \$25 or as much as \$65 (U.S. dollars), depending on the vehicle, and takes about an hour and a half. Check at [sanmiguelguide.com/tours.htm](http://sanmiguelguide.com/tours.htm) for a list of transportation options. We highly recommend the mid-route snack break in La Saucedá. You can't miss the block of roadside food stands selling corn tortillas and all the fillings—hot, fresh, and cheap. Once in San Miguel, you won't need a rental car. Everything is within walking distance, even the villas and rental houses. You will need good walking shoes with rubber soles—the cobblestone streets can be bumpy and the old rocks have been worn slick. Cab rides (to anywhere in town) should never cost more than 25 pesos (about \$2).

## WEATHER

San Miguel sits at 6,143 feet in a dry climate. April and May are the hottest months with highs in the low 80s. The rest of the year sees consistent 70s for highs and nights in the 40s. The chill can linger longer than expected in the stone homes and buildings, so bring some warm clothes.

## CELEBRATE

**SEPTEMBER IS FESTIVAL MONTH.** Many Mexicans come to celebrate the town's chief patron saint, San Miguel Arcangel. Traditional dancers adorned in bells, feathers, cloaks, and masks walk to the The Parish to offer flowers. Dances continue until around the 29th. Events include bullfights and bull-running. **JANUARY** Founding father Ignacio Allende's birthday celebration: parades, dance performances, and religious ceremonies. **MARCH/APRIL** Semana Santa (Holy Week) coincides with the Easter season. Pilgrimages, processions, feasts, and lavish religious iconography define this multiweek celebration. **AUGUST** The Escuela de Bellas Artes sponsors a chamber music festival in the first two weeks of the month. For more info call 011-52-415-154-5141 or visit [sanmiguelguide.com](http://sanmiguelguide.com).



## SLEEP

Your options here are more diverse than anywhere in the States and vary depending on how many people you're traveling with and how long you plan to stay. For groups of four or more staying for at least five days, we recommend renting one of the numerous spacious villas. They are owned by individuals and leased through various agencies, some based in Texas. You'd be surprised at the level of luxury you can find for under \$1,500 a week for a three- or four-bedroom house (housekeeping is often included). The best way to pick is online, where you can see the various houses; visit [sanmiguelguide.com/vacation\\_rentals.htm](http://sanmiguelguide.com/vacation_rentals.htm). For those traveling in pairs or for a shorter period, try the following lodgings, from an affordable bed-and-breakfast to a high-end boutique hotel.

**Sleep prices** reflect lowest standard rate per night:

**\$:** Under \$100 **\$\$:** \$100-\$150 **\$\$\$:** \$150+

**■ WHIMSICAL AND ARTSY: \$-\$\$**

**CASA CALDERONI**, 011-52-415-154-6005 or [casacalderoni.com](http://casacalderoni.com). Each room is designed in the style of a famous artist in this quiet hotel five minutes outside the Plaza Jardín. Breakfast included.

**■ QUIET AND INTIMATE: \$\$\$**

**CASA QUETZAL**, 011-52-415-152-0501 or [casaquetzalhotel.com](http://casaquetzalhotel.com). Another boutique hotel, this one owned by an American woman. These stone and tile rooms are very contemporary and distinct from one another.

**■ SLEEK LUXURY: \$\$\$**

**DOS CASAS**, 011-52-415-154-4073 or [living-doscasas.com](http://living-doscasas.com). This was our favorite. A tiny boutique hotel with sleek sitting rooms and a relaxed, warm kitchen headed by one of San Miguel's best home cooks. Lupita and her crew bake up fresh breads and stew fresh mint, spring onions, and green tomatoes into thick sweet jams to accompany a typical Mexican breakfast of chilaquiles (fried tortilla strips with eggs and salsa). Choose from five spacious rooms, including the rooftop suite with private terrace and whirlpool. The manager, Alvaro, speaks English and heads a helpful and friendly staff.

ILLUSTRATION: JEROME COOKSON

## BAZAR EL NUEVO OESTE'S MARIO PADILLA



## SHOP

### UPSCALE INTERIORS, ART, AND CLOTHING

On Recreo and Correo, a few blocks off the Plaza Jardín, you'll find stylish clothing shops, small boutiques, fine art, and decorative art stores. You'll see plenty of silver and pewter tableware, colorful tiles, mirrors, and lamps. The typical bright blue and yellow glazed pottery and handwoven goods can be found throughout town.

**LOCAL ARTISAN MARKET** Don't miss the market that runs down a narrow alley filled with vendors of typical central and coastal Mexican pottery, silver, pewter, folk art, religious art, luminarias, and handcrafted tin metalwork. Feel free to bargain—it's customary here. Find the market on the street called Andador Lucas Balderas, which runs parallel to Calle Insurgentes behind Plaza Cívica. Or just ask for "Mercado Artesanía" (mair-KAH-doe ar-ti-ZAN-ee-uh).

**ANTIQUES** For the best antique shopping, stroll down Calle Hernandez Macias, one block off the Plaza Jardín. Take Hernandez Macias to Calle Codo and on to Ancha de San Antonio—you'll pass a handful of stores selling everything from new wooden candleholders to 200-year-old wooden tables to full-size crucifixes. Stop at the beautiful Zeus Bar and antiques store on Hernandez Macias for mid-stroll refreshment.

## READ UP

### ON MEXICAN TIME:

**A NEW LIFE IN SAN MIGUEL**, by Tony Cohan, tells the autobiographical story of an American and his wife who are seduced into moving full-time to San Miguel. They refurbish a 250-year-old house and meld into the colors and passions of Mexican life. \$9.95 at [powells.com](http://powells.com)  
**LONELY PLANET LATIN AMERICAN SPANISH PHRASE BOOK.** This dictionary of words and phrases will be much more thorough than the glossary in your guidebook. It'll get you through the food market, shop, or tour. \$7.99 at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)

## EXPLORE

**SIDEWALK WANDERS** Just walking the streets for an afternoon feels exploratory—the smells, the slants of light and shadow, the bumpy cobblestones and slick sidewalks. Be sure to look in each doorway: Store signs are strictly regulated so a plain-faced doorway might open to a sun-filled courtyard café or a shop selling handmade, hand-painted wooden boxes.

**THE OVERLOOK** For a bird's-eye view of downtown, walk up Calle Correo from Plaza Jardín, take a right onto Salida Real a Queretaro, and continue up the hill less than a half mile to El Mirador (me-ra-DOOR), "The Overlook." You'll see that the easiest way to get your bearings is by the churches and their distinct protrusions into the skyline.

### ORGANIZED TOURS

**PMC TOURS (18 HIDALGO)**, which stands for Promotion of Mexican Culture, makes a great base. Have a latte and relax on the couch as the friendly, informative, English-speaking staff answers your San Miguel questions. They offer half- or full-day van tours to destinations like Dolores Hidalgo to Guanajuato. They'll even ship your purchases back to the States.

**DOLORES HIDALGO** is a small town roughly an hour away. Center yourself at the tidy colonial plaza with yet another grand cathedral. Dolores is best known for the hand-spun, hand-painted pottery and tiles. Shop the outlying roadside warehouses and compare to the downtown Dolores prices. No matter how many tortillas you had at lunch, you must try the homemade ice cream infused with offbeat flavors like beer, tequila, and cheese from one of the green carts on the main plaza.

**GUANAJUATO** There's no better little town in which to get lost. The narrow, twisting, climbing, tunneling streets and alleys of this World Heritage Site city make for a must-see tour, either for a day from San Miguel or an afternoon and night before flying home from the León airport, a 20-minute cab ride away. The town boomed in the 1500s when a lucrative silver vein was discovered in the steep slopes around town. Now the mining tunnels have been widened to accommodate streets and walkways that duck unexpectedly under entire blocks of the bustling town. The towering university's vibrant student body has created a mix of old-world *tranquillo* and educated youthfulness.

## TAKE A CLASS

**ACADEMIA HISPANO AMERICANA**, 011-52-415-152-4349 or [ahaspeakspanish.com](http://ahaspeakspanish.com), offers one-on-one Spanish instruction. Native teachers cater to individual student's level and interests. Their total immersion approach works quickly. Literary, historical, and cultural seminars on Mexican themes available. **INSTITUTO ALLENDE**, 011-52-415-152-0190, 011-52-415-152-0929, or [instituto-allende.edu.mx](http://instituto-allende.edu.mx). Year-round schedule of art classes ranges from watercolors to sculpture to drawing. Most classes are at least two weeks, but visitors can jump in for a week or get in touch with an instructor and negotiate for private lessons. Tuition discounts in off-season. **WARREN HARDY SCHOOL**, 011-52-415-154-4017, 011-52-415-152-4728, or [warrenhardy.com](http://warrenhardy.com). Owned by an ex-pat, this school is popular among American travelers wanting to learn Spanish. Group classes or one-on-one sessions. **REYNA POLANCO'S COOKING CLASSES**, 011-52-415-152-41-93 or [internetsanmiguel.com/polanco](http://internetsanmiguel.com/polanco). Take a half-day cooking class in which you and a group of as many as six shop at the local market before heading to an up-close lesson in typical Mexican dishes. Cleanup's easy—you get to eat it all. **INDIVIDUAL ART, CULTURAL, LANGUAGE CLASSES** Classes Unlimited, 011-52-415-152-2483 or online at [sanmiguelguide.com/education\\_calendar.htm](http://sanmiguelguide.com/education_calendar.htm); Nina Wisniewski, 044-415-151-2462 or [wisnina2@hotmail.com](mailto:wisnina2@hotmail.com)