







Clockwise, from top left: Banderas Bay in Puerto Vallarta; University Temple Company in Guanajuato; the Lady Basilica in Chichén Itzá ruins on the Yucatán Peninsula; the International Mariachi Festival of Guadalajara

# *My heart belongs to* **MEXICO**

*Julie Schwietert Collazo shares her memories of living in Mexico City, and the many attractions that entice her to keep coming back to visit this fascinating country time and time again*

One Sunday morning 10 years ago, I found myself wandering happily through Antiguédades Plaza del Ángel, the endlessly fascinating antiques emporium of Mexico City's Juárez neighborhood. As I browsed the many treasures, I found myself wondering, "what am I doing here?" I had never *planned* to live in Mexico City, though I considered myself an intrepid globetrotter. Since the age of 15, I have traveled, learned, and lived abroad. Circumstances of my marriage led me to move to Mexico City – my husband would more easily be able to visit his family in Cuba from our new adopted home town. So I found myself flying to Mexico City without much more than a suitcase and the address of a leased property organized by a friend: Versailles 57, Colonia Juárez.

From the moment the plane broke through the clouds and began its descent, I was captivated. Surrounded by mountains, the city is indeed a teeming, ultra-urban caldera. Here, from the left side of the plane, you could see a volcano. A few miles closer to approach was a city whose skyline was more thrilling and unimaginable than Manhattan's, with the Torre Latinoamericana, an Empire State Building-inspired skyscraper; the newish Torre Mayor, which held Mexico's and Latin America's tallest building titles for a brief time; and lower-slung buildings that still managed to stand out, among them Palacio de los Deportes, a structure that looks like an abstract armadillo that was built for the 1968 Olympic Games. In the years that followed, I'd come and go over that

landscape dozens of times, and it never failed to impress and move me.

If there are places in the world where we feel like we just fit, Mexico City – and soon, Mexico at large – is mine. While the capital could keep anyone busy for a lifetime, there are treasures to be experienced beyond city limits. We'd frequently rent a car, open up the Guía Roji map, and put our finger down, our destination marked. One weekend we'd be headed to Cuernavaca; another, to Puebla, Oaxaca, or Veracruz. Sometimes we'd board a plane and head to other spots, like Guadalajara or the Yucatán Peninsula. Every getaway was grand. We'd explore Precolonial and Colonial sites that had hundreds or thousands of years of history behind them, marveling at their persistence and how they fit so seamlessly into the modern Mexico narrative.

We'd stumble upon places that weren't in guidebooks, like a decommissioned prison in the town of Perote. Built inside a Colonial-era fort, the structure still bore the signs of its penal past, with prisoners' drawings etched into the walls and some of their personal effects left behind on concrete cots.

We'd meet people who, after brief conversations, would invite us into their homes or to accompany them to their favorite restaurant. A lawyer and his family in Guadalajara introduced us to *tortas ahogadas*, or "drowned" sandwiches, a signature dish of the city. Afterward, he encouraged us to join the family for their regular Sunday outing to the *lienzo charro*, an arena where cowboys and cowgirls showed off their horsemanship and rope-work skills.

*From the moment the plane broke through the clouds and began its descent, I was captivated*





Left: The Basilica de Guadalupe is a major Catholic shrine on the outskirts of Mexico City. Below left: Revelers dress up for a Día de los Muertos procession



That kind of openness and warmth, that kind of: “Let me drop everything and bring you into my world and my life,” is found throughout Mexico, and the people’s generosity of spirit is palpable, extended in even the briefest, most fleeting of encounters, even for those just visiting or passing through. The most meaningful moments of my life (and many of the most meaningful ones in my marriage) have happened in Mexico. While we couldn’t go on to become citizens, the country, its culture, and people remain a central part of our lives, and we visit as frequently as we can. We’ve had three kids in the years since we lived in Mexico City, and they often accompany me on

my trips back “home.” We go to watch whales and drive along the ocean in Los Cabos; to rumble along the cobblestone streets in a horse-drawn carriage in the charming, mansion-dense city of Mérida on the Yucatán Peninsula; to float in cenotes, natural pools that are sacred to the Maya; to take the Jose Cuervo tequila train from Guadalajara to the UNESCO World Heritage site of Tequila (the town); to wander along Puerto Vallarta’s seaside walk and count all the whimsical public art statues; to road trip to Michoacán to witness the annual monarch butterfly migration and explore more of Mexico’s *pueblos mágicos*, or magical towns; and to ride the El Chepe passenger train through the Copper Canyon. We also go, of course, to gorge on *tamales*, *tlayudas*, *mole*, and *chilaquiles*. Igniting a love for Mexico in our children – and, really, in anyone I meet – is important to me.

All those years ago, when I was walking through the antiques market that Sunday morning, I bought a postcard that I still have today. The photo shows a man sitting on one of the wooden pleasure boats that floats along the canals of Xochimilco, in southern Mexico City. Seated on either side of him is a smiling woman. They all look really happy, as if they’ve given themselves wholly to this moment. It’s November 18, 1956 – that’s what the back of the photo indicates anyway. The recipient of the photo isn’t named, but the man’s message is clear: “I told you you should have come,” he wrote. And so should you.

***We go to watch whales and drive along the ocean in Los Cabos; to rumble along the cobblestone streets in a horse-drawn carriage***

GETTY





DESTINATION  
MEXICO



ROBERT HARDING



Clockwise from top left: The Monument to the Revolution in Mexico City; women dress up and ride sidesaddle during the sport of *Escaramuza charra*; the Aztec Calendar Stone (or Sun Stone); Mexican street tacos; the Pyramid of the Moon in Teotihuacan





## Regional delights

### WHICH MEXICO WILL STEAL YOUR HEART?

#### GUADALAJARA

Mexico's vibrant spirit is on display in Guadalajara and the surrounding countryside. Mariachi musicians and folk dance performers can be found throughout the city, along with a celebrated food scene, and a universal love for *charrería* – the country's national sport, akin to rodeo, that's rooted in the centuries-old traditions of *charros*. In the Guadalajara metropolitan area, visitors have the chance to experience fun festivities as well as ancient culture. Archeological site Guachimontones (dating back to 400 BC) and the Jose Cuervo distillery can both be found less than two hours northwest of the city.

#### MEXICO CITY

Colorful history and lively culture weave throughout exciting Mexico City. In the nation's capital, travelers find themselves enchanted by some of the best restaurants in the world and a population that is as passionate about *fútbol* (soccer) as it is heritage. From the former village of Coyoacán to the flowering beauty of Xochimilco, the city's dozen-plus boroughs offer a comprehensive look at the beating



Clockwise from above: Stained-glass windows in Mexico City's Chapultepec Castle; Puerto Vallarta on the west coast; the popular ruins on the beach at Tulum, on the Yucatán Peninsula; colorful Tlaquepaque





WEST COAST



heart of the country. Places like Chapultepec Castle, the Historic Centre, and the Museo Nacional de Arte treat visitors to an experience that's both fun and fascinating. In fact, only an hour's drive northeast lies the Pyramid of the Moon and the Pyramid of the Sun, two of the most significant Mesoamerican structures predating the Columbian Era.

**WEST COAST**

Although they share the country's idyllic western coast, Mexico's beach towns on the Pacific are completely different from one another. In Acapulco, a late-night party scene thrives. In Cabo San Lucas, serene beaches offer a starting point for adventurous nature excursions, such as whale watching. In Puerto Vallarta, the cobblestoned Colonial city blends beautifully with its newer offerings of impressive beach fun and local

entertainment. In Zihuatanejo, a more laid-back pace of life is surrounded by Colonial architecture and brilliant culture.

**YUCATÁN PENINSULA**

From the beach vibes and strolling esplanade of Playa del Carmen to the historical ruins and sensational cuisine of Tulum, visitors find it hard to leave the Riviera Maya. There's something for everyone on the Yucatán Peninsula's dreamy coastline. In Cancún, travelers are treated to white-sand and clear-blue perfection that's ideal for afternoon lounging before exploring the area's exciting nightlife. Throughout the Peninsula, guests can enjoy eco-archeological parks like Xcaret and Xel-Há, or venture inland for significant Mayan religious centers, such as Chichén Itzá and Cobá. Whatever you're looking for, you'll find it on the Yucatán Peninsula.

*Where to stay*



**Banyan Tree Cabo Marques, Acapulco**

Perched on a cliff above the Pacific Ocean, this five-star hotel offers breathtaking views of Acapulco's beaches. Each luxurious villa blends seamlessly into the surrounding landscape and offers a secluded veranda and private pool.



**NIZUC Resort & Spa, Cancún**

Stylish suites and private villas have magnificent views of white beaches and mangrove forests at this tranquil resort. Six restaurants offer modern Mexican, fusion Asian, Peruvian, and Mediterranean cuisines. Five pools, watersports, tennis courts, and a spa make this a luxurious oasis.



**Grand Solmar Land's End Resort & Spa Cabo San Lucas**

Set on the Baja Peninsula, this luxury resort offers eight restaurants, three infinity pools, hot tubs, fitness center, and world-class spa. Suites and studios are tastefully decorated with plush king-sized beds and state-of-the-art conveniences.



**Hotel Mousai, Puerto Vallarta**

Each suite at this adults-only hotel offers a private terrace with hammock, rain shower, and Nespresso coffee maker. Guests can enjoy seven restaurants, the Spa Imagine, Outdoor Play & Fitness Center, and rooftop pool.

➤ For a full list of properties in Mexico, see page 101. For information and reservations, please visit PreferredHotels.com