

Mexico is a traveller's paradise, crammed with a multitude of opposing identities: desert landscapes, snow-capped volcanoes, ancient ruins, teeming industrialised cities, time-warped colonial towns, glitzy resorts, lonely beaches and an impressive display of flora and fauna.

This mix of modern and traditional, the clichéd and the surreal, is the key to Mexico's charm, whether your passion is throwing back margaritas, listening to howler monkeys, surfing the Mexican Pipeline, scrambling over Mayan ruins or expanding your Day of the Dead collection of posable skeletons.

One look at this country is enough to remind visitors that there is nothing new about the so-called New World. Despite the considerable colonial legacy and rampant modernisation, almost 60 distinct indigenous peoples survive, largely thanks to their rural isolation.

Electricity: 110V, 60Hz

Time Zone: Most of Mexico is GMT - 6, Southern Baja and other Northwest states are GMT - 7, Northern Baja is GMT - 8.

Dialling Code: 52

Climate

Mexico is enjoyable all year-round, but October to May is generally the most pleasant time to visit. The May-September period can be hot and humid, particularly in the south, and inland temperatures can approach freezing during December-February. Facilities are often heavily booked during Semana Santa (the week before Easter) and Christmas/New Year, the peak domestic travel periods.

Mexico's climate has something for everyone: it's hot and humid along the coastal plains, and drier and more temperate at higher elevations inland (Guadalajara or Mexico City, for example). Try to avoid Mexico's southern coast between July and September - the resorts are decidedly soggy and jam-packed, as July-August is also the peak holiday months for foreign visitors.

Festival Calendar

May 5th - Cinco de Mayo - Anniversary of Mexico's victory over the French

Week before Ash Wednesday - Carnival is celebrated throughout Mexico complete with floats, parades, elaborate costumes and dancing.

Late July - Los Lunas del Cerro - Celebrated on the last two Mondays of July. Indian groups come from all over to Oaxaca for a grand festival featuring dances from each state.

September 15th - 16th - Independence Day in Mexico City - Fireworks and parades surround the Zocolo and Palacio Nacional

October 12th - Columbus Day - Celebrations commemorating the discovery of the New World

November 1st - All Saints Day

November 2nd - Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) - One of Mexico's most colourful fiestas. Families believe the dead return to earth and so they celebrate by crafting garlands and gifts to commemorate their dead ancestors. Candy skulls are sold in all markets.

December 12th - Dia de Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe (Festival of Our Lady of Guadalupe) - The best celebrations can be found in Mexico City

Currency

Mexico's money, the Peso is divided into 100 centavos. On average, prices tend to be higher than the neighbouring Central American countries. Budgeting \$25 USD per day should be adequate, depending on your personal tastes. You can get by on less in the more remote areas.

It is best to bring US currency as most establishments will accept it (although usually at a poor rate of exchange). Bank and Casas de Cambios' business hours can be sporadic. They tend to operate around siesta times. ATMs are popping up all over the place as well, especially in tourist areas. Credit cards are widely accepted. Be careful of price tags labeled in dollar signs. The peso is often denoted in the dollar sign as well so ask if you are unsure of the currency being requested. Normally, if the price is quoted in US dollars, you will see a USD marked behind the dollar sign.

Banks are open between 9am and 1:30pm Monday to Friday (some a while longer) and open 9am to 12:30pm on Saturdays.

Visas

Most travellers do not require a visa for stays no longer than 30 days. All visitors do however require a tourist card that can be obtained at the airport. They are valid for the holder only and must be kept with you at all times during the entire length of your stay. You will be required to present the tourist card upon exiting the country.

Health

Yellow fever no longer occurs in Central America, but many Central American countries, including Mexico, require a yellow fever vaccine before entry if you're arriving from a country in Africa or South America where yellow fever occurs. If you're not arriving from a country with yellow fever, the vaccine is neither required nor recommended. Yellow fever vaccine is given only in approved yellow fever vaccination centers, which provide validated International Certificates of Vaccination ('yellow booklets'). The vaccine should be given at least 10 days before departure and remains effective for approximately 10 years. Reactions to the vaccine are generally mild and may include headaches, muscle aches, low-grade fevers or discomfort at the injection site. Severe, life-threatening reactions have been described but are extremely rare.

Typhoid fever is caused by ingesting food or water contaminated by a species of *Salmonella* known as *Salmonella typhi*. Fever occurs in virtually all cases. Other symptoms may include headache, malaise, muscle aches, dizziness, loss of appetite, nausea and abdominal pain. Either diarrhoea or constipation may occur. Possible complications include intestinal perforation, intestinal bleeding, confusion, delirium or (rarely) coma. Unless you expect to take all your meals in major hotels and restaurants, a typhoid vaccine is a good idea. It's usually given orally, but is also available as an injection.

Dengue fever is a viral infection found throughout Central America, and is transmitted by *Aedes* mosquito, which bite preferentially during the day and are usually found close to human habitations, often indoors. They breed primarily in water containers such as barrels, cans, plastic containers and discarded tyres. As a result, Dengue is especially common in densely populated, urban environments. Dengue usually causes flu-like symptoms including fever, muscle aches, joint pains, headaches, nausea and vomiting, often followed by a rash. The body aches may be quite uncomfortable, but most cases resolve uneventfully in a few days.

Hepatitis - Several different viruses cause hepatitis and they differ in the way that they are transmitted. The symptoms in all forms of the illness include fever, chills, headache, fatigue, feelings of weakness and aches and pains, followed by loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, dark urine, light-coloured faeces, jaundiced (yellow) skin and yellowing of the whites of the eyes. Hepatitis A is transmitted by contaminated food and drinking water. Seek medical advice. Hepatitis E is transmitted in the same way as hepatitis A; it can be particularly serious in pregnant women. Hepatitis B is spread through contact with infected blood, blood products or body fluids, for example through sexual contact, unsterilised needles (and shaving equipment) and blood transfusions, or contact with blood via small breaks in the skin. The symptoms of hepatitis B may be more severe than type A and the disease can lead to long-term problems. Hepatitis C and D are spread in the same way as hepatitis B and can also lead to long-term complications. There are vaccines against hepatitis A and B, but there are currently no vaccines against the other types. Following the basic rules about food and water (hepatitis A and E) and avoiding risk situations (hepatitis B, C and D) are important preventative measures.

Rabies is a viral infection of the brain and spinal cord that is almost always fatal. The rabies virus is carried in the saliva of infected animals and is typically transmitted through an animal bite, though contamination of any break in the skin with infected saliva may result in rabies. Most cases in Mexico are related to dog bites, but bats and other wild species remain important sources of infection. Local health authorities should be contacted if someone has been bitten, to determine whether or not further treatment is necessary.

Malaria is transmitted by mosquito bites and the main symptoms are high fever, chills, sweats, headache, body aches, weakness, vomiting, or diarrhea. Severe cases may involve the central nervous system and lead to seizures, confusion, coma and death.

Cholera is an intestinal infection acquired through ingestion of contaminated food or water. The main symptom is profuse, watery diarrhea, which may be so severe that it causes life-threatening dehydration. The key treatment is drinking oral rehydration solution but antibiotics are also given.

Chagas' disease is a parasitic infection transmitted by triatomine insects which inhabit crevices in the walls and roofs of substandard housing. The triatomine insect lays its faeces on human skin as it bites and the person becomes infected when he or she unknowingly rubs the faeces into the bite wound or any other

open sore. It is rare in travellers but if you are staying in a poorly constructed house, especially one made of mud, adobe or thatch, you should be sure to protect yourself with a bed net and good insecticide.

Best time to go

The months between September and June are often the most pleasant in the coastal areas. This is the cool, dry season. But July and August tend to be most popular months for foreign travellers. The highlands of Chiapas and Oaxaca, and the central, inland regions of the state of Juarez are temperate and the nights are chilly from December to February.

Upon arrival

Once you've reclaimed your baggage and cleared customs, you will be warmly welcomed to Mexico, assisted with your luggage and taken you to your hotel by private air-conditioned minivan/bus. Please do not leave the airport terminal building unless you have made contact with Amazing Peru staff. Also ignore the calls from taxi drivers as your private transport has been provided for you.

Food and drink

Drink only bottled water. Pasteurised milk is widely available. Avoid dairy products that are likely to have been made from unboiled milk. Avoid street food vendors and the cheaper restaurants.

What to eat

To try some typical foods, here is a selection of what we recommend.

Tamales - Meat wrapped in corn dough, covered with a layer of banana leaves and then boiled.

Mole poblano - Chili and chocolate sauce with grated coconut

Mexican taco, enchilada, burrito, quesadilla – The original !!

Machaca - Cured, dried and shredded pork or beef mixed with eggs, cilantro, chilies and onions

Gazpacho - chilled veggie soup spiced with chilies

What to drink

Tequila (Mescal)

Margaritas,

Beer: Corona, Sol, Dos Equis, Bohemia, Modelo

Highlights

Mexico City (altitude 2200m)

If you can deal with the traffic and the smog, it's definitely worth arriving a few days early to explore Mexico City. There is simply so much to do, you can't possibly get bored.

The Zocalo - Every exploration should start here, at the historical centre of Mexico City. It is surrounded by government buildings, cathedrals and restaurants

Palacio Nacional - Famous for its colourful murals by Diego Rivera (one of Mexico's most popular artists)

Catedral Metropolitana - Must be visited as it remains probably one of the most impressive in all of Mexico. Built by the Spanish in the 1520s, it was erected directly above the sacrificial ceremonial site of the Aztecs where rows of skulls were displayed. You could easily spend a full afternoon wandering around the many temples and museums housed within.

The Alameda - Probably the prettiest park in Mexico City, lined with colonial mansions and museums. A good place to buy handicrafts.

Museo Nacional de Arte - open from 10am to 5pm Tuesday to Sunday.

Museo Nacional de Artes e Industrias Poplares - Displays and sells high quality handicrafts from all over Mexico. Open from 9am to 6pm every day

Museo Nacional de Historia - Found in Zona Rosa and provides an excellent account of the history of Mexico. Open from 9am to 5pm Tuesday to Sunday.

Museo Nacional de Antropologia - Also in the Zona Rosa. A world famous museum of anthropology is Open from 9am to 7pm Tuesday to Sunday.

Cancun

Discotheques, neon and concrete define the landscape of this Caribbean coastal city. It's no wonder that tourists flocked here from far and wide to spend their week vacations. The beaches really are Spectacular but also provides an excellent starting point for our tours in the Yucatan peninsula. Cancun is also excellent for scuba diving.

Cancun is not exactly the cultural centre of Mexico. While there are some nearby ruins called Zona Arqueologica El Rey, they are fairly unimpressive. Our best advice is to wander along the main strip and admire the flurry of activity. There are also a lot of good restaurants and cafes to enjoy.

Isla Mujeres - The beaches on this island offer a relaxed atmosphere compared to those on the mainland. It's also a great place to dive for sunken treasures. To get there, take a ferry 11km off the coast.

Acapulco

Maybe it's the romantic history of spice ships and pirates; maybe it's the golden beaches, tropical jungles and lagoons; or perhaps it's the high-rise hotels, glittery nightlife and famous daredevil cliff-divers that have made Acapulco the first and foremost resort town in Mexico. The beaches are the big draw at Acapulco, and most are content to limit their sightseeing to a view of the sun slowly traversing the blue yonder. For variety there are museums, aquariums, a fun park, and the famous divers of La Quebrada, who plunge into the ocean swell from vertiginous heights.

Baja California

With Tijuana as its frontier post, Baja is the epitome of 'south of the border'. The peninsula is renowned for its long coastline of fine white beaches, peaceful bays and imposing cliffs, sharply contrasting with the harsh and undeveloped interior. Baja has long been a hideout for revolutionaries, mercenaries, drinkers and gamblers, but these days, visitors are attracted by more healthy pursuits like horse riding, surfing and whale-watching. Highlights include Loreto, with its Spanish mission history and offshore national park; the extraordinary pre-Columbian rock-art sites of Sierra de San Francisco, near San Ignacio; La Paz, the laid-back capital of Baja California Sur and known for its equally gorgeous beaches and sunsets; and the hiking paradise of Sierra de la Laguna, a botanical wonderland of coexisting cacti and pines, palms and aspens set beside granite rockpools.

Chihuahua-Pacific Railway

Mexico's most scenic railway connects Los Mochis on the Pacific coast with Chihuahua in the country's arid inland. The route includes several stops in the fabled Barranca del Cobre (Copper Canyon) - actually a group of 20 canyons, and all four times larger than the Grand Canyon. The 655km (406mi) train line passes through 86 tunnels and over 39 bridges as it cuts through the Sierra Tarahumara's sheer canyons, hugging the sides of towering cliffs and offering dizzying glimpses of river beds far below. The views are stunning, particularly between Creel and Loreto.

Guadalajara

Many of the traditions considered characteristically 'Mexican' were created in Guadalajara, the country's second-largest city. Guadalajara can be held responsible for the mixed blessings of mariachi music, tequila, the Mexican Hat Dance, broad-brimmed *sombrero* hats and the Mexican rodeo. Part of Guadalajara's huge appeal is that it has many of the attractions of Mexico City - a vibrant culture, fine museums and galleries, handsome historic buildings, exciting nightlife and good places to stay and eat - but few of the capital's problems. It's a bright, modern, well-organised and unpolluted place, with enough attractions to please even the pickiest visitor. Highlights include the giant, twin-towered cathedral and the lovely plazas that surround it, the Instituto Cultural de Cabañas and its frescoes by José Clemente Orozco, and the twin handicraft-filled suburbs of Tlaquepaque and Tonalá.

Oaxaca

This Spanish-built city of narrow streets has a special atmosphere - at once relaxed and energetic, remote and cosmopolitan. Situated in the rugged southern state of the same name, Oaxaca has a large indigenous population, flourishing markets and some superb colonial architecture. Not least of Oaxaca's attractions are the abundant local handicrafts and the conviviality of the local cafes. Centre of town is the shady, arcaded *zócalo* and the major landmark is the Iglesia de Santo Domingo, the most splendid of Oaxaca's many churches. The city also has a clutch of worthy museums exploring Oaxacan culture and the lives of famous former inhabitants such as Benito Juárez.

Puebla

The Spanish colonial flavour is particularly piquant in the old city of Puebla, 125km (77mi) east of Mexico City. The town's towering cathedral is considered one of the country's best proportioned, blending severe Herrerresque-Renaissance and early baroque styles. Local indigenous influences can be seen in the stucco decoration of the Capilla del Rosario in the Templo de Santo Domingo - a sumptuous baroque proliferation of gilded plaster and carved stone with angels and cherubs popping out from behind every leaf. Puebla is also known for its regional cuisine, celebrated and imitated throughout Mexico. Try the *mole poblano*, spicy chocolate sauce usually served over turkey or chicken.

Puerto Vallarta

Nestled between palm-covered mountains, a river and an azure sea, full of cobblestone streets and whitewashed houses, and sitting in front of a gorgeous sandy beach, Puerto Vallarta is extremely picturesque. There are dolphins in the bay year-round, and humpback whales between November and March. The city has mutated from a sleepy seaside village into an international resort so quickly that it is fashionable to deride its spoilt charms, but it's almost impossible to hold a grudge against its lively beaches, bars, restaurants and galleries.

Pátzcuaro

Pátzcuaro boasts some particularly stately colonial architecture, but the town's major claim to fame is its candlelit Day of the Dead celebrations on November 2. Graveyards are lit with candles, decorated with altars of marigolds and filled with traditional dancers and musicians. Pátzcuaro also has a core of handsome colonial buildings, churches and plazas, its streets climbing steeply to Our Lady of Good Health in the east of town. Plaza Vasco de Quiroga, the city's main plaza, is one of the loveliest in Mexico, flanked by trees and arcaded 17th-century mansions.

San Cristóbal de las Casas

This handsome colonial town in the pine-clad Valle de Jovel is surrounded by the classic Mayan villages of the Chiapas highlands. It's a delightful place and a magnet for travellers who want to learn a little Spanish, absorb the bohemian atmosphere and enjoy the lively bar and music scene. San Cristóbal has a fine plaza and an assortment of churches, including the beautiful, pink Santo Domingo. Popular pursuits include stocking up at the local weavers' co-op, sampling delicious organic coffee, horse riding in the hills and drinking in the amazingly clear highland air.

Teotihuacán

The fabulous archaeological zone of Teotihuacán lies in a mountain-ringed offshoot of the Valle de México. Site of the huge Pirámides del Sol y de la Luna (Pyramids of the Sun and Moon), it was Mexico's biggest ancient city and the capital of what was probably the country's largest pre-Hispanic empire. A day here can be fabulous, unless the hawkers get you down. The site's main drag is the famous Avenue of the Dead, a monumental 2km (1.2mi) thoroughfare lined with the former palaces of Teotihuacán's elite. To its south is the pyramid-bedecked La Ciudadela, believed to have been the residence of the city's supreme ruler. Enclosed within the citadel's walls is the Quetzalcóatl Temple, with its striking serpent carvings. Heading north, the avenue passes the world's third-largest pyramid: the awe-inspiring, 70m (230ft), 248-stepped Pyramid of the Sun. The pyramid was originally painted a suitably sun-drenched, bloody red. The avenue terminates at the Pyramid of the Moon, flanked by the 12 temple platforms of the Plaza de la Luna. Nearby are the beautifully frescoed Palace of the Quetzal Butterfly, the Jaguar Palace and the Temple of the Plumed Conch Shells. Teotihuacán's most famous mural, the Paradise of Tláloc, is in the Tepantitla Palace, a priest's residence northeast of the Pyramid of the Sun. The site has a museum to help make sense of it all; bring your hat, water and your walking shoes.

Yucatán Peninsula

Cross the Río Usumacinta into Yucatán, and you enter the realm of the Maya. Heirs to a glorious and often violent history, the Maya live today where their ancestors lived a millennium ago. Yucatán has surprising diversity: archaeological sites galore, colonial cities, tropical forests, peerless snorkelling, seaside resorts, quiet coastlines and raucous nightlife. The region's famous Mayan sites are particularly impressive at Uxmal and Chichén Itzá, near the Yucatán state capital of Mérida. The coastal state of Quintana Roo attracts plane-loads of sun-loving tourists to its islands and white-sand Caribbean beaches, particularly Cozumel, Playa del Carmen and, party central, Cancún.

Álamos

This tranquil little town in the foothills of the Sierra Madre Occidental has been declared a national historical monument. Back in the 18th century, Álamos was a silver boom town of gorgeous mansions and haciendas, but by the 1920s it had declined into a forgotten backwater. An injection of expat funds gave the dilapidated ghost town a much-needed facelift, and today, Álamos' Spanish colonial buildings have been beautifully restored. Much of the architecture has a Moorish influence, thanks to the Andalusian artisans who originally built the city.

Cascada de Basaseachi

The dramatic 246m (806ft) Cascada de Basaseachi are the highest waterfalls in Mexico, and are especially spectacular in the rainy season - it's worth the bumpy three-hour drive and every footstep of the five-hour hike to reach the falls and back. If that sounds too daunting, the views of the falls from up on the rim aren't so bad either.

Palenque

All those images of romantic Mayan ruins shimmering in the morning mist come true at the lost jungle city of Palenque. Surrounded by emerald jungle, Palenque's setting is superb and its Mayan architecture and decoration are exquisite. Evidence from pottery fragments indicates that the site was first occupied more than 1500 years ago, flourishing from 600 to 700 AD when many plazas and buildings were constructed, including the elaborate Temple of Inscriptions pyramid crypt, the tallest and most prominent of Palenque's buildings. The best time to visit this sweltering, breezeless complex is in the early morning when a humid haze wraps the ancient temples in a mysterious mist. Only a handful of the almost 500 extant buildings have been excavated, and all were built without the use of metal tools, pack animals or the wheel. The new town, where most hotels and restaurants are clustered, is about 7km (4mi) from the archaeological zone, and shuttle buses trundle the route every 15 minutes. Palenque is easily accessible by bus, but keep an eye on your valuables during the trip. There is a bus and ferry connection from Guatemala's Tikal via the border town of La Palma, linking two of Central America's most impressive Mayan sites.

Real de Catorce

This reborn ghost town has a touch of magic. On the fringes of the Sierra Madre Oriental, and reached by a road tunnel through former mine passages, Real de Catorce was a wealthy silver-mining town of 40,000 people until early in the 20th century, when it inexplicably went into decline. Only recently, Real de Catorce was almost deserted, its paved streets lined with crumbling stone buildings, its mint a ruin. Nowadays it is attracting increasing numbers of residents - wealthy Mexicans and foreigners looking for an unusual retreat.

Santa Rosalía

Aficionados of industrial archaeology will find Santa Rosalía well worth exploring for the ruins of its massive copper-smelting operation. The former French company town lies on the Sea of Cortez coast of Baja California Sur, some 50km (31mi) east of San Ignacio. The town also has unusual clapboard residential architecture and a church designed by the famous Alexandre Gustave Eiffel, of Paris' tower fame. The prefabricated church was originally intended for a destination in West Africa but somehow ended up being shipped to Mexico.

Hotels

All the hotels we recommend are clean, well located and comfortable hotels varying in services according to their category. We rarely use hostels as the price difference is negligible between a good hostel and a hotel. We do endeavour to choose the best hotels in line with your budget. There are five star hotels all the way to modest three star establishments. We will always quote you with good hotels on all our programmes but upgrades or downgrades will be available as per your request. However, as the price will decrease with downgrades, this will ultimately reflect in the services and standards of the hotel.

Flights

Unless otherwise stated, we provide the internal flights in your programme. We can provide international flight quotes upon request. We work directly with the best airlines in South America but are not responsible for any changes in flight schedules or cancellations made by the airlines. This is the

responsibility of the airline in question. We will always endeavour to minimise any delays or changes but cannot guarantee a successful outcome.

Insurance

It is a mandatory requirement that all our customers take out adequate travel insurance cover. Once you have obtained your insurance, it is company practice to check the validity and cover of your insurance policy and we hold the right to refuse travel to anyone whose insurance does not satisfy Amazing Peru's stringent criteria. These include cancellation and curtailment, death or injury, medical insurance, emergency repatriation, delayed baggage, loss and theft etc.