Karen Brown’s
Mexico
Colonial Gems
Charming Towns by Car or Bus

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About This Itinerary

This itinerary guides you on journeys that give you the opportunity to choose the experiences you most want to have. Each routing can easily be tailored to meet your own specific needs by leaving out some sightseeing if time is limited, or linking several of our itineraries together if you wish to enjoy a longer vacation.

PLACES TO STAY
To view a list of Karen Brown recommended properties along this itinerary, click here:

View Places to Stay for this Itinerary

Some of the properties listed are great bargains, others very costly; some are in cities or well-trafficked areas, others in remote locations; some are quite sophisticated, others extremely simple. The common denominator is that each place has some special quality that makes it appealing. Each listing includes a link to an extended description of that property, complete with color photographs, which will give you an honest appraisal so that you can select accommodations based on your personal preferences. Some listings include more information, such as reader comments, special offers and discounts for Karen Brown readers and Karen Brown Club Members, recipes and more. Most listings also include an e-mail address, a link to the property’s website, and a phone number, so making a reservation once you’ve selected the right place to stay is a breeze.

MAPS
Maps at the end of this document include an overview that shows all of our recommended driving itineraries and a few detailed maps that show specific routes and Places to Stay. These maps show All recommended properties in an area, some of which may not be in the itinerary-specific list above. For precise trip planning it is essential to supplement these with commercial maps; a list of suggested maps can be found via the link above.

Note: Page numbers (where shown) refer to our print edition. Please disregard them.
The following itinerary covers the trail of the Spaniards, who built a necklace of beautiful towns as they spread their influence throughout the country. There is no better way to experience the romance and history of Mexico than following the path of these conquistadors. When Cortés arrived in Veracruz, he made a bravado gesture, burning the small ships that brought him and his soldiers to the New World. The message was clear—his men were supposed to stay, and stay they did. After the fall of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, the conquistadors spread throughout Mexico, hoping to make their fortunes in the New World. Because precious metals presented the quickest path to wealth, these adventurous men, young and old, fanned out across the country looking for
gold and silver. They were quickly followed over the years by newcomers from Spain, almost all looking for fortunes, which is why the majority of Colonial towns you see today had their roots in mining. What makes following the footsteps of these conquistadors especially intriguing is that some of the most beautiful of these early mansions, convents, and haciendas have come to life again as outstanding small hotels that simply ooze with charm.

Mexico abounds with these historic Colonial cities, which strongly reflect the architecture and layout of the towns where the conquistadors were born. As you travel in some of these lovely Colonial towns, you will think you are in Spain. However, the towns possess an extra richness, since when you look closely, a subtle Indian influence is always there—such as an Indian god discreetly worked in amongst the Christian images. Visiting these cities, you are magically transported back three hundred years. You can almost hear the clatter of horses’ hooves on the cobbled streets and smell the fragrance of romance in the air.

These towns founded by the Spaniards look much as they did when built hundreds of years ago. The sturdy, handsome buildings, usually made of stone, look a bit stern from the outside, and it is not until you enter through the massive wooden doors that their beauty is revealed, for the Spaniards secreted their delights within. Almost all homes have a central, enclosed courtyard with a lush garden enhanced by fragrant flowers, fountains, and trees. On the ground level is the family living area with dining room, parlors, and kitchen, and a wide, open, stone staircase leading to the floors above. Galleried walkways (with bedrooms opening onto them) wrap around the upper floors and look down into the garden below. Small balconies adorned with black wrought-iron embellish the upper windows overlooking the street, while intricate black wrought-iron lamps embrace each side of the entrance, adding both decoration and light. A huge, thick wooden door with iron braces is typically framed by an arched doorway, which is often surmounted by a carved-stone plaque displaying the original owner’s family crest (escutcheon).

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Not only the architecture of the buildings looks like “Old Spain,” but also the design of the towns. Every town founded by the Spanish, even the tiniest, has a central square (zócalo) where the most important buildings and the homes of the wealthy were found. These squares generally have arcaded walkways on four sides, and are like parks with trees, gardens, benches, and paths radiating from a central fountain or bandstand. The larger towns have a series of squares, but there is always a central one that is the most important, usually with a church on one side. Note: Although usually called a zócalo, this central square is sometimes called a plaza or jardín (garden).

Throughout all of Mexico, many cities retain some hint of their Spanish heritage. Some have totally lost their appeal due to the intrusion of modern buildings, but others remain absolute jewels. At first encounter, some of the places we recommend appear to be huge, modern cities (which they are), but have absolutely charming historic centers. Listed below are some of our favorite Colonial cities, many of which are described in this itinerary (others are featured in other itineraries and are so marked). The towns that have an asterisk (*) in front of them are exceptionally romantic jewels with very little from the modern world to spoil their charm.

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COLONIAL TOWNS

Alamos (Copper Canyon)  Querétaro
Guadalajara
* Guanajuato
Mérida (Mayan Mysteries)  * Pátzcuaro
Mexico City
Morelia
* Oaxaca (Oaxaca Valley)  * Puebla (Mexico City & Beyond)

CHOICE OF TRANSPORTATION

Because these Colonial cities are highlights of Mexico, we designed this itinerary so that it could be used by everyone, including those who prefer not to drive. Therefore, we purposely planned this routing with stopovers in towns that are linked by good bus service, and we explain with each destination how to use public transportation. We give times just as an indication to give you an idea of departure times and length of trip. Please be sure to verify current departure times.

A car offers greater flexibility, but bus transportation also works just fine. If you choose a deluxe line, the buses are excellent. Trains, with a few exceptions, are dreary, rarely on schedule, and much slower than direct bus service. Our introduction has in-depth information on Mexican buses, but here we’ll repeat a few of the key factors in planning. Always choose the most deluxe bus company and take only a direct bus. Unless you are fluent in Spanish, ask the concierge at your hotel to arrange a taxi with instructions that you will pay the extra cost for the driver to go into the bus station with you and help you buy your ticket and show you where to board your bus. Some of the bus stations are pretty well organized, but others are quite confusing—so many people milling about and so many ticket counters, many of them seeming to sell tickets to the same destination. It’s really hard to know just where to go and which ticket to purchase. Once you have
your ticket and know where to board the bus, the only hard part is over. The first-class buses and deluxe and premium buses are very clean, have reclining seats, toilets, reading lights, and often a snack served en route. Frequently there is a television, but this is no great attribute since the program being shown (often quite loudly) is usually nothing that will interest you. The whole scene, though, is fun. When you arrive at your destination, you really do not need much assistance since there are always taxis available outside the station to take you to your hotel. All you need to do is to tell the taxi driver where you want to go. If you don’t speak Spanish, you might want to write down in advance the name and address of your hotel to show the driver.

RECOMMENDED PACING: We suggest eleven nights to follow this itinerary, more if you want to savor each destination in a leisurely fashion. With optimum bus connections in mind, we planned this itinerary as a loop, beginning and ending in Mexico City (or if you prefer, beginning and ending in Guadalajara). If you are driving, you could zigzag this itinerary, making it a one-way trip between the two cities. We recommend three nights in Mexico City, three nights in San Miguel de Allende, two nights in Guadalajara, and three nights in Morelia or Pátzcuaro. If you want to shorten the trip, you could skip one of the stops.

ORIGINATING CITY MEXICO CITY

When you arrive at the Mexico City airport, don’t pick up a cab at the curb or barter with hustlers in the lobby trying to entice you to use their cars. These are unregulated vehicles. Instead, go directly to the transportation booth and buy a ticket for your transportation into the city. There is a set price for taxis and minivans so you won’t need to haggle over the fee. Just tell the ticket agent your destination; you will be charged accordingly and issued a ticket to give to the driver who will take you to your hotel. Mexico City has a great selection of delightful places to stay in every price range. Note: Because driving is a hassle within the city, wait to rent a car until the day of your departure and use taxis or public transportation until then.
Mexico City with its 22 million inhabitants is the second-largest city in the world, and growing every day. Its importance as a cultural and political center is not new—with its fabulous location on a high, fertile plateau, the site has hosted a great city since long before the Spaniards arrived. The Aztecs had the seat of their flourishing empire here in a magical city they called Tenochtitlán. Set in the middle of a lake, connected to the mainland by causeways and laced with canals, and embellished with palaces and splendid temples, this city was indeed a sight to behold. Even Hernán Cortés, who had seen the wonders of Europe, was overwhelmed by its grandeur.

Three nights will give you two full days to visit some of the city’s museums (most museums are closed on Monday), which depict so richly the heritage of the Mexican people, setting the stage for what you will be seeing on your trip. We cover sightseeing for Mexico City in greater depth in the itinerary *Mexico City & Beyond*, but even though it will be duplicating information, we want to mention two places you must not miss: the Museo Nacional de Antropología and the zócalo. Depending upon which hotel you choose, you can either walk or take a cab. Your hotel can arrange a guide or order one of their secure taxis to take you wherever you want to go.

**Museo Nacional de Antropología:** First, head for the Museo Nacional de Antropología, one of the world’s most outstanding museums. We first saw it when it opened in 1964 and now, almost 40 years later, it is even more fabulous, with tremendous improvements made in a massive renovation in 2001. The museum has a stunning architectural style with a spacious, partially enclosed central courtyard. Wrapping around the courtyard is a two-story building with 23 rooms displaying with artful elegance artifacts giving the history of the Mexican nation. Don’t miss a single room. Visit them all and read the description in English of what you are viewing. Linger at the dioramas that show the glorious city as it was before Cortés’s arrival. Enjoy the rooms that show the everyday life of the Indian people. Study carefully the information on the many archaeological sites and peek below the glass floor to see a royal tomb. Push all the buttons on the video monitors to watch videos of rituals and customs. You could spend an entire day here, which isn’t a problem as there is a very good restaurant for lunch.
**Zócalo:** The second place you must include is a visit to Mexico City’s fabulous zócalo (main square). This is an incredible, huge plaza capturing the magic of Mexico’s past and present. It is surrounded by handsome Colonial buildings and dominated on one side by a superb cathedral, all built upon, and with the stones from, the mighty Aztec city that previously occupied the site. Wander through the square admiring its majesty and, of course, visit the breathtaking cathedral. Be sure not to miss the incredible Templo Mayor and Museo del Templo Mayor, which are situated on the northeast corner of the square. Scholars knew that a great Aztec city was the foundation for the one built by the Spaniards, but it wasn’t until 1978, when workmen accidentally came upon a fabulous statue of the Moon Goddess, that the archaeologists knew where to dig. They excavated in the plaza to the right of the cathedral and unearthed the Templo Mayor, the most important pyramid in the Aztec world. Today you can explore the ruins by a series of ramps and bridges that crisscross above the excavations. To display the wealth of artifacts that were uncovered, the museum was built next door. Within are over 6,000 artifacts taken from the site, superbly displayed, showing the sophisticated culture that flourished here before the arrival of Cortés. Do not miss the model of Tenochtitlán, the Aztec city that was the predecessor of the one you see today. Facing the zócalo is the massive Palacio Nacional where you must walk in to admire the bold murals by Diego Rivera. The paintings which adorn the walls of the staircase depict the history of Mexico.

More of our favorite places to visit in Mexico City include: the not-to-be-missed Museo Nacional de Antropología, the Museo Franz Meyer, the Museo Dolores Omedo Piña, the Palacio de Bellas Artes, the Bosque de Chapultepec, Chapultepec Castle, the Museo de Arte Moderno, the Museo Frida Kahlo, and the Floating Gardens of Xochimilco. All of these and more sightseeing options are described in the itinerary Mexico City & Beyond.
DESTINATION I      SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE

Your destination today is **San Miguel de Allende**, one of our favorite Colonial towns, which radiates charm and old-world ambiance. Below is a suggested bus schedule in case you opt for public transportation.

**BUS OPTION:** We offer you two choices here, since if you take the bus, you might prefer to skip the suggested stop in Querétaro (as sightseeing is more complicated when you have luggage) and go directly on to San Miguel de Allende. The bus station for Querétaro is located south of town, not within walking distance of the historic center.

10:05 am  Leave Mexico City, Norte Terminal, ETN bus
2:05 pm  Arrive San Miguel de Allende

or if you want to make a stopover in Querétaro:

9:00 am  Leave Mexico City, Norte Terminal, ETN bus
11:45 am  Arrive Querétaro
3:30 pm  Leave Querétaro, La Central station, ETN bus
4:30 pm  Arrive San Miguel de Allende

Note: If you prefer more time in Querétaro, you can take a later bus at 7:30 pm, arriving in San Miguel de Allende at 8:30 pm.

**CAR OPTION:** If you are driving, before leaving Mexico City, purchase a detailed map and ask the concierge at your hotel (or the car rental agent) to highlight the best route out of the city heading north to highway 57. You will need all the help you can get because the confusion and congestion getting in or out of the city is staggering.

En route to San Miguel de Allende, stop at Querétaro, a city dating back to the 16th century. In the mid-1700s Franciscan missionaries founded a church here, but its real growth evolved from its strategic position as a stopping point on the main road between Mexico City and the flourishing silver and gold mines farther north.

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You come to the **Querétaro** exit from 57 about 130 kilometers after leaving Mexico City. Follow signs to the center of the town. As you drive through its outskirts, Querétaro doesn’t look too promising, but persevere since its Colonial heart holds much allure. Once you arrive in the historic center, find a parking lot or garage to leave your car and set out on foot. The center is small and has many pedestrian-only areas that are especially inviting for strolling. As you wander the non-touristy historical center you discover tree-lined lanes, baroque churches, intimate plazas enhanced by fountains, pretty gardens, benches set to enjoy the ambiance, small street-side restaurants, jewelry shops selling semiprecious opals and amethysts that are mined in the nearby hills, and ornate 18th-century mansions.

Before leaving Querétaro, if the timing is right, have lunch in the courtyard of **La Casa de La Marquesa**—the food is excellent and the ambiance is charming.

Return to highway 57 and continue north in the direction of San Luis Potosi. After about 38 kilometers, turn left and follow signs to San Miguel de Allende. Without a doubt, this is one of the most enchanting of Mexico’s Colonial towns, so perfect that it has been...
designated as a national monument, which adds to its appeal since modern buildings are prohibited and all renovations must strictly adhere to the purity of the original design. If you want to gently immerse yourself in the delights of Mexico without too much of a cultural jolt, nothing is better suited to your first experience of Colonial Mexico than San Miguel de Allende. The town is a delight to the eye, with winding cobblestone streets, splendid 17th-century mansions, fine craft shops, gorgeous courtyards hidden behind thick, wooden doorways, lush gardens, beautiful churches, beckoning art galleries, chic boutiques, and a wealth of appealing, small restaurants.

San Miguel de Allende is a favorite of retired Americans and Canadians, who are lured here by the beauty of the small town, the warmth of acceptance by the locals, and the delightful weather. Many of them have bought splendid old mansions and restored them to their original beauty. The expatriate element is one of the reasons the town is so appealing: without them there probably wouldn’t be such a wealth of cute restaurants or so many lovely shops. Many who have discovered San Miguel are artists and writers, and the town has become known as an artists’ colony, with the added bonus that boutiques and galleries feature many fine works of original art. The town is also well known for its many language schools, the best known being the Instituto Allende, housed in a once-abandoned, 18th-century hacienda. This has grown into one of the most important schools for fine arts in Latin America, with not only language courses offered, but also year-round classes in fine arts, crafts, and culture.

For the tourist, there is another huge bonus. San Miguel has an abundance of truly outstanding places to stay in every price range that ooze with charm—from intimate bed and breakfasts to exquisite, world-class hotels within 18th-century mansions. Take your choice from the many places we recommend, all of which are either in the center of town or within walking distance. Many have pretty swimming pools nestled in their gardens, making your stay even more enchanting.

The heart of the town is the central plaza, the Jardin Principal (Main Garden). Indeed, it is a garden with a festive bandstand in the center, laurel trees, fanciful fountains, and pathways accented by ornate wrought-iron benches. On Sundays and holidays and in the
evenings the square is often closed to traffic. It becomes the scene of what seems like a huge party, with everyone greeting friends, stopping to chat, children buying balloons from vendors, young lovers strolling hand-in-hand, and everyone eating snacks. Although there are many tourists, that doesn’t in the least diminish the ambiance. It is real. It is unspoiled. By all means join in the fun—find a spot on one of the benches, buy an ice cream cone or a coffee, perhaps have your shoes shined, smile at the children romping about, and just enjoy watching the festivities around you.

Clustered around the square are many handsome stone buildings fronted by 17th-century archways. One side of the plaza is dominated by the town’s landmark, La Parroquia, the parish church. This fanciful creation is not acclaimed as a masterpiece of design, however, it is a pure delight with a personality of its own. It was built in 1683 by a local stone mason, an Indian named Ceferino Gutierrez who didn’t really know what a proper church was supposed to look like—but that didn’t stop him. He was enchanted by a postcard he had seen of a European gothic church and decided to use it as his inspiration. The story goes that he sketched his plans in the sand with a stick. Since the postcard showed only the front of the church, he had no idea of how to design the back so improvised with a Mexican style. The result is a fanciful creation enhanced by pink spires that stretch into the blue sky.
Of the many churches tucked within the town, my favorite is the Oratorio de San Felipe Neri, an extremely appealing church built of pink stone in 1712 by the local Indians. In addition to its many churches, San Miguel de Allende has six patron saints, a delightful excuse for many festivals to honor them. Lining the narrow, cobblestone lanes are splendid mansions built by the wealthy aristocracy of the New World, many of which are still private homes. As you meander, if the thick, wooden doors are open, discreetly take a peek inside to see the many gorgeous inner courtyards secreted within. On Sundays, many of these splendid homes are open to the public. Ask at the tourist office about times.

There is much to see as you stroll the streets including the Teatro Angela Peralta, built in 1873, where many famous artists have performed; the Biblioteca Publica, a library in a beautiful Colonial building that houses Mexico’s second-largest English library; the Centro Cultural Ignacio Ramirez, an art institute built within a former convent which has one of the largest interior courtyards found anywhere in the New World; the Santa Casa de Loreto, a chapel built to duplicate its namesake in Loreto, Italy; and Casa de Ignacio Allende, a mid-18th-century home which was the birthplace of Captain Ignacio Allende, famed hero of the War of Independence.

SIDE EXCURSIONS FROM SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE:

Dolores Hidalgo: Although its central square is quite attractive, Dolores Hidalgo is not nearly as pristinely picturesque as San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato, or Pozos. However it is worth a visit—especially for those fascinated by Mexican history or interested in purchasing Talavera tile. It was in Dolores Hidalgo that Father Hidalgo sounded the church bells on the morning of September 16, 1810, calling the townspeople to take up arms against the Spanish king. This was the beginning of the bloody war that would last for 11 years. Unfortunately for Hidalgo, he was soon captured, and then executed, and his head was hung in nearby Guanajuato as a deterrent to liberals wanting freedom. Miguel Hidalgo left his mark in other ways in Dolores Hidalgo. There is a statue of Hidalgo in the central plaza and his simple home is nearby, now the Museo.
Casa Hidalgo. In an effort to help the impoverished parish, Father Hidalgo taught them the craft of making colorful ceramics and opened the first shop selling Talavera tiles and pottery. The industry thrives and today Dolores Hidalgo, along with Puebla near Mexico City, is one of the major producers of Talavera pottery in Mexico. Connoisseurs consider the pottery made in Puebla to be finer, but what you see in Dolores Hidalgo is beautiful and usually cheaper—the prices for beautiful lamps, dinnerware, vanities, vases, and colorful tiles are incredibly low. Many of the vendors make their own pottery in factories behind their shops, and if you are interested, will show you how the pottery is made and painted, every step done by hand. There are many shops selling the colorful ware in the center of town. Also, the highway that wraps around town is lined with factories and boutiques.

Guanajuato: You can easily stop to see Guanajuato en route from San Miguel de Allende to Guadalajara, however since this quaint, picturesque town deserves more time that a quick visit, we suggest including it as a day’s outing from San Miguel de Allende. Because parking is a nightmare here (the streets are in a maze of tunnels beneath the town which is predominantly pedestrian only), we suggest you take a bus from San Miguel de Allende to Guanajuato. In 1559, silver was discovered in the surrounding mountains and Guanajuato became one of the richest cities in Mexico, mining an astonishing one third of all the silver produced in the world. You mustn’t miss this perfectly preserved city, which has been designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

Guanajuato is a photographers’ delight, with narrow cobblestone streets, inviting shaded plazas, ornate 18th-century mansions, spectacular churches, and pretty fountains. You can walk everywhere. The town’s main plaza, which is in the heart of town, is quite unusual. Instead of being designed as a square, it is a wedge-shaped plaza called Jardín Union, affectionately nicknamed Pedazo de Queso (Slice of Cheese). This tiny square is delightfully alluring, featuring an old-fashioned bandstand and pretty tiled walkways shaded by centuries-old trees that form an overhead canopy. In the evening strolling musicians add to the festivity of the scene. Located nearby is my favorite building in
town, the **Teatro Juárez**, an ornate theater dating back to 1873 which is fronted by Greek columns adorned by statues of eight muses. Overlooking the plaza is the 17th-century **Church of San Diego**, a splendid church with an ornate doorway. Originally part of a Jesuit seminary, the Templo de La Compañía de Jesús is quite impressive, with a dramatic dome that looks like that of St. Peter’s in Rome. Guanajuato was the birthplace of Diego Rivera, whose home is open as a museum displaying typical furnishings of the period including the brass bed in which he was born in 1886. Within the house is a collection of his paintings and preliminary sketches for his murals. Also visit the 17th-century **Basilica of Our Lady of Guanajuato**, located on the Plaza de La Paz. Here you find a wooden statue of the Virgin Mary, covered with jewels, that supposedly dates back to 714. King Philip II of Spain sent it to the church as a gift in 1557.

About ten minutes north of Guanajuato in the village of **Valenciana**, you can get a glimpse into how vast the mining industry was. Here you find the Hacienda de San Gabriel de La Barrera, the home of a wealthy mine baron, which has been restored and furnished with antiques and is now open as a museum. On the property are an outdoor restaurant and gift shop. You can also visit the **Valenciana Silver Mine**, dating back to 1558, which is still operational and open to the public. The enormously wealthy Count of Valenciana, owner of the mine that bears his name, spared no expense when he built the dazzling **Church of San Cayetano**, lavishly embellished with gold. Also in Valenciana is one of Guanajuato’s most popular restaurants, the Casa del Conde de La Valenciana, which also houses an arts and crafts gallery.

Note: Guanajuato makes a good choice as a place to stay as an alternate choice to San Miguel de Allende.

**Mineral de Pozos:** About an hour’s drive northeast of San Miguel de Allende (just south of the larger town of San Luis de La Paz) is the Colonial town of Mineral de Pozos, affectionately known by all as just “Pozos.” In the early part of the 20th century this once wealthy mining town was abandoned and lay dormant until recently rediscovered by an ever growing number of artisans and expatriates who came and fell in love with Pozos’ laid back charm. Make it a day’s outing and enjoy a delicious lunch in the lovely **Colonial Gems: Charming Towns by Car or Bus** 57
garden courtyard of the appealing Casa Montana, which is also a delightful small hotel. Your hostess Susan Montana (a transplant from New Mexico), will be glad to share her love of the town and advise you what sights to see. Note: The Casa Montana would be an excellent alternate choice for accommodations if you prefer to stay off the beaten path rather than in the tourist center of San Miguel de Allende.

Santuario de Atotonilco: If you are a history buff you might want to visit the Santuario de Atotonilco. From San Miguel de Allende take highway 51 north toward Dolores Hidalgo. About 14 kilometers after leaving San Miguel, turn left and go 3 kilometers farther along an unpaved road to the Santuario de Atotonilco. This is a lovely 18th-century church built by Father Luis Felipe Neri de Alfaro as a place of spiritual retreat. Inside are many sculptures, canvases, and frescoes painted by Indian artists. It was from this sanctuary that Father Miguel Hidalgo took off to join the Revolution in 1810, taking with him the standard bearing the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, which became the flag and symbol for the fight for independence. People from all over Mexico continue to flock to worship at this shrine.

DESTINATION II GUADALAJARA

Your destination today is Guadalajara, often called the City of Roses. Below is the bus schedule for those using public transportation.

BUS OPTION: If you are taking the bus, we recommend that instead of stopping en route at Guanajuato (as suggested with the car option), you visit it as a side bus trip from San Miguel de Allende. Ask at the tourist office or at your hotel for the schedules—there is frequent service.

4:15 pm Leave San Miguel de Allende, La Central station, ETN bus
9:15 pm Arrive Guadalajara, La Central station

CAR OPTION: When planning your drive to Guadalajara, if you have not already visited Guanajuato as a day excursion from San Miguel de Allende, allow sufficient time to stop en route to have lunch here and enjoy this historic mining town. Otherwise, bypass

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Guanajuato and join highway 45, and continue toward León. Continue beyond León for 42 kilometers and then head west on highway 80, which takes you directly to Guadalajara. Buy a detailed city map in advance so that you can find your way to the hotel of your choice.

**Guadalajara** is a huge, modern, cosmopolitan city with over 5 million inhabitants. It is studded with shady parks, statues highlighting small plazas, tree-lined boulevards, fine museums, world-class restaurants, handsome residential areas, large department stores, and fancy boutiques. However, at first encounter, especially as you drive into the city and experience its horrific traffic, uninspired apartment complexes, and swarm of humanity, you might be a bit less than enthusiastic about what the city has to offer. But hidden within its very heart is the 16th-century Guadalajara, which abounds with historic character. This core of old Guadalajara stretches for seven blocks and is laid out like a cross. At its western end is the **Plaza Guadalajara**, dominated by a stunning cathedral; at the southern end of the cross is the **Plaza de Armas**, enhanced by a park with a lacy wrought-iron bandstand where concerts are performed on Thursday and Sunday evenings; at the eastern arm of the cross is **Plaza de La Liberacion**, named in honor of the heroes of the Revolution for Independence; at the northern arm is **Plaza de La Rotonda**, enhanced by a ring of Greek columns in the center of its park. The majority of Guadalajara’s Colonial architectural gems face onto this seven-block stretch of plazas.

If you are driving, you can park your car in the underground garage before setting out on foot to explore. Stop first at the tourist office located in an 18th-century mansion at Morelos 102 for general information and a map showing suggested walking tours. You must not miss the 15th-century cathedral, which is marked by two towers that soar 200 feet into the sky. Its interior is beautiful, with rows of columns, eleven altars, and fabulous paintings, some of which were donated by King Ferdinand in thanks for the financial help given during the Napoleonic Wars. Another precious work of art, a beautiful sculpture of Our Lady of the Roses, was also given as a gift; this one by King Carlos V. Across from the cathedral is another impressive edifice, the Palacio de Gobierno, which dates back to 1643. It has great historic importance since it was here in
1810 that Father Miguel Hidalgo, leader of the Revolution for Independence, announced the end of slavery. Within you can see a series of murals by one of Mexico’s most famous artists, José Clemente Orozco, whose paintings depict the struggle for independence. A stroll down the block from the palace, in a building enhanced by interior courtyards, you find the Museo Regional de Guadalajara, which displays a wealth of exhibits including religious art, paintings, Colonial furniture, portraits, pre-Columbian artifacts, fanciful carriages, pottery, and Indian handicrafts. On Plaza de La Liberación is the stunning Teatro Degollado. With its rich red and gold ornate interior and rows of balconies, it is compared by many to Milan’s jewel, La Scala. All forms of art are presented here including opera, jazz, classical concerts, and ballet. This theater is also home to the internationally famous dance group, the spectacularly colorful Ballet Folklórico. Ask what is playing while you are in town and try to attend a performance to experience the plush amenities firsthand. Also in the historic center is the Mercado Libertad, a huge indoor marketplace, said to be the largest in the western hemisphere, where vendors sell everything imaginable. For local color, it can’t be beat.

In addition to its historic center, Guadalajara has many other attractions for the visitor including many parks. Its largest and oldest, the Parque Agua Azul, not only has
gardens
but also an orchid house, an aviary, and a butterfly sanctuary, but is also home to the Casa de Las Artesanias where some of the best handicraft items made in the state are displayed and sold. There is always something going on here—concerts, outdoor theater, festivals, etc.—and it’s a great place for strolling and soaking in the spirit of the city at play.

Mariachi music originated in the state of Jalisco, in which Guadalajara is located, so it is no wonder that you hear so much of it here. “Mariachi” derives from the French word for marriage, and it originated during the brief period when the French controlled Mexico, they often hired local musicians to play at their weddings. This jolly kind of band usually had at least a guitar, a trumpet, and a violin. Today, Mariachis, smartly dressed in spiffy, ruffled shirts, fancy jeans, jackets studded with silver, shiny boots, and large sombreros are called upon to celebrate not only weddings, but almost every festive occasion with their happy, exuberant music. If you want a sound dose of entertainment, go on a Sunday to the Plaza de Los Mariachis, where roaming musicians perform (it is customary to tip).

If you want to shop for handicrafts, you can drive or take a taxi out to Tlaquepaque, an artists’ town located in the suburbs about 9 kilometers from the center of Guadalajara. This once-small crafts village is now all but smothered within the growing sprawl of the city, but at its center Tlaquepaque still retains its old charm with cobbled streets, colorfully painted houses, and picturesque Colonial architecture. The heart of town is El Parian, which has at its core a series of restaurants, cafés, and bars—a favorite place to enjoy a cold beer and watch the activities while strolling musicians entertain. Surrounding El Parian, streets stretch out in every direction, lined with cute restaurants, stunning galleries, fine antique shops, and boutiques selling all kinds of crafts including hand-blown glass, articles made of leather, cheerful pottery, hand-loomed fabrics, embroidered clothing, painted furniture, wrought-iron fixtures, and original art. Usually the wares are artistically displayed and with over 300 stores, you are bound to find a
treasure. The popular El Palomar pottery, known for its classic, simple design often featuring a dove, is made here.

OPTIONAL SIDE TRIP FROM GUADALAJARA TO TAPALPA

Tapalpa is well worth a couple of nights visit as a side trip from Guadalajara. This small town is highly recommended to those of you who delight in discovering authentic small Colonial villages that have not been spoiled by any modern buildings and still look much as they did several hundred years ago. It is definitely off the beaten path, but in a beautiful rural area of Mexico that otherwise you might never see. This quaint town is one that you can add to your repertoire of memories.

Tapalpa

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Although, many sophisticated travelers who know Mexico quite well have never heard of it, Tapalpa is very well known to Mexicans, especially to those who live in Guadalajara. This is a favorite weekend retreat for the “city folks” who love to come here for the sweet fresh mountain air, hiking in the mountains, horseback riding, and the cool weather (since the town sits at a 1,950 meter elevation, it is always cool here). Note: When planning your trip, try to arrive in the middle of the week because not only are the hotel rates often higher on weekends, but also the roads much more crowded. Because it has many local tourists who visit, the town has a surprisingly good selection of places to stay. None are fancy, multi-star hotels, but ones that often have lots of charm and offer very nice accommodations. And a definite bonus to a lesser known destination, the prices are comparatively very low (especially mid-week). Because of the altitude, the nights are chilly—especially in winter. Many of the hotels have fire places in some of the guestrooms to make up for the lack of central heating. Be sure to bring a wrap whether you come in winter or summer.

The Colonial era of Tapalpa dates back to the 17th century. Although, the Spanish architecture creates an exceptionally picturesque ambiance, the town has not yet succumbed to blatant tourism. In fact, there are very few tourist shops—just a few miscellaneous stores selling some local handicrafts or stores offering jars of marmalade and canned fruits from the local produce. It is hard to even find a store selling souvenir T-shirts. The town is so “real” you will often hear clattering and look up to see a farmer on his horse riding through the cobbled streets.

It is definitely not the lure of upscale boutiques or luxurious hotels that bring people here. It is the town itself and its setting that is so appealing. The town is nestled on a high plateau surrounded by densely wooded pine forests. The Mexican government has designated the town as one of the “Pueblos Magicos” (Magical Towns’), a designation that the tourism department gives to towns that exemplify Mexico’s culture and tradition. It is well-deserving of this honor.
The town is typical of the area with narrow cobbled streets, white-washed buildings, thick adobe walls, rustic red-tiled roofs, wood shutters and doors, and wrought iron accents. Another detail which adds special personality to the houses in Tapalpa is are the handsome, carved wood balconies that embellish the second stories and are held up by sturdy wood support columns.

The spire of the church will lead you straight to the heart of town where everything is within walking distance. First visit the Temple de Señora Señora de Guadalupe. It appears to be quite old, but actually was built in the 1900s. This is an exceptionally lovely church, built entirely of brick. A broad staircase leads up to the front doors. Be sure to go inside. You will be surprised at how beautiful it is. Like most of the churches in town, it was built by the Franciscans.

Close by the Temple de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, you find the church called Apilla La Purisma. This is one of the oldest churches in town that was also built by the Franciscans.

Just across from the Templo de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe is another splendid church, the Antiguo Templo de San Antonio. This church no longer seems to conduct religious services but is a real beauty. This church was built in the 17th century by Franciscan friars. This beautiful building dominates the central plaza of the town.

Another church built of grey limestone, the Templo de Nuestra Senora de la Mered, is located about a 15-minute walk from the town square. It was built in 1859 in the neoclassical style. It has stained glass windows and murals painted on the interior of the dome.

Tapala has still another church worth seeing, the Hospital Indio de Atacco, which is located a short distance south of town. The construction of the church was also by the Franciscans who used the church as a hospital where they cared for the native Indians, especially the women, children, and elderly.

You can reach Tapalpa either by bus or car.

Colonial Gems: Charming Towns by Car or Bus
BUS OPTION: Tapalpa is about a three-hour bus ride from Guadalajara. The buses leave from the old bus station called Central Vieja. The bus company is “Linea Sur de Jalisco”.

CAR OPTION: From Guadalajara follow Av. Lopez Mateos Sur which runs into the Autopista 54 to Colima. Just before you reach the first toll station, there is a turnoff to the right to Barra de Navidad and Tapalpa. Turn right here and take the route called Acatalán de Juárez, continuing to follow signs to Tapalpa. The scenery is exceptionally beautiful—particularly in the fall when everything is very green after the summer rains. The road leads you through the towns of Acatalán de Juárez, Atemajac de Brizuela, Ferreria de Tula and Frontera before reaching Tapalpa. The journey should take around two hours, depending upon traffic.

OPTIONAL SIDE TRIP FROM GUADALAJARA TO ZACATECAS

If you are captivated by Colonial towns, you might want to take a round trip from Guadalajara to Zacatecas, which was declared a World Heritage Site in 1993. Squeezed in a narrow valley, high in the barren mountains, this once-famous and thriving mining town was one of the largest producers of silver in Mexico.

Since it is off the beaten path and doesn’t fit neatly into any other of our other itineraries, this is your best opportunity for a visit, if you are so inclined.

BUS OPTION: It is a long, six-hour bus ride from Guadalajara to Zacatecas and we don’t really recommend the trip since it is so time-consuming. However, for your information, and if you want to try it, the bus company that serves this route is Camions de Los Altos: tel: 333.679.04.55.

CAR OPTION: If you drive to Zacatecas, we suggest making the trip as a loop. Take highway 80 northeast to Lagos de Moreno, then north on highway 45 to Zacatecas, a total drive of about 390 kilometers. On your return, take highway 54 (a two-lane road) south to Guadalajara, about a 320-kilometer drive. En route, stop in La Quemada, mentioned in sightseeing below. Another option would be to drive to Zacatecas after leaving San Miguel de Allende, as a stop before Guadalajara.

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The dazzling wealth of this once-prosperous mining town is displayed everywhere you look: opulent mansions, superb churches, ornate theaters, and many museums displaying fine art. You will not want to miss the ornate, pink-stone cathedral, considered by many to be the finest example of baroque architecture in the country. It was built from 1729 to 1752 from the riches of the local mines and its façade, with rows of intricately carved columns framing carved stone statues, is quite unbelievable. Zacatecas had its share of artists, two of whom, brothers Rafael Coronel and Pedro Coronel, donated fabulous museums to the city. One of the most unique museums in town is the Rafael Coronel Museum in the beautiful Monastery of San Francisco, which displays a staggering private collection of over 5,000 masks and 19th-century marionettes donated by Rafael Coronel.

Not to be outdone, Rafael’s brother, Pedro, gave his extensive collection of art to the city and this is housed in the Pedro Coronel Museum, an old Jesuit monastery. The museum features not only sculptures and paintings by Pedro, but also works of art by Picasso, Dalí, and Chagall. Adjacent is the fabulous Elias Amador Library where an incredible collection of over 25,000 antique books is magnificently displayed.
While in Zacatecas, take the *teleférico* (cable car), which glides over the city to the *Cerro de La Bufa*, the hilltop that was the site of Pancho Villa’s most famous battle. There are monuments on the hill commemorating this event. Also on the summit is a beautiful church. When the cable car returns you to town, ask directions for the short walk to *La Mina Eden*, just a few blocks away. At the entrance to the mine you buy a ticket and a guide leads you through the vast, dimly lit tunnels, hand-hewn by Indian slaves. Along the way you cross suspension bridges over cavernous drop-offs where water has collected. You cannot help being saddened when you see the horrific conditions in which the slaves—men and young boys—worked and died. We were told that not a day ever passed without a fatal accident. At the bottom of the tunnel, your guide leaves you and you board a little train that slowly returns you to a world of light.

About 57 kilometers southwest of Zacatecas on highway 54, there is the interesting pre-Columbian site of *La Quemada*. A visit here can be made as an excursion by car from Zacatecas or as a stop en route from or back to Guadalajara. La Quemada is a fortress-like pre-Columbian site situated on a hilltop overlooking the valley and the route of the ancient traders. The ruins of its massive buildings and stone walls attest to its ancient purpose of protection for traders and the valuable goods they carried. In addition, it probably also served as a warehouse for collection and storage of goods awaiting transfer by Mesoamerica’s long trains of porters. Porters were a vital commodity in pre-Columbian Mexico as beasts of burden were not available and most goods moved on the backs of men. Somewhere around A.D. 1000–1200 the site was destroyed, probably by Chichimec tribes from the northern desert.

**DESTINATION III   MORELIA OR PÁTZCUARO**

Your destination for the next few days is in the heart of the state of Michoacán. This beautiful state, abounding with lush volcanic hills, dense pine forests, rivers, and lakes, is the homeland of the *Tarascan Indians*. This group of indigenous people had a number of characteristics that set them apart from the rest of the natives of Mexico. First of all,
they spoke a language unrelated to any other in Mesoamerica. Second, their architecture differed from the style used elsewhere. Third, their design and type of clothing was unique. Fourth, while, like the rest of Mesoamerica, they used gold, silver, and copper for items of jewelry, they also learned to make bronze from which they crafted tools and weapons. Finally, their independent kingdom centered at Lake Pátzcuaro was never conquered by the Aztecs. In fact, these two contemporaneous kingdoms, Aztec and Tarascan, were constantly at war with each other, skirmishing along an extensive shared border. It may be that the use of superior bronze weapons by the Tarascans prevented them from being overrun by the aggressive Aztec state.

To explore this region, we suggest you stay in either Morelia or Pátzcuaro, two of our favorite gems in Colonial Mexico. Since they are only 55 kilometers apart, choose one or the other to use as your hub while in the area. Each has its individual personality and great appeal. Morelia, a sophisticated, polished city, displays a rich Colonial charm highlighted by splendid buildings; Pátzcuaro, a simple, picturesque Indian village on a lake, has one of the most gorgeous squares in all of Mexico and abounds with authentic charm.

BUS OPTION: There is faster service on a better bus from Guadalajara to Morelia than there is from Guadalajara to Pátzcuaro. So if you are staying in Pátzcuaro, consider changing buses in Morelia, rather than taking the direct service. Whichever town you choose to use as your base of operations, you will certainly want to visit the other location, which is no problem as buses run between the two about every 15 minutes.

9:30 am Leave Guadalajara, La Central station, ETN bus
1:00 pm Arrive Morelia (buses leave for Pátzcuaro about every 20 minutes)
or
11:00 am Leave Guadalajara, La Central station, Pegasso bus
5:00 pm Arrive Pátzcuaro

CAR OPTION: From Guadalajara take highway 15 heading southeast toward Mexico City. About 245 kilometers after leaving Guadalajara, turn right when you come to the

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turnoff for Morelia and continue on for another 24 kilometers to the city. If you are staying in Pátzcuaro, when you come to Morelia, don’t go into the center of town but instead follow signs on to Pátzcuaro.
Morelia, the capital of the state of Michoacán, is an attractive, tidy, modern city with many upscale stores and elegant men and women bustling to and fro. If you circumvent the center of town, you totally miss the best part: its fabulous historic center where you step instantly back to the 16th century when Morelia (whose original name was Old Valladolid) was founded by the Spanish. Its heritage, however, goes back to much earlier times for this rich plateau was the ancestral home of the proud Tarascan Indians and their influence is strongly felt in their native handiwork, which makes this area today one of the richest handicraft areas in Mexico.

Before you begin your sightseeing in Morelia, ask at the tourist office or get a map from the concierge at your hotel and mark the places you want to see.

If you are driving, follow signs to the center of town, leave your car in one of the parking garages, and continue on by foot. Wear comfortable shoes because you will be doing a lot of walking. You will be in the vicinity of the main boulevard, Avenida Francisco Madero, which stretches through the center of town and is highlighted by pretty plazas, churches, sculpted gardens, and handsome Spanish-style buildings made of a pastel, pinkish-colored stone. It is immediately obvious that Morelia was a prosperous city, for its buildings are all grand and the boulevards wide. There aren’t many tourists in Morelia, so you get the authentic feel of a real city.

A convenient spot to start your explorations of Morelia is on the (above-mentioned) Avenida Francisco Madero at the Plaza de Armas, nicknamed Plaza de Los Mártires (Square of the Martyrs), in honor of two leaders of the Revolution of Independence who were executed here. This is an especially pretty square accented by a fanciful wrought-iron bandstand. This main plaza is easy to find since it is dominated by Morelia’s exquisite cathedral, one of the most beautiful in Mexico. Designed and built by Indian artisans, it has a stunning dome embellished with brilliant blue-and-white tile and twin spires that soar over 60 meters into the sky—easily spotted from afar. When you see the immensity of the church, you understand why it took over 80 years to complete. You
enter through massive doors covered with intricately tooled leather. Inside there is a central nave with a freestanding altar where an ornate 18th-century silver holder for the Holy Sacrament is displayed. If you happen to be in the cathedral when someone is playing the organ, you are in for a special treat since the music from this 4,600-pipe organ is astounding. Also noteworthy is the statue of la Señora de La Sacristía, made from a claylike paste of dried maize and wearing a gold crown, which was donated in the 16th century by the Spanish King, Felipe II.

Clustered within a few blocks of the cathedral are the following recommended sights:

**Palacio de Gobierno** (Government Palace): Facing onto Avenida Francisco Madero, catty-corner across from the cathedral, is the 18th-century Palacio de Gobierno. Formerly a seminary that educated many of Mexico’s most important statesmen, it has been used as the government building since 1867. Step inside to view the sweeping murals depicting the history of Mexico, painted by Alfredo Zalce, one of Mexico’s well known artists.

**Museo Regional Michoacán** (Regional Museum of Michoacán), corner of Allende and Abasolo: Originally a private mansion where Emperor Maximilian stayed during his visits to Morelia, this museum displays many pre-Columbian ceramics, Colonial arms, and paintings. Of special interest are Indian codices (most of these rare Indian manuscripts were destroyed by the Spanish). Also of interest is a mural by Alfredo Zalce.

**Museo Casa Natal de Morelos** (Museum of Morelos’s Birthplace), Corregidora 113: The home where Morelia’s native hero, José María Morelos, was born in 1765. It is now a library and a museum showing mementos of his life. A torch burns eternally in memory of Morelos.

**Museo Casa de Morelos** (Museum of Morelos’s Later Home), Avenida Morelos Sur 323: This is the home where José María Morelos lived in his later life. This museum shows furniture, personal objects from his life, a wonderful old kitchen, and many displays about the War of Independence, in which Morelos was a hero.
**Palacio Clavijero**, Nigromante 75: This handsome, baroque building, formerly a 17th-century Jesuit college, is now the tourist office. Stop in here for maps, information on places to see, and events going on during the time of your visit.

**Museo del Estado** (State Museum), Guillermo Prieto 176: This tiny museum was the home of Ana Huarte, wife of Agustín Iturbide who was briefly Emperor of Mexico after the execution of Maximilian. The museum displays archaeological artifacts representing pre-Colombian history and jewelry made by Tarascan Indians. You can see didactic displays showing Indian life in the eight regions of Michoacán. The museum also houses a complete pharmacy with a great exhibit of antique apothecary jars.

**Templo y Exconvento de San Francisco** (Church and Convent of Saint Francis), Fray Juan de San Miguel 129: This church and convent, built in dramatic Spanish-Moorish style, are some of the oldest buildings in Morelia, dating back to 1525. Today the convent houses the Casa de Las Artesania, a museum displaying and selling handicrafts from around the state. As you enter, to your right is a museum with some of Michoacán’s finest handmade items on display. A few are for display only, others are for sale. On a galleried upper floor, facing onto the cloister below, is a series of small shops, each representing crafts from Indian villages throughout the state. Sometimes the Indians are working on their crafts as you watch. These shops sell guitars, hand-loomed fabrics, brightly painted lacquerware, copperware, embroidered clothing, and pottery.

**Templo y Exconvento de Las Rosas** (Church and Convent of the Roses), Santiago Tapia, between Galeana Nigromante and Guillermo Prieto: Facing a small park called Jardín de Las Rosas, the Convent of the Roses was built in the 16th century for Dominican nuns, then later became a school to house and educate poor children. In 1785, it was converted to a music school which has become internationally famous for its Morelia Boys’ Choir. If you are lucky, you might be in Morelia when a concert is being performed; otherwise, you might be able to quietly slip in on a weekday afternoon when they practice.
In addition to the above sightseeing, there are a few recommendations that are not clustered around the cathedral. The following sights are still within walking distance, but be prepared for a bit more of a walk—about 4 kilometers round trip from the cathedral to the Santuario de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe. All can be reached by walking east on Avenida Francisco Madero.

**Plaza Villabongin:** From the cathedral, turn right onto Avenida Francisco Madero and continue walking for about nine blocks. You will come to a triangular plaza with a park, the Plaza Villabongin, which has a fountain featuring a handsome sculpture of three bare-breasted Indian women holding baskets of fruit and vegetables.

**Aqueduct:** Just beyond the Plaza Villabongin, you see one of the symbols of Morelia, its aqueduct, built in the late 1700s to supply water from nearby springs for the growing city. It stretches for an impressive 2 kilometers and has over 250 dramatic high arches in excellent condition, which, when softly illuminated at night, are an impressive sight.

**La Calzada Frey Antonio de San Miguel:** Go under the aqueduct and continue ahead on La Calzada Frey Antonio de San Miguel. The street was named by Father Antonio de San Miguel who commissioned the aqueduct to be built. This pedestrian esplanade is lined by beautiful 18th-century mansions, which during its heyday housed Morelia’s elite. This pretty street, which has a parklike causeway running down the middle, adorned with ash trees and ornate benches, is very tranquil except during the celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe (early to mid-December), when it is very lively and its every inch lined with vendors.

**Santuario de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe** (also called Church of San Diego): Continue walking down La Calzada Frey Antonio de San Miguel. The street dead-ends at the Santuario de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe (Church of San Diego), an 18th-century church that is my favorite in Morelia. The exterior is rather staid and totally belies the treasure within. Step inside and you are surrounded by an interior façade that is awesome. Brilliantly colored plaster rosettes and endless gold totally cover the walls, the
ceiling, and the domes. It seems as if you are surrounded by an exquisitely jeweled porcelain egg by Fabergé.

PÁTZCUARO

Pátzcuaro, a small Colonial gem with a strong Indian heritage, is one of our favorite destinations. For the first-time traveler to Mexico wanting to visit just one charming Colonial town, San Miguel de Allende might be a better choice since it is more sophisticated with chic boutiques and upscale restaurants. However, Pátzcuaro gives you the true feeling of being in Mexico, in an authentic Indian village that hasn’t been prettied up yet for tourists—it is the real thing. Whereas magnificent 17th- and 18th-century stone mansions embrace the squares, simple one-story whitewashed adobe houses with rustic red-tiled roofs line the surrounding jumble of narrow cobbled streets.

You cannot visit Pátzcuaro without becoming familiar with, and quite a fan of, Don Vasco de Quiroga, a 16th-century bishop who is the heart and soul of the town. He not only dreamed of Pátzcuaro becoming one of the most important towns in the New World, but also influenced the lives of the Indians in all the surrounding villages. This gentle yet dynamic priest was sent by the Spanish king to try to make amends for the cruelty rained upon the Indians by one of the most hated of the Spanish conquistadors, Nuño Beltran de Guzman, a lieutenant of Cortés, whose brutality was so extreme and atrocities so profound that finally the Mexican governor ordered him back to Spain to stand trial for his deeds. Don Vasco de Quiroga was a genius with compassion, great organizational abilities, and profound wisdom. He was beloved by all and even today the local Indians affectionately speak of him as “Tata Vasco” (Uncle Vasco) and remember the years he dedicated to preserving their indigenous culture and improving the lot of their people.

What is especially remarkable is how much Don Vasco was able to accomplish in just a few short years. He was already 60 (an age most people think of retiring) when he made the tortuous voyage from Spain to the New World, and then upon his arrival, climbed upon a horse to complete his long journey overland to Pátzcuaro. By the time he died in
his 90s, he had accomplished more after the age of 60 than most people could even dream of doing in their lifetime.

SIGHTSEEING SUGGESTIONS

Plaza Don Vasco de Quiroga: If for no other reason, Pátzcuaro would be worth a detour to see its stunning Plaza Don Vasco de Quiroga, in our estimation one of the two most beautiful squares in Mexico (our other favorite is the plaza in Tlaxcala—see Mexico & Beyond itinerary). This parklike plaza (also called Plaza Grande) is a real jewel with
huge, centuries-old ash trees shading paths radiating from the center, where a large circular fountain highlights a big, bronze statue of Don Vasco de Quiroga standing on a pedestal. Stone benches are set along the paths so that you can enjoy the beauty of the plaza. Surrounding the square are handsome, stone mansions fronted by arcaded walkways, some of which have been converted into restaurants and hotels. Try to visit this plaza at dawn. It is almost mystical at that time of day with the gentle illumination of the morning light filtering through the trees and tiny, Indian women wrapped in striped, handwoven woolen rebozos (shawls) scurrying through the park on their way to work.

**Plaza Gertrudis Bocanegra:** A block north of the Plaza Don Vasco de Quiroga is another plaza that goes by several names: Plaza Chica, Plaza de San Agustín, or Plaza Gertrudis Bocanegra. This is a bustling square with many shops and commercial buildings around it. The activity really picks up on Friday morning, the big market day when Indians come from far and near to set up their stalls. In the center of the square is a statue of one of the heroines of the Revolution, Gertrudis Bocanegra.

**Museo de Artes Populares:** Don Vasco wanted to make Pátzcuaro an important religious, cultural, and political center. He decided the town needed a university and so, in 1540, chose a site a block from the main square and founded the Colegio de San Nicolás, which claims to be the second-oldest university in the New World. In 1580 the university was moved to Morelia, which began to surpass Pátzcuaro in political importance. The school now houses the Museo de Artes Populares, a lovely museum with nine rooms opening onto an open courtyard, displaying regional arts and crafts.

Also in the museum is a troje with typical furnishings. A troje is a wooden log home used by the Tarascan Indians with a porch in front supported by carved columns. Note: As you stand at the entrance to the museum, look to your right to see a water tank with a niche holding the Virgin Mary. According to legend, Don Vasco de Quiroga struck his staff on the ground here and a spring miraculously appeared to supply water for the town.

**Basilica de Nuestra Señora de La Salud:** Another of Don Vasco’s dreams was to build an extraordinary cathedral, which he designed to be three times larger than the Cathedral...
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of Notre Dame in Paris. With that in mind, he built the Basilica de Nuestra Señora de La Salud on a gentle hill about two blocks from the plaza. Only one nave of the original plan was ever completed, but the simple basilica is appealing. One of its principal attractions is the Virgin de La Salud, a small statue encased in glass on the altar, made by the Indians in 1547 from wild orchids and corn paste. Indians come from afar, especially on feast days, to pay homage and ask miracles from their Virgin de La Salud (Virgin of Health).

Casa de Los Once Patios: Not attributed to Don Vasco, but certainly a place you won’t want to miss, especially if you are into shopping for crafts, is the Casa de Los Once Patios (House of the Eleven Patios), a 17th-century Dominican monastery just a half block off the Don Vasco de Quiroga Plaza. The original building had eleven interior patios but today only five remain, each of which is lined by small craft shops selling all kinds of native handmade goods such as loomed fabrics, masks, wooden sculptures, embroidered linens, copper, lacquerware, carved furniture, and colorful paper flowers. It is fun to wander from patio to patio to see what new delights await. You will be reminded that this was a living convent when you notice in one of the patios an arch, supported by richly embellished columns sheltering a small niche, where the novices came to bathe.

AROUND PÁTZCUARO

Santa Clara de Cobre: It is great fun to explore the town of Pátzcuaro, but the outlying region holds many places of interest, including towns that blossomed under the tutelage of Don Vasco de Quiroga. To help the Indians make a transition from their pre-Columbian world to the Spanish culture brought by the conquistadors, Don Vasco established special crafts for each small village, based upon the skills they already knew. Each of these villages, even today, continues to thrive on what Don Vasco taught them. These handicrafts included weaving, woodworking, furniture-making, pottery, lacquerware, guitar-making, and embroidery work. Perhaps the most successful venture occurred in the village of Santa Clara de Cobre (the official name of the town is Villa
Escalante, but you will rarely hear it called that), where the people were trained in the working of copper. Today this small, out-of-the-way village has become a hub for copper craftsmen throughout Mexico—fine artists come to learn the “old ways” of their craft and many stay on to continue working among their peers. You can see the artists and craftsmen at work here and buy wonderful copper objects directly from them. There is a competition each mid-August when all the artisans vie for the finest works of art; the winners’ pieces are featured in Santa Clara’s National Copper Museum. This is a village that should not be missed on a trip to Pátzcuaro.

**Lake Pátzcuaro:** This lake is located about 5 kilometers from the center of town. Tourist photos show it as an idyllic expanse of water with a cone-shaped island jutting up in the middle, and fishermen out in rustic, wooden boats fishing with butterfly nets. In our estimation, the beauty of the lake is overrated since the water is polluted, the fishermen rarely fish with butterfly nets (except for the tourists), and Janitzio (the town on the picturesque-looking island in the middle of the lake) is a bit dirty and scruffy-looking once you get up close. That being said, we still think a boat trip on the lake is fun and a very “non-touristy” outing since most of your companions will be Mexicans out for a day of fun. To visit the island in the lake, take a taxi to the wharf (called Melon Grande or embarcadero) where you will see many boats lined up at the dock.

It may be confusing to know quite what to do, but just go to the ticket booth and ask for a round-trip ticket to **Janitzio** (which costs about 30 pesos). Go down the ramp to the boats, show one of the “officials” your ticket, and he will point out which boat to board. The boats seem to leave whenever enough people appear. You shouldn’t have to wait too long and, in the meantime, it’s entertaining just to watch the action. On weekends and holidays, the boats are full of tourists going to the island to have a meal at one of the many restaurants. During the week, most of the boat passengers seem to be locals, schoolchildren returning home, and women returning from the market. When the boat arrives at the island, disembark, and walk the many steps lined by vendors to the top of the hill, which is topped by a 70-meter statue of José María Morelos (about a 15-minute walk).
Within the statue is a museum with galleries on five floors joined by a rampway, each level covered with huge murals with titles in Spanish. Even if you can’t read Spanish, it is pretty obvious that the tale being told is of the cruelty of the Spanish Conquest and the sad plight of the Indians. Walk back down the hill to the village to wait for the next boat back. There are many colorful restaurants on a terrace above the pier.

*Butterfly-Net Fishermen at Lake Pátzcuaro*

*Colonial Gems: Charming Towns by Car or Bus*
**Tzintzuntzan:** If you are interested in archaeological sites, you must not miss Tzintzuntzan (translated as “The Place of the Hummingbird”), located on the east side of the lake about 17 kilometers from Pátzcuaro. When the Spanish arrived in the 16th century, more than 40,000 Tarascan Indians lived in this town, which was the capital of their state. This unusual site sits on a rise just above Lake Pátzcuaro, with a splendid view across the water to the islands and fertile fields of this lovely valley in the mountains. Five large *yacatas*, round keyhole-shaped stone structures, stand in a row along a great man-made platform on a ridge facing the lake. Behind the *yacatas* steps lead down into a plaza with remains of a palace, living quarters, and storehouses. While some archaeological excavations have been carried out at the site, very little information has ever been published. It is generally assumed, however, that these finely made round cut-stone bases were once topped with perishable temples dedicated to the major Tarascan gods. In addition, the *yacatas* were used as the burial places of the Tarascan kings. Rich finds from the tombs include magnificent examples of the metalwork for which the Tarascans were renowned as well as skeletons of retainers who were interred with their royal masters in order to serve them after death. Tzintzuntzan is also well known for its intricate straw weavings and there are numerous shops where handicrafts are sold. Note: On the road from Pátzcuaro to Tzintzuntzan you will see factories selling wrought-iron garden furniture, mostly tables and chairs and handsome tall, old-fashioned wrought-iron lamps, at excellent prices. Our choice of these shops, which makes the furniture in a factory behind, is Fundidora Los Fresnos, on the left side of the road as you go toward Tzintzuntzan.

**Tocuaro:** If you are interested in buying one of the region’s popular carved wooden masks, drive along the western edge of the lake to the tiny village of Tocuaro, just a little distance beyond the town of Eroncuariquero. Here you will find a master craftsman, Señor Horta, who creates and sells his pieces of art in his home. His work and skill are so well known that he is frequently invited to the United States to lecture. Once you arrive in the village, anyone you meet should be able to point the way to his home (it has his name on the door).
Cuanajo & Tupátaro: Another skill of the Tarascan Indians is the making of intricately carved furniture. If you are interested in buying some furniture or just want to see how it is made, go to the tiny, nondescript town of Cuanajo. This is an interesting excursion because along the way there is an outstanding tiny church to visit. From Pátzcuaro, take the highway toward Morelia and about 10 kilometers after leaving town, turn right on a small road at a small sign marked to Cuanajo. Soon after leaving the highway you come to the postage-stamp-sized town of Tupátaro, which is not much more than a tiny, beautifully kept plaza enhanced with old-fashioned wrought-iron lamps and bordered on three sides by one-story whitewashed buildings with rustic tiled roofs. Across from the tiny park is an adobe wall enclosing a very old church. Although not in the least ostentatious, this tiny church is truly a gem. Aged shade trees dot the grounds and a rugged stone marks the entrance. Notice as you enter that adorning one side of the doorway is a moon, on the other, the sun—surely not Christian motifs but undoubtedly reflecting the culture of the Indian craftsmen who built the church. The exterior is very simple, making it all the more amazing when you step inside and see the breathtaking gold altar. Be sure also to look up—the ceiling too is quite amazing. Its beams are totally covered with intricate paintings of angels and scenes from the life of Christ, clearly reflecting the style of the early Indian artistic tradition. After seeing the church, continue on to Cuanajo, where it is fun to stroll along the streets to see the vast array of furniture being made of pine wood. Most of the shops (often home fronts) offer intricately carved furniture at incredibly low prices. My favorites are the delicately carved headboards, but these are a bit large to tote home. You might want to consider one of the lovely small carved pine chests, which can be packed up to take on the plane.

Lake Zirahuen: Whereas Lake Pátzcuaro is polluted, Lake Zirahuen, located in the pine-studded hills 22 kilometers southwest of Pátzcuaro next to a town of the same name, is crystal-clear without a hint of pollution. Many Mexicans come here for family outings. If you want to combine sightseeing, dining, and lots of local color, go to Le Troje de Ala restaurant (open on weekends), which is built within a Tarascan-style wooden home called a *troje*. The restaurant faces the lake and has a long wooden pier stretching out
into the water. It is possible to drive to the restaurant, but much it’s more of an adventure to take a boat. Ask at your hotel for details on how to get there.

**Paricutín Volcano**: A truly off-the-beaten-path adventure, and one you would probably want to undertake only if you are making an extensive stay in the area, is to the remote village of San Juan Parangaricútiro, which lies covered in ash from the Paricutín Volcano. The volcano erupted in 1943 and for nine years rained ash upon the valley below. What you see today is a field of black lava punctuated by the steeple of the village’s 16th-century church, which lies buried below. What makes this trip special is not so much what you see, or don’t see, of the buried village, but the jaunt itself, which takes you into a beautiful, lush area of pine-covered hills and tiny villages in a remote area of Michoacán rarely seen by tourists. Here Indians are still living as they have done for countless generations in picturesque *trojes* (log homes with carved columns). Allow a full day for this adventure. From Pátzcuaro, take the toll road west for 60 kilometers to Uruapan, a bustling commercial town that would win no beauty contests but is very important as it lies at the heart of Mexico’s vast avocado plantations. Eduardo Ruiz National Park, on the outskirts of town, is a real beauty, with lovely streams, springs, waterfalls, and lush, almost tropical foliage. From Uruapan, go north for about 13 kilometers on highway 37, turn left, and continue for another 20 kilometers to Angahuan. Here you will find plenty of guides eager to rent you horses and guide you to see the covered town (a 6-kilometer round trip). Arrangements can be made also to take you up the volcano, but I think just the round trip to the buried village is enough.

When it is time to end this itinerary, you can return to Mexico City for your trip home, take a flight to one of the beach areas for a few days in the sun, or, if you want to continue your explorations of the countryside, link with one of the other itineraries featured in the guide, such as the *Miracle of the Monarch Butterfly* itinerary.
BUS OPTION: Below we indicate some possibilities for public transportation back to Mexico City.

11:15 am       Leave Morelia, La Central station, ETN bus
3:15 pm       Arrive Mexico City, Observatorio station
or
9:00 am       Leave Pátzcuaro, La Central station, Autovíos bus
2:15 pm       Arrive Mexico City, Observatorio station

CAR OPTION: If you are driving, return to highway 15 from Pátzcuaro or Morelia and follow signs into Mexico City, a total distance of just a little over 300 kilometers. Note: it can be a little confusing because the highway changes numbers en route from 15 to 55.
Mexico States

Small states numbered as follows:

1. AGUASCALIENTES
2. DISTRITO FEDERAL
3. GUANAJUATO
4. HIDALGO
5. MEXICO
6. MORELOS
7. QUERETARO DE ARTEAGA
8. TLAXCALA
9. COLIMA

0  100  200 Kilometers
0  100  200 Miles