

INTO THE DEPTHS OF MEXICO

**Dive into the past and an assortment of seafaring adventures
in one of the world's friendliest destinations.**

BY KATHY H. ELY

The crowd, 40,000 strong, bursts into cheers as the angry bull surges. The suave matador, in traditional uniform, waves his red cape in defiance. This centuries-old contest between man and beast is a scene repeated each Sunday afternoon (at least during the dry months) in Mexico City's Plaza Mexico, the world's largest bullring. Not far away, soccer stars battle for dominance in the country's—and the world's—most popular sport at the Estadio Azteca, in front of more than 100,000 screaming futbol fans. It's the only stadium in the world to host two World Cup finals, the latest in 1986.

Two contests, the old and the new; both epitomizing the mix of tradition and wordliness that is the cosmopolitan Mexico City. But it also speaks of this varied country, the geographical link between the United States and Latin America. Bullfights, even the occasional cockfight, test some wills, but more are drawn to the myriad personal adventures to be found here, from dirt bikes in the challenging Baja to diving with sharks. The range of habitats caters to all personalities: the beach bum, the nature lover, the explorer and adventurer. This is a vast land—742,000 square miles and home to more than 107 million people. And the locals generally offer a quick smile and warm welcome to visitors from all over the globe.

The adventure begins in mysterious ruins, centuries old.



RUINS TO DIE FOR

The ambitious builders of the temples and buildings surrounding Nohock Mul were not daunted by the jungle closing in on the ancient city of Coba—they built their 12-story pyramid right in its midst. Here, in the Yucatan, the popular east coast peninsula that juts up into the Caribbean, Mexico serves up mystery and history in equal parts. Several clusters of temples and ancient structures dot the original footprint of this metropolis, scattered over 27 square miles. Many have yet to be excavated, seemingly swallowed up by the towering palms and ferns. Get a grand view of this even grander site from the main temple, one of the tallest in the region, amidst the echoes of jungle noises: birds, monkeys, and not much else. The remote location adds a hint of drama to the ancient site; stay to the winding paths lest you lose your way in the thick foliage.

Many more travelers head to the more accessible coastal ruins of Tulum, just an hour south of Cancun. Indeed, this is the most visited of all the Mayan ruins in Mexico. Despite the crowds in high season, the striking location, perched on a cliff overlooking the Caribbean, makes it more than worth a



visit. Most of the structures, including the main temple, are not open for climbing, so it can easily be explored in a half day (if you don't count some added time at the beach).

Allow time, however, to explore the most magnificent of all the Mexican ruins, Chichen Itza. If you see only one ruin, make it this fifth-century site just four hours from the coast. Hundreds of buildings remain of the metropolis, in two major clusters, but only a portion have been fully explored. Notable among them is one of the few round buildings built by the Maya, an observatory known as El Caracol. (Its name, which translates as “the Snail,” came from the spiral staircase within.) It stands as a monument to the astronomical expertise of the Mayan elders, with its alignment with the planet Venus and windows facing due north, south, east and west.

Astronomy also stars in the 98-foot-tall pyramid here called El Castillo (the Castle), which draws throngs of the curious each equinox to watch a rare natural event. The astute ancient architects knew that the sun, just a couple of times a year, would hit the serpent statues just right and send a shadow winding perfectly down the steps.

The Cenote Sagrado nearby, a 65-

foot-wide, seemingly endlessly deep pool, has given up other centuries-old secrets. Experts believe that human sacrifices were carried out here, probably after the city was abandoned in the 12th century. Scientists have discovered numerous skeletons in the depths, as well as gold and jade artifacts, most not indigenous to the region. More evidence of rituals long lost but still studied.

Equally compelling is the huge ball court, the pelota, the site of ancient competitions that make football or rugby seem tame—especially when you learn that the losers often literally lost their heads. Luckily, more enjoyable pursuits await the modern journeyman.

THE YUCATAN: ANCIENT FUN IN THE SUN

For some, plunging into the past may pale next to the seaside wonders of the Yucatan. For most travelers, the strip of formerly lonely beaches and barrier islands that make up Cancun is the picture of a Mexican vacation. This was a deserted area where the jungle met the beach a mere 40 years ago, when the resort began taking shape. The prevailing view today is a modern tourist Mecca packed with high-rises, docking cruise ships, and a raucous party going on most any time of day or night. But new resorts, nightclubs and a slew of fine



Photo page 23: One of Acapulco's famous cliff divers launches into the surf. Page 24: Panoramic view of the Kukulcan Pyramid at Chichen Itza on the Yucatan (top); Mayan ruins of Coba (bottom). Page 25: A variety of local eateries exist in Cancun (top left); Oaxacan woman wears regional clothing and jewelry (top right); a diver at a reef wall in Cozumel, one of the top diving sites in the world.

restaurants have added an upscale touch to the atmosphere, making it welcome to all. The folks here regularly weather the storms that hit (like Hurricane Wilma in 2005), bouncing back with hotel renovations and new attractions.

Silky white beaches are fine on their own, but add in water adventures: diving, snorkeling, parasailing, and the beach bum and water lover will both be in their element. Water skis and personal watercraft are available all along the coast for those interested in speed; fun banana boats, those inflatables that bounce behind motorboats, are hilarious fun for the whole family. Kayaks and sailboats offer a more placid ride. Numerous rental outlets (including at many of the hotels) lie all along the resort beaches and at local marinas.

Just a few miles out in the Caribbean lie the dual islands of Cozumel and Isla de Mujeres, drawing those interested in a less crowded getaway. Divers and snorkelers head here first, for the world's second-longest barrier reef puts Cozumel on the list of the top diving sites in the world. The extremely laid-back, seven-mile-long Isla de Mujeres ("island of women") is even more



serene. Plus, there are tales of "sleeping sharks" in nearby underwater caves for those adventurous types. But swimming with dolphins has become *the* thing to do. It's a life-changing event for many (even those skeptics who sniff at the reported stress-relieving attributes of such an experience). Numerous outlets offer this rather expensive swim; but those in the know suggest that meeting dolphins in the wild is the way to go.

WESTERN BEAUTY

The coastal area just to the south of the U.S. state of California has become known as Mexico's Wild West. Think of the Baja, and dry, dusty desert scenes

emerge (many with the buzzing of four-wheelers or motorcycles thrusting up over dirt-track hills). The interior of Baja, the long spit of land bounded by the Pacific and the interior Gulf of California, is indeed an unwelcoming, even deadly wilderness. But its dual coasts deliver more than a few hospitable recreational opportunities.

A drive down the coast past Tijuana (the large border town just 18 miles south of San Diego; worth a stop for a bullfight, perhaps, or to pick up fine Mexican cigars) is one to remember. Winding highways, running in many places high above the picturesque Pacific, thread between a number of



Left: Waves meet stunning rock formations at Solmar Beach, Cabo San Lucas. Bottom: Souvenirs for sale.

Mexico's most luxurious getaway, with high-end accommodations and major golf courses drawing international travelers. Great restaurants, beautiful beaches and close-by snorkeling lure sun lovers.

But a great many come for the world-class sport fishing: sailfish, marlin, dorado, wahoo, yellowfin tuna and more swirl in these fertile fishing waters—upward of 800 species just waiting for your lure. While many hotels can arrange a charter (most leave from the Cabo San Lucas Marina), there are several fleets with fine reputations that will take you for a day, or longer. Some even offer 50- to 70-foot cruisers, complete with state-rooms and numerous amenities.

Some game fishermen head northeast to the wilder East Cape (also big with windsurfers), or even farther up the inland coast to La Paz and Loreto, starting points for some of the best fishing around in the Sea of Cortez (also called the Gulf of California). Charter recreation fleets also head out of Mazatlan and Puerto Vallarta, Pacific coast ports on the mainland.

The Sea of Cortez is a nature lover's dream—with an amazing array of wildlife, more than 30 species of whales and dolphins alone, not to mention sea lions, marine turtles, 500 kinds of fish and more than 200 different birds. There are 900 islands here; Isla Espiritu Santo, about a 40-minute boat ride from La Paz, is one of the most diverse, now owned by the Nature Conservancy and protected as a federal nature preserve. Several marine parks in the area feature a tamer variety of marine wildlife. Besides the gray whales that arrive after their long trip to winter and calve, giant manta rays and more regularly ply these waters. Ecotour companies abound that are happy to arrange whale-watching trips, for an afternoon or a week, in small and larger craft. The intrepid explore these waters in kayaks, an exciting way to meet those marine creatures up close and personal.



beach towns along the way south. Many new hotels are sprouting up in these unfettered spots, each with an individual flavor. Surfers, for example, often head straight to Playas de Rosarito. And the fishing town of Ensenada, a medium-sized city with just enough shopping and regular folks to give you a sense of the real Mexico, also features a bustling seafood market where you can pick up today's catch. Whale-watching is the draw here in the winter, as the huge mammals make their way down from Alaska to mate. Excursion boats leave from Ensenada, but more popular spots are Scammon's Lagoon and Magdalena Bay (Mag Bay) further down the coast.

On Baja's southern tip, Baja Sur, lies the other major Mexican vacation destination, Los Cabos, the fastest-growing region in the country. Actually the combination of three distinct areas—San Jose del Cabo (the quieter, more residential area); hip Cabo San Lucas; and "The Corridor," cliffs hosting exclusive resorts and lodges—this has become



MEXICAN MISCELLANY

Weather or Not

Southern temps range from spring-like to tropical, except at the highest elevations. To avoid crowds and the rainy season, the best months to go are November, April and May. Easter and spring breaks are hugely popular; look up the festival schedule as well to judge the crowd potential. For more general information, check out visitmexico.com (hit the United States link for an English version).

Hit the Rails in Copper Canyon

The northern state of Chihuahua boasts Copper Canyon, with gorges deeper and wider than the United States' Grand Canyon, and some peaks soaring up to 12,000 feet. Here lives the dwindling population of indigenous, and very private, Tarahumara Indians, literally "the running people," known for their endurance and great long-distance running abilities—often barefoot. If hiking through the canyon's 6,500 square miles doesn't suit your fancy, take the storied railroad Chihuahua al Pacifico, which winds almost 400 miles through dramatic canyon scenery. The dazzling journey begins in the coastal town of Los Mochis.

Dancing with the Dead

Cemetery kitsch, like wedding cake toppers of skeletons dressed in bridal gear, is rampant each November when the Día de Muertos, or Day of the Dead festivals roll out across Mexico, especially in the Guadalajara region. Gravesites get spiffed up for all-night candlelight vigils, homemade altars are festooned with marigold wreaths and macabre baked treats in the shapes of skulls and coffins, dark breads are made into animas (human souls) and much drinking is enjoyed as the deceased ancestors come to visit. It's just one of many festivals throughout the country, which never saw a party it didn't like.

Dolphin Dreaming

Swimming with dolphins can be a life-changing, if pricey, experience (recent medical research cites it can alleviate depression). But much controversy surrounds the practice—several animals died a couple of years back in the hands of nefarious handlers—so visitors are advised to check into a site before leaping. It's extremely popular in the Yucatan: Fodor's recommends the eco-park Xcaret on the Riviera Maya outside of Playa del Carmen; Dolphin Discovery on Isla Mujeres has also received kudos for responsible treatment of the animals.



The Real Mexico On Display

Word has it that cockfights are held throughout the country (the only place in North America where cockfighting is legal, outside of Louisiana and New Mexico in the United States). But a "regulated" version rolls out each spring at the annual San Marcos National Fair in Aguascalientes. This 175-year-old fair, which began as a livestock show, also celebrates other longstanding Mexican traditions, from mariachi music and poetry to bullfights and the traditional artistry of charrería, horseback riding in traditional garb. Movies, food and a beauty pageant draw more than 200,000 to this central Mexican town every April.

Big Heads A' Rollin'

Before there were Mayan, before there were Aztecs, the Olmec ruled MesoAmerica, anywhere from 1,000 to 3,000 B.C. Huge carved heads, some more than 6 feet tall and almost as wide, were discovered at sites such as San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan and La Venta, as recently as 1987. Mystery still surrounds these colossal heads—are they rulers or decapitated warriors? Do they suggest African lineage? And how did the ancients move such massive monuments? It's a Mexican mystery on the order of England's Stonehenge.

DIVE INTO MEXICO

The striking ruins and ubiquitous water sports top the list for most Mexican vacationers. But there are those emerging pursuits drawing a whole new wave of travelers: Mexican cooking holidays, like at the upscale Los Dos in Merida; cultural art tours, finding silver in Taxco, amber and pottery in Oaxaca, and more. There's mountain climbing and vineyards; and there's always a festival going on somewhere, with great mariachi music and better food. Once again, the diversity of a country blessed by great weather draws all brand of visitor.

The 1950s saw Acapulco, farther south on the Pacific coast, reigning as *the* jet-set destination, with natural cove beaches ringed with high-rises and the high life—including all-night clubs and discos. The now ubiquitous sport of parasailing actually began here, as well, during those high times. After years of being eclipsed by more modern spots, it is seeing something of a resur-



The sweeping shoreline of Acapulco Bay.

gence, with luxury resorts once again welcoming travelers. Fine dining, shopping and the best nightclubs keep the nights hopping, after a day of beach sports or a trip to the Old Town.

But the famed cliff divers are still the reason that many tourists come to Acapulco. They perform their spine-tingling feats, jumping off the cliffs of La Quebrada, north of the city. The

famed 1940s hotel El Mirador is the place to watch these *clavadistas*, who pray at a shrine before plunging 130 feet into the swirling surf. Grab a seat at one of up to five “shows” a day; be sure to tip these natural entertainers.

It's an image that lingers, as are many of the myriad scenes of Mexico.



THE POTENT TASTES OF MEXICO

Beer Bits: It seems poetic justice that Cinco de Mayo, anniversary of the overthrow of Napoleon and Austrians in Mexico in 1862, is celebrated with Mexican beers, many with a strong European influence. Most Americans know imported cervezas—Corona, Dos Equis, Tecate and the rarer Negro Modelo; in Mexico, Superior, Victoria, and Indio stand out. But specialty microbrews are increasing. The “All About Beer” Website exclaims, “Look for Noche Buena (“Good Night”) ... described as a traditional German bockbier. Available only from September to December, Noche Buena is reason No. 1 why you should embark to Mexico on a beer holiday.”

No Worm Unturned—Tequila Basics: Tequila reigns as the famed Mexican potable. Myths swirl about worms in bottles (marketing ploy), what's real and what's not. Here are some basics:

- Tequila is made from the blue agave cactus plant, and must be at least 51 percent blue agave.
- It is named for the original town of Tequila in the state of Jalisco.
- Tequila must come from Jalisco and parts of Guanajuato, Nayarit, Michoacán and Tamaulipas (like only true champagne comes from the Champagne region of France)
- Mezcal, often confused with tequila, is made with other agave plants.

Blanco or Silver—a strong, clear version usually enjoyed shortly after the distillation process.

Oro or Gold—the blanco (white) with added flavors and/or colors, often caramel. Most popular in frozen drinks.

Reposado or Rested—white tequila that has been “rested” in white oak casks or vats for several months. The blue agave taste remains, and a smoother, more mellow taste ensues.

Añejo or Aged—when the reposado remains in the casks (no larger than 159 gallons) for more than a year, resulting in an amber color and oaky flavor picked up from the casks. Special *Reserva* varieties, aged up to 8 years, up the ante in flavor—and price.

If you can't decide, just go with a Tequila, the *cerveza* whose label touts “with blue agave nectar and the natural flavor of lime.”