

# **Mexico Unfiltered**

**Land of Magic,  
Mystery and Murals**

By  
**Petros Eshetu**

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Printed in the United States of America

First Edition, 2025

ISBN 978-0-9985548-7-7 (Kindle)

ISBN 978-0-9985548-8-4 (Paperback)

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Inspired Mind Publishing

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# INTRODUCTION

## DANCING WITH DANGER: A JOURNEY INTO THE HEART OF MEXICO

The tequila burned on the way down, a fire that reminded me I was alive. The dive bar in Tijuana pulsed with chaos: music blared, laughter ricocheted off the walls, and whispers of secret deals floated through the dimly lit corners. It was my last night before heading back to the States, and I wanted to soak in every ounce of the madness.

That's when he walked in.

A crisp white shirt. A gold chain shining beneath flickering neon lights. His presence was a vacuum, sucking the air out of the room. Conversations died. The bartender froze. Patrons stared into their drinks, willing themselves to disappear.

Narco.

No one had to say it. You could feel it in the way the air thickened with unspoken fear.

I should have kept my head down. I didn't. Curiosity got the better of me. I glanced his way.

Big mistake.

His dark eyes locked on mine, pinning me in place. A slow, menacing smile crept across his face.

Seconds later, two hulking men grabbed me, escorted me out the back door. The roar of revving engines drowned out my protests. They shoved me into a black SUV, the stench of stale cigarette smoke soaked into the leather seats filled my lungs as I struggled to make sense of what was happening.

“You’ve been watching us, haven’t you?” The man in white leaned in, voice smooth, commanding—heavy with the weight of someone who demands total respect.

“N-no! I swear! I’m just a tourist!” My heart slammed against my ribs.

“Tourists don’t drink in places like that.” He exhaled smoke, tilting his head. “Let’s take a ride.”

The city lights faded behind us, swallowed by the empty stretch of desert.

At a sprawling compound, floodlights blazed over men cradling automatic rifles. My captors dragged me inside, dumping me in a bare room. A single chair. A rusty machete leaned against the wall.

"You work for the DEA, don't you?" the man in white asked, his calm demeanor with a powerful resolve.

“What? No! I’m a writer! Check my check my phone!” Panic clawed at my throat.

He studied me. Silent. Unreadable.

With a bored sigh, he nodded to his men. "Let's see if you can survive the desert." After holding me for hours, they drove me into the middle of nowhere and left me with nothing but the clothes on my back and the searing sun.

Hours passed. The Heat was unbearable. Just as I was ready to collapse, the distant rumble of an engine broke the silence. A beat-up pickup truck appeared on the horizon, kicking up dust.

The driver, an old man with a face carved by the sun, motioned me to get in as if finding an American lost in the Mexican desert was nothing out of the ordinary for him.

By the time we reached the nearest town, I was sunburned, dehydrated, and utterly broken.

I never found out who the man in white was, though maybe that was for the best. I will never know why he fixated on me. But one thing was certain, I had danced too close to the fire and barely lived to tell the tale.

As the bus carried me north toward the border, I swore I'd never tempt fate like that again.

Well...that's the terrifying story I imagined before my first trip to Mexico in November 2019.

**Reality? I did not run into any cartel members, that I know of? My first trip was nothing like the harrowing adventure I had imagined above.**

Back then, I was living in San Diego, California, having just started dating Erika, whose family was still living in Mexico. Before we were official, she asked me to meet them—an unusual request given my African cultural background. I was born to Ethiopian parents in Rome and later grew up in Zimbabwe before moving to the U.S. at 21. For me, meeting parents comes after commitment, not before. Still, I knew from our first date that she was special and was confident I'd get along with her family.

There was just one problem.

They lived in **Tecate, Mexico**—yes, that town, home of the brewery—a small border town about 40 minutes from San Diego. Until then, my only impressions of Mexico came from Narcos TV shows in Netflix, crime documentaries, and sensationalized news stories.

So, when I agreed to visit, I did so with hesitation.

“Are you nervous to meet my parents?” Erika teased.

“No,” I admitted. “I’m nervous about going to Mexico.”

The fear wasn’t irrational. Just a week before my trip, the news was flooded with reports of a Mormon family gunned down by cartels near the border, six children and three adults. My anxiety skyrocketed.

Erika did her best to calm my fears, patiently talking through my anxieties and reminding me of the good that existed beyond the headlines. And despite my lingering apprehension, I went.

Tecate wasn’t what I expected. Instead of chaos and crime, I found a quiet, charming town nestled in the foothills of the Sierra de Juárez mountains. Erika’s family lived on a stunning ranch, surrounded by vineyards and endless sky. Tecate, I soon learned, was part of Mexico’s famous Wine Route, Valle de Guadalupe, often called the “Napa Valley of Mexico.”

That night, I found myself at a family gathering, celebrating Erika’s mother’s birthday. I met Erika’s parents, her sister, and more cousins than I could count. We laughed, shared stories, and indulged in Mexican traditions.

The town seems charming but I still had my doubts.

I realized my initial perception wasn't unique. Many people see Mexico through a narrow lens, headlines of cartel violence, kidnappings, and crime. It's why most tourists stick to places like Cancún, Cabo, or Tulum, avoiding anywhere off the beaten path. But a few bad headlines shouldn't define an entire country.

Since that first trip, I've traveled to over 30 cities across Mexico. Does crime exist? Sure, like any country. But with common sense, street smarts, and a simple rule—*don't get involved in anything drug-related*, I've not run into much trouble.

I travel using two simple rules: learn about the places you will visit. Talk to locals.

Two years later in October 2021, I married that incredible Mexican woman. Together, we've explored deserts, jungles, bustling cities, and ancient ruins in Mexico.

This book is the story of that journey. Specifically at the beginning of 2023, we decided to fulfill a once in lifetime trip of traveling.

around Mexico for 8 months, moving to a new city every month. In the following chapters, I'll share those experiences — where to go, what to do, and how to truly immerse yourself in Mexico's magic.

But before we dive into the cities and adventures, let's step back into the rich and complex history of Mexico itself. To truly appreciate its vibrant culture, you must first understand the past that shaped it.

# CHAPTER 1

## **THE EPIC HISTORY OF MEXICO: A LAND OF LEGENDS, CONQUEST, AND REVOLUTION**

**I**n the heart of North America, where the Pacific kisses the western shores and the Gulf cradles the east, lies a land carved by the hands of time — Mexico. A country that was home to dazzling civilizations, fierce warriors, and unbreakable spirit, its history is a saga of triumph, tragedy, and transformation.

## **THE DAWN OF CIVILIZATION: GIANTS OF THE ANCIENT WORLD**

Long before Mexico had its name, its lands nurtured some of the most extraordinary civilizations in history. The Olmecs, the "mother culture" of Mesoamerica, emerged from the lush rainforests of Veracruz and Tabasco between 1400 and 400 BCE. With their colossal stone heads and mysterious rituals, they laid the cultural blueprint for the empires to come.

Then came the Maya, a civilization of breathtaking intellect and celestial ambition. By 600 AD, their great cities like Palenque and Chichén Itzá flourished, their white limestone temples gleaming under the sun. Masters of mathematics and astronomy, they crafted intricate calendars and predicted celestial events with mind-boggling accuracy. Yet, by 900 AD, the mighty Maya civilization declined, paving the way for the

rise of the Toltecs and, ultimately, the empire that would define pre-Hispanic Mexico, the Aztecs.

## **THE RISE OF THE AZTECS: EMPIRE OF THE SUN**

Guided by a divine vision, the Aztecs, once a wandering tribe, beheld an eagle perched on a cactus, devouring a snake. It was the sign their god Huitzilopochtli had promised, and upon that fateful spot, they founded Tenochtitlán (what is now Mexico City), the jewel of their empire and the heartbeat of Mesoamerica.

By the 15th century, Tenochtitlán was a marvel of engineering, its canals and towering pyramids rivaling the grandeur of any European city. The Aztecs ruled with a fierce hand, demanding tribute from neighboring peoples while their warriors conquered vast territory. Their society was one of discipline, devotion, and dazzling artistry, yet their fate would soon be decided by forces beyond their imagination.

## **THE SPANISH CONQUEST: COLLISION OF TWO WORLDS**

In 1519, the world of the Aztecs trembled. From the east, across the stormy seas, came the Spaniards. Armored men with thunderous weapons and a hunger for conquest that rivaled that of the Aztecs. Hernán Cortés, a cunning and relentless conquistador, landed with only 600 men, yet he wielded something far more dangerous than numbers: deception.

Allies to the discontented, Cortes turned Mexico's own people against their rulers. With the help of his brilliant translator Malintzin (or known as Malinche), he navigated the political maze of Mesoamerica, marching into Tenochtitlán in November 1519. The city's ruler, Montezuma II, met the invaders with a mixture of awe and caution, perhaps believing Cortés to be the returning god Quetzalcoatl.

But admiration soon turned to war. Betrayals, massacres, and an unrelenting siege tore the Aztec capital apart. In August 1521, after months of brutal fighting and the deadly grip of European diseases, Tenochtitlán fell. The once-mighty empire was reduced to rubble, and from its ashes rose New Spain, a land forever altered by conquest.

## **NEW SPAIN: THE BIRTH OF A HYBRID NATION**

Mexico became the crown jewel of the Spanish empire, its lands rich with silver and its people subject to the iron rule of European masters. Cities bloomed with elaborate cathedrals and vast haciendas, while indigenous traditions blended with Spanish customs, forging the unique identity of mestizaje, the fusion of indigenous and European cultures.

Yet, beneath the golden facade of New Spain, resentment simmered. A rigid caste system kept power in the hands of Spanish-born elites, while indigenous and mixed-race peoples bore the weight of labor and oppression. It was only a matter of time before the cry for freedom would shatter the chains of colonial rule.

## **THE CRY FOR INDEPENDENCE: A NATION AWAKENS**

On the night of September 16, 1810, a bell rang out in the town of Dolores, Mexico and with it, the first battle cry of an independent Mexico. Father Miguel Hidalgo's 'Grito de Dolores' speech ignited a rebellion that swept across the land. It was a speech calling for revolt against Spanish rule, demanding an end to 300 years of oppression and advocating for racial equality and land redistribution. For over a decade, revolutionaries fought, bled, and died for the dream of liberty.

Finally, in 1821, Mexico declared its independence from Spain. But freedom came at a cost including political instability, foreign invasions, and internal strife would trouble the young nation.

## **WAR AND LOSS: MEXICO'S STRUGGLE AGAINST EMPIRE**

The 19th century saw Mexico tested by external threats and internal turmoil. The Mexican-American War (1846–1848) stripped the country of nearly half its territory, including California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, Texas and parts of Colorado, Wyoming, and Oklahoma.

The French intervention in the 1860s brought Emperor Maximilian of Austria to the throne, an unwelcome ruler swiftly overthrown by the nationalist forces of Benito Juárez three years after the new Emperor's arrival.

Benito Juárez, a Zapotec Indian and one of Mexico's most revered leaders, championed reforms that reshaped the nation. But his death in 1872 left a void soon filled by another powerful figure, Porfirio Díaz.

## **THE PORFIRIATO: PROGRESS AND OPPRESSION**

The Porfiriato was known as the period in Mexican history when General Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911) served as president, effectively ruling as a dictator. It was an era characterized by a combination of stability, economic modernization, and authoritarian control. Under Díaz's rule, Mexico leaped into modernity. Railroads stretched across the landscape, cities sparkled with electricity, and foreign investments flooded in. Yet, beneath this golden age of progress, the rural poor suffered. Landowners grew wealthier while peasants lost everything. Dissent was crushed, elections were a farce, and the people's voice was silenced until the revolution came knocking.

## **THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION: THE BATTLE FOR JUSTICE**

In 1910, the people had had enough. A young leader, Francisco I. Madero, dared to challenge Díaz, and his call for "Effective suffrage, no reelection!" sparked an uprising. The revolution unleashed a whirlwind of battles, betrayals, and legendary figures.

Pancho Villa, the bandit-turned-revolutionary, led fearless cavalry charges across the north, while Emiliano Zapata, the voice of the landless, fought for “Tierra y Libertad” (Land and Freedom) in the south, being one of the most iconic and powerful slogans of the Mexican Revolution. By 1917, Mexico had a new constitution, one of the most progressive of its time, promising land reforms, labor rights, and restrictions on foreign control.

Yet, the revolution was a double-edged sword. Though it shaped modern Mexico, it also left scars of violence and uncertainty that lingered for decades.

## **MODERN MEXICO: A NATION REBORN**

The political landscape of Mexico shifted dramatically after the 71-year rule of the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) that ended in 2000. The PAN (Partido Acción Nacional) came to power, led by Vicente Fox (2000–2006) and Felipe Calderón (2006–2012), who focused on free-market policies and combating crime. The PRI briefly returned to power under Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018), though his administration faced widespread criticism for corruption. In 2018, the left-leaning Morena party (Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional) rose to prominence with Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who championed progressive reforms. As of 2025, Claudia Sheinbaum Pardo serves as Mexico’s first female president.

Understanding Mexico's history is essential to truly appreciating its culture, because the past shapes its vibrant present. From the ancient civilizations of the Aztecs and Mayans, whose influence endures in Mexico's art, architecture,

and traditions, to the Spanish conquest that introduced new languages and religion. Mexico's history weaves a rich tapestry of cultural fusion. The struggle for independence, the Mexican Revolution, and modern political transformations further highlight the resilience and evolving identity of its people.

Many of Mexico's traditions, foods, and festivals reflect centuries of historical influence. Without grasping these deep roots, it's impossible to fully comprehend or celebrate the richness and uniqueness of Mexico's cultural identity.

# CHAPTER 2

## CHIAPAS

### TUXTLA GUTIÉRREZ: FINDING AFRICA IN CHIAPAS

**A**s the plane descended, the golden Chiapas sun cast a warm glow over the city **Tuxtla Gutiérrez**, illuminating the city in a hazy, sun-drenched embrace. It was January, the dry season, when the skies remained a brilliant blue, and the air was charged with the promise of adventure. I had read about Tuxtla's vibrant energy and rich culture, but no words could have prepared me for the sensory feast awaiting in the heart of Chiapas.

The moment I stepped off the plane, the contrast in the air was striking. The warmth settled comfortably around me, a mild 82°F (28°C), just enough to remind me why January was the perfect time to visit.

After settling into our hotel near the city center, Erika and I ventured out for a casual stroll. Tuxtla greeted us with bustling streets, a medley of colors, and people just going about their daily lives. The midday heat nudged us toward a nearby air-conditioned mall, where we cooled off over coffee and a movie, a quiet pause before the city would reveal its true magic.

As dusk settled, Tuxtla came alive. We made our way to **Parque de la Marimba**. The park was a symphony of movement and joy. Couples twirled gracefully to the rhythmic melodies of the marimba, their feet gliding effortlessly across the Town square. Laughter rippled through the air as children chased one another, and vendors wove through the crowd, offering sweets, balloons, and irresistible street food.

The music was intoxicating. Before long, Erika and I found ourselves dancing to the beat, swept up in the communal energy. But for me, this was more than just a dance, it was a connection to home.

Growing up in Zimbabwe, the marimba was an instrument deeply embedded in both traditional and contemporary music. It's a percussion instrument with wooden bars, it produces rich, resonant tones when struck with mallets. Its warm sound is cherished worldwide, but seeing it celebrated in Mexico sparked my curiosity. How had the marimba made its way here?

And then, out of the corner of my eye, I spotted the **Museo de la Marimba** (Marimba museum). Excitement surged through me. Before stepping inside, we struck up a conversation with a friendly security guard, who proudly declared, “The marimba is from Chiapas!”

This only deepened the mystery. If the marimba originated from there, how had it traveled to Africa? The question stayed with me, adding another layer of intrigue to this journey. The museum, a hidden gem with free entry, offered a fascinating look at the marimba's evolution, from rustic, handmade instruments to modern, intricately crafted masterpieces. Once

inside we discover Marimba originated in Africa but was brought to the America's during the African slave trade. Thus forever connecting the African and Latina American Culture.

We ended the evening on the terrace of a restaurant overlooking the park, drinks in hand, watching the dancers below. The marimba played on, weaving its melodies through the night, a perfect soundtrack to the moment.

Then, we approached a vendor that had an irresistible offer: tickets to **Cañón del Sumidero** and **Chiapa de Corzo**, that are considered **Pueblo Mágicos** (I will share more on what that means later). These are the must-see attractions, and without hesitation, we bought our tickets. The adventure had only just begun. We could also find the same travel package in our hotel but we got a better deal on the street.

## **The Journey to Cañón del Sumidero**

The next morning, a minibus whisked us away to **Cañón del Sumidero** (Sumidero canyon), just 15 minutes outside the city. As we neared the dock at Chicoasén Dam, small shops and vendors lined the walkway, selling essentials like water, snacks, sunscreen, and hats. If you ever take this trip, stock up. This is a two-hour boat ride through one of Mexico's most breathtaking natural wonders. Have water, snacks, sunglasses, and a hat as you will be exposed to the sun with no shade.

Gliding along the turquoise waters, we were flanked by towering cliffs, their sheer faces carved by time and legend. Howler monkeys called from the treetops, crocodiles basked lazily along the riverbanks, and black vultures perched at the water's edge. Our guide told stories of ancient civilizations and

the canyon's ecological significance, painting vivid images of the past.

The ride was peaceful yet exhilarating. Every turn in the river revealed new wonders including hidden caves, towering waterfalls, and even a rock formation closely resembling a Christmas tree, draped in moss and mist. The views were unforgettable.

## **Chiapa de Corzo: A Glimpse into History**

After two hours on the river, we arrived in **Chiapa de Corzo**, a picturesque fishing town brimming with colonial charm. Lunch was included in the tour, but if we could do it again, we would skip the pre-arranged buffet as it was underwhelming. Instead, we would have explored the town's many authentic eateries.

However, I did try something I won't forget, a **Tascalate** drink. A regional specialty, Tascalate is a blend of ground corn, cacao, cinnamon, achiote, and sugar, resulting in a vibrant orange hue. The taste? A harmonious mix of subtle sweetness, nuttiness, and a whisper of chocolate and spice. It was pretty good.

After a brief exploration of town, we boarded a minibus to the canyon's rim. The 20-minute drive ascended the mountainside, revealing several panoramic viewpoints. Our final stop, nearly 4,000 feet (1,200 meters) high, was breathtaking. **The Grijalva River**, which we had explored earlier by boat, snaked far below, dwarfed by the canyon's dramatic cliffs. It was a view I'll carry with me long after leaving Chiapas.

## San Cristóbal de las Casas: A Mountain Escape

The next afternoon, we faced a decision: How to get to **San Cristóbal de las Casas**?

A local recommended OCC. Erika, confused, asked, “*What’s that?*” The man chuckled and replied, “*You’re not from around here, are you?*” In actual fact we weren’t from there. *OCC we learned is* a well-known Mexican bus company.

I hesitated on using the OCC, picturing an overcrowded bus full of chickens and luggage. Instead, I opted for a taxi, a mistake. It cost nearly five times more than the bus. Later, I learned that the OCC bus, as well as other buses, is spacious, air-conditioned, and incredibly comfortable (like a Greyhound bus in the US). Lesson learned: in Mexico, buses are a great affordable way to travel between cities.

The drive from Tuxtla to San Cristóbal is nothing short of magical. As we left the city behind, the air grew cooler, carrying the scent of pine and damp earth. The road twisted and turned, climbing into the **Sierra Madre de Chiapas**.

Outside the window, the landscape transformed into a dream with pine-covered peaks stretching toward the sky, waterfalls trickling down mossy cliffs, and mist rolling through deep valleys. Halfway through, it felt as if we were driving through the clouds.

Then, as if emerging from another time, **San Cristóbal de las Casas** revealed itself, a colonial jewel nestled in the mountains. Red-tiled rooftops, narrow cobblestone streets, and bustling markets painted a scene straight out of a storybook.

The moment we arrived, I knew I would love this place.

## **A City of Culture, History, and Flavor**

**San Cristóbal de las Casas** is a city where history whispers from every cobblestone street and bursts into color in its vibrant markets. Founded in 1528 by Spanish colonists, it was named after Saint Christopher, the patron saint of travelers. The “de las Casas” was added later in honor of Bartolomé de las Casas, a Dominican friar and constant advocate for Indigenous rights, who dedicated his life to fighting the injustices of colonial rule.

Once a colonial hub, San Cristóbal became a melting pot of cultures, where Indigenous traditions blend seamlessly with Spanish influence. The city’s rich past is engraved into its architecture, from the decorated cathedrals and colorful colonial homes to the lively Zócalo (public square), where life pulses with energy. It has long been a spiritual and cultural center for the Tzotzil and Tzeltal Maya communities, who have lived in the surrounding highlands for centuries. Their presence is woven into the city’s soul, reflected in the intricate textiles they weave, the crafts they sell, and the vibrant festivals that bring the town to life year-round. No wonder San Cristóbal is designated a Pueblo Mágico—a title the Secretary of Tourism of Mexico (SECTUR) reserves for towns of unique historical and cultural significance.

## **Settling In: Our First Impressions**

Our first challenge upon arrival? Finding our Airbnb. The narrow, one-way streets meant we had to hop out quickly, juggling our bags to avoid blocking traffic. After 10 to 15 minutes of confusion, we finally located the right door.

Walking into the apartment building, we climbed a flight of stairs to a charming patio area shared by three apartments. When we unlocked our door, we were pleasantly surprised. The place was far more spacious, clean, and well-organized than we'd expected. Fully furnished and equipped with a complete kitchen, perfect for our month-long stay. It exceeded every expectation. And at just \$450 for the entire month, it felt like an absolute steal.

But the best part? The location. A five-minute walk led us straight to the *Zócalo*, the lively heart of the city.

Though we were thrilled with the apartment, hunger quickly took priority. We dropped off our luggage and headed to **La Terraza**, a rooftop restaurant with sweeping views of the city. Under the open sky, we shared a pizza, sipped on lattes, and soaked in the atmosphere of our new home. It was the perfect beginning to what would be an unforgettable journey.

## Exploring the City

The next day, we hopped on a **turibus** (tour bus) for a city tour, something I highly recommend when visiting a new city or town in Mexico. These small buses take you past the main attractions, helping you decide which spots to revisit later. They're also a great way to get acclimated. Most cities have them stationed near the *Zócalo*—just look for them!

One of the first things we did in San Cristóbal was find a Spanish school. Since Erika had visited the city before, she recommended Tierras Mayas Spanish Language School, where we managed to negotiate a great deal: one month of morning classes at an affordable rate. My schedule was set, I'd attend

class from 7:30 to 9:30 AM everyday except weekends. It was perfect as it gave me enough time to go back to the apartment to start work at 10am.

## **A City of Cafés, Culture, and Connection**

San Cristóbal's cooler climate was a stark contrast to Tuxtla's heat, a surprise I hadn't prepared for. Without enough warm clothes, I found myself layering up wherever possible. Another thing I noticed? The city had more European tourists than Americans. Their fashion and mannerisms gave them away immediately, including cigarette smoking.

As I wandered the streets, I also became aware of the curious stares from locals. Being one of the few, if not the only, Black person in the city, I could feel people trying to place me where I was from? How did I ended up there? But rather than feeling uncomfortable, I found it intriguing. Also unlike in the U.S., I noticed that no one walked around with earbuds in, lost in their own world or listening to a podcast or music. Instead, people here were engaged, chatting with one another, fully present in their surroundings.

One of the best things about San Cristóbal is simply walking through its streets. The shopping alleys that are filled with life. The city is a haven for cafés and restaurants, each with its own unique charm. Despite being a tourist destination, the food scene is surprisingly affordable and diverse. You can find Italian, Thai, French, Venezuelan, Peruvian, and, of course, incredible Mexican cuisine.

The first week-and-a-half, we indulged in everything, maybe a little too much. We ate chocolate, drank coffee, and enjoyed

two three restaurant meals a day until our bodies rebelled. Overindulgence had its price. We slowed down, opting to cook at home more often and save eating out for special occasions.

One cultural adjustment? The slow pace of service. Waiters took their time, and the bill was never brought unless we asked. At first, this felt frustrating, especially coming from the fast-paced U.S. But then, Erika and I had a realization: we weren't in the U.S. anymore. In Mexico, meals are meant to be enjoyed over hours, not rushed. Restaurants are social spaces, where people linger, talk, and savor the experience. Adapting to this rhythm became part of our cultural immersion.

Another key lesson? The best restaurants aren't always online. Back home, we rely on Yelp or TripAdvisor, but in Mexico, word of mouth is king. The best way to find hidden gems? Ask the locals. They're always happy to share their favorite spots.

## **Immersing in Culture: From Chess to Chocolate**

San Cristóbal offered Erika and I an unforgettable mix of experiences. We even learned how to play chess for the first time at a nearby chess school.

One of the highlights of our stay was a cooking class, where we learned to make mole, Mexico's legendary sauce. Pronounced *moh-leh*, it's a rich, complex blend of chili peppers, chocolate, nuts, seeds, and spices. The result? A deep, earthy, slightly sweet, and smoky sauce that embodies the heart of Mexican cuisine. With nearly 30 ingredients, it took us two hours to prepare but every minute was worth it. There are many kinds of moles across Mexico, each dish varies by region.

Before the class, there was an option to visit the local market with the instructor to buy fresh ingredients, an experience we skipped but would recommend to anyone wanting to dive deeper into the process.

Another indulgence? **A chocolate tasting at Jungala cafe.** We learned about cacao's journey from cultivation to the rich, nuanced flavors in every chocolate bite. For those wanting an even deeper experience, some tours take you straight to the cacao farms, where the magic begins.

Beyond food, San Cristóbal is a paradise for artisans. The streets overflow with handcrafted clothing, intricately woven textiles, and colorful bed linens. The craftsmanship was mesmerizing. I was particularly fascinated by the distinctive black, feathery dresses worn by Indigenous women.

One day, while browsing a market, I had a unique cultural exchange. An Indigenous woman, intrigued by my hair, reached out and touched it, fascinated by its curly texture. A small but beautiful reminder of the curiosity and connection that travel fosters.

## **Evenings in San Cristóbal**

Evenings in the *Zócalo* were pure magic. Marimba music filled the air, creating a nostalgic and relaxed atmosphere, just like in Tuxtla. My favorite street treat? *Gorditas con nata*—thick, fluffy cakes made with wheat flour and clotted cream, slightly sweet and perfect with coffee or hot chocolate.

San Cristóbal de las Casas is more than a destination, it's a mixture of culture, history, and flavors. Every street corner holds a story waiting to be discovered.

## **THE BEST STORIES COME FROM CHAOS: A PALENQUE ADVENTURE TO REMEMBER**

We were heading to Palenque (also in Chiapas), faced with two possible routes. One was through the jungle, a shorter trip of about two to three hours. But Erika had taken that route before and encountered some severe motion sickness and rather aggressive "donation-seeking" roadblockers (guerrilla fighters). It was an experience she wasn't eager to repeat. The alternative was a much longer highway route, taking about seven hours. Reluctantly, we chose the longer path, figuring we could just sleep on the bus overnight. Our journey would begin at 11 PM, getting us to Palenque by 6 AM.

On our last evening in San Cristóbal de las Casas, we enjoyed a nice meal at a Mexican restaurant. Erika ordered *carne en su jugo*—tender pieces of flank steak simmered in their own juices, creating a rich and flavorful broth, while I opted for a Caesar salad, hoping for something light after a month of indulgence. Little did we know that this meal would cost us more than just the price on the menu.

After dinner, we gathered our luggage and made our way to the bus station at the city's entrance. The bus departed at 11 PM, first heading an hour back toward Tuxtla before making the six-hour trek north to Palenque.

At first, the ride was uneventful. But soon, Erika started feeling unwell. Her stomach churned, nausea set in, and she hurried to the bathroom. She didn't come out for a long time. I sat there, helpless, as the sounds of her being violently sick echoed through the bus. She eventually returned to her seat, visibly pale and exhausted, but the ordeal was far from over.

About two hours into the trip, we reached the first of several immigration checkpoints, a standard process for highways near the Guatemalan border due to high migration traffic. The bus stopped, an immigration officer boarded, glanced around, and moved on. No issues. But at the second checkpoint, things took a turn.

By this point, Erika had gone back to the bathroom, still incredibly sick. The bus halted, and another immigration officer, a woman, walked in. She scanned the passengers, walked to the back, then returned—and came straight to me.

*"¿Tiene una visa?" (Do you have a Visa?)* she asked.

I was caught off guard. Why was she singling me out? I hesitated, then tried to act casual. In broken Spanish, I responded, *"Uh, yeah, let me get it..."* I knew I didn't have a visa, but I instinctively reached for my passport. Then I admitted, *"Yo no tengo visa." (I don't have a Visa)*

I handed her my U.S. passport, hoping it would smooth things over. Instead, it seemed to raise more suspicion. She examined it, looked puzzled, then took it and stepped off the bus.

Meanwhile, Erika was still in the bathroom, unaware that I was being questioned. A few minutes later, the immigration officer returned, now more inquisitive.

*"Dime más sobre Italia."*

"Uhh... la capital es Roma," I answered, confused by the question.

She didn't seem convinced. *"Dime más..."*

I explained that I was born in Italy but carried a U.S. passport. Still skeptical, she pressed further. I reached into my bag and found Erika's Mexican passport, hoping that showing we were married would help. *"Aquí está el pasaporte de mi esposa."*

But when I handed it over, the officer corrected me: *"No, es tu novia."*

"No," I insisted, *"es mi esposa."*

She didn't believe that I was a U.S. citizen, didn't believe I was born in Italy, and didn't believe that Erika was my wife. The entire bus watched, waiting to see what would happen next. Keep in mind, this was around 1:30 AM.

Then, out of nowhere, Erika emerged from the bathroom, weak but alert, drawn by the commotion. She initially thought the officer was checking on her well-being. Little did she know they were considering deporting me.

As Erika sat down next to me, the officer immediately started speaking to her in Spanish. *"Who is he to you? What is he doing here?"*

Still groggy, Erika looked at her in confusion. And in Spanish replied "I'm sorry, who are you?"

"I'm an immigration officer," she replied. "Your husband is here illegally."

Despite her condition, Erika snapped into defense mode. She explained that we had entered Mexico through the northern border, where no visa was required. This seemed to catch the officer off guard. She backtracked, claiming she had singled me out simply because I looked like someone who might not have a visa. But with a bus full of people, many also non-Mexican, why only me?

Finally, after some tense minutes, she let me stay on the bus. By then, it was 2 AM. Exhausted and drained, we continued the ride.

Erika remained sick for the rest of the journey, and soon, I started feeling unwell too. We arrived in Palenque at dawn, took a taxi to our jungle-surrounded hotel, and tried to check in. But with our room not ready for two hours, we slumped onto the lobby couch, miserable.

As nausea hit me, we finally put it together, it was her food. I had only taken a bite of Erika's meal, so my symptoms arrived later. Before long, I was just as sick as she was.

Thankfully, Erika's mother had a friend in Palenque, someone she had met at a conference in Tecate, Mexico, years ago. We reached out to the friend and she arranged for us to see a doctor. She picked us up, and took us to a clinic.

The doctor took one look at us and asked us to stick out our tongues. He informed us we were severely dehydrated. Erika asked "How do you know?" He replied, "Your tongues, *they're black.*"

We rushed to the mirror. Sure enough, our tongues had turned completely black, something we had never seen before. The

doctor explained that we were severely dehydrated from all the vomiting. He hooked us up to IVs, prescribed medication, and sent us to a pharmacy.

The friend of Erika's mother was a godsend, picking up food and supplies while we recovered. Without her, navigating a new city while sick would have been incredibly difficult.

Despite the hardships, we made the most of our trip. We visited the breathtaking **Palenque ruins**, surrounded by lush greenery and echoing with the calls of howler monkeys. We explored **Bonampak**, known for its ancient murals, and **Yaxchilán**, an ancient Maya city on the Usumacinta River near the Guatemalan border. These sights were unforgettable, though the journey to get there was anything but smooth.

Our travel package also included an overnight stay in the **Selva Lacondona** (Lacandona Jungle). We had expected a rustic but comfortable lodge—but reality had other plans. The place was incredibly remote, with few amenities. Meals had to be ordered two hours in advance, and the bathrooms ... well, let's just say they left a lot to be desired. Mosquitoes were everywhere.

The next day, we hiked through the jungle for two to three hours with a local guide. We saw different plants, vegetation, and animals. The challenging part? The mosquitoes—so if you visit, *bring repellent*. Our guide shared survival skills, teaching us which plants were edible, how to find water sources, and what animals to watch out for. We even discovered small ruins deep in the jungle and swam in a nearby waterfall.

Despite the unexpected obstacles, we left Palenque with unforgettable memories. It was a trip that tested our resilience

but also highlighted the kindness of strangers and the beauty of this remarkable place. It gave us a crazy story to share with our friends, because, let's be honest, the best travel stories aren't the ones where everything goes right, but the ones where everything goes wrong.

We also learned that Palenque is a well-known refuge for immigrants, which may explain why we saw so many Haitians, Guatemalans, and other foreigners. Looking back, I wondered if that's why the immigration officer had been so suspicious of me. Perhaps she assumed I was heading to Palenque seeking sanctuary, given my African descent. *Maybe?*

Our chapter in Chiapas ended on a high note, and now we were off to another state—Tobasco.

## **Recommended Activities/Restaurants**

### **Tuxtla Gutiérrez**

- Parque de la Marimba
- Cañón del Sumidero
- Chiapa de Corzo
- Sierra Madre de Chiapas

### **San Cristóbal de las Casas**

#### **Cultural & Historical Sites:**

- Catedral de San Cristóbal de las Casas
- Iglesia de Guadalupe
- Templo de Santo Domingo

- Museo Mesoamericano del Jade (Jade Museum)
- Na Bolom Museum

### **Food & Drink:**

- Jungala (Chocolate tasting café)
- La Friandise (French bakery)
- Black Love Coffee Shop (*many cafés in the city are excellent*)
- Patio Azul (Indian restaurant)
- Restaurante Trattoria Italiana

### **Markets:**

- Mercado de Dulces y Artesanías Ámbar

### **Education:**

- Tierra Mayas Spanish School

### **Day Trips & Nearby Ruins:**

- Palenque Ruins
- Yaxchilán
- Bonampak
- Selva Lacandona

## Memories of Chiapas



# CHAPTER 3

## TABASCO

### VILLAHERMOSA: BETWEEN JUNGLE ECHOES AND MODERN EDGES

**A**fter trekking through the dense jungles of Palenque, soaked in sweat, dust, and ancient stories, we were done. Spiritually full, physically drained. There were only two choices: wait hours for a late-night bus or spring for a taxi and make it to Villahermosa by early evening. We chose the latter, paid 1,500 pesos for two hours of winding roads, fading light, and quiet reflection.

When we finally arrived, it was nearly 10:30 P.M. Our Airbnb, tucked into the heart of Villahermosa, felt like a portal back into civilization: Bohemian, stylish, spotless, and, most importantly, it had a proper bathroom and hot shower. Small luxuries we hadn't dared dream of in the jungle.

Our stomachs led us across the street to the only open spot: Pizza Hut, with a sit down area, glowing with pink neon hearts, a not-so-subtle reminder that Valentine's Day was just a week away. That first bite of greasy, cheese-stuffed pizza tasted like a royal feast after weeks away from fast food. We laughed, showered, and collapsed into bed, grateful, full, and still scratching at the phantom bites of jungle mosquitoes.

**Tabasco**, a state nestled in southeast Mexico, is a region where history runs deep beneath the thick canopy of green. This land once cradled the *Olmec civilization*, one of Mesoamerica's earliest and most influential cultures. The Olmecs, often called the mother culture, flourished from roughly 1200 to 400 BCE, setting the stage for civilizations like the Maya and Aztec. Their spirit lingers in the mystifying colossal stone heads, jade carvings glinting with ancestral memory, and jungle-shrouded ceremonial centers like '**La Venta**', located just outside modern-day Villahermosa.

Three thousand years ago, these jungles were the heartbeat of innovation. The Olmecs built thriving societies, mastered agriculture, and even pioneered early writing and calendar systems. Their riverside cities buzzed with trade, spreading cultural symbols that would echo across the centuries.

Time reshaped the region. By the 16th century, the Spanish arrived, and Tabasco became a crossroads of conquest and commerce. In 1564, San Juan Bautista, now **Villahermosa** (the city), was founded, becoming a witness to the swirl of colonialism, resistance, and reinvention.

Today, Villahermosa pulses with modern life. And yet, the spirit of the Olmec breathes beneath its sidewalks and rustles through the trees at **Parque Museo La Venta**, a unique blend of open-air museum and zoo tucked into the jungle within the city. Here, massive stone heads gaze out from beneath palm petals, surrounded by jaguars, and spider monkeys. It's not just a museum, it's a portal.

## My Initial Thoughts

Villahermosa surprised me. It felt cozy yet urban, intimate but buzzing. It reminded me of a smaller, tropical Tijuana, with its splash of American franchises and a pharmacy on every corner. The next morning, daylight brought clarity: our Airbnb, while charming and art-filled, wasn't ideal. Erika couldn't take her remote calls comfortably, and the Wi-Fi worked only in the room and not outside. Still, it had soul. Sculptures filled the shelves. Eclectic art covered the walls.

In contrast to Palenque, I noticed something immediately: very few Black people. After being among Haitians and Africans just days earlier, I felt hyper-visible. I joked with Erika that I should start selling ad space on my shirt since I was drawing many stares, might as well get paid for it.

My daily retreat became a Starbucks in a nearby mall. A cool oasis with great coffee and, most importantly, solid Wi-Fi. I'd spend hours working there, sipping drinks that were somehow better than what I'd get in the U.S. Their chicken pepitos and bacon-avocado sandwiches became my favorite lunch meal. Uber rides turned into mini language lessons—Starbucks became 'Star Books' for the locals as they say it, and also Pizza Hut was pronounced 'Pizza Hoot'. I would learn a new Spanish word with every ride.

Villahermosa wasn't trying to impress tourists, but that's what made it endearing. One afternoon, we wandered through **La Venta Park**. It was alive with history: ancient air, howler monkeys in the trees, jaguars behind glass, and the giant stone heads, each whispering stories from the dawn of civilization. And just beyond the museum? A public lake full of live

crocodiles, completely unfenced. Kids played nearby as if it were nothing. In the U.S., that would have made headlines. In Tabasco, it was just another Tuesday.

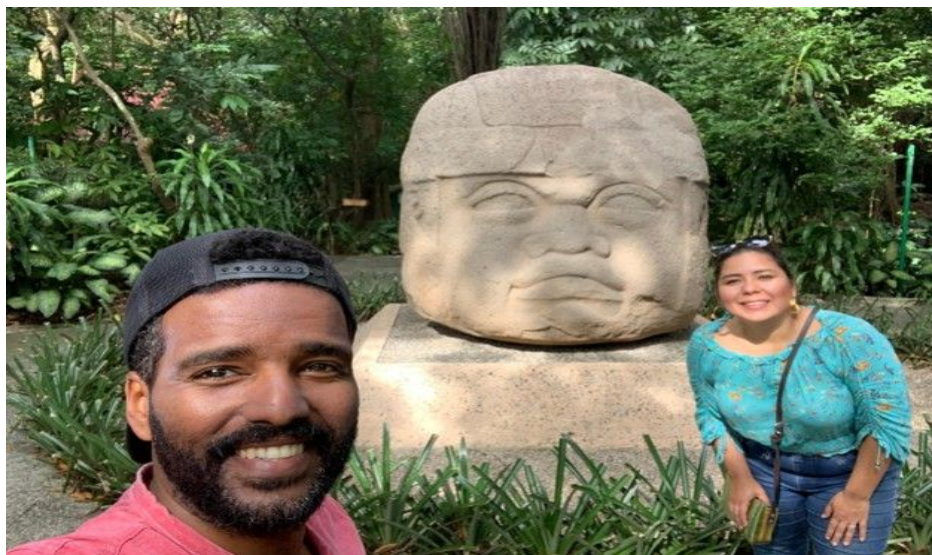
We also explored **El Palacio del Hierro**, a massive upscale mall filled with global brands, sushi bars, and even Cacao Nativo, one of our favorite chocolate shop from San Cristóbal. It was surreal like stepping from jungle ruins into glossy modernity.

We spent a week in Villahermosa, though in hindsight, two or three days would've been enough. It's not a city for bucket lists. But it is a place that catches you off guard offering small moments of humor, humanity, and history when you least expect them.

## **Recommended activity**

Parque Museo La Venta

### **Memory of Villahermosa**



# CHAPTER 4

## CAMPECHE

### **CAMPECHE: ARRIVAL UNDER HEAVY SKIES AND SOLDIERS ON THE STREETS**

**W**e caught an Uber to the bus station in Villahermosa, unaware that our real adventure was just beginning. The station was a whirlwind, bus numbers and departure times announced on speakers or on the screens, felt more like loose suggestions than anything fixed. Thankfully, Erika took charge, weaving through the chaos with a calmness that both impressed and baffled me.

I'll never forget that ride to Campeche. A storm chased us the entire way, sheets of rain hammering the windows, the wind howling like ancient spirits whispering from the past. At one point, we passed a stretch of town that had turned into an ocean. People walked through waist-deep water as if it were a normal Monday. The bus, swaying around, felt more like a ship at sea gliding through water than a vehicle on land.

After nearly seven hours, we arrived in Campeche under stormy skies. We compared prices between Uber, Didi (Mexico's version of Uber), and taxis, a travel habit we'd picked up. If you're going the taxi route, always negotiate first. Tourist towns have a way of turning casual rides into premium fares.

When we finally stepped into our Airbnb, fatigue melted into awe. It was one of the best places I've ever stayed—elegant, spacious, and just a short walk from the Zócalo. The storm had quieted the streets, leaving the city in a still, reflective hush. Inside, though, it felt like home. A cozy living room opened into a second sitting area, a grand dining space, and a dream kitchen stocked with snacks, thoughtful touches from our host. Every detail felt intentional and warm. It was the kind of place that makes you want to unpack, slow down, and stay awhile.

I didn't know much about Campeche yet, but I already knew I liked it.

When the rain finally lifted, we ventured outside. The sky was cloudy and the streets were calm, almost too calm. As we neared the Zócalo, we saw uniformed police and soldiers stationed on nearly every corner. Shopkeepers peeked cautiously from behind shutters. It wasn't panic, it was more like quiet vigilance. To steer clear of the tense atmosphere, we headed to the waterfront, then wandered to **Calle 59**, a lively street filled with restaurants and charm. We grabbed dinner at **Aduana 59**, tried a local dish, and made our way home. We would later learn that the Cuban President, Miguel Díaz-Canel, was visiting to meet with Mexico's President, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, on the day we arrived hence the heavy security presence.

A week later, reality knocked on my door. My boss messaged me: "Let's chat when you get a minute." I found out my company, that in the Semiconductor and Wireless Telecommunication industry, was doing layoffs, and my two-week notice began that day. My last official day? On my birthday. Strangely, I wasn't crushed. I saw it as a blessing in

disguise. The severance was generous and gave me breathing room, not only to continue our journey without stress but to reflect on the next chapter. Still, it stung. I've built great relationships with my team and have grown so much in that role.

That next week, we had a good friend from San Diego visiting us in Campeche. Together, we explored cafés, local spots, and even rented bikes to ride along the waterfront. The sun was brutal, the ocean calm, and the breeze carried a salty sea. You will notice some boats abandoned along the waterfront, now repurposed as pelican real estate and certain areas smelled quite nasty as a result. Though we planned to ride bikes for hours, the heat turned our adventure into a short loop. We dropped off the cruiser bikes and cooled off at **Galerías Campeche**, a modern mall by the ocean.

That evening, we joined a walking tour. Just us, three Germans, and a passionate local guide. For two hours, we strolled through centuries of stories of pirates, Maya legacies, and colonial walls. Campeche is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and it shows. Buildings can't be altered or repainted without approval. Electrical wires are hidden underground instead above the surface so as not to disturb the charm of the city. It's a place that demands preservation and rewards it with beauty. Churches once doubled as fortresses; when pirates attacked, bells rang to summon citizens to safety. That context transformed everything. Erika and I realized we should've taken more tours like this earlier. The more you learn, the more a place opens up to you.

One of the most profound places we visited with our friend was **Edzná**. Located an hour outside the city, this ancient Maya city rises from the jungle like a forgotten dream. It was a marvel of ingenuity with canals, reservoirs, and stone pyramids that once touched the stars. From the top of the main temple, I stood in silence, the wind breathing life into the ancient past only ruins remember. Unlike other famous ruin sites we visited, Edzná offered solitude. No crowds, no noise. Just us and the echoes of the past. Our driver was a retired chemistry teacher turned farmer, growing pineapples in the fertile soil nearby. She didn't speak much English, but her kindness needed no translation.

## **A Birthday to Remember**

Back in Campeche, Erika had planned a birthday surprise for me. I thought we'd already celebrated enough dinners, gifts, and just being there felt like more than enough. But Erika had something else in mind.

At 5 P.M., the day after my birthday, we left the house. I heard her tell the taxi driver to head to the mall, but we ended up at the gates of a private marina. That's when it clicked: a boat ride. I hadn't seen any tourist boats before, just the fishing ones, so this was a complete surprise.

After a short wait, a man named Antonio arrived and drove us into the marina. We boarded a small, sleek speedboat and set off into the golden light of sunset. The sea sparkled. The city faded behind us. We sat in silence, overwhelmed by the beauty. The boat bounced with the waves, the thrill rising with each leap. All the time we hugged the coast looking at the waterfront from a different view as we rode into sunset.

As the sun sank into the horizon, we chatted with Antonio about life in Campeche. On the return, I even got to drive the boat, speeding carefully through the shallow waters. I'm fine with boats, but once it's dark, I prefer land. You never know what's under the surface.

Back on shore, I noticed someone setting up a candlelit dinner in a nearby gazebo within the marina. I assumed it was for another couple since there are small yachts from around the world that are parked nearby. But no, it was for us. Erika had planned it all. Antonio's girlfriend was arranging the table, and we'd just come back a little earlier than expected.

The scene was straight out of a movie: candles, pasta, white wine. Later, they brought garlic bread and a divine apple crumble cheesecake. I joked that maybe this dinner was more Erika's style than mine, but truthfully, I was touched. It was thoughtful. It was romantic. It was memorable.

All in all, I loved the slow pace of Campeche. I enjoyed waking up in the morning and going for a run at the Waterfront and looking at the endless ocean while watching the fishermen prepare boats to head out to sea to fish for local restaurants. Campeche is a place that I think is like Cuba, a place where you can see in the 70's it was a rich city but that time stopped.

## **Recommended Activities/Restaurants**

### **Campeche**

- Malecón de Campeche
- Calle 59
- Edzná ruins

- Galerías Campeche
- Museo Arqueológico de Campeche
- Fuerte de San Miguel

## Restaurants & Cafés

- Marganzo Restaurante
- Café Origen
- Chocol Ha
- Hierro Dulce
- Punto Verde

## Memories of Campeche



# CHAPTER 5

## YUCATAN

### MÉRIDA MAGIC

**W**e arrived in Mérida, and right away, I could tell, it was a different energy. More vibrant, more lively than Campeche. The streets full with with people, both locals and tourists. I'd heard great things about this city, and now that I was here, it was clear it lived up to the hype. You can feel the layers of history in the air. It's the trendiest city in Yucatan, and is also the state capital, located in the north-west of the peninsula. The city attracts visitors with its cosmopolitan atmosphere, walkable streets, and tranquil atmosphere.

Our taxi driver, a charming 79-year-old, gave us a quick crash course in local history as we drove into town. But what stood out most was when he casually mentioned that people dance in the streets every night. That's when I knew this place had soul.

Our Airbnb was less than a block from the central square. The place and area itself was nothing fancy, but being near the Zócalo was nice. After dropping off our luggage, we headed straight out to explore. One of the first things we did was hop on a horse-drawn carriage ride to get a feel for the city. We rolled through cobblestone streets lined with lively plazas, restaurants, shops, and a sea of people.

## Mérida: A City of Echoes and Evolution

Mérida, the capital of Yucatán, is a city where history fills the air, echoing through streets and colonial facades. It's a place where the past is not just remembered, it's lived.

Before the Spanish arrived, this land was home to a thriving Maya city called *T'Hó*. The Maya built majestic temples and palaces here, showcasing their sophisticated architecture, astronomy, and urban planning. When Spanish conquistador Francisco de Montejo known as "the Younger" arrived in 1542, he was so struck by the monumental ruins that he founded a new city on top of them and named it Mérida, after the Roman-influenced city in Spain. Many of the stones from those Maya structures were repurposed to build colonial buildings, including the **Cathedral of San Ildefonso**, one of the oldest cathedrals in the Americas.

Mérida quickly flourished as a colonial hub, a center of trade and culture. But it was in the 19th century that the city experienced an economic boom, thanks to the henequén industry. Known as "green gold," this agave plant was used to produce rope and twine, turning Yucatán into one of the wealthiest regions in Mexico. With this wealth came grandeur: mansions and palaces sprang up along **Paseo de Montejo**, a boulevard inspired by the grand avenues of Europe.

Yet, beneath the wealth lay a more troubling truth. The prosperity of the henequén era was built on the exploitation of the Maya people, who were often forced into labor under brutal conditions. The Caste War of Yucatán in the mid-1800s, a long and bloody conflict between the indigenous Maya and the

ruling elite, served as a stark reminder of these deep-seated injustices.

Today, Mérida stands as a vibrant blend of Maya and Spanish heritage. Nicknamed "La Ciudad Blanca" (The White City) for its bright limestone buildings and clean streets, it's a place that honors its layered past while embracing the present. The city pulses with cultural life: traditional music, folk dances, colorful festivals, and bustling markets are part of the everyday rhythm.

And for those seeking a deeper understanding of its roots, **Gran Museo del Mundo Maya**, offers a stunning journey through thousands of years of Maya history and culture in the museum.

Mérida's story is one of resilience, transformation, and coexistence. It is a living museum, a place where every corner hums with tales of conquest and community, pain and pride. More than just a destination, Mérida is an experience—a bridge between ancient legacies and modern vitality.

## **Through Fresh Eyes: Our Introduction to the City**

Compared to Campeche, which felt smaller and quieter with fewer tourists, Mérida was a big adjustment. Even the prices reflected the difference, everything was more expensive. A simple order of fried plantains was 50 pesos, whereas in other cities it might've been half that. But with this level of tourism, it made sense. It reminded us of when we went to San Miguel de Allende for our honeymoon a few years back, where we felt like we were paying U.S. prices in Mexico.

## The Mayan Ball Game Experience

One of the coolest experiences in our Mérida trip was seeing a live reenactment of the ancient Mayan ball game, known as *Pitz*. They played it right in the main square at night, closing down the streets as a crowd gathered to watch.

There were two teams, about four players each, and they played using a heavy rubber ball. The goal was to get the ball through a stone hoop, like a sideways basketball net, mounted about three meters high. But here's the twist: they could only use their hips to move (hit) the ball. No hands, no feet. It was wild to watch them bounce and pivot, trying to launch the ball high enough to score.

Sometimes, if the ball hit the ground and lost momentum, players had to shuffle across the court and swing their hips to send it back across, almost like a game of tennis with no net. Even more intense was the second part of the game, played with the same rubber ball, but this time it was on fire. Yes, literal flames. They used their hands in this round, passing and setting it up like volleyball to score through the hoop. The players' hands were black with ash, but their energy was electric. The whole crowd gasped and cheered with every close shot or goal.

Later that night, we had dinner at a beautiful Mayan restaurant. The ambiance felt like stepping into an old hacienda with whitewashed walls, bursts of color, and a peaceful fountain in the center courtyard. It was the kind of place that made you want to stay.

The next day, we explored museums and wandered through local food markets. We sampled tamales, ice cream, and more fried plantains. Little things stand out: at an Italian café, I noticed they serve sugar in cubes instead of packets. Also, the driving in Mérida? Total contrast to Campeche. People there drive fast, barely stopping for pedestrians. It took some getting used to. It's funny the details you remember.

But not everything was smooth. We started to realize we were overspending on our trip. The same discipline that made this trip possible, budgeting, started to slip as we got caught up in the fun. A good reminder, you can fly thousands of miles, but your habits don't need a boarding pass, they're always right there with you.

## **Cultural Observations**

I've noticed how different Mexican family dynamics are, with whole families, multiple generations, going out together. There's a deeper sense of togetherness. And people here are so respectful. If you're eating and someone walks by, they'll often say "buen provecho", a simple wish for you to enjoy your meal. Street vendors are polite too. If you say 'no' to what they are offering, they don't push. They'll just smile and wish you a good visit. I've been to countries where the street vendors are pushy and spoil the travel experience. Sometimes it's not about the price, just the timing—maybe I'm in a rush, maybe I'm hungry, maybe I'm cold and just thinking about finding a sweater. You never know what it is, and it's not personal. And that respect makes a difference.

The nightlife in Mérida is a joy with live music, dancing, and events in the plazas. You see locals and tourists mingling, people out enjoying the moment. In traditional Yucatecan dances, men and women wear all white, men in guayaberas and sombreros, and oddly, sandals with small heels like the ones women wear. It's a beautiful cultural display.

## Day Trip to Izamal

We took a day trip to **Izamal** by bus—only 1.5 hours and just 40 pesos (\$2 USD) each ticket. If we'd done a tour package, it would've cost 1,200 pesos (\$60 USD). That was a great reminder: tours are often overpriced, and sometimes local transportation can get you there just fine.

We passed through sleepy little towns, and then, suddenly, everything turned golden. **Izamal** is known as “The Yellow City”, the entire town is painted in warm, golden color. It was hot that day, pushing into the 90 degrees Fahrenheit, and the heat felt heavier somehow.

As we explored, we saw a massive church on a hill called **Convento de San Antonio**. Turns out, the Spanish had built a convent on top of a Mayan temple. That's why it sat so high. We climbed the stairs and reached a wide, grassy courtyard surrounded by 75 arched pillars. I later found out it's the second-largest church courtyard in the world, after St. Peter's in Vatican City. Pope John Paul II even visited there years ago, there's a statue of him in the courtyard and a photo inside the church.

From the top, you can see the whole town. I've noticed that in many Spanish towns, the most important or historic church is

often built on the highest point, overlooking everything. In Mérida, the town square follows the traditional layout too: government buildings on one side, the church on the other, and businesses and cafes completing the square.

Leaving Mérida, I carried more than just photos and souvenirs, I carried impressions, questions, and quiet revelations. What struck me most, perhaps, was the coexistence of old and new, of wealth and struggle, of joy and sorrow. Watching the Mayan ball game in the square, eating next to fountains in old haciendas, or walking past mansions built on the back of “green gold,” I was constantly reminded of how layered every place, and every person, truly is. Mérida showed me that travel's true purpose is to help us see others, ourselves, and the historical narratives around us more clearly.

## **Recommended Activities/Restaurants**

- Plaza Grande
- Cathedral of San Ildefonso
- Paseo de Montejo
- Museo Casa Montejo
- Gran Museo del Mundo Maya
- Izamal and Convento de San Antonio
- Chichén Itzá
- Museo Regional de Antropología, Palacio Cantón
- Monument to the Fatherland
- Quinta Montes Molina

## Memories of Merida



# CHAPTER 6

## OAXACA

### **MOLTEN CHOCOLATE, SHAKING EARTH: SAVORING OAXACA WITH ALL THE SENSES**

**W**e arrived in Oaxaca, a large city with deep historical roots. Many key figures in the Mexican Revolution, like Benito Juárez, were born here. We were lucky to find a great place to stay in the historic center, reminding me of San Cristóbal, just ten times bigger and far more touristy. There were a lot of Americans and European travelers, giving it a vibe similar to Mérida, though with even more energy and variety.

I searched for Spanish classes and was surprised by how many options were available compared to San Cristóbal. One of the things I appreciated most was how affordable the food was. Erika and I especially loved shopping at the local food market to stock up on fruits, vegetables, and other essentials. After all the eating out we did in Mérida, it felt refreshing to cook again.

The day we arrived, the city was alive with events. There was a vibrant celebration raising awareness for Down Syndrome, complete with dancers, musicians, and performers parading through the streets. In the square, a rally for Indigenous rights was taking place.

It was a reminder that Oaxaca is not just a tourist destination—it's a place with heart, culture, and activism.

## Where History Breathes and Culture Dances

**Oaxaca** is a land of vivid colors, deep traditions, and an enduring spirit shaped by centuries of cultural fusion. From its sweeping valleys to its rugged mountains, this region has long been a crossroads of civilizations.

Oaxaca was home to the *Zapotec* and *Mixtec* peoples, two of Mesoamerica's most influential indigenous civilizations. The Zapotecs, often referred to as the “cloud people,” founded **Monte Albán** around 500 BCE, a majestic city built atop a mountain ridge. This ancient metropolis became a thriving center of political, religious, and astronomical knowledge. Later, the Mixtecs, renowned for their artistry, rose to prominence, crafting intricate gold jewelry and detailed writings that captured their myths, rulers, and deities.

In the 15th century, the Aztecs extended their influence into Oaxaca, though their control was brief. Everything changed with the arrival of the Spanish in the early 16th century. Hernán Cortés, drawn by the region's gold and fertile lands, claimed it for the Spanish Crown. In 1529, the city of Oaxaca was officially founded, blending Spanish colonial architecture with indigenous foundations. The stunning **Church of Santo Domingo**, with its decorated, rich outer structure and golden interior, remains a striking symbol of this cultural fusion.

Colonial Oaxaca blossomed as a hub of agriculture and trade, yet it was also a time of profound upheaval for its native peoples. The push of Catholicism, forced labor, and foreign

diseases devastated indigenous communities. Still, their traditions endured, woven into the very identity of Oaxaca, from its languages and textiles to its rituals and celebrations.

The 19th century brought revolutionary change. Oaxaca played a pivotal role in Mexico's fight for independence and gave birth to two of its most iconic leaders: Benito Juárez, a Zapotec who rose to become Mexico's first indigenous president and a fierce advocate for indigenous rights, and Porfirio Díaz, whose long presidency left a complicated but lasting legacy.

Today, Oaxaca is a living celebration of its rich heritage. Its bustling markets with handmade crafts, its streets come alive during vibrant festivals, and its cuisine, from mole to tlayudas to smoky mezcal, is a sensory feast. Through it all, the people of Oaxaca proudly carry their ancestral traditions into the present, blending creativity with resilience.

Oaxaca's story is one of endurance, identity, and artistry, a place where ancient echoes mingle with modern rhythms, and the past is never far from view.

## **Art, Tremors, and Alebrijes: Living the Layers of Oaxaca**

This month of April 2023 was set to be a busy one; family and friends were flying in, eager to see what we'd been raving about. Erika took the lead in planning the group tours, but we carved out the first few days just for ourselves. We didn't rush to see everything. Some experiences we deliberately saved to share with our guests. Still, those first quiet days and moments in Oaxaca felt like a gift, an invitation to settle in and start noticing the details.

Oaxaca had a reputation to live up to, and it did. Everyone talked about the city's magic, and we felt it immediately. I've never had so much hot chocolate in my life, and not the powdered kind either; this was the real deal: thick, rich, earthy cacao that makes you feel like a kid again. **Mayordomo** restaurant/chocolate shop became a favorite. You can sit down for a full Mexican meal or just pop into the shop for a steaming cup of molten joy.

And the cheese, **Oaxaca cheese**, was another revelation. Stringy like shredded chicken and mild but flavorful, it's unlike any other. I don't usually eat dairy, let alone cheese, but for this, I made an exception. Honestly, it was worth it.

Of course, we dove into the food scene. **Tlayudas**, sometimes called the "Mexican pizza," became a staple. It's an oversized corn tortilla topped with beans, Oaxacan cheese, grilled meats, avocado, and salsa. It is a must try for any tourist. We also devoured tamales smothered in mole, memelas, tacos de elote, and warm, comforting atole drink. Each dish carried a piece of the culture, each bite a story. The food in Oaxaca could fill its own chapter.

One day, we joined a Guru Walk with a guide named Rodolfo, who pulled back the curtain on the impact of gentrification. He spoke with quiet intensity about rooftop restaurants being banned in some zones, how rising prices have pushed out locals, and how even joy is being commodified. "Locals shouldn't have to pay tourist prices to enjoy their own spaces," he said. That line stuck with me.

Rodolfo also spoke of the late Francisco Toledo, a revered artist and cultural protector. Despite his fame and wealth, Toledo walked the streets in humble clothes. He was one of the people. His death, he collapsed drunk on a street where passersby mistook him for a homeless person, left a lasting scar on the city. His art, especially his depictions of Afro-Mexicans, radiated humanity and told a part of Mexico's story that's often erased.

Art is everywhere in Oaxaca seen in murals, galleries, and workshops. My brother once collaborated with artists from here, but in South Africa, and it's no surprise that this is one of his favorite creative corners of the world that he would like to visit one day.

We ended up taking three walking tours in our month's stay, each with a different guide, each showing us a different Oaxaca. That's the beauty of these tours: the same streets, completely different stories. We've come to really value these experiences. They're often free, but we always tip well. It's disheartening to see tourists walk away without offering anything after hours of storytelling and local insight. When we bring guests, we give them a heads-up, respect the value. In one of the tours we even got to see an area in the city where the 'Nacho Libre' movie was shot. That was cool.

And then there was **Monte Albán**. Twice we visited, and both times I felt like I was walking through a dream. Set high above the Oaxaca Valley, the site was once the powerful capital of the Zapotec civilization. Its pyramids, temples, and ceremonial plazas still hold a quiet power. You can feel the brilliance of a people who studied the stars and carved their place into the land. It's not just a ruin, it's a living memory.

In Oaxaca, we also lived through an earthquake. A 5.6 tremor that jolted us from stillness into realization. Erika and I were on the bed one night when I felt the wall behind me shift. At first, I thought she was moving the bed. But then we both froze. The siren in the distance confirmed it: our first earthquake. Outside, people stood in stunned silence, their expressions mirroring ours. At that moment I was nervous but also excited as I had never experienced an earth quake before.

In Oaxaca, magic is everywhere, sometimes in the form of **Alebrijes**, those fantastical, hand-painted creatures or familiar animals, born from dreams according to folk tales. Based on my birthday, I'm a mix of coyote and iguana. We watched artisans bring these Alebrijes to life in their crafts, visited workshops where clay pots were shaped with care, and saw clothing crafted entirely by hand. Here, learning how things are made deepens your appreciation for them. Whether it's chocolate or weaving, or making mole, it's the process that connects you to the people and their pride.

One day, Erika and I sat down to look through our photos for the first time. That was when it hit me on how much we'd already lived and travelled in the last few weeks. Unlike other trips, there's no going "home" to decompress. We're still in it. The road is still unfolding.

And all I can think is: I want to make every day count. That doesn't mean every day will be perfect. Some will be hard. But I want to be present. To notice. To remember certain places not for taking a selfie or filling up the itinerary, but for soaking in the moment.

## **Recommended Activities/Restaurants**

- Church of Santo Domingo
- Monte Albán
- Mercado Benito Juárez
- Mescal Distillery tour
- Jardín Etnobotánico de Oaxaca
- Food: Oaxaca cheese, Tlayudas, Mayordomo
- Mercado 20 de Noviembre
- Hierve el Agua
- Tree of Tule
- Zona Arqueológica de Mitla
- Museo de Filatelia de Oaxaca
- Ruta mágica de las artesanías

## Memories of Oaxaca



# CHAPTER 7

## PUEBLA

### MEXICO'S HEARTBEAT OF HISTORY AND RESILIENCE

**A**fter weeks of travel, we took a brief detour, a two-week break from our journey in southern Mexico to visit friends and family in the northern part of Baja California. We spent time in Mexicali, Tecate, and Rosarito, soaking in the comfort of familiar faces, reconnecting over stories and food. I also had some dental work done across the border in San Diego. That pause was worthwhile as it gave us a chance to ground ourselves before continuing back south.

On June 13, 2023, we flew out of Tijuana airport, heading to Puebla. The flight was just under three hours, and as we began our descent, I looked out the window, expecting to see a charming, mid-sized city. But what I saw surprised me, Puebla stretched for miles. Lights glittered across the horizon as the sun dipped behind the mountains. This wasn't a quiet little town. It was a bustling metropolis, larger and more expansive than I'd imagined. Its skyline was a mix of soaring cathedrals, bustling markets, and vibrant plazas. Every corner whispered an untold story; every street pulsed with its rhythm, like a heartbeat you could feel under your feet.

We had stumbled, quite unknowingly, into a place of astonishing beauty, rich culture, and undeniable energy. A city that demanded to be seen, not overlooked. This wasn't just another stop on our journey. Puebla was about to rewrite all my expectations.

After landing, we grabbed a Didi to head into the city center. The ride took about 30 minutes, and our driver turned out to be a goldmine of local knowledge. He pointed out neighborhoods, shared safety tips, and recommended spots that weren't even listed online. That's one travel tip I'd pass on: talk to your drivers. They often know the best places to eat, ways to save money, and how to plan your days based on local rhythms, like when popular spots are less crowded or which buses to take to avoid tourist traps.

We finally arrived at the Zócalo, Puebla's historic heart, and it was stunning. The main cathedral towered over the square, illuminated in soft yellow light, anchoring the entire city. Our Airbnb was right on the square, above a restaurant serving local dishes. The space reminded me of our place in Oaxaca, above a restaurant, full of aromas and life.

The inside of the apartment surprised us with its size: a kitchen led to a dining room, which opened to a living room, and then two more bedrooms. It had the old-world layout that echoed our time in Campeche. We settled in quickly, then went downstairs for our first Puebla meal.

We tried chalupas, which are like sopas (a fried masa base with toppings) but with thin, crispy corn tortillas drenched in red and green salsa. I had the Carne Poblano, a hearty plate of steak with avocado, beans, cactus, and mole. Erika tried a poblano

chile soup, though it lacked flavor. Still, it was a satisfying introduction to Puebla's food scene.

That first night, though, reality checked back in, and we discovered bed bugs. We didn't sleep much and had to move to another apartment unit the next day. Travel teaches resilience. In Campeche, we had a mouse issue. In San Cristóbal, the cold pushed us to ask for a portable heater. Airbnb life isn't always smooth, but what matters is how the hosts respond. In Puebla, they moved us immediately, washed all our clothes for free, and made things right. That's what I've learned: it's not about whether problems happen, but how we handle them, as well as the host. And honestly, I still prefer an Airbnb over a hotel as having a kitchen and a place that feels like home, especially when staying long-term, was worth it for us.

## **A City Built by Angels and Carved by Time**

Puebla, founded in 1531 as 'Puebla de los Ángeles', was envisioned as a peaceful settlement between the great indigenous cities of Tlaxcala and Cholula, the latter, home to the Great Pyramid of Cholula, a staggering monument to pre-Hispanic ingenuity that still towers today.

But Puebla's destiny was never to remain a quiet backwater. It soon rose as one of colonial Mexico's most vital cultural and economic centers. Its streets were decorated with delicate Talavera tiles, its skyline crowned by majestic decorated cathedrals each one more breathtaking than the last.

## **The Battle That Made History**

Then came a moment that would forever place Puebla into the soul of Mexico: the Battle of Puebla in 1862.

Under a rain-soaked sky, outnumbered and outgunned Mexican forces, many of them farmers, stood their ground against a mighty French army.

Led by General Ignacio Zaragoza, the Mexicans fought from the forts of Loreto and Guadalupe, repelling wave after wave of attacks. Against every odd, they achieved the impossible. The Mexicans defeated one of the greatest armies at that time.

That victory didn't just safeguard Puebla; it sent shockwaves around the world. Abraham Lincoln, deep in the struggle of the American Civil War, recognized its significance. Had the French established a foothold in Mexico, it could have changed the fate of the United States as well because the French would've taken advantage of the U.S. Civil War and possibly taken back Louisiana that it sold to America almost 60 years prior. At least that was the rumour.

Thus, Cinco de Mayo (the 5th of May) was born, commemorating not just a battle, but a triumph of spirit over might.

Interestingly, I assumed Cinco de Mayo was celebrated all over Mexico, but it's only a major event in Puebla and the United States. In the rest of Mexico, it's a day noted, but not widely celebrated.

Even though the French eventually captured Mexico City later on June 10, 1863, the Battle of Puebla remains a symbol of Mexican pride, unity, and defiance.

Today, visitors can explore the very forts where history was made in **Loreto** and **Guadalupe**, where you can walk through hidden tunnels, gaze out over the city's skyline from historic battlements, and feel the echo of battle drums in the breeze.

Every corner of Puebla seems to tell a story of resilience, victory, and heritage. Cinco de Mayo isn't just a holiday there; it's a living, breathing testament to the strength of the underdog and the belief that courage can rewrite destiny. Erika and I arrived in Puebla a few days after the 5th of May celebrations, which we wished we were a part of.

Today, Puebla thrives as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, a bridge between Mexico's storied past and its dynamic present. Its streets are alive with tradition and innovation alike.

Consider this: Puebla boasts 217 counties or municipalities, nearly 400 churches, and not just any churches, but stunning architectural masterpieces that seem to touch the sky. It's home to 12 designated Pueblos Mágicos, more than any other state in Mexico, each one a living postcard of magic, culture, and beauty.

And Puebla isn't just about history and churches. It's also a hub of modern industry, with the second-largest Volkswagen car production plant in the world, blending tradition with technology in a way few places can.

## *Ash in the Air: Living Beneath Popocatépetl*

We arrived in Puebla not knowing we were stepping into the aftermath of an eruption.

It was our first Sunday in the city, and as we set out to explore the city, we noticed something odd. A fine white dust coated the sidewalks, the cars, the rooftops, everywhere. At first, we shrugged it off as construction debris. Puebla is a growing city, after all. But the dust wasn't just on the streets; it was in the air, clinging to my black clothes like powder, getting into my eyes, my mouth, and my lungs.

Then I started noticing the locals, everyone was wearing masks. Not pandemic-style, but protective gear: masks and even glasses to shield against the dust. That's when it hit me. This wasn't construction dust.

It was volcanic ash.

Fifteen hours before we landed, **Popocatépetl**, one of Mexico's most active volcanoes, had erupted. The ash it expelled traveled over 150 kilometers, settling over Puebla like snow after a storm. Except this snow didn't melt. It floated down quietly and coated the city in a pale, ghostly film.

The air quality was terrible, like walking through smoke after a fire. It reminded me of harsh Minnesota winters, but instead of snow crunching underfoot, it was grit. To continue exploring, we had to buy a mask and a pair of glasses. Without them, we couldn't walk more than a few blocks without coughing or blinking the ash from our eyes.

Though **Popocatépetl** (volcano) is about a 2.5-hour drive away, its presence is constant here. The city lives in its shadow,

majestic, unpredictable, and always active. In fact, since its last major eruption in 1994, tremors and ashfall have become part of life for people in Puebla. Some weeks are calm; others, like this one, shift everything.

The volcano was still releasing ash sporadically while we were there. Some days were better; others, you'd wake up to another fine layer of gray across your balcony. We even prepared a basic evacuation plan, just in case. Cities closer to the volcano had already evacuated. Schools were shut down, and on the worst days, airports were closed. Our friends from San Diego had planned to visit us in Puebla, but their flight was canceled due to the ash. Our flight had just narrowly made it through. We were lucky to have arrived, unlucky to witness the disruption firsthand.

Even after the volcano quieted, the ash lingered. Every car that passed on the street kicked ash dust into the air, making masks a daily necessity. The city carried on, but it was clear this was life near an active giant. Nature had its rhythm here, and we were simply guests.

It's one thing to visit a city for its food, its history, its architecture, but it's another to experience how people live with the earth's volatility. Puebla taught me that. A beautiful city built near a breathing volcano, where daily life continues under skies occasionally filled with ash instead of clouds.

## Veracruz: Where Mexico's Story Begins

Because of the falling volcanic ash in Puebla and our friend's flight being canceled to visit us on one of the weekends, we made a spontaneous decision to head four hours east, toward a city I had dreamed of visiting: Veracruz.

This wasn't just another destination. Veracruz is where it all began. The first place the Spanish set foot in Mexico, the port through which centuries of history, culture, and change flowed. It's also the birthplace of 'La Bamba', that iconic song, by Ritchie Valens, with roots in the Afro-Mexican and Jarocho rhythms that still echo through the streets.

But nothing could have prepared us for the heat.

We stepped off the ADO bus at 8 P.M. on Friday after a 3.5-hour ride, when we were immediately hit by the thick, tropical warmth. If it felt this hot at night, I could only imagine what the daytime would be like. To make things worse, we realized we'd forgotten our swimsuits as our hotel had a pool, and the beach was right there. Still, the excitement of finally being in Veracruz made up for it.

Since there's no Uber or Didi in the city, we took a taxi to our hotel. On the way, we passed the vibrant historic center, which was buzzing with life—restaurants full, music pouring out from doorways, families strolling, dancers in the plaza. The energy was infectious. Tired, we dropped our bags and headed straight out to explore.

Just ten minutes from our hotel was the Zócalo, Veracruz's main square, and as we approached, the streets lit up brighter, the music louder, and the smell of street food more tempting.

The whole place pulsed with rhythm. People were dancing to Jarocho music, salsa, marimbas and the square was alive with laughter and movement.

We ate at a restaurant at **El Estribo**, and I had a burger with a classic lecherito, a small coffee served with hot milk poured dramatically from above the waiter, clinking the cup just right. Music played. People clapped along. The city didn't just welcome us, it embraced us.

After dinner, we walked to the Malecón de Veracruz, the long, breezy seafront along the port. Street vendors sold souvenirs, perfumes, Cuban cigars, toys for kids, etc. Ships of all shapes and sizes rocked gently in the harbor. And just across the way, I spotted the original **Café de La Parroquia**, the legendary spot serving coffee, delicious pastries, and food since 1802. We made plans to return for breakfast the next day. That same night at 9 P.M., we took a customary tour bus around the city, which was fun.

The next morning, Café de La Parroquia didn't disappoint; it was packed, full of energy, and the food was incredible. I tried this place for the first time in Campeche and then later in Puebla. Now I'm a big fan!

Later, we hopped on a second tour bus that took us beyond the old center, past the aquarium, the coastline, and into the modern city. It was so hot and humid that Erika started to feel faint, so we stopped by **Las Américas Mall**, which thankfully had air conditioning and an incredible ocean view. We even caught the fascinating 'Human Body Exhibition', which added an unexpected insightful twist to our trip.

Later, we visited the **Museo de la Ciudad**, diving deep into the rich history and importance of Veracruz as a port city. Exhausted but content, we went back to our room and took the longest nap in the blessed AC.

That night, I had another burger, and we went out to a local street known for its legendary hot dogs called **Calle de los Hot dogs**. It's a street full of vendors selling hotdogs. Not just normal hot dogs like in the US. For just 40 pesos, you could get one stuffed with cheese, loaded with chorizo, avocado, grilled onions, and melted Oaxaca cheese. It was messy and unforgettable, a street food masterpiece. This a must-visit spot.

On our final day, we toured one of the most impressive sites in all of Veracruz: **San Juan de Ulúa**. This is a can't-miss place if you travel here.

Once a fortress, palace, and prison, San Juan de Ulúa sits on an island overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. This is where Hernán Cortés met envoys of Moctezuma II on Easter Sunday, 1519, marking the beginning of the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire. Cortés famously claimed his men were sick and could only be cured by gold. When the envoy confirmed they had it, history changed forever. That moment, so crucial, so dark—began right there.

We closed our trip with a visit to the **Museo Histórico Naval** (Naval Museum), which was beautifully curated and packed with maritime history, war relics, and stories of the Mexican navy. It was the perfect way to reflect on everything Veracruz represents—resilience, rhythm, and roots.

## Return to Puebla

Puebla, as a city, reminded me of Guadalajara, modern, sprawling, alive. Unlike Oaxaca, it doesn't have a strong Indigenous presence, at least not in the city center. The art, too, is different—less folk, more colonial, more European in style.

Besides chalupas, we devoured **Cemitas**—thick sesame seed sandwiches filled with avocado, fried meat, and onions—and enjoyed **Tacos Árabes**, a delicious fusion dish with Middle Eastern roots introduced by Palestinian immigrants, featuring spit-roasted meat similar to shawarma. We also sampled **Mole Poblano**, a rich, complex sauce made with chocolate, chiles, nuts, and spices, traditionally served over turkey or chicken.

Another standout was **Chile en Nogada**, a traditional Pueblan dish of poblano pepper stuffed with spiced meat and fruit, topped with creamy walnut sauce, pomegranate seeds, and parsley to reflect the colors of the Mexican flag.

One thing I noticed: I didn't get as many stares here. In some parts of Mexico, as an African traveler, you stand out. But in Puebla, like in Mérida, there's more diversity, or maybe just more tourism. I could blend in.

We stayed active by walking everywhere, clocking in 8,000 to 10,000 steps daily. El Centro makes it easy with parks, museums, and plazas all nearby and walkable. I also kept up with my keto diet and intermittent fasting, eating just two solid meals a day and avoiding snacks. It helped save pounds, money, and energy for exploring.

Puebla wasn't what I expected, but in the best way. It was bigger, more complex, and full of flavor. It surprised me with

its scale, its charm, its food, and the way it balanced history with modern life. Not everything went smoothly but that's travel. It's not about chasing perfection. It's about leaning into the unexpected, and Puebla gave us plenty of that.

## **Puebla's Churches: Beauty Built on Centuries of Labor**

Puebla is home to 335 Catholic churches, and some of them are among the most breathtaking I've ever seen. It feels like there's a church on every corner—each one uniquely designed, some with interiors covered in gold, others with soaring ceilings, elaborate altars, and intricate murals. Even in the small towns we visited, the churches were out of this world—unexpected masterpieces tucked into quiet plazas.

What struck me most was not just their beauty, but the stories behind them. Take the main cathedral in Puebla, for example—it took over 200 years to build. The Spanish used indigenous labor, often enslaved, to construct these monumental structures. While the design may have come from European artists—possibly French—the hands that built it belonged to the local people, many of whom died during the process.

In many cases, churches were deliberately built on top of pre-Hispanic temples, erasing indigenous spiritual sites to assert colonial power. These buildings are massive, awe-inspiring, and too expensive to replicate today, not because we lack the skill, but because the social and historical conditions that enabled them no longer exist.

Back then, labor was free. The cost was human life. Construction took generations, but no one questioned the

timeline. Today, workers rightly demand fair wages, and investors want returns within a decade. We no longer build monuments for future centuries. Instead we build malls, hotels, apartments, homes, etc., that can take less than a year to build.

These churches, for all their grandeur, are more than religious sites. They are time capsules—monuments to a brutal history, a lost sense of continuity, and a level of artistry we may never see again.

## **Exploring Puebla Beyond the City: From Volcanoes to Hidden Tunnels**

When people think of Puebla, they often picture the grand colonial city at the heart of it all. But beyond the capital lies a network of magical towns and natural wonders that are just as captivating—**Cholula** and **Atlixco** being two of the most memorable.

First we visited something completely different: **Cuexcomate**, the smallest volcano in the world. Located in a quiet neighborhood in Puebla, Cuexcomate is dormant and tiny compared to the giants nearby, but it offers a unique glimpse into the region's volcanic geology. Walking inside its hollow cone was surreal. Visiting the site for 20-30 minutes is enough time to explore.

We then continued our journey with a visit to **Cholula**, a town just an hour away by bus. Its most iconic sight is the **Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios**, seen atop the Great Pyramid of Cholula, the largest pyramid by volume in the world. It's a breathtaking paradox, an ancient indigenous

temple buried beneath a Spanish colonial church, crowned by sweeping views of the valley and surrounding volcanoes.

## **Atlixco: The City of Flowers, Secrets, and Volcano Water Beer**

The next day we toured another must-visit, **Atlixco**, a charming small town about 40 minutes from Puebla City. We took an Uber straight to the Zócalo, and instantly noticed something curious. Instead of the usual gazebo in the center of the square, there stood a grand, Arabic-style kiosk and inside it, a full-blown Italian Coffee Company café.

It was unexpected. This coffee chain, despite the name, is a local Mexican brand that originated in Puebla. You'll see it everywhere in the state, almost like a regional Starbucks. And honestly? The coffees are not that bad.

We had breakfast just a short walk away at **La Casa del Obispo**. It's a beautiful 16th-century colonial building with a lush garden courtyard, now transformed into a cozy restaurant. The owner himself hosted us with kindness and care, making it feel like we were guests in someone's home.

While there, we learned about the house's past and its scandal. Once home to a bishop, the building hides a secret tunnel that connected it directly to the church across the street. Back in the day, bishops were expected to be untouchable, seen as holy, distant figures. But according to local folklore, this one bishop used the tunnel for midnight visits to see the nuns. The story goes that he fled town abruptly, burned all his documents, and was never seen again, after allegedly fathering children with more than one nun.

Later, we hopped on a trolley tour around the city, stopping at a local brewery that uses volcanic water in its craft beer. The rosemary-infused beer was surprisingly good—crisp, herbal, and unique. There's something magical about drinking beer made from the earth itself.

One of Atlixco's highlights is the **Escalera Ancha** (The Wide Staircase). It leads to Cerro de San Miguel, where another hilltop church overlooks the town. The staircase itself is art: each step painted with a vibrant mural of a couple dancing calabaceado, a traditional regional dance. This was also the original site of the Atlixcayotl Festival, now the biggest cultural celebration in Puebla, held every last Sunday of September.

Unfortunately, we didn't have time to climb the hill or visit Cerro de San Miguel, but it's on the list for next time.

True to its nickname, Atlixco de las Flores, the town is known for its lush plant life. A short walk from the hill leads to the Viveros de Atlixco, a collection of plant nurseries filled with flowers, trees, and ornamental plants. It's a paradise for nature lovers and anyone with a green thumb.

We left Atlixco wishing we had more time to visit the gardens, explore the churches, and soak up more of its quiet charm. But even in a short visit, this little town offered history, flavor, scandal, and soul.

If you're in Puebla, don't just stay in the city. Cholula and Atlixco are both within reach and completely worth the trip.

## **African Safari Zoo – A Wild Surprise**

Unexpectedly, the 80-acre **Africam Safari** became a trip highlight, providing an authentic safari experience rarely found outside of Africa. Honestly, it felt like stepping into Jurassic Park, but with real animals instead of dinosaurs.

I wasn't too eager to go at first, since I had already been in a lot of safari's. But I was invited along with the family, so I thought, *why not?* I'm so glad I did. The sheer size of the park and the variety of animals completely blew me away.

It's beautifully maintained, and the setup feels far more immersive than traditional zoos. Compared to places like the San Diego Zoo, where you can easily pay \$80 USD per person and still feel distant from the animals, this safari gives you a much closer and more authentic encounter.

In the end, it turned out to be one of the best safari experiences you can find outside of Africa and a highlight of the trip I never saw coming.

## **A Surprise Escape to Tlaxcala On Our Final Days**

We visited **Tlaxcala** on our last day before leaving Puebla, a spontaneous day trip with Erika and my in-laws that turned out to be one of the most surprising moments of our journey. It's only about 40 minutes from Puebla, but it felt like we crossed into a completely different world.

The drive didn't give much away. We passed small towns, scattered homes, and farmland, nothing that hinted at what was waiting for us. Even upon arrival, the town didn't immediately

reveal its charm. But once we entered the historic center, it was like stepping into a storybook European village.

It turns out, Tlaxcala's town center isn't centuries-old—it's a man-made reconstruction, designed to evoke the feel of a European plaza. And it does so beautifully. With cobblestone streets, pastel buildings, boutique cafés, and quiet courtyards, it felt like wandering through a small town in Italy or southern France. I had no expectations going in, and honestly, that made it even more magical.

We wandered through the streets for a couple of hours, occasionally getting lost among the charming alleyways. There were chocolate shops filled with creative treats, some shaped like pyramids, others like tiny tequila barrels. I grabbed a chocolate cookie that was so rich and flavorful, I almost went back for another.

While my in-laws hopped on a bicycle carriage tour of the town, Erika and I strolled hand-in-hand, soaking in the atmosphere. Souvenir shops lined the streets with locally designed t-shirts, artisan goods, and colorful crafts. I found a shirt I liked—one of those unexpected travel finds that will always remind me of this day.

We stopped at a lovely spot for light food and wine, and to our surprise, came across a South African restaurant called *Out of Africa*. The menu had dishes like brats, oxtails, sambusas, and even game meats. We didn't eat there, but just seeing such a place in the heart of Tlaxcala was a fun twist.

As the sun set, we ended our visit with a meal at a French-style restaurant in one of the main plazas. There was live music

playing, and we were surrounded by elegant buildings and cozy terraces filled with people chatting over wine and tapas.

I came to Tlaxcala with zero expectations, just following a few friendly recommendations, and left enchanted. It's a place that proves some of the best travel moments happen when you least expect them. I highly recommend going there for a romantic one night stay.

All in all, Puebla isn't just a city. It's a heartbeat, an anthem, a reminder. A place where every tile, every street, and every plate of mole poblano carries the spirit of those who refused to be conquered.

It's a place where history lives on, not behind glass in a museum, but in the laughter of its people, the rhythm of its markets, and the towering peaks of its churches.

Puebla is, and will always be, Mexico's spirit made flesh.

## **Recommended Activities/Restaurants**

### **Puebla**

- Zócalo de Puebla
- Calle de Dulces de Santa Clara
- Museo Regional de la Revolución Mexicana Casa de los Hermanos Serdán
- Callejón De Los Sapos
- Túneles de Puebla
- Loreto Fort Museum
- Museo de la Evolución Puebla

- Museo Interactivo de la Batalla del 5 de Mayo
- Teleférico Puebla
- Museo Amparo
- Mercado El Parián
- Santa Rosa Convent
- African Safari Zoo
- Biblioteca Palafoxiana
- Cholula
- Atlixco
- Cuexcomate
- Tlaxcala
- **Food:** Tacos Árabes, Cemitas, Mole Poblano, Chalupas, Chile en Nogada

## Veracruz

- Zócalo de Veracruz
- San Juan de Ulúa
- Naval Museum
- Museo de la Ciudad
- Calle de los Hot Dogs
- Café de La Parroquia

## Memories of Puebla



## Memories of Puebla/Vera Cruz



# CHAPTER 8

## TAXCO, GUERRERO

### WHERE SILVER SHINES AND HISTORY LIVES

**W**e left Puebla after an amazing month and began our journey to Taxco. It's only a 3 hour drive, but getting there isn't as straightforward as it seems. The direct buses from Puebla leave either at 6 A.M. or 11 P.M., a detail we discovered too late. All other routes had to go through Mexico City, turning a three-hour trip into a six-hour minimum.

Thankfully, we found a workaround: a bus to Cuernavaca, just three hours away, and from there, a taxi or local bus to Taxco, which would take about an hour. It wasn't ideal, but it was our best option. We booked a ride on DiDi to CAPU (Puebla's main bus terminal) and bought our tickets with ORO Bus. Unlike ADO or OCC buses, you can't buy ORO tickets online, you have to purchase them in person.

When we arrived in Cuernavaca, we tried to find a driver who could take us directly to Taxco, but every request we made on DiDi and Uber kept getting canceled. Eventually, we realized we'd need to head to another bus terminal in Cuernavaca that had buses to Taxco. We ordered Uber to get us to the next station, about 19 minutes away. Halfway through the Uber ride,

we asked the driver if he would be willing to just take us all the way to Taxco.

To our surprise, he said ‘yes’.

Relieved, we quickly changed the destination in the Uber app. Erika and I both sighed in relief as our Airbnb host was expecting us before 6 P.M., and we didn’t want to arrive after dark. The drive was stunning. Mountains blanketed in trees lined the road, and the landscape reminded me of parts of Africa. We passed through several toll booths, the winding highway opening up to incredible views.

As we got closer, the scenery took our breath away. Taxco sits on the side of a mountain, and the view of the entire town clinging to the hillside was stunning, like something out of a dream. And now here we are, about to spend a month in Taxco. Unbelievable.

As we entered the town, the streets grew narrow and steep. Taxco feels like Europe: tight cobblestone roads, one-way lanes, charming shops and cafés spilling onto the sidewalks, and all of it framed by breathtaking views of mountains and valleys. I felt bad for our Uber driver maneuvering through streets that sometimes felt like 90-degree inclines. I could hear his brake pads groaning under the pressure, but he kept a cheerful attitude. I know I wouldn’t have.

After a little over an hour, we finally reached our new place, tucked away in a narrow alleyway. Finding the place took some effort; the house numbers weren’t clearly marked. But eventually, we met our landlord, a small woman with white hair who welcomed us warmly. She showed us around the apartment, which was much bigger than our previous one in

Puebla. Just a few minutes' walk from the Zócalo, it had two bedrooms, a master and a second room with three beds. But the real highlight was the rooftop terrace with panoramic views of the entire town. From up there, you could see why people fall in love with Taxco.

As is our custom when arriving in a new city, we joined a walking tour the next day. Our guide, Joel, met us through GuruWalk. He's an artist who came to Taxco from Mexico City ten years ago to study art, and never left. The slower pace, the silence, and the mountains had captivated him. He spoke about how life in Taxco feels calmer, and more connected.

Taxco has long been known for its silver. The city's identity is deeply tied to its history as a mining town during the Spanish colonial era. Even today, silver shops are everywhere, each one gleaming with handcrafted jewelry, trays, and trinkets that reflect centuries of craftsmanship.

That first walk through Taxco set the tone: this place was not just beautiful, it had soul, art, and a story etched into every street.

## **Silver Streets and Pink Houses: Wandering Taxco**

Our walking tour with Joel, our local guide, began down the narrow, cobblestone streets of Taxco so tight that we had to press ourselves against the walls to let cars squeeze by. As I mentioned before, it was like being in an old European town where streets weren't designed for modern traffic. In many ways, Taxco doesn't feel like Mexico at all. It's a magical blend of colonial charm, dramatic mountain views, and deep artistic roots.

We passed the **Ex-Convento de San Bernardino de Siena**, a peaceful reminder of Taxco's early religious history. Then Joel pointed out a house unlike any other: painted entirely in pink. In Taxco, that's not just rare, it's almost rebellious. This is a Pueblo Mágico, a "magic town," and part of the magic lies in its uniform appearance: every house must be painted white with red-tiled rooftops and burgundy window trims. But this house, the pink one, once hosted none other than Frida Kahlo.

Frida and her husband, Diego Rivera, two of Mexico's most iconic artists, had a brief but legendary connection to this town. While most homes stick to regulation colors, Frida's stood out in every way, just like she did. And she's not the only notable figure to fall under Taxco's spell.

In the 1920s, an American adventurer named William Spratling arrived in Taxco and stumbled upon a forgotten legacy. Though the Spanish had discovered rich silver veins here as early as 1521, the mines had been abandoned following Mexico's war for independence in 1821 and the chaos of civil wars and revolutions that followed. Foreign investors fled. The mines fell silent.

But Spratling had a vision. In the 1950s, he brought artists from across the world to Taxco and revived its silver trade, not as industrial mining, but as artisan jewelry. Taxco's handcrafted silver soon gained fame worldwide. Even Marilyn Monroe visited three times, twice publicly and once in secret. She adored the jewelry, and photographs of her wearing Taxco silver helped elevate it to international status.

Spratling lived in Taxco for thirty years before dying in a tragic car accident. He left behind more than a silver revival, he

donated over 300 artifacts from across Mexico to the town. We visited the **William Spratling Museum**, where many of those pieces are now preserved. It's a quiet, thoughtful space that tells the story of a man who gave Taxco a new artistic life.

Beyond the silver and stories, what really stood out were the details: the dozens of Volkswagen Beetles buzzing through the streets, their engines perfectly suited to Taxco's impossible inclines and the hard angled turns. These beetles aren't just iconic, they're practical. Their small size and strength make them ideal for a town where 90-degree hills and narrow alleys would defeat most modern cars. Our guide joked that most cars last about six years here, unless they're Volkswagen Beetles.

We also passed clusters of motorbikes and small taxis weaving their way through the crowds where even walking takes strategy here. The food, though, that's worth every twist and turn. Taxco is known for two things: **green pozole** (traditional Mexican soup) and **mole rosa**. We tried the latter at **Restaurante Casa Santa Lucía**, a slightly upscale place that was worth the splurge. We had a hearty potato soup, Argentine chorizo, fresh guacamole, and Erika enjoyed a glass of wine. Everything was flavorful, rich, and deeply satisfying. That mole rosa, a local twist on the traditional sauce, was delicate, floral, and unforgettable.

In the evening, the streets cooled down and the Zócalo came to life. Locals and tourists mingled beneath the glow of lamplight. Families sat on the steps of **Santa Prisca de Taxco**, the town's most iconic church, watching the scene unfold. Built between 1751 and 1758, the church rises like a pink sandstone cathedral above the plaza, decorated, imposing, and magnificent. It was built at the height of the silver boom, when the town was flush

with wealth and ambition. And it remains the spiritual and architectural heart of Taxco.

We were also told a haunting Easter tradition that Taxco is famous for, a procession involving hooded figures reenacting the Passion of Christ. Statues of three hooded men are displayed in the city to commemorate it, part of a deeply moving Holy Week ritual that blends faith, penance, and culture.

We also visited **Casa Figueroa**, a grand colonial mansion-turned-museum. Admission includes a guided tour through this once-private home, said to be haunted by its tragic past. It was built with indigenous labor during the Spanish era. Many died during construction, and legend holds that their bodies were buried beneath the home's foundations. The opulence of the house is striking: Talavera tiles cover the bathroom walls, enormous oil paintings loom over the halls, and every room seems touched by history.

The house has a darker legacy. One former owner, a elderly woman who did not like to be around people, was murdered by thieves who broke in. Some locals believe the house is cursed. Still, it attracted celebrities in its prime including Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, and others who reportedly stayed there during its Hollywood heyday in the late '70s and early '80s.

Taxco doesn't let go of you easily. Its streets may be steep, but the town draws you in with its silver shimmer, pink defiance, old ghosts, and mountaintop views. It's not just a beautiful place, it's a place with memory, with layers, and with spirit.

## Acapulco: Heat, Highrises, and Hidden Legends

Taxco was once the gleaming midpoint between Mexico City and Acapulco, back when Acapulco was the destination for the wealthy in the 1970's and 1980's, long before Cancun stole the spotlight in the 1990s. Travelers heading south for luxury and surf passed through Taxco's narrow, winding roads lined with whitewashed buildings and red-tiled roofs. That is, until the highway bypassed the town, leaving Taxco in quiet slumber, its silver legacy and colonial beauty preserved in time.

Erika and I took a five-hour bus ride from Taxco to Acapulco to visit for the weekend.

We stepped off the bus and were instantly hit with the sweltering 85°F heat. It reminded me of arriving in Veracruz. Acapulco was much larger and more developed than I had imagined. The city sprawled like a coastal Las Vegas: strip after strip of hotels, restaurants, and nightclubs stretched endlessly along the ocean.

Our hotel, **Camino Real**, sat in a gated community about 30 minutes from the city center. We'd visited Camino Real hotel chains in Zacatecas and Oaxaca for meals, but this was our first time staying overnight. Exhausted from the long, winding bus ride, we relaxed in our well air conditioned room, which is a luxury in Taxco since we used fans in our home and rarely will you find cafes or restaurants. After lunch, having had burgers and cold drinks, we collapsed into a deep, much-needed siesta.

Normally, I'd recommend taking a Turibus in a new city, but Acapulco is an exception. The city is stretched along the coast and hot, and the best way to see it is by boat. The next day, we hired a small private boat, *una lancha*, for \$100 USD, and it

was worth every penny. For an hour, we cruised past secluded beaches, luxury villas, and vacation homes once belonging to Mexican presidents and celebrities. We sailed past the former residences of Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, and JFK. Acapulco glowed in the late afternoon light, a tropical metropolis flair with nostalgia.

Our hotel overlooked Puerto Marqués Bay, and from the balcony we watched the beach goers, water sports, and the endless pulse of the city. Still, being so far from the center, we mostly stayed around the hotel. Next time, we'll stay closer to **Avenida Costera Miguel Alemán**, Acapulco's iconic beachfront boulevard, a Mexican version of the Vegas Strip, but with waves.

## **Back to Taxco:**

Taxco dazzles in silver. Quite literally. The town has hundreds of silver shops and weekend markets spilling into the cobblestone streets, making it nearly impossible to walk away empty-handed. The jewelry glints in the sun including the rings, bracelets, sculptures, all crafted from *plata (silver)*. Vendors line the alleys, and the air buzzes with bargaining and excitement. June 27th marks **Día del Platero**, a celebration of silversmiths. We were lucky to witness it: live music, a beauty pageant where women wore clothing embroidered with silver, and stories told proudly by each contestant, until the rain cut the show short.

We got to visit an actual silver mine, called **Mina Prehispánica de Taxco**, just a 15-minute walk from town. We got a tour of the underground, where we saw veins of gold, silver, and quartz glimmering faintly in the rock walls. The tour guide explained how to spot pure silver, usually marked 985 out of 1000 grams. We learned that pure silver (100%) is too soft for jewelry, so artisans mix it with copper for strength.

Later that day, we went to a gentleman's silver workshop where I created my silver ring. You will not find this workshop available publicly because the owner does not advertise it due to fear that city gangs will ask for payment (tax) to do business. Not sure how Erika discovered him, but we met with him by the Zócalo and followed him up the steep city steps, passing through alleyways and corners. At the workshop, I melted the metal to shape it into a ring and polished it. I was involved of every step of the process. The final product turned out better than my current wedding ring. It was an amazing experience.

## **Coffee, Churches, and Chilaquiles**

For breakfast the next day we went to **Hotel Santa Paula**, and were served the best chilaquiles, which are cheesy layers of tortilla heaven, paired with café de olla and a pastry basket. Chilaquiles is a traditional Mexican dish made of fried tortilla pieces simmered in red or green salsa and topped with ingredients like cheese, crema, onions, and often eggs or shredded chicken.

Another great spot was **Café Bassam**, known for hot drinks and light breakfasts. And if you're craving a scenic view to wine and dine, **Del Ángel** is a restaurant with one of the best

views in Taxco. Their garlic bread, tortilla soup, shrimp dishes, alcohol drinks and alcohol-free mocktails are excellent.

If you're visiting Taxco, **Montetaxco** is a must. This five-star hotel, perched high atop the mountains, offers one of the most spectacular views of the city. You can reach it by taxi or ride the scenic **Teleférico** (cable car), which adds to the adventure. At the top of the cable car station, you'll find small gift shops before taking a short walk to the hotel itself.

Our first time there was for dinner with friends. We were immediately captivated by the sweeping view of whitewashed buildings cascading down the hillsides of Taxco. The food, the view, the atmosphere, everything was perfect. We loved it so much that during our final week in the city, we returned and spent the night. Thanks to a Monday-night deal, we paid just 1,200 pesos (around USD \$60), a fraction of the regular rate people would pay for one night.

Staying overnight was worth every peso. We enjoyed a generous buffet featuring a range of traditional Mexican dishes—chilaquiles, frijoles, pastries, and Café de olla. If you haven't had Café de olla, it's a traditional Mexican coffee drink brewed with cinnamon sticks, piloncillo (unrefined whole cane sugar), and sometimes other spices like cloves or star anise, typically served in a clay pot over a campfire.

We spent the afternoon by the pool, completely relaxed, taking in the panoramic views. Our room even had air conditioning, the first and only place in Taxco where we experienced that comfort, as it's rare in the city's colonial-style accommodations. Even though we still had our Airbnb in the

historic center, that one luxurious night at Montetaxco was memorable.

## **A Weekend in Cuernavaca, Morelos: History, Pulque, and Colonial Charm**

Erika and I decided to spend a weekend in **Cuernavaca**, the capital of Morelos. Just an hour-and-a-half away by bus, it offered the perfect escape from mountain life: close enough for a quick trip, yet different enough to feel like a whole new world.

We arrived early in the day, stepping into a much larger, livelier city than Taxco. Cuernavaca was instantly striking. Clean, open, and alive with greenery. In some ways, it reminded me of Puebla, though with far less traffic and fewer crowds. The air felt lighter, freer.

Our hotel, **Casa Colonial**, was about a 15-minute walk from the bus terminal, and we loved it from the moment we arrived. A classic colonial-style inn, it blended old-world elegance with tropical charm: large gardens, a tranquil pool, and an intimate restaurant serving flavorful Mexican dishes. The best part was its location, just steps away from Cuernavaca's central square.

Our first stop, and one I'd call a must-see, is the **Palacio de Cortés**, a massive fortress that looms over the city center. Built in the 1520s by Hernán Cortés himself, it's one of the oldest preserved colonial buildings in the Americas. You can't miss it, its Gothic walls and commanding presence seem to whisper stories from another century.

The museum inside spans Cuernavaca's history from prehistoric times through the Aztec empire, the Spanish conquest, and the Mexican Revolution. One of the highlights is a grand mural by Diego Rivera, titled *La Conquista y Revolución*, which vividly illustrates Mexico's long and complex journey from indigenous civilizations to colonial rule and independence.

We've visited so many museums across Mexico by now that Erika and I have developed an almost instinctive ability to identify artifacts by region and era. This one had incredible pieces from the Olmec period with stone sculptures, tools, and ceremonial objects that date back thousands of years. It felt like walking through layers of time.

After the museum, we explored a nearby market filled with souvenirs, crafts, and clothing. I found and fell in love with a **guayabera** shirt (a traditional formal shirt) that I couldn't resist. It was black, lightweight, with delicate embroidery. Though it's traditionally from **Veracruz**, the price was right (250 pesos), and I already knew how comfortable and elegant they could be. I had one back home, but this design was too good to pass up.

The guayabera reminds me of the batik shirts from Indonesia, which have also gained popularity in South Africa. Nelson Mandela made batik internationally famous by wearing it at diplomatic meetings and even when addressing the United Nations. In many ways, the guayabera holds a similar cultural power in Latin America, effortless style, deep roots, and a quiet kind of dignity.

Cuernavaca's Zócalo is vibrant yet relaxed, ringed with cafes, restaurants, and live music. We spent hours simply walking around, people-watching, and snacking on street food like gorditas, slices of local pizza, and whatever looked good in the moment.

One of the more memorable experiences was ducking into a local bar to try **pulque**, a traditional fermented drink made from agave sap. Unlike tequila or mezcal, pulque is milky, frothy, and lower in alcohol, refreshing without being overwhelming. We tried three flavors: natural, honey, and almond. Each had its own character, but all shared that ancient, earthy essence.

To wind down the day, we visited the **Jardín Borda**, a sprawling 18th-century garden once owned by a wealthy silver magnate before being purchased by Emperor Maximilian. It's easy to see why: tranquil ponds, stone fountains, and walkways shaded by ancient trees. Just strolling the grounds made me feel calmer. I could imagine why people choose to settle in Cuernavaca, it's known as the "City of Eternal Spring" for a reason.

That night, craving a bit of comfort, we went to a movie theater, something we hadn't done in a while, and watched an *Indiana Jones* film. Popcorn, nostalgia, and a quiet evening capped off a beautiful day of discovery. A fun fact, the adventurous character of Indiana Jones was partly inspired by real-life archaeologists, including Sylvanus Morley, who undertook significant restoration work at the ancient Mayan city of Chichén Itzá in Mexico.

Cuernavaca surprised me. It's a city that balances history with charm, liveliness with calm. From the weighty halls of the Palacio de Cortés to the light fizz of pulque on your tongue, it's a place full of contrasts and stories. It may not get the same buzz as other destinations, but for a weekend getaway rich in culture, food, and peaceful beauty, **Cuernavaca** is more than worth your time.

The only inconvenience we ran into was when our 7 P.M. bus we had planned to take back to Taxco was suddenly canceled. Apparently, not enough people had bought tickets in advance so they just stopped that route for the day. I didn't even know they could just cancel a scheduled departure like that.

With no other immediate options, we decided to head back to our hotel and to stay one more night, planning to catch a bus the next morning. As we hopped into an Uber, retracing the same route we had taken when we first arrived in Cuernavaca, we casually asked the driver if, by any chance, he could take us all the way to Taxco.

To our surprise, he said 'yes'.

Once again, just when we hit an unexpected obstacle, we got a lucky break. If this trip has taught us anything, it's that challenges will come, often when you least expect them. But it's how you respond, with patience, openness, and a little faith, that defines the journey.

## A Pre-Birthday Adventure: Taxcafé and Pozas Azules

One of our last major outings in Taxco was a special pre-birthday gift for Erika. Though she knew I had a plan for her, I quietly arranged the details for the surprise. Our destination? **Taxcafé and Pozas Azules de Atzala**, a perfect blend of nature, coffee, and crystal-blue water.

Taxcafé lies about 30 minutes outside of downtown Taxco. You can get there by combi (shared van) for 19 pesos or take a taxi for around 200 pesos. We chose the combi. The ride snakes up steep, winding roads, so if you're prone to motion sickness, prepare accordingly. But what a ride! The landscape opened into breathtaking views of green valleys and scattered mountain homes. We passed a few small towns, but most of the journey was rural and peaceful.

Taxcafé is set within a large coffee estate. This was my first coffee tour, though Erika had done two before. A woman greeted us at the entrance of what looked like a rustic, multi-level mountain home. The top level displayed coffee equipment and artifacts, while the middle floor resembled a cozy living room filled with nature-inspired decor. It reminded me of Ethiopian coffee houses, earthy and warm. As it turns out, the place is also an Airbnb.

But the real magic was downstairs, a spacious veranda overlooking a lush valley blanketed in green. It was quiet, serene, and alive with the sound of birds. Breakfast was part of the tour: gorditas made of corn flour and filled with dried beans, served with homemade salsas and strong, slightly bitter local coffee. Delicious and humbling, the simplicity reflected

the local lifestyle, where beans are leaner and food is made with care.

We then began our walk down the mountain to explore the coffee plantation. The altitude is 6,323 ft (1,900 metres) above sea level which makes it ideal for cultivating rich, complex coffee. The woman explained how the flavor of the beans is influenced by the pine trees and highland soil. We even got to plant our own coffee seeds. We learned how coffee starts as green berries, turning red when ripe. She busted the myth that raw coffee beans contain caffeine, they don't. Caffeine only emerges during roasting.

She also explained the deeper science: light-roasted coffee contains more caffeine and nutrients than dark roasts, which are more bitter but less potent. Roasting coffee too long is like overcooking vegetables, it strips away the good stuff. Her advice? Drink light roast, high-quality coffee with no sugar. Add cinnamon if you need flavor. She also confirmed something I'd heard from other coffee enthusiasts, that mixing milk with coffee interferes with its benefits, including caffeine quality. I smiled at her, knowing I still love my lattes.

Before we left, she showed us a collection of her handmade goods made of coffee including chocolate, candy, candles, and cookies. Of course, we bought a few treasures to take home.

Just ten minutes drive from Taxcafé lies one of Taxco's best-kept secrets: **Pozas Azules de Atzala**. If you're in town for more than a couple of days, this is a must. The natural pools are located in a small town called **Atzala**. For 100 pesos per person, we gained access to some of the most stunning blue pools I've ever seen that were clear, vibrant, and refreshing.

There are sixteen pools in total, though we decided to visit six. We went on a Tuesday to avoid the weekend crowds, and it paid off. We had the place almost to ourselves. The pools are fed by mountain spring water, which means they are *always* cold. Erika and I dipped our toes first, hesitating. But eventually, I decided to just jump in and wow. It was a shock to the system, but within minutes, our bodies adjusted, and the water began to feel rejuvenating.

The experience was hard to describe, it's like the water was giving us new life, washing away the fatigue of travel. One pool was about eight meters deep. We didn't jump in from high, but we floated, swam, and soaked in the calm. Later, we explored shallower pools around three meters deep, equally refreshing and surrounded by nature. There were vendors selling food and drinks nearby, and lifeguards posted at each pool.

We stayed for almost two hours before preparing to catch the combi back to Taxco, which runs every 30 minutes. The last one departs at 5:30 P.M. After that, it's a pricey taxi ride back. As we left and drove down the mountain, I still felt the rush and clarity from the swim. Oddly enough, we weren't tired. That evening, we went out for tacos and enjoyed a peaceful night back in town. If I return to Taxco, Pozas Azules will be one of the first places I go back to.

## **A Final Celebration in Taxco**

One of the last things we did in Taxco was visit **El Cristo Panorámico**, a massive statue of Christ overlooking Taxco. The view from up there, across tiled rooftops and winding

alleys, felt like a postcard from another era. The statue of Christ the Redeemer, just three meters tall, watches over Taxco from a site that once served as a slate quarry. The same quarry that provided the stone for many of the buildings below. It is a must-visit sight if in Taxco.

We flagged down a cab to get us to the location, and Erika leaned in, asking cab driver:

“¿Nos puede llevar a Jesús?” (Can you take us to Jesus?)

The driver paused, eyebrows raised, and blinked at us.

“¿A Jesús...?” he repeated slowly, like he wasn’t sure if we were serious or having a spiritual crisis in the middle of the street.

Then, with the most sincere expression, he said:

“No creo que pueda llevarte a Jesús” (I don't think I can lead you to Jesus)

For a second, none of us said anything.

Then it hit us, he thought we were talking about *finding salvation*, not sightseeing.

We burst out laughing and quickly clarified, “¡No no no! El Cristo... el grande, en la colina.” ( “No, no! The big Jesus statue... on the hill!”)

He threw his head back, chuckling.

“¡Ahhh! ¡Ese Jesús! ¡Claro que sí!” (Ohhh, *that* Jesus! Of course!)

And off we went, climbing the winding roads in the little white taxi, still laughing, chasing down Jesus... just the statue, this time.

To mark both the end of our journey and her special day (pre-celebration), we dined at **La Hacienda**, a refined Mexican restaurant with a flair for tradition located by the Zócalo.

One memorable moment was when the waiter prepared fresh salsa at our table—grinding roasted tomatoes, chilies, and even insects (a local delicacy) into the mix. We shared a salad topped with grilled chicken, sesame, jicama, cheese, walnuts, and a rich dressing. I ordered a mole dish made with over 30 ingredients—spicy, deep, and unforgettable. And for dessert, they surprised us with a slice of banana cake and a candle for Erika. It was a beautiful gesture.

We ended the night in the Zócalo, dancing to live music in the heart of the city. A perfect close to a trip filled with wonder, adventure, and memories that will stay with us forever.

In Taxco, what I appreciated was how everyone seemed to know each other. You'll hear people greeting friends from the sidewalks or shouting across taxis. There's a rhythm to the town, a timelessness that you don't find everywhere.

Taxco sparkles. Sometimes from the silver. Sometimes from the people. Always from the stories carved into its stones.

## **Recommend Activities/Restaurants**

### **Taxco**

- Plaza Borda
- Mina Prehispánica de Taxco
- Santa Prisca de Taxco
- William Spratling Museum
- Casa Figueroa
- Restaurante Casa Santa Lucía
- Hotel Santa Paula (chilaquiles spot)
- Café Bassam
- Del Ángel Restaurante
- Teleférico de Montetaxco
- Taxcafe
- Pozas Azules de Atzala
- Parque Nacional Grutas de Cacahuamilpa
- El Cristo Panorámico
- Pozolería Tía Calla (try green pozole and flautas)

### **Cuernavaca**

- Palacio de Cortés
- Jardín Borda

### **Acapulco**

- Enjoy all the beaches

## Memories of Taxco



## Memories of Taxco/Cuernavaca



# CHAPTER 9

## MEXICO CITY

### INTO THE HEART OF THE BEAST

**W**e left **Taxco** with a hint of sadness. That mountaintop city, with its narrow cobblestone streets, whitewashed houses, and quiet charm, had woven itself into our hearts. But a new adventure awaited. **Mexico City**—the capital, the beating heart of the nation was calling.

The bus ride from Taxco took about three hours, winding through lush green hills and small valley towns. It felt like driving through a living painting. The landscape reminded me of how I imagine Switzerland would be with rolling hills dotted with villages, mist hanging in the trees, everything vivid and alive. As we got closer, the scenery began to shift. The mountains gave way to sprawling suburbs, then to concrete, traffic, and motion.

And suddenly—we were in it.

**Mexico City.** Even from the window of the bus, you could feel its immensity. It's not just big. It's **colossal**. People everywhere. Cars jammed on every road. Buildings climbing endlessly into the sky. We arrived at the **Taxqueña bus terminal**, where the real chaos began. It was Erika's birthday,

and this was our gift to ourselves to spend three days in one of the world's most storied cities.

A taxi ride to our hotel near **Chapultepec Park** should have taken 40 minutes. Instead, we crawled through traffic for an hour-and-a-half, watching as the city unfolded before us like an urban jungle.

Skyscrapers soared above us, billboards blinked with advertisements, and sidewalks filled with life with people walking, jogging, riding scooters, even roller-skating through the traffic. American brands like Starbucks, Carl's Jr., WeWork, and so on were everywhere, but so were taco stands, fresh juice vendors, and murals that covered entire buildings. It was a sensory overload.

We arrived at our hotel, **Laila Hotel**, which was just one block from the grand boulevard **Paseo de la Reforma**, and a short walk from Chapultepec Park. The neighborhood was lively, lined with cafés and local restaurants. It felt like we'd landed in the perfect corner of this chaotic city.

After dropping our bags, we went straight out for lunch and found a clean, modern spot serving fresh green juice and healthy plates. But something surprised me. Everyone spoke to me in English. After months of conversing in Spanish across smaller towns and cities, I wasn't expecting that shift. Even when I handed over cash at the counter, the server seemed taken aback, then reached for the card machine. It was clear: Mexico City ran on plastic cards, not pesos in-hand, which was the exact opposite experience we had in other parts of Mexico where cash is king. In many ways, it felt more like New York than anywhere else we'd been in Mexico.

We walked directly to **Chapultepec Park**, soaking in the sunny afternoon. The entrance alone was monumental, a vast green space with sculptures, vendors, and even a giant panda statue welcoming us. There was a story behind that panda, something about the zoo being one of the first outside China to receive pandas in the 1970s. But we were here for something else: the castle.

## **A Castle in the Clouds**

Our first stop inside Chapultepec was the **Monument to the Niños Héroes**, six towering pillars honoring the young cadets who died defending the castle from U.S. forces in 1847. The monument was powerful, solemn, and set the tone for what came next.

We then began the climb toward the **Castillo de Chapultepec**, nestled high on a wooded hill in the park's center. The uphill walk took about fifteen minutes, not too long, but steep enough to leave us catching our breath. The path took us through shady trees, past statues and fountains, until the castle finally came into view.

Standing atop the hill like a crown, **Chapultepec Castle** is one of the most beautiful and surreal places in all of Mexico. It's the only true royal castle in North America, once home to Emperor Maximilian I and Empress Carlota, European royals sent by Napoleon III during Mexico's short-lived imperial era. Their story, like the castle itself, is part dream, part tragedy.

The entrance fee was 99 pesos, and it was worth every cent. Inside, marble staircases spiral upward, grand balconies overlook the city, and the rooms are filled with antique

furniture, golden mirrors, and murals that tell the story of Mexico's fight for independence. Outside, manicured gardens bloom beside cannons, and from the rooftop terrace, Mexico City stretches to the horizon with an unending sea of buildings, neighborhoods, and history stacked on history.

It's hard to grasp the scale. Standing there, surrounded by 360 degrees of city, you realize just how massive and alive this place is. The streets buzz below, but up here, it's peaceful. Tranquill. Timeless.

## A Birthday Above the City

That evening was special, it was Erika's birthday. I had made a reservation weeks earlier at **Ling Ling**, a sleek Asian fusion restaurant found on the **52nd floor** of a tower next to Chapultepec Park. It's part of the **Ritz-Carlton Hotel**, and from the moment we stepped inside, it felt like entering another world.

We arrived at 6:30 P.M. First, we took an elevator to the 14th floor to check in, then a second elevator lift that shot us up to the top floor. When the doors opened, we stepped into a space filled with lush greenery, ambient lighting, and floor-to-ceiling windows that offered a view that made our jaws drop.

The hostess greeted us with complimentary margaritas while we waited at the bar. Everything felt upscale, sleek, stylish, but still warm and inviting. We toasted Erika's birthday, watching the sun sink into the sprawling skyline outside.

Dinner was divine. We ordered sushi, wontons, and a crisp Asian salad. Every bite was a perfect balance of flavor and

presentation. As the city lights flickered on far below, the staff surprised Erika with a slice of strawberry velvet cake, topped with sparkling candles. It was rich, soft, and so big we could only finish half. The rest of it came back to the hotel with us, a sweet reminder of a perfect night.

The day had been long, overwhelming, and unforgettable. From ancient castles to sky-high celebrations, Mexico City had already begun to work its magic.

## Echoes Beneath the Stones

The next morning, we woke early, eager to explore the historical core of the city. Our destination was **Zócalo**, also known as the **Plaza de la Constitución**, the symbolic heart of Mexico.

When we finally arrived, the Zócalo opened up before us like a stone ocean. It's the largest plaza in Latin America, and it *feels* like it. Surrounded by historic buildings including the **National Palace**, the **Metropolitan Cathedral**, and government offices. It's both a gathering place and a stage for Mexico's political and cultural life. This is where people come to protest, to celebrate, to be heard. It hums with energy.

We waited near the cathedral steps for one of our favorite travel rituals: a **free walking tour**. Erika and I love these tours, not just for the history, but for the unexpected stories that come alive when told by locals who know every hidden corner.

Our guide began with a bombshell, that we were standing above the ruins of Tenochtitlán.

Right beside the cathedral lies **Templo Mayor**, the buried heart of the Aztec capital, uncovered by accident during electrical repairs in the 1970s. The ancient stones rise out of the earth, layer upon layer of temple foundations, altars, and offerings, unearthed like a memory the city tried to forget, but couldn't. It was surreal to see skyscrapers and Spanish architecture rising around the ruins, like time stacked in layers.

From there, we wandered through the historic center. One of the most powerful stops was the **Escuela de Artes**, the school where Frida Kahlo once studied and met Diego Rivera. Rivera would go on to paint some of Mexico's most iconic murals that are a vast, emotional thread of history and struggle. After the revolution, the government wanted to reconnect the people with their roots. Since over 90% of Mexicans at the time were illiterate, they turned to images. Art became education, and mural painters became the storytellers of a nation. Through Diego Rivera and others, Mexico remembered itself in paint and plaster.

Everywhere we walked, history whispered beneath our feet. One of the most astonishing facts we learned was that Mexico City is sinking. Literally. Built on the drained lakebed where Tenochtitlán once floated, the ground is soft and unstable. The city drops by several centimeters every year.

You can see it everywhere, like churches leaning awkwardly to one side, buildings where the floor slopes noticeably, or sidewalks where steps have been added because the ground has shifted. It gives the city a feeling of being alive, still changing, still settling.

By the end of the tour, we were buzzing with new understanding. We had walked through ancient ruins, colonial cathedrals, revolutionary murals, and modern chaos, all within a few blocks. Our guide ended the tour with a simple fact: Mexico City has more museums than almost any other city in the world, second only to London. Over 21 million people live there, and somehow, it all holds together - barely, beautifully, boldly.

This city is not just a capital. It's a living archive. Every street, every stone tells a story, if you're willing to listen.

We spent just three nights in Mexico City, and it was barely enough to scratch the surface. This city is vast, so sprawling and full of life that each neighborhood feels like a world of its own. With traffic and distance between attractions, you're lucky to fit in one or two experiences at a time. But every moment pulses with energy, history, and surprise.

As we packed our bags and looked out over Mexico City's endless skyline one last time, I knew this wasn't a goodbye. It was merely *see you soon*. I made myself a promise then and there: *I will return*. Not just to see more, but to feel more. To go deeper. To let this city teach me the rest of its story.

## **Back to the Heart: A Birthday in Mexico City... Again!**

Little did I know that six months later from the first time visiting Mexico city, that I would be back. I kept that promise. This time to celebrate my birthday.

We booked a hotel near **Chapultepec Park**, which I highly recommend if you're new to the city. There's so much to do in the area, and it serves as a fantastic base for exploring. While the Zócalo is iconic and always worth a visit and staying near, Chapultepec offered a quieter, more relaxed vibe compared to the bustle of the historic center.

Our first stop after checking in was the **Museo Nacional de Antropología**, truly one of the best museums I've ever visited. It's a breathtaking blend of global and Mexican history, and even the on-site café is impressive. We ate bean soup, salad, tamales, and a refreshing Jamaican (hibiscus) drink before diving into the exhibits.

The museum is a treasure trove of ancient civilizations and cultural wonders. Walking through it feels like stepping into a time portal with towering Aztec monoliths, intricately carved Mayan relics, and mysterious Olmec heads greet you silently.

The museum's light-filled halls echo with the stories of Mexico's ancestors, while the famed **Aztec Sun Stone** radiates awe from its central place of honor. Every exhibit whispers secrets of the past, sparking curiosity and wonder. It's not just a museum, it's a journey through time. We spent a solid two to three hours there, and it still felt like only a glimpse.

Afterward, we hopped into a taxi back to the hotel, but things took an unexpected turn. As Erika tried to pay with her Visa card, the transaction was declined. Seconds later, she received a bank alert about a suspicious \$1,500 USD charge. The ride had cost only \$5. The driver insisted on card payment only. Apparently, it was their policy and we were now blocking traffic on one of the busiest streets in the city during Friday

rush hour. Tense and surrounded by honking cars, we showed the driver the bank alert. He wasn't having it. Eventually, we left the cash in the back seat and got out. If that charge had gone through, it could've ruined the trip experience. Lesson learned: stick to Uber. It had been tempting to grab a nearby cab for convenience, but we won't make that mistake again.

The next day, we explored the Zócalo, finally touring the **Templo Mayor museum**, which we had missed on our last trip. It's an extraordinary glimpse into the heart of the ancient Aztec world. Rising beside the modern cityscape, the ruins mark what was once the center of the Mexican empire.

As you wander through the layers of stone temples, you uncover centuries of devotion, sacrifice, and cosmic belief. Skulls, serpents, and the mighty gods 'Huitzilopochtli' and 'Tlaloc' seem to come alive in the carvings. Inside the museum, dazzling treasures like jade masks, golden offerings, ceremonial blades all gleam with the power of myth. It's a place where history and legend dance together in silence and stone.

Afterward, we had lunch at **Al Mayor**, a rooftop restaurant with panoramic views of the Templo Mayor ruins and the surrounding Zócalo. The food, music, and ambiance were all excellent, but the view was what truly stole the show. I highly recommend it.

Later, we wandered the streets despite the suffocating heat and a massive political rally that had packed the area. Maneuvering through the crowds was nearly impossible. That's when we stumbled upon a hidden gem: the **Museo Interactivo de Economía (MIDE)**. We had no idea at the time, but it's the world's first museum dedicated solely to economics. As

someone who had recently published a book on Hyperinflation, I was thrilled to find it. Housed in a beautifully restored 18th-century convent, MIDE brings economics to life through hands-on, interactive exhibits about money, markets, sustainability, and decision-making. It's enlightening and fun for adults and honestly, even more important for kids to explore how the world works.

That evening, we dined at the enchanting **Azul Histórico**, located inside the 17th-century Palace of the Counts of Miravalle. You can't miss it, its façade is covered in striking blue Talavera tiles. The restaurant's open-air courtyard is lit by candle-filled trees under a retractable roof, creating a dreamy, almost magical setting. The food was okay, but it's the ambiance that captures your heart.

And then the next day, March 2nd was my birthday. We celebrated with a day trip to **Teotihuacan**. We opted for an Uber, which took about an hour to an hour-and-a-half. Though taking a bus would've been cheaper, it would've required additional transfers to the bus terminal, then to our destination, and we wanted to beat both the crowds and the midday heat.

Arriving at **Teotihuacan** feels like stepping into an ancient city of the gods. The massive **Pyramid of the Sun** rises with quiet majesty, daring you to climb toward the heavens. The **Pyramid of the Moon** and the grand **Avenue of the Dead** stretch before you in silent splendor. As you walk these sacred grounds, once home to a powerful and mysterious civilization, the wind seems to carry whispers of their stories. Murals, temples, and ruins speak of cosmic belief, forgotten rulers, and timeless wonder. Near the entrance, local guides offer tours, and while

we didn't have time to hire one, I'd consider it next time for a deeper experience and to appreciate the place even more.

We ended our visit with lunch at **El Ranchito**, a rustic, open-air restaurant just outside the site, surrounded by greenery. True to its name, it felt like dining on a peaceful ranch that's quiet, breezy, and relaxed.

It was the perfect close to a birthday I'll never forget, and a city that continues to call me back, again and again.

Later that evening, we made our way to **Coyoacán**, a neighborhood in Mexico City that feels like a storybook come to life. We had signed up for a walking tour, and it turned out to be the perfect way to discover its layered charm.

This is also the neighborhood that Frida Kahlo once called home, and her spirit still lingers in the air. You can almost feel it in the colorful streets and artistic energy that flows through every plaza and mural. We passed by the **Casa Azul** (Frida Kahlo Museum), a striking blue sanctuary of creativity, color, and emotion. While we didn't go in (visits require booking well in advance as walk-ins aren't allowed), just standing outside felt like standing at the edge of a legend.

The walking tour was a delight. As we strolled through leafy avenues and colonial-era streets, we soaked in the laid-back, bohemian vibe that makes Coyoacán so special. Once a quiet village on the outskirts of the city, it now pulses with art, history, and culture while still holding onto its small-town soul.

We ended the two-hour tour at Coyoacán's Zócalo, where the heart of the neighborhood truly beats. The market was alive with color and conversations, stalls bursting with handmade

crafts, the scent of roasted corn and fresh tamales drifting through the air. Churros were served hot and sweet, their sugary warmth the perfect end to an evening stroll.

Coyoacán is the kind of place where you lose track of time, where stories hide in every doorway, and where life unfolds slowly and beautifully. It's a corner of Mexico City that invites you to wander, reflect, and fall in love with the city all over again.

As the night came to a close, we shared dinner with a Hungarian tourist we'd met during the tour. Over good food and laughter, in a plaza lit by string lights and soft conversation, it felt like one of those rare travel moments when strangers become companions and a city becomes lively.

On our last morning in Mexico City, we lingered over breakfast at a cozy café, savoring the moment and the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee. Afterward, we set out to explore the city on foot, taking full advantage of the pedestrian-friendly streets.

It was Sunday, which meant we had the chance to experience **Paseo Dominical**, also known as **Muévete en Bici (Move by Bike)**, a beloved weekly tradition in Mexico City. From 8:00 AM to 2:00 PM on Sundays, major avenues like **Paseo de la Reforma** are closed to motor vehicles, transforming the bustling street into vibrant, car-free zones for cyclists, joggers, skaters, and pedestrians.

The atmosphere was electric. Families with children, couples hand-in-hand, and solo adventurers all shared the open streets, moving freely and joyfully. Street performers entertained passersby, and the scent of street food wafted through the air, adding to the festive ambiance.

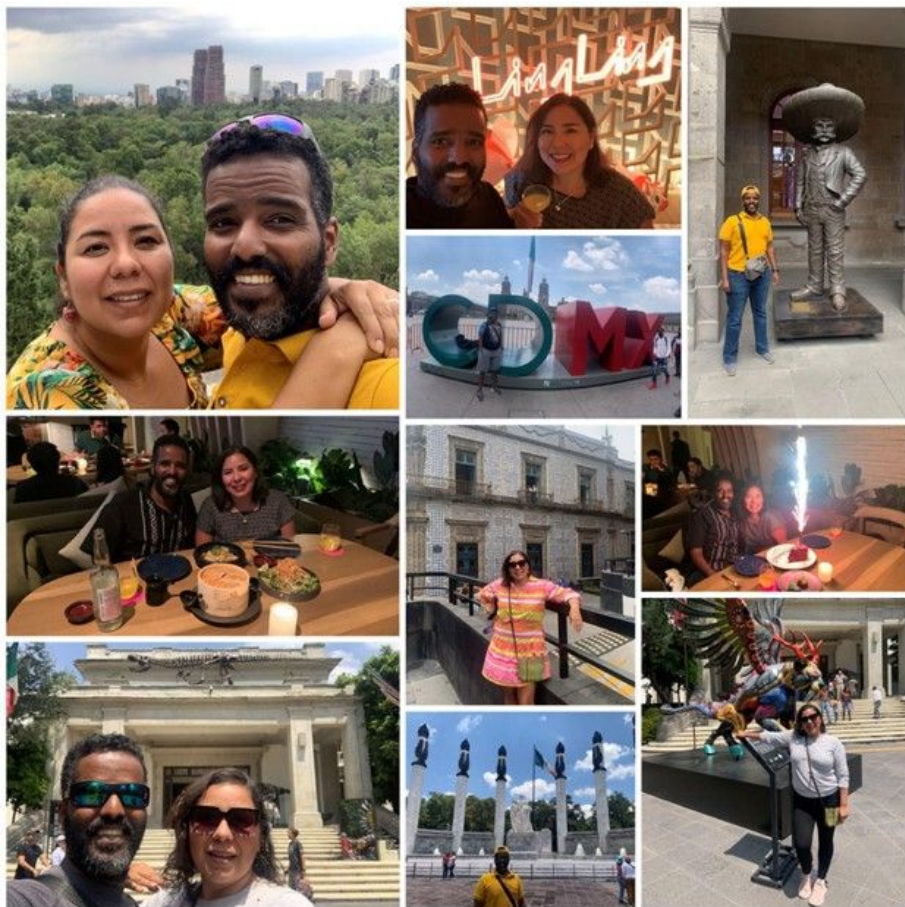
Participating in Paseo Dominical offered a unique perspective of the city, one that emphasized community, health, and the simple pleasure of movement. It was heartwarming to see so many people embracing the outdoors, turning the city into a shared space of celebration and connection.

As we strolled along, soaking in the sights and sounds, I felt a deep appreciation for Mexico City's commitment to creating such inclusive and lively public spaces. It was a perfect, uplifting way to conclude our journey, a reminder of the city's vibrant spirit and the joy found in its everyday moments.

## **Recommended Activities and Restaurants**

- Chapultepec Park
- Castillo de Chapultepec
- Monument to the Niños Héroes
- Paseo de la Reforma
- Plaza de la Constitución
- Templo Mayor Museum
- Museo Nacional de Antropología
- Museo Interactivo de Economía
- Azul Histórico
- Teotihuacan
- Coyoacán

## Memories of Mexico City (Part 1)



## Memories of Mexico City (Part 2)



# FINAL CHAPTER

## WHERE THE ROAD MEETS HOME

Travel has a way of waking you up and peeling back the layers of routine and expectation to reveal something raw, beautiful, and profoundly real. This journey through the South of Mexico was more than a change of scenery; it was a shift in how we saw the world and ourselves.

Each new city brought its own vibe: a different scent in the morning air, a new flavor dancing on our tongues, a new chapter written in the rhythm of the streets. There was a thrill in the unknown, in booking one-way tickets and trusting we'd figure it out when we landed. But just as powerful were the quieter moments, like returning to the same café enough times that they remembered our order, bumping into familiar faces in a foreign land, and realizing that, somehow, we'd found home in a place we'd only just met.

This experience reminded me of something simple but profound: *life happens between vacations*. It's not the Instagram-perfect snapshots that define your memories, it's the in-between. The grocery runs, the bus rides, the moments when things go wrong and you learn to laugh anyway. That's where growth lives.

Would I do it all again? Maybe, but I also believe we did it at the exact right time in our lives. The timing, like so many things in life, made the difference. The next adventure might

look different: maybe its three months in one place instead of one month, long enough to sink our roots, short enough to keep our sense of wonder because there's a sweetness in the balance, where adventure meets belonging.

This journey also taught me that preparation matters but overplanning kills the magic. Some of our best moments came when we had *no expectations*. We wandered. We lingered. We let the cities show themselves to us, on their own terms. And more often than not, they offered something we never could have imagined: surprise.

Not everything went smoothly. Some cities didn't live up to the hype. Other places shattered every expectation and became instant favorites. The takeaway? The best parts of travel are rarely the ones you plan. They're the ones that sneak up on you, that catch your breath and stay with you long after you've moved on.

We also learned to be skeptical of headlines. The Mexico we experienced was full of warmth, diversity, and life, far from the fear-based images broadcast from afar. We found kindness in strangers, safety in simplicity, and joy in the ordinary. Having traveled through more than 30 cities and towns in Mexico over the past four years, I've learned that perception isn't reality, and that courage opens doors fear never could.

Now, as Erika and I settle in Dallas, Texas buying a home and reconnecting with our community, I see this new chapter not as the end of something, but as the beginning of a different kind of adventure. One with deeper roots. One where we see the same faces, build lasting bonds, and learn that travel isn't the only path to transformation.

Because the truth is, you can't live on the road forever. Life has seasons. And part of growth is knowing when to roam and when to rest. The road gave us unforgettable memories, but community gives us something just as vital, belonging. And in that, there is power.

To anyone dreaming of packing a bag, hopping on a plane, and chasing something new—I say, go. Let it stretch you, humble you, and teach you. But also remember: the most important journey is the one inward. And you can start that anywhere.

As for us, we'll keep the door open. There's still more of the world to see. But for now, we're home and that feels just right.

The journey changed us. The memories shaped us. But the love we carried, and the lessons we learned will guide us wherever we go next.

Let wonder lead you. Let presence ground you. And let every journey bring you closer to who you're meant to be.

# DEDICATION

I dedicate this to Erika, the love of my life. Thank you for walking beside me through every winding road, unfamiliar street, and quiet moment of wonder. I'm always grateful that I get to share this life, and every chapter of it, with you.

Together, we've not only explored the beauty of Mexico, but also discovered more of ourselves along the way. We've grown, laughed, learned, and been stretched in ways only the road can teach.

This book is more than a record of places, it's a tribute to our journey, our courage, and our love. A legacy to leave for our family.

Here's to many more adventures, side by side.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**P**ETROS ESHETU, #1 Amazon best-selling author of "The Introvert Immigrants Journey," . His passionate about helping coaches who want to share their knowledge and expertise through books so they can build authority in their field and secure speaking engagements. Petros has been featured on prominent platforms including Self-Publishing School, Kindlepreneur, IntrovertU, Mo2vate Media, etc.

Petros currently lives in Dallas, TX with his wife Erika and is an avid traveler having lived in different parts of Africa, United States and Mexico.

If *Mexico Unfiltered* made you laugh, reflect, or just desperately crave tacos, please consider leaving an Amazon review! Every review helps spread the word to others and allows more readers to discover the magic of Mexico.

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