

If you go . . .

How to get there

Guanajuato is about 220 miles northwest of Mexico City, about a five-hour drive or bus ride.

Where to stay

Hotel Posada Santa Fé

Jardín Unión No. 12, Centro
011-52-473-732-0084
posadasantafe.com
Historic and atmospheric 19th-century home. Doubles from \$90.

Holiday Inn Express Guanajuato

Blvd. Euquerio Guerrero 120
Colonia Burócrata
011-52-473-735-2000,
800-315-2621
www.hotelesmilenium.com/
New hotel with clean modern rooms, high-speed Internet access in the public rooms, indoor pool, and fitness center. Buffet breakfast included. Doubles from \$84.

Quinta Las Acacias

Paseo de la Presa 168
011-52-473-731-1517,
888-497-4129
www.quintalacacias.com
Deluxe boutique suites in a restored 19th-century mansion. In a quiet neighborhood, but on the hillside above the city. Doubles from \$185.

Hotel San Diego

Jardín Unión No. 1 y Calle de Alonso, Centro
011-52-473-732-1300 (-1321)
www.hotelesandiego.com
Historic building on busy corner across from the city center. Doubles from \$80.

Where to eat

Tasca de los Santos

Plaza de la Paz
011-52-473-732-2320
This popular sidewalk café serves regional soups, entrees, and desserts, with frosty glasses of lemonade, jamaica (made from hibiscus blossoms) or horchata (rice, sugar, and cinnamon). Try the corn soup made with poblano chilis and asadera cheese, followed by orange-and-almond chicken and flan. Moderate, from \$3-\$8.

Casa Valadez

Jardín Unión No. 3
011-52-473-7362-1157
Entrees of chicken, steak, and spicy stews in a bustling bistro atmosphere. The bar serves wine, beer, and mixed drinks. Dinners from \$8-\$15.

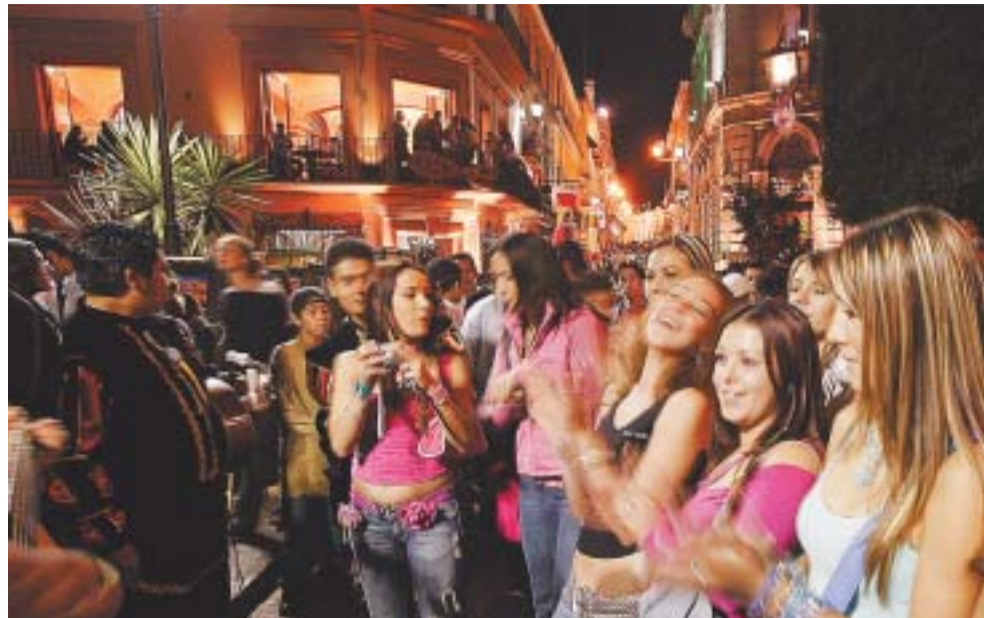
El Jardín de los Milagros

Calle Alhondiga 80, San Javier
011-52-473-732-9366
Chef Bricio's fusion cuisine is served by candlelight inside a restored 18th-century hacienda. Entrees include steaks, veal, and fish, with garden vegetables and mango and mushroom sauces. Three-milk cake is a house specialty. Dinners from \$10-\$30.

Information

Tourism Office

Plaza de la Paz 14, across from La Parroquia church
Open daily.
www.guanajuato-travel.com
(in Spanish)
info@guanajuato-travel.com



PHOTOS BY ESSDRAS M SUAREZ/GLOBE STAFF

The 33d Festival Internacional Cervantino in Guanajuato, Mexico, last fall celebrated world-class artists, indoors and out. The city lies amid the Sierra Madre.

Lively old Guanajuato making new friends

By Anne Z. Cooke
and Steve Haggerty

GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS

GUANAJUATO, Mexico — After a day or two here even visitors from El Norte stop checking their watches.

As the sun fades over the Jardín de La Unión Plaza, the local people emerge for the daily social hour, the ones we saw yesterday and will probably see tomorrow. Here are the same two gray-haired women — sisters, perhaps — walking arm-in-arm and smiling at people they pass.

Behind them come schoolgirls in uniform, giggling over their ice cream cones. Old men, leathery faces creased by the sun, and mothers with children, waiting for friends, sit on the benches under the trees, the day's chores forgotten for a few quiet hours.

"I don't know a soul, but I feel right at home," said Christina Cisneros, here from Arizona for a language course. She invites a visitor to share her bench across from the city's most elegant building, the neoclassical Teatro Juárez.

"Older people usually sit here, in the shade," she said. "The university students sit over there, on the theater steps, to watch the mimes and wait for the estudiantinas [strolling street musicians] to arrive. If you wait long enough, you'll hear them sing."

Nearby is a bearded fellow in rumpled shorts and sandals, cameras dangling. A tourist, recognizable anywhere. What you won't see in Guanajuato, a colonial city of about 112,000 people tucked into the base of a steep ravine in the Sierra Madre, are colonies of expats, retirees in search of better climes and cheaper living.

Not that some Americans — count us among them — enchanted by Guanajuato's shady courtyards, winding lanes, and the advantages of a world-class university, are not tempted. Settled in 1548 and the capital of the state of Guanajuato, this is one of Mexico's best-preserved old cities, its steep hills and cobblestone streets echoing its Spanish ancestry. But the terrain and 6,500-foot elevation

are tough on people with unsteady legs and arthritic hips.

In 1988, after UNESCO declared the city a World Heritage Site, the state redoubled restoration projects and introduced programs to increase tourism. But name recognition has been slow in coming to Guanajuato (pronounced wah-nah-WHA-toe), which means "place of the frogs."

Instead, foreigners seem to visit the city accidentally. Some discover it on packaged tours to Mexico's silver cities that usually include Taxco, Zacatecas, and San Luis Potosí. And some come in October for the annual International Cervantes Festival. This two-week event draws thousands of attendees for programs that have grown from dramatic skits and literary readings to seminars, theater productions, operas, jazz and orchestral music, and ballet.

"Where else can you hear performances by world-famous professional singers and musicians for \$5 to \$20 a ticket?" said Maria del Rufio Ruiz-Velasco, director of tourism for the state of Guanajuato. She was promoting nonstop flights from the States to the region's international airport, built between Guanajuato and Leon, a growing manufacturing town.

"Three years ago, we didn't have a single trained guide here, even in Spanish," said Ruiz-Velasco, whose decade spent living in Los Angeles convinced her of the need for English-speaking guides. "We're collecting visitor statistics hoping to help each attraction see what brings in more visitors."

Bilingual signs are rare, so understanding what you are seeing is hit-or-miss. Remedy this with a guidebook, such as "Colonial Mexico: A Guide to Historic Cities and Towns" by Chicki and Oz Mallan (Avalon, 2001). And look for state-produced bilingual publications describing attractions and hotels.

Spanish miners arrived around 1526, discovering little gold but lots of silver. By the time the city was founded in 1570, some 15,000 people lived in houses terraced up the canyon walls, with streets and plazas linked by stone steps and

winding paths.

The big strike came in 1760, with the discovery of vast quantities of silver at the Valenciana Mine. Worked entirely by Chichimeca Indian laborers forced into near slavery, the mine was a money pit, producing half of all the silver Mexico sent annually to Spain and an estimated one-fifth of the world's total supply.

To get an idea of what 18th-century mining conditions were like, take one of the 45-minute mine tours led daily by English-speaking guides. In a group of 15, we climbed 150 feet down into one of the oldest shafts, on stairs hacked out of the rock. (The mine entrance is northwest of town, on a side road off the Carretera Panoramica, which circles the city.)

"It was horrible work," said Omar Guerra, our guide, handing out hard hats and leading the way to the entrance. "Hundreds of men and boys brought 400 to 500 tons of ore to the surface every day, carrying 80 pounds at a time in leather bags. It took a ton of ore to get a half-pound of silver — and killed the average worker after about eight years."

Silver from the mine — and gold, found in smaller quantities — paid for the nearby Valenciana Church, built in 1788 by the mine's owner, Don Antonio Obregón y Alcocer, count of Valenciana and one of the richest men of New

Spain. The church, Guanajuato's most beautiful, is a classic example of churrigueresque, or Spanish rococo architecture and is dedicated to St. Cayetano, the patron of job seekers and the unemployed.

The city's most unforgettable attraction may be the Mummy Museum (Museo de Las Momias), a collection of 117 old cadavers.

As the guides tell it, the roots of the museum reach to 1865, when the local cemetery ran out of room, forcing new arrivals into graves beyond the boundary. This was forgotten until 1901, when local builders unexpectedly unearthed dozens of bodies, each preserved by the minerals and salt in the soil and as stiff and leathery as an old boot.

Not sure what to do next, the local doctor stood the bodies up in a nearby structure where visitors came to gawk at them, until someone said, "We could make a business out of this!"

And so they did, displaying the mummies — adults, children, infants — in glass cases under subdued light in a rambling one-story building. The display is more bizarre than gruesome, but wandering from room to room does provoke reflections on mortality.

Here is a woman in her best leather boots, a man wearing nothing but socks, babies in rotted hand-sewn clothes, women with their heads propped on velveteen

pillows, and old men with clenched jaws and folded hands. As you pass by, you may find workers energetically dusting.

Guanajuato's other special museum is dedicated to Diego Rivera (1886-1957), the muralist and painter, and occupies the home where he spent his childhood. A narrow, three-story house furnished with period beds, chairs, and tables, it's spacious and pleasant, with cool courtyard lighting and plenty of room for a family. Climb to the second and third floors to see a collection of 90 of Rivera's smaller works of art, including drawings, watercolors, and paintings.

But you will have just begun to see the treasures of Guanajuato. Visitors should plan on three days for an introduction, and five, at least, for the rest: Churches, historic haciendas, gardens, museums, and the enormous Hidalgo Market, located in a two-story, open-air structure. Shopping for silver jewelry is also a must, along with Talavera-style pottery.

To do it all, you may have to return. And you will want to. As Ruiz-Velasco told us, "Guanajuato is hard to pronounce, and hard to forget."

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