

What to see and do in San Miguel de Allende

01:23 PM CST on Friday, December 9, 2005

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San Miguel de Allende in the highlands of central Mexico in the state of Guanajuato is a magical place.

Perhaps it's because the cobble stoned colonial village seems frozen in time. Mexico declared San Miguel a national monument in 1926, and to this day, there are no traffic lights, neon signs or fast-food establishments.

My partner, Rob Dailey, and I have been going to San Miguel for years, but recently, we were able to experience the historic city in a whole new way. Our friends (and renowned Dallas art collectors) Cindy and Howard Rachofsky invited us and several other friends to join them as guests in a special San Miguel home owned by Martha Hyder of Fort Worth.

The Hyder House, as it's known, was like a movie set with meandering rooms filled with candles and cozy fires. There's a rooftop garden and plenty of hidden nooks for naps or reading. The home also boasts an amazing collection of primitive and religious Mexican art. Staying in a private home is a wonderful way to experience this amazing city.

On our first night in San Miguel, we toasted our arrival with frothy, cold margaritas, followed by plenty of fresh guacamole and chips. All in all, we ate too much, drank too much and laughed until it hurt - but this, after all, is San Miguel.

Here are some tips to help you navigate and enjoy this fabulous city.

PACK

The Insider's Guide to San Miguel by Archie Dean. Think of this as your official Yellow Pages for San Miguel, and a good source for basic facts, such as high season (January to March; July and August), population (about 80,000 in San Miguel proper, including as many as 4,000 expatriates from North America) and climate (sunny days and cool nights year-round).

GETTING THERE

Take a quick, direct flight on American Airlines from D/FW to Leon/Guanajuato, Mexico, \$400 average round-trip fare for coach. There, arrange transportation by car service or the San Miguel shuttle for the 80-minute drive to San Miguel.

Hint: Be prepared. Buy a bottle of water and take a restroom break before leaving the airport. The stops and public restrooms on the way to San Miguel are rustic at best.

SLEEP

There are several great bed and breakfast spots here, not to mention the wonderful Sierra Nevada Hotel.

Hint: Share expenses. My favorite way to sleep in San Miguel is in a private home booked through one of the estate-rental agencies. There are some gorgeous homes in the city, and you can rent them complete with pools, maid service, a chef and margaritas on tap. Even better? Stay for a week and invite friends. You can divide the cost among the group, making your trip a real bargain.

Hint: Preorder bites. Send a fax of your group's favorite eats and drinks in advance to the rental agency, which will arrange their purchase. Once you arrive, pay for the supplies up front and prepare to enjoy.

Always request botanas (snacks) and drinks for when you arrive. A little guacamole, pico, chips, flautas and margaritas definitely rev up the trip early.

Breakfast usually must be ordered in advance - delicious chili with bacon and eggs could tide you over until the next millennium.

SHOP

While prices are not as inexpensive as in the past, San Miguel still offers bargains - and don't be afraid to haggle. The boho look has been in style here for a very long time - and can be found for sale everywhere in the form of cool boots, big skirts, wraps and shawls. Great antiques and housewares are also readily available. There is also wonderful regional art available along the streets and in one of our favorite shops, Zócalo.

Hint: Leave the Manolos at home! Bring walking shoes, instead. I advise sneakers by day, and wedges or flip-flops for evening. Prepare to walk three to five miles a day - and feel it, both in the abundant hills and in the altitude of 6,400 feet. Fortunately, taxis are abundant and safe here, and most rides will cost you only the equivalent of \$2.

Joyería David - Great jewelry, big chunky pieces with loads of silver, and good discounts if you pay cash

Zacateros 53, 011-52-415-152-0056

Zócalo - Great folk art and furnishings. One of our favorite places for cool gifts, great photography, pieces from Mexican artists and more.

Hernández Macias 110, 011-52-415-152-0663

Arte Antique - Unique religious artifacts, as well as hand-carved pieces in stone and wood

Hernández Macias 83, 011-52-415-152-5049

La Diligencia - Great antiques and custom reproductions. We always find a little something here.

Hernández Macias 118, 011-52-415-152-1626

GALERÍA PÉRGOLA - Contemporary art gallery featuring local and Mexican national artists

Ancha de San Antonio 20, 011-52-415-154-5595

LA AURORA - This collection of multiple vendors is incredible; it's like the best antique mall ever - art, antiques, jewelry. Take a taxi; all drivers know it.

Fàbrica La Aurora, inside the newly reopened fabric factory

EAT

If you stay in a house, have breakfast and lunch there and hit the bricks for dinner.

Tío Lucas - Great steaks, live music and lots of fun

Mesones 103, 011-52-415-152-4996

Mama Mía Restaurant and Bar Leonardo - Just off the main square of the Jardín, it serves huge margaritas.

Umarán 8, 011-52-415-152-2063

Hecho en México - Great food and well priced, especially for lunch

Ancha de San Antonio 8, 011-52-415-154-6383

Bugambilia - Great pozole cuisine and wonderful authentic food

Hidalgo 42, 011-52-415-152-0127

La Capilla - Upscale eatery with an amazing atmosphere, boasts a romantic, stunning view of La Parroquia

Cuna de Allende 10, 011-52-415-152-0698, www.la-capilla.com