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GOING TO

## San Miguel de Allende

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**WHY GO NOW** The jacaranda trees are blooming, and so too is this 16th-century colonial town, thanks to an ambitious renewal effort that is halfway through its two-year run. Every building along the narrow cobblestone streets has been repainted in the colors of a desert sunset: ocher and sienna, deep orange and clay red. The government is restoring churches and theaters, rebuilding plazas and illuminating the arches of the plaza and the ornate spires of the main church with Disneylandlike brightness.

The civic improvements have coincided with a housing boom as Americans searching for vacation homes are increasingly buying up property in the old section of town, anchored by the Parroquia de San Miguel de Allende, a Gothic-style construction of spires and arches. The invasion of foreign investors has dismayed some residents, who note that there are now more real estate offices downtown than good bars. Prices for everything from a bottle of beer to a plate of enchiladas are going up as a result.

But all this investment has not altered the bones of the place: the 300-year-old architecture from Spain, the heavy, carved wooden doors along narrow sidewalks, the explosion of bougainvillea over compound walls surrounding meticulous courtyards. Unlike Cancún or Acapulco, where American fast food joints and discos rule, San Miguel de Allende still feels like Mexico.

**WHERE TO EAT** Yes, it's expensive - especially for Mexico - but one night should be devoted to La Capilla, (7) Cuna de Allende 10, (52-415) 152-0698, which serves innovative seafood and poultry dishes on a terrace that used to be part of the Parroquia church. The chefs create sauces with mango and other exotic fruits, cheeses and local spices, making even red snapper an adventure. A three-course meal for two runs \$150 to \$200. The music from the schmaltzy piano bar leaves something to be desired.



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Map of San Miguel de Allende. Numbers in the article correspond to numbers on the map.



For a good, affordable Mexican meal, you can walk along Calle Hidalgo to No. 42, the Bugambilia, **(8)** (52-415) 152-0127, where you'll be served first-rate sopa azteca, chicken mole and other traditional dishes under a giant bougainvillea plant in the dining room. Dinner for two is about \$55, with wine.

If your taste buds are crying out for traditional Spanish food in an intimate, Old World environment (seven tables seat 28 guests), La Cartuja **(9)** on Calle Hernández Macías 109, (52-415) 152-2057, is a good bet. A variety of tapas is on the menu, as well as traditional Spanish dishes like Serrano ham. Dinner for two with wine is \$44.

**WHAT TO DO DURING THE DAY** The town center feels like a small Spanish or Italian village except all the houses are painted in vibrant colors. The area surrounding El Jardín Principal, **(10)** the central square, is riddled with cantinas, ice cream shops, art galleries, artisan boutiques and even a few Mexican merchants who will sell you a saddle and bridle for your horse.

Various guided tours offer different perspectives of the town. Horseback tours can be arranged at 3 Señores, (52-415) 101-4976, [www.3senores.com](http://www.3senores.com), a stable next to the train station about two miles outside town on Calle Canal. On Sunday, tourists gather at noon in front of the town library for a two-hour tour of some of San Miguel's richest homes offered by Casas y Jardines, (52-415) 152-4987. The cost is \$14. And, for orchid fanatics, it might be worthwhile to take a walk to Los Pocitos, **(11)** the orchid gardens at Santo Domingo 38, which once belonged to an American writer and botanist, Stirling Dickinson.

In the early 19th century, San Miguel de Allende was a place of political intrigue where revolutionaries plotted their movements. Ignacio Allende, a native of the town who became a revolutionary hero and had his surname added to the town's name for his trouble, is memorialized in a historical museum **(12)** that displays weapons, documents and other exhibits at his former home at Cuna de Allende 1 on the main square. The museum, (52-415) 152-2499, is closed Monday. Admission is \$6.35 (free on Sunday).

You might also hire a car or a taxi and head north from San Miguel de Allende toward Dolores Hidalgo, birthplace of the first Mexican revolution. Just a few miles outside the town are several spas, hotels and restaurants with hot springs. The most well known of the springs is Agua Magica but old hands prefer La Gruta, **(13)** on the left, at kilometer 10, farther down the road; (52-418) 185-2128, admission is \$6.40. It has three pools fed by thermal springs of varying temperature in a shady valley. At Agua Magica, (52-415) 158-2099, the cost is also \$6.40.

**WHAT TO DO AT NIGHT** The night life in San Miguel - most of it concentrated in the town center - is limited but vibrant. Mama Mia's, **(14)** a bar and restaurant at Umaran 8, (52-415) 152-1958, offers everything from salsa bands to jazz fusion groups and reasonably priced drinks. The cover charge is \$1; a beer is \$2. For live music, Cha-Rok, **(15)** (52-415) 152-7373, a two-floor bar upstairs at Correo 7, has salsa and blues bands

many nights. Pancho and Lefty's, **(16)** Mesones 99, (52-415) 152-1958, is a loud dance club popular with young singles. The cover charge is \$1; a beer is \$2.

**WHERE TO SHOP** In San Miguel, the question is where to stop shopping. For ceramics, a specialty in the state of Guanajuato, try Arcilla, **(17)** at Recreo 5A or Terra, **(18)** just down the street, at Recreo 8. Artes de Mexico, **(19)** at Calzada Aurora 47, has a nice selection of handicrafts, lamps and wrought iron accessories. The best place to buy glass work is La Casa del Vidrio, Correo 11, where tours to see the artisans blowing their bluish marvels into life can be arranged. Vases range from \$7 to \$36. La Tienda de la Piel, Umaran 1, is a first-class place for leather goods like jackets, which start at \$200, and wallets (from \$18).

**HOW TO STAY WIRED** Most of the hotels do not have high-speed Internet access, but there are several Internet cafes in the village. Net@ San Miguel Cybercafe, **(20)** at Calle Aldama 60, corner of Calle Tenerias, (52-415) 152-1210, charges about 90 cents an hour. If you have a wireless laptop, you can also drop into the Biblioteca de San Miguel, the public library, on Insurgentes between Reloj and Hidalgo. The wireless connection there is free.

**YOUR FIRST TIME OR YOUR 10th** Often called the symbol of San Miguel, the pink Gothic-style Parroquia de San Miguel Arcángel**(21)** dominates El Jardín. The original building dates from the 17th century, but the present one is the result of 18th- and 19th-century renovations, much of it inspired by the Gothic cathedrals of Europe. At night, before you head back to the hotel, be sure to go by the Jardín one last time. While you listen to the oddly archaic love songs of the mariachi bands, you can watch the street vendors selling carnitas and churros, the young folks going out to dance, the old men in cowboy hats chewing the fat into the night and the little kids, if they are still up, chasing pigeons or one another. This is the beating heart of the town.

**HOW TO GET THERE** The closest international airport is about 66 miles away, near Guanajuato. You can fly from New York on Continental Airlines or American Airlines to the Guanajuato-León Airport with a stop in Texas. Fares in mid-May were \$575 to \$600 for a round trip in early June. Several airlines offer nonstop flights from Los Angeles, for \$371 to \$431 in June. Several van services at the airport will take you to San Miguel for about \$70, among them Reyna Polanco Tours, (52-415) 152-4193, Julian Cartas, (52-415)152-0079, or Rafael Tovar, (52-415) 152-7196. There are also several direct bus services to carry you from the airport to Querétaro, where you can hire a taxi (\$45 for up to three people) to go on to San Miguel.

**HOW TO GET AROUND** There is very little in San Miguel de Allende that cannot be reached on foot, and one of its pleasures is strolling around its streets. But if your feet are tired, or if you want to make a trip outside town, taxis are plentiful and cheap. You can usually find one at the Jardín Principal, or at a number of other taxi stands in the town center. Ask the locals where to find the closest sitio, as taxi stands are called. The usual flat fare within the town center is about \$1.35.