

WORLD TRAVEL

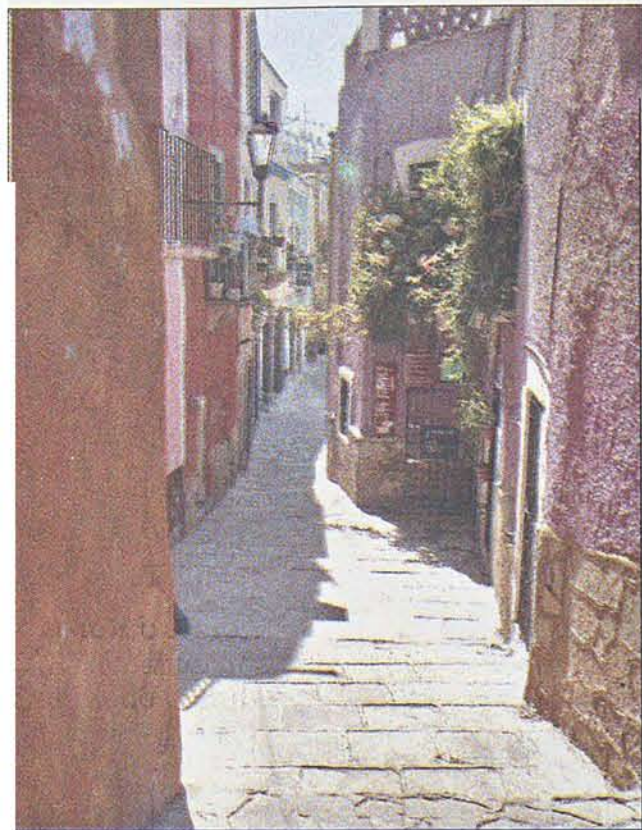
Discovering Guanajuato

A Mexican city hard to pronounce, and hard to forget

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GUANAJUATO, MEXICO



Costumed dancers perform on the Plaza de La Paz.



Pedestrian walkways separate historic buildings.



Basilica of Our Lady of Guanajuato, on La Plaza de La Paz.

After a day or two in this colonial city, located in central Mexico, visitors from El Norte stop checking their watches. As the sun dips behind the trees on the Jardín de La Unión Plaza, residents — and tourists — take a break from their daily routines to gather on the plaza, sit in the shade or visit with friends and neighbours.

Here are the same two gray-haired ladies we saw yesterday, sisters walking arm in arm, nodding hello. Behind them come fresh-faced mothers pushing strollers and schoolgirls in uniforms eating ice cream cones. Leathery-faced old men sit together, talking and laughing.

"I don't know a soul here but I feel at home," said Christina Cisneros, an American studying Spanish at the university. Cisneros moved her book bag so that visitors could share a bench facing the Teatro Juárez, a restored neoclassical theatre and the city's most elegant building.

"The locals sit here in the shade," she said. "The university students sit over there, on the theatre steps, to watch the mimes. They're waiting for the *estudiantinas* (strolling street musicians) to arrive. If you wait, you'll get to hear them sing."

On the opposite corner, a photographer in rumpled shorts and sandals aimed a camera in our direction. As tourist, we're recognisable anywhere. What you won't see many of in Guanajuato, a silver mining town founded in 1548, are senior communities and retirees from the Snow Belt looking for warm weather and affordable living.

Not that some Americans — count us among them — haven't been tempted by the city's cobblestone streets, shaded courtyards and red tile roofs. Guanajuato, a state capital, has a world-class university and a reputation for its dedication to the performing arts. But the 6,500-foot elevation and the mountainous terrain make the town a poor choice for people with unsteady legs and arthritic hips.

In 1988, after Unesco added Guanajuato to its list of World Heritage Sites, the state government funded new restoration projects and designed a marketing campaign to encourage tourism. But with a tongue twister of a name — "Guanajuato", meaning "place of the frogs" — the project has had a slow start.

Instead, visitors discover this town by accident. Some package tours include the town on the traditional "silver cities" itinerary, a trip that also visits Taxco, Zacatecas and San Luis Potosí.

Other visitors are here to attend the International Cervantes Festival, held annually in October. A two-week event, the festival draws thousands of



Photos by STEVE HAGGERTY/COLORWORLD

Spires of the La Parroquia Church and crenellated roof of the University of Guanajuato, at centre.

attendees for programmes that have grown from dramatic skits and literary readings, to seminars, theatre productions, operas, jazz performances, orchestral music and ballet.

"Where else can you hear performances by world-famous professional singers and musicians for US\$5-20 a ticket?" asked Maria del Rufio Ruiz-Velasco, director of tourism for the state of Guanajuato. Hoping to increase tourism, Ruiz-Velasco was promoting nonstop flights from the United 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 in Los Angeles convinced her of the need for English-speaking guides.

Since bilingual signs are rare, understanding what you're seeing is hit or miss. Remedy this with a guidebook, such as *Colonial Mexico*, by Chicky and Oz Mallan, a Moon-Avalon publication. And look for several state-produced publications, in English and Spanish, describing attractions and hotels.

Spanish miners first explored Guanajuato around 1526, discovering little gold, but lots of silver. By the time the town was founded, in 1570, 15,000 people lived in houses terraced up the

canyon walls, with streets and plazas linked by stone steps and winding paths.

The really big strike came in 1760 with the discovery of vast quantities of silver at the Valenciana mine. Worked entirely by Chichimeca Indian labourers forced into virtual slavery, the mine was a money pit, producing one-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. Joining a group of 15, we climbed 150 feet down into one of the oldest shafts, climbing down into the gloom on stairs hacked out of the rock. (The mine entrance is northwest of town, on a side road off the Panorámica Highway — Carretera Panorámica — that 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 Valenciana mine — and gold, found in smaller quantities — paid for the Valenciana Church, built in 1788 by the Valenciana mine's owners, the Obregon-Alconcer family. The church, Guanajuato's most beautiful, is a classic example of Churrigueresque architecture. But what Saint Cayetano, to whom the church is dedicated, might have thought about the human cost of building such a place in his name was, of course, irrelevant.

On the lighter side, be sure to visit the city's most unforgettable — and its weirdest — attraction, the Mummy Museum (Museo de Las Momias), which offers a collection of 117 parched cadavers. As the guides tell it, in 1865, when the local cemetery ran out of room, it forced new arrivals into graves beyond the cemetery boundary. The bodies were 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, a Frenchman, stood the bodies up in a nearby outhouse where visitors came to gawk at them, until suddenly someone said, "We could make a business out of this!"

And so they did, displaying the mummies — men, women, children and 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

More INFO

The Tourism Office is open daily, at Plaza de la Paz 14, across from the La Parroquia Church. Or visit www.tripadvisor.com. Email to info@guanajuato-travel.com.

Airline connections: Book tickets directly to the Leon/Bajo Airport (BJX), or fly through Mexico City. You can also travel from Mexico City by bus, a five-hour drive.

Recommended dining: La Tasca de la Paz: local specialties at the cafe on the Plaza de la Paz, city centre. Casa Valadez: lunch or dinner in a bistro atmosphere, on the Jardín de la Unión Plaza. El Jardín de los Milagros: candlelight dining with Chef Bricio, Calle Alhondiga No. 80.

Hotels:
Hotel Posada Santa Fe: Rooms for two from US\$90. Central location, old but historic home. Email to reservaciones@posadasantafe.com.

Holiday Inn Express: Rooms for two with full breakfast from US\$86.00; it is three miles from the centre. Book with Holiday Inn 800-465-4329 or see www.hotelesmillennium.com.

Quinta Las Acacias: Standard suites for two from US\$185; it is up a steep hill. In the US, call 888-497-4129, in Mexico 52-473-731-1517. See www.quintalascacias.com, or email quintalascacias@prodigy.net.mx.

Hotel San Diego: Rooms for two from US\$80. Historic building in the city centre. Email to sandiego-hoteleria@prodigy.net.mx.

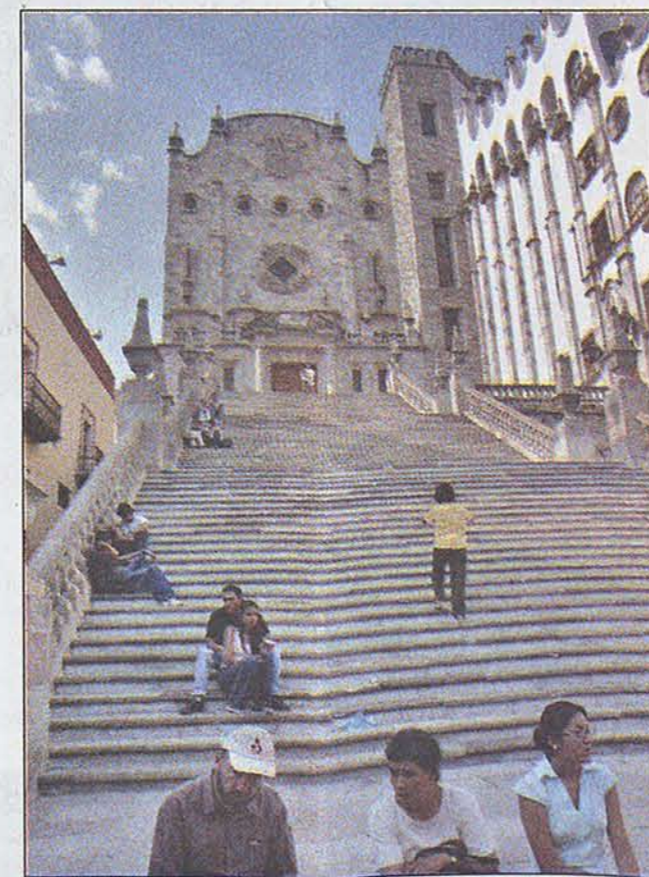
does tend to provoke reflections on mortality.

Guanajuato's other special museum is dedicated to the muralist and painter Diego Rivera 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 collection of 90 of Rivera's smaller works of art including drawings, watercolours and paintings.

But you will have just begun to see the treasure 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 two-story, open-air structure. Shopping for jewellery is also a must, as is Talavera-style pottery.

To do it all, you may have to return. But you'll want to. As Ruiz-Velasco told us, "Guanajuato is hard to pronounce, and hard to forget." TRIBUN MEDIA SERVICES



Students hang out on the steps of the university.