

The New York Times

36 Hours in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico



Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times

Santuario de Atotonilco, just outside San Miguel de Allende. [More Photos »](#)

By JEANNIE RALSTON

San Miguel de Allende is almost 500 years old, and for more than 50 it's been a beloved tourist destination. Nevertheless, it's still possible for newness to wash over this famous Mexican mountain city of snaking cobblestone streets and colonial buildings in delectable fruit-bowl-meets-spice-rack colors (think mango and avocado next to paprika and turmeric). After a spell when some Americans hesitated to travel to their southern neighbor, San Miguel — a Unesco World Heritage site — feels fresh again, with rebooted energy from an influx of sophisticates far younger than the expatriate retirees traditionally associated with the town. Stores focus on regional designers and artists,

and restaurants specialize in the locally grown — organic produce and livestock from surrounding farms that thrive year-round in the eternal spring climate at roughly 6,100 feet. Lovely as always and livelier than ever, it's a new old San Miguel.

Multimedia



[The Famous Mountain City of San Miguel de Allende, Mexico](#)



[San Miguel de Allende, Mexico](#)

FRIDAY

4

p.m.

1. In the Sister 'hood

The most famous building in town is the multispired pink Parroquia church, which stands guard over the town's heart, the Jardín. But the most beautiful building is the nearly 250-year-old Centro Cultural Ignacio Ramírez "El Nigromante," a k a Bellas Artes on Hernandez Macias. First a convent, then an art college, it's now a newly renovated community center and art gallery. It's easy to imagine nuns scurrying off to Mass under soaring bóveda ceilings and through the large interior courtyard that is surrounded by two stories of arched colonnades. Stone stairs dip in the middle from centuries of footfalls. Though exhibitions rotate through five gallery spaces, the permanent art is the most impressive — frescoes of pueblo life by one of Mexico's finest muralists, David Siqueiros. Free. (Centro Cultural Ignacio Ramírez, Hernández Macías 75; elnigromante.bellasartes.gob.mx)

5:30p.m.

2. Choose Your View

La Azotea (Umarán 6; azoteasanmiguel.com), a sleek rooftop bar off the Jardín, offers a two-for-one special: two of San Miguel's most extraordinary views from one spot. To the east is a crane-your-neck close-up of the Parroquia; the ideal perch at sunset, however, is the outside patio, where you can sip your margarita (70 pesos, or \$5.60 at 12.45 pesos to the dollar) while watching the light disappear over a panorama of the Guanajuato Mountains in the distance.

7:30p.m.

3. Piece of Peru

Leche de tigre figures prominently in the delights of the beautiful La Parada (Recreo 94; laparadasma.com). That's the name for the citrus concoction that "cooks" the unusual ceviches (fish, corn and sweet potatoes, for instance) at this popular bistro, which a Peruvian Cordon Bleu-trained chef and her fiancé opened last year. The snug dining room with a fireplace flows onto a patio surrounded by an ivy-draped stone wall (heat lamps keep the chill away on cool nights). Other memorable dishes are the pork ribs and the gnocchi with shrimp and pecans, and don't leave without a pisco mojito; 550 pesos for two.

9:30p.m.

4. The Fat Mermaid Awaits

Traditionally, women, members of the military and police officers aren't allowed in a cantina — a down-and-dirty version of a gentlemen's club. But everyone's welcome at La Sirena Gorda (Calle Barranca; 52-415-110-0007), which retains the hole-in-the-wall look of a cantina — swinging doors, dim light, faded paint on the walls — but with a more refined bar (and fewer chances of a fight). Also known by its original name, La Manantial, which is painted on the front, this is where you want to nestle in for the late-evening hours, drinking the signature ginger or tamarind margaritas, for 60 pesos each.

SATURDAY

9a.m.

5. Start in the Middle

Situated right in the Jardín, El Rincon de Don Tomas (Portal de Guadalupe 2; 52-415-152-3780) provides front-and-center seats as the city wakes up. Sit outside under the arched portico and watch street sweepers work with twig brooms under the carefully trimmed laurel trees as a newspaper vendor calls out in a baritone near-yodel, trying to attract buyers. Dig into wonderful traditional breakfasts like huevos otomi (scrambled eggs in a bean stew) and huevos divorciado (one fried egg with green salsa, the other with red); 270 pesos for two.

10a.m.

6. On the Hunt

Treasures can be found on every San Miguel street, but with limited time for exploration, you need a cheat sheet. You'll hit the mother lode at Mixta (Pila Seca 3; mixtasanmiguel.com); along with fun trinkets and handicrafts, Mixta carries furniture (elegant log stools by Carey Berkus Designs sell for 3,800 pesos) and fashions (hand-embroidered dresses and tops by the San Miguel designer Almudena, 800 to 2,200 pesos). Another local fashionista, Laura Reyes, sells tapestry coats and vests made from coffee-bean burlap bags (965 pesos) at her boutique, Altelier (Relox 79; opens at 11 a.m.). Load up on rebozos, or shawls (starting at 500 pesos) and other woven goods from 35 Oaxacan villages at Juana Carta Textile Art (Recreo 5-A), and if you want hand-painted pottery, you don't have to go all the way to Dolores Hidalgo (the traditional ceramics center). The most beautiful designs can be found right in San Miguel at Quinta Irma (decorative serving platter, 1,400 pesos). Camino Silvestre (Correo 43; caminosilvestre.com) started off selling handblown glass bird feeders (480 to 750 pesos), but has evolved into a smart home furnishings store. San Miguel is a fabulous place for jewelry; for the most imaginative designs head to UMA by Sami (Cuna de Allende 11; opens at 11 a.m.). At a store called Recreo (Recreo 26; recreosanmiguel.com), the traditional Mexican serape gets a graceful update — made from fine fabrics like cashmere and linen, with some trimmed in beads or fur (starting at 5,700 pesos).

1p.m.

7. Shack Chic

San Miguel's most-buzzed-about new restaurant, De Temporada (Camino a San Miguel Viejo 8; de-temporada.com), brings new meaning to the farm-to-table concept. The table is literally at the farm, 10 minutes from centro, overlooking fields of organic produce. The humble, colorful shed built by the young owners (he's American; she's Mexican) from wood pallets gives the air of a picnic, but this is not your ordinary picnic food. Dishes like the spicy papaya and octopus salad and quail eggs on mustard butter with arugula purée indicate a mature but playful hand in the kitchen. A fine afternoon in the country is finished with a divine pear and vanilla bean panna cotta; 300 pesos for two.

4p.m.

8. Costume Party

Some resemble deranged Wile E. Coyotes; others look like dentally challenged Gandalfs. But all 500 of the masks at the Other Face of Mexico museum (Cuesta de San Jose 32; casadelacuesta.com) are fascinating. The owners, Bill and Heidi LeVasseur, have spent years traveling through rural Mexico, collecting masks that have been used in traditional dance ceremonies. Buy a mask of your own at the connecting folk art gallery at prices from 900 to 25,000 pesos. Visits by appointment; the 50-peso suggested entrance fee goes to a children's charity.

8p.m.

9. On the Foodie Map

An international culinary star has landed in San Miguel. Enrique Olvera has won numerous accolades at his Mexico City restaurant, Pujol. Now he's brought his revamp of Mexican cuisine two and a half hours north to Moxi (Hotel Matilda, Aldama 53; moxi.com.mx), part of the stylish Hotel Matilda. Standout dishes include pescado al pastor (fish of the day with pineapple purée and serranos) and the cactus salad. Equally striking is the décor: velvet banquettes under low-hanging lampshades and mirrored walls; 1,200 pesos for two.

10p.m.

10. Martini Heaven

After a stop in the Jardín to listen to the mariachis croon, head to Martínez (Mesones 80; 52-415-152-4343) for a stronger beat. If you're lucky you'll catch a guest D.J. or a live performance. Choose from more than 20 martinis with ingredients like cucumber juice and watermelon, and watch mixologists in white shirts and black bow ties wield their shakers like maracas. Martinis are 90 to 120 pesos.

SUNDAY

8:30a.m.

11. Green Dawn

The juices at the sunny cafe at Vía Orgánica (a nonprofit organic farm and education center; Calle Margarito Ledesma 2; viaorganica.org) are squeezed from the produce in the adjoining grocery store: carrot, apple, guyabano, orange (of course) and whatever's fresh — a celery-basil brew, maybe? Pair your juice of choice with homemade pastries or a full breakfast; 160 pesos for two.

10a.m.

12. God's Graphic Novel

Baroque Mexican churches are not unusual, but the 250-year-old Santuario de Atotonilco (Atotonilco; santuariodeatotonilco.org), about nine miles from San Miguel, is over-the-top ornate, a dizzying visual cacophony. Nearly every inch of wall and ceiling space is filled with detailed biblical scenes and passages, which is why the church is known as Mexico's Sistine Chapel and was named a Unesco World Heritage site in 2008. The sanctuary, in the main plaza of Atotonilco, is also a pilgrimage site for penitents, who self-flagellate to atone for sins. Note the rope flails sold by vendors outside the church.

Noon

13. Steam Scene

Atotonilco is surrounded by thermal springs, and on your way back toward San Miguel stop for a soak at Escondido Place (entry, 100 pesos; Caraterra Dolores Hidalgo, Km. 10; escondidoplace.com). There are several outdoor pools, but the showpiece is the series of techados (bathing houses with bóveda ceilings). The 100-degree water is piped from the ground into one techado, then flows down stairs to fill a second and then onto a third — cooling off slightly as it travels. For the steamiest, dreamiest end to the weekend, loll a while in the hot house.