

MEXICO

SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE'S CHARMS CAPTIVATE VISITORS

BY LISA LUBIN

ften called the prettiest city in Mexico, San Miguel de Allende is straight out of a colonial storybook with its cobblestone streets, church bells clanging in the distance and fuchsia bougainvillea spilling over terra-cotta walls. Situated in the central highlands, about three hours from Mexico City, this small city is big on charm, character and sophistication. And now it's topping many travel lists as one of the world's best places to visit.

The art, culture and affordability make this city a standout, and a growing expat community — roughly 10 percent of the city's population is from the U.S., Canada and Europe — proves it's not only a popular place to visit but also to live.

"It reminds me of San Francisco with so much to offer, but it's so much cheaper," said Lyn Knox, a retired schoolteacher from Kansas City. "It feels like a combination of being retired and being on vacation all the time."

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"There's something about the people this city attracts," said Faith Fuller, a documentary filmmaker who moved to San Miguel de Allende about five years ago. "They've traveled the world, are very successful, but they've chosen to make San Miguel de Allende their home."

The city's temperate climate makes it suitable to visit year-round, and the multitude of things to do includes art classes, musical events, horseback riding and visiting hot springs.

Founded in 1542, the city is now a UNESCO World Heritage site, and a quick stroll around the wellpreserved historic center, filled with buildings from the 17th and 18th centuries, demonstrates why. Right in the heart is the pink Parroquia de San Miguel Arcángel or main parish church, with its gothic spires punctuating

the sky straight up from the main plaza, El Jardin. The old town is a charming maze of narrow streets lined with stone and stucco homes painted in terra-cotta red, burnt orange and subdued yellow.

WHERE TO STAY

At the contemporary and artfilled Hotel Matilda, rooms start around \$400. Named best city hotel in Mexico by Travel + Leisure last year, this

boutique hotel has a stunning light-filled lobby atrium with a clubby yet modern feel. Books line the walls, and the centerpiece is a striking, three-story, mixedmedia painting by Mexico City artist Bosco Sodi. Other contemporary art pieces are displayed throughout the hotel, including a piece by famed painter Diego Rivera.

The 32 rooms are a mix of white marble, fluffy white linens and classic furniture. A lush pool area, spa and fitness center are out back.

At the hotel's highly acclaimed Moxi — a restaurant partnership with Mexican chef Enrique Olvera, who many consider to be the best chef in Mexico — you can indulge in a six-course tasting menu or choose a la carte dishes of modern Mexican fare to eat inside the small, softly lit space with banquettes and a white and blue painted wood-plank ceiling.

Other top choices i nclude the new L'Otel (suites start at \$375), a former mansion turned modern white-on-white hotel with just 10 suites inside Doce-18 Concept House, a mixed-use building with galleries, shops and a modern food hall; and the classically luxurious Rosewood San Miguel (\$490, starting rates), which has more of a resort feel, with its larger grounds and not-to-be-missed Luna Rooftop Tapas Bar, a lovely place to see a sunset over

WHAT TO SEE AND DO

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Near the historic center, duck into Instituto Allende and Escuela de Bellas Artes. Centro Cultural Ignacio Ramírez "El Nigromante," known locally as Bellas Artes,

> is a beautiful former monastery that was converted into a fine arts school. Don't miss the murals of Pedro Martínez, plus the unfinished mural by celebrated Mexican painter David Alfaro Siqueiros. There's also a museum, an auditorium, two art galleries and a charming courtyard café. Founded in 1950, Instituto Allende offers courses and degrees in visual and fine arts, which are recognized by most North American universities. You

also can enroll in "lifelong learning" workshops, which are taught in English, and include Spanish learning, jewelry-making, weaving and watercolor.

For an afternoon trip, hop in a taxi and head just 15 minutes from town to the delightful San Lucas Winery. Enjoy brunch at the main restaurant housed in a stone lodge-like building with cozy fireplaces. Making about 35,000 bottles a year, the boutique winery offers daily tours and tastings given by their dynamic chief winemaker, Mailen Obon, who is from Argentina.

When you're ready to get out into the countryside for a bit of adventure, there's horseback riding, ATV tours and hot air balloon rides. After that, head to the hot springs at La Gruta Spa to soak in the warm, mineral-





ntrance to the Casa Dragones House, formerly the site of historic stables in the 17th century. The property is now the site of a luxury tequila production company.

WHERE TO EAT

With more than 350 restaurants and several expansive markets in San Miguel de Allende, you'll never run out of mole, tacos or tequila to sample. At night, there's nothing like sitting at an open-air cafe with a glass of wine under the stars.

Just opened a few months ago by Spanish chef Jesus Manuel Calvo, romantic rooftop Atrio is across from the main church and has terrific views and international dishes. Nearby Quince also has a stunning rooftop and serves modern Mexican fare. Try one of their fantastic cocktails from the bar or from the tableside gin and tonic cart. For an urban-chic feel, try Bovine, from rising star chef Paul Bentley of Magno Brasserie in Guadalajara. While known for its meat dishes, the fish and vegetable dishes are standouts, too. Donnie Masterton's The Restaurant is very popular with the expat crowd. Try to snag a table near the fountain in the front patio and enjoy global

comfort food such as spaghetti and meatballs, mushroom risotto, chops and steaks.

For a great overview of the old town and the burgeoning food scene, take the food tour with San Miguel Food Tours. The tour offers a taste of food from at least six restaurants, including popular La Parada, a modern Peruvian spot known for great ceviche and ambiance, and Jacinto 1930, a newer eatery with innovative Mexican fare, plus a few traditional Mexican spots for flavorful cochinita pibil (slow-roasted pork) and mole enchiladas.

WHERE TO SHOP

Visitors can explore most of the city on foot, wandering its quaint streets while browsing for handicrafts and embroidered clothing. Stroll through the Mercado de Artesanias, which sells a wide variety of pottery, hand-embroidered textiles, silver

jewelry and metal star lanterns. Many high-end boutiques can be found scattered throughout the old town. Mixta (Pila Seca 3, Centro) offers a mix of unusual home decor items, clothing and jewelry. Popular with celebrities and fashionistas, Virgins, Saints, and Angels sells jewelry pieces handcrafted in San Miguel. They have a small boutique inside Cafe Rama (Calle Nueva 7, Centro) or a showroom by appointment only (they also sell at Club Tattoo in Las Vegas). The serape, also known as a shawl or poncho, has its origins in this area. At Recreo San Miguel (Recreo 26, Centro) each garment is individually designed to combine traditional and modern elements, and is handmade with luxurious fabrics such as silk, wool and cashmere. About a 15-minute walk from the center, Fabrica La Aurora is a former textile factory turned into a vibrant, modern space housing galleries, design stores, artist studios (with classes) and boutiques.

Do a tequila tasting of Casa Dragones, a luxury, boutique brand co-founded by Bob Pittman, the creator of MTV and chief executive of iHeartMedia Inc. and by Bertha González Nieves — the first woman ever named a tequila master by the Mexican government. One of Oprah's "favorite things," the spirit is made exclusively in small batches, each bottle handcrafted from pure, lead-free crystal and hand-numbered and signed. Try it at the reservations-only tasting room at Doce-18 Concept House or the even more exclusive 17th century, private home which housed the former stables for the battalion Dragones, an elite cavalry that helped lead Mexico to independence.

To learn more about San Miguel de Allende, go to visitsanmiguel.travel.

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