

# Mexico: The Place You Thought You Knew | The Scriptorium Daily: Middlebrow

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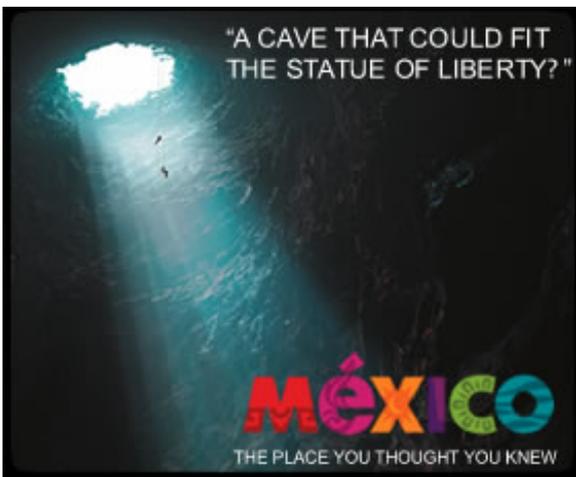


I've been to some fifty countries, and one question I always get asked is: "What is your favorite?" That's a tough one to answer, because it depends what you're looking for. But if you want the total package: great people, food, architecture, history, culture, nature, arts, etc., then I'd have to say Mexico is one of my top five favorite countries in the world (the other four being Italy, Japan, Brazil, and South Africa). It often surprises Americans when I say this, because they often just

think of Mexico as being dirty and crime-ridden. That's probably because they only think of Tijuana—but that's like foreigners coming to the most backwater part of the U.S. and thinking that the whole country is like that. The drug violence is mainly along the border towns. But (and this is just a touristy-level comment), I have always had the best vacations in Mexico (in fact I'm here right now—I've spent two of my last three Easter vacations here). I realize there are many other layers to the country, but it is a great place to visit.

There recently has been an ad campaign entitled, "Mexico: The Place You Thought You Knew." And for once, an ad campaign is completely correct. Around Los Angeles, I've seen their billboards that say "A cave that could fit the Statue of Liberty?" (they're referring to the Cave of Swallows in central Mexico) or "A colonial city on a beach?" (they're referring to the city of Mazatlan, often called "The Pearl of the Pacific"; for great colonial architecture, try the city of Oaxaca as well). In fact, Google or YouTube "Mexico: The Place You Thought You Knew" and watch their videos, it will change all your stereotypes of the country. They highlight Mexico City (which has a million cool things to do, but especially the best anthropology museum I've ever seen); the Mayan pyramid of Chichen Itza (one of the Seven New Wonders of the World); the cenotes (huge underwater diving holes); the Mayan Riviera (not only Chichen Itza but Tulum, Palenque, and other archaeological treasures—the Zapotec capital of Monte Alban is equally spectacular); the pyramids of Teotihuacan (the third largest in the world after the ones in Egypt and the one in Puebla, Mexico, which is highlighted in the picture at the top of this blog); and food is different in every region of Mexico (it's not all just tacos and burritos)! Have you ever tried the dozens of flavors of mole (chocolate sauce—did you know that chocolate originated in Mexico)? Or how about churros filled with *cajeta* (the Mexican dark semisweet caramel), or *tlayudas* (like a Mexican pizza using a tostada as the crust), or *chilaquiles rojos con pollo* (tortilla chips & chicken w/ red sauce), or Aztec soup (avocado, Oaxacan cheese, tortilla strips, sour cream, in a delicious chicken broth)! Oh, and have a Mexican Coke—they still make it with real cane sugar rather than high fructose corn syrup as they do in the States, so it's tastes much better. Have you ever tried the dozens of flavors of mole (chocolate sauce—did you know that chocolate originated in Mexico)? The cathedrals are amazing architecturally, and the

Catholicism is interesting to see their local expressions of the faith. Also there are tons of great water sport opportunities (cliff diving, water skiing, boat rides, parasailing—it's like Hawaii but much closer and much cheaper). The beaches are unparalleled—they have thousands of miles of pristine coastline, much more than the United States. There are plenty of natural reserves too. You can go hiking in the rainforests, spelunking, and birdwatching if you're a nature lover. And their cultural festivals are great—especially see the Ballet Folklorico in Mexico City where they show you indigenous types of dances from every region of Mexico. You'll see that Mexico is by no means homogeneous.



Another great thing about Mexico: it's close. You can drive there from L.A., even just to do a day trip. I go down to Mexico several times a year to serve at an orphanage in Ensenada. I have gone down just to get tacos (real ones, not the kind you get at Taco Bell! Real ones don't have hard shells, don't have cheese or lettuce or tomatoes, and may be filled with adventurous things like tongue or tripe or brain, in addition to the normal fillings of pork and beef and chicken!). Fish tacos abound in Baja California and are ten times better than anything you'll find at Rubio's or Wahoo's. You can even get variations on the fish taco, like shrimp tacos or even manta ray tacos! And here's an optimistic note: I have never once gotten sick from any food in Mexico—and I've eaten plenty of 'street food.'

OK, I should stop there. Basically, if you go to Mexico, don't just stay in the posh resorts of Cancun, Acapulco, or Cabo San Lucas. Get out and about to see the forests and indigenous archaeological treasures, try the local food, and above all meet the people! Latin people are some of the friendliest and most hospitable people you'll ever meet, and you need to meet them on their own turf to really see what they're like. Yep...Mexico is one of my top five favorite countries in the world. Go figure.