

Planning Your Trip to Southern Pacific Mexico

This chapter tells you everything you need to know before you go: Customs and passport requirements, currency details, package tours, getting there, getting around, and more.

1 The Region at a Glance

Though Pacific Mexico may be uniform in its often exotic tropical beaches and jungle scenery, the resorts along this coast couldn't be more varied in personality. From high-energy seaside cities to pristine, primitive coves, this is the Mexico that first lured vacationers around the globe.

Spanish conquistadors were attracted to this coast for its numerous sheltered coves and protected bays from which they set sail to the Far East. Years later, Mexico's first tourists found the same elements appealing, but for different reasons—they were seeking escape in the warm sunshine, and stretches of blue coves nicely complemented the heady tropical landscape of the adjacent coastal mountains.

Time at the beach is generally the top priority for most travelers to this part of Mexico. Each of the beach towns detailed in this book is capable of satisfying your sand-and-surf needs for a few days, or even a week or more. You could also combine several coastal resorts into a single trip, or mix the coastal with the colonial, say, with visits to both Puerto Escondido and Oaxaca City, or Acapulco and Taxco.

The resorts have distinct personalities, but you get the requisite beach wherever you go, whether you choose a city that offers virtually every luxury imaginable or a rustic town providing little more than basic (but charming) seaside relaxation.

Over the years, a diverse selection of resorts has evolved in the area. Each is distinct, yet together they offer an ideal attraction for almost any type of traveler. The region encompasses the country's

oldest, largest, and most decadent resort, **Acapulco**, one-time playground of Hollywood's biggest celebrities. Of all the resorts, Acapulco has the best airline connections, the broadest range of late-night entertainment, the most savory dining, and the widest range of accommodations—from hillside villas and luxury resort hotels to modest inns on the beach and in the city center.

The resort of **Ixtapa** and its neighboring seaside village, **Zihuatanejo**, offer beach-bound tourist attractions, but on a smaller, newer, and less hectic scale than Acapulco. They attract travelers for their complementary contrasts—international high-rise hotels in one, plus the local color and leisurely pace of the other. To get here, many people fly into Acapulco, then make the 4- to 5-hour trip north (by rental car or bus), although one can fly directly into Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo, as well.

South of Acapulco, along the Oaxacan Coast, lie the small, laid-back beach towns of **Puerto Escondido** and **Puerto Angel**, both on picturesque bays bordered by relaxed communities. The region's most upscale resort community, **Bahías de Huatulco**, couples an unspoiled, slow-paced nature with the kind of modern infrastructure and luxurious facilities you'd find in the country's more crowded megaresorts. Nine bays encompass 36 beaches—many are isolated stretches of pure white sand—and countless inlets and coves. Huatulco has become increasingly known for its ecotourism attractions; you won't find much in the way of shopping or nightlife, but for most visitors, the clear blue waters and quiet, restful beaches are reason enough to come.

From Acapulco a road leads inland to **Taxco**, a colonial city that clings to the side of a mountain and is famed for its hundreds of silver shops. And verdant **Cuernavaca**, known as the land of eternal spring, has gained a reputation for exceptional spa facilities, while also boasting a wealth of cultural and historic attractions.

The whole region is graced with a stunning coastline and tropical mountains. Outside the urban centers, however, paved roads are few, and these two states remain among Mexico's poorest, despite decades-long influx of U.S. tourist dollars (and many other currencies).

2 Visitor Information

The **Mexico Tourism Board** (☎ 800/446-3942) is an excellent source for general information; you can request brochures on the country and get answers to the most common questions from the

Destination: Mexico—Red Alert Checklist

- Did you check to see if any travel advisories have been issued by the U.S. State Department (www.travel.state.gov) regarding your destination?
- Do you have your passport or official ID? If traveling in a coastal area, did you pack insect repellent? Sunblock? A hat? Sunglasses? A sweater or jacket?
- Do you need to book tour, restaurant, or travel reservations in advance?
- Did you make sure attractions and activities that interest you are operating? Some attractions, such as seasonal nature tours, sell out quickly.
- If you purchased traveler's checks, have you recorded the check numbers and stored the documentation separately from the checks?
- Did you pack your camera and an extra set of camera batteries, and purchase enough film?
- Do you have a safe, accessible place to store money?
- Did you bring emergency drug prescriptions and extra glasses and/or contact lenses?
- Do you know your daily ATM withdrawal limit?
- Do you have your credit card personal identification numbers (PINs)?
- If you have an e-ticket, do you have documentation?
- Do you know the address and phone number of your country's embassy?
- Did you leave a copy of your itinerary with someone at home?

exceptionally well-trained, knowledgeable staff. More information (15,000 pages' worth, they say) about Mexico is available on the Mexican Tourist Promotion Council's website: www.visitmexico.com.

The **U.S. State Department** (☎ 888/407-4747 or 202/501-4444; fax 202/647-1488; www.travel.state.gov) offers a **Consular Information Sheet** on Mexico with safety, medical, driving, and general travel information gleaned from reports by its offices in Mexico, and consistently updated. The **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Hot Line** (☎ 800/311-3435 or 404/639-3534; www.cdc.gov) is a source of medical information for travelers

to Mexico and elsewhere. For travelers to Mexico and Central America, the number with recorded messages is ☎ **877/394-8747**. Information is also available at www.cdc.gov/travel. The U.S. State Department website (see above) also offers medical information for Americans traveling abroad and a list of air ambulance services.

MEXICAN GOVERNMENT TOURIST OFFICES

Mexico has foreign tourist offices (MGTO) in the United States and Canada. They include the following:

The **Mexican Government Tourist Board** has offices in major North American cities, in addition to the main office in Mexico City (☎ **55/5278-4200**). In the **United States**: Chicago (☎ **312/228-0517**, ext. 14), Houston (☎ **713/772-2581**, ext. 105, or 713/772-3819), Los Angeles (☎ **310/282-9112**), Miami (☎ **786/621-2909**), and New York (☎ **212/308-2110**).

In **Canada**: 1 Place Ville-Marie, Suite 1931, Montreal, Quebec H3B 2C3 (☎ **514/871-1052**); 2 Bloor St. W., Suite 1502, Toronto, Ontario M4W 3E2 (☎ **416/925-0704**); and 999 W. Hastings, Suite 1110, Vancouver, British Columbia V6C 2W2 (☎ **604/669-2845**). The Embassy is located at 1500-45 O'Connor St., Ottawa, Ontario K1P 1A4 (☎ **613/233-8988**; fax 613/235-9123).

3 Entry Requirements & Customs

For information on how to get a passport, go to the “Fast Facts: Mexico” section, later in this chapter—the websites listed provide downloadable passport applications as well as the current fees for processing passport applications. For an up-to-date country-by-country listing of passport requirements around the world, go to the “Foreign Entry Requirements” Web page of the U.S. State Department at <http://travel.state.gov>.

DOCUMENTS

All travelers to Mexico are required to present **photo identification** and **proof of citizenship**, such as a valid passport, naturalization papers, or an original birth certificate with a raised seal, along with a driver's license or official ID, such as a state or military issued ID. Driver's licenses and permits, voter registration cards, affidavits and similar documents are not sufficient to prove citizenship for readmission into the United States. If the last name on the birth certificate is different from your current name, bring a photo identification card *and* legal proof of the name change, such as the original marriage license or certificate. **Note:** Photocopies are *not* acceptable.

Effective January 23, 2007, all U.S. citizens traveling by **air** to Mexico are required to have a valid passport to enter or reenter the United States. As early as January 1, 2008, U.S. citizens traveling between the United States and Mexico by **land** or **sea** may also be required to present a valid U.S. passport or other documents as determined by the Department of Homeland Security.

Safeguard your passport in an inconspicuous, inaccessible place like a money belt, and keep a copy of the critical pages with your passport number in a separate place. If you lose your passport, visit the nearest consulate of your native country as soon as possible for a replacement.

You must carry a **Mexican Tourist Permit (FMT)**, the equivalent of a tourist visa, which Mexican border officials issue, free of charge, after proof of citizenship is accepted. Airlines generally provide the necessary forms aboard your flight to Mexico. The FMT is more important than a passport, so guard it carefully. If you lose it, you may not be permitted to leave until you can replace it—a bureaucratic hassle that can take anywhere from a few hours to a week.

The FMT can be issued for up to 180 days. Sometimes officials don't ask but just stamp a time limit, so be sure to say "6 months," or at least twice as long as you intend to stay. If you decide to extend your stay, you may request that additional time be added to your FMT from an official immigration office in Mexico.

Note that children under age 18 traveling without parents or with only one parent must have a notarized letter from the absent parent or parents authorizing the travel.

LOST DOCUMENTS

To replace a **lost passport**, contact your embassy or nearest consular agent (see "Fast Facts: Mexico," later in this chapter). You must establish a record of your citizenship and also fill out a form requesting another Mexican Tourist Permit if it, too, was lost. Without the **tourist permit** you can't leave the country, and without an affidavit affirming your passport request and citizenship, you may have problems at Customs when you get home. So it's important to clear everything up *before* trying to leave. Mexican Customs may, however, accept the police report of the loss of the tourist permit and allow you to leave.

CUSTOMS ALLOWANCES

When you enter Mexico, Customs officials will be tolerant as long as you have no illegal drugs or firearms. Tourists are allowed to bring in their personal effects duty-free. A laptop computer, camera equipment,

and sports equipment that could feasibly be used during your stay are also allowed. The underlying guideline is: Don't bring anything that looks as if it's meant to be resold in Mexico. **U.S. citizens** entering Mexico by the land border can bring in gifts worth a value of up to \$50 duty-free, except for alcohol and tobacco products. Those entering Mexico by air or sea can bring in gifts worth a value of up to \$300 duty-free. The **Mexican Customs** (*Aduana*) website is www.aduanas.sat.gob.mx/webadunet/body.htm.

Returning U.S. citizens who have been away for at least 48 hours are allowed to bring back, once every 30 days, \$800 worth of merchandise duty-free. You'll be charged a flat rate of 4% duty on the next \$1,000 worth of purchases. Any dollar amount beyond that is dutiable at whatever rates apply. On mailed gifts, the duty-free limit is \$200. Be sure to have your receipts or purchases handy to expedite the declaration process. Note: If you owe duty, you are required to pay on your arrival in the United States, either by cash, personal check, government or traveler's check, or money order, and in some locations, a Visa or MasterCard.

To avoid having to pay duty on foreign-made personal items you owned before you left on your trip, bring along a bill of sale, insurance policy, jeweler's appraisal, or receipts of purchase. Or you can register items that can be readily identified by a permanently affixed serial number or marking—think laptop computers, cameras, and CD players—with Customs before you leave. Take the items to the nearest Customs office or register them with Customs at the airport from which you're departing. You'll receive, at no cost, a Certificate of Registration, which allows duty-free entry for the life of the item.

With some exceptions, you cannot bring fresh fruits and vegetables into the United States. For specifics on what you can bring back, download the invaluable free pamphlet *Know Before You Go* online at www.cbp.gov. (Click on "Travel," and then click on "Know Before You Go! Online Brochure.") Or contact the **U.S. Customs & Border Protection (CBP)**, 1300 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20229 (☎ 877/287-8667) and request the pamphlet.

For a clear summary of Canadian rules, write for the booklet *I Declare*, issued by the **Canada Border Services Agency** (☎ 800/461-9999 in Canada, or 204/983-3500; www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca).

For information on U.K. rules, contact **HM Customs & Excise** at ☎ 0845/010-9000 (from outside the U.K., ☎ 020/8929-0152), or consult their website at www.hmrc.gov.uk.

For Australians, a helpful brochure available from Australian consulates or Customs offices is *Know Before You Go*. For more information, call the **Australian Customs Service** at ☎ **1300/363-263**, or log on to www.customs.gov.au.

For citizens of New Zealand, most questions are answered in a free pamphlet available at New Zealand consulates and Customs offices: *New Zealand Customs Guide for Travellers, Notice no. 4*. For more information, contact **New Zealand Customs**, The Customhouse, 17–21 Whitmore St., Box 2218, Wellington (☎ **04/473-6099** or 0800/428-786; www.customs.govt.nz).

GOING THROUGH CUSTOMS

Mexican Customs inspection has been streamlined. At most points of entry, tourists are requested to press a button in front of what looks like a traffic signal, which alternates on touch between red and green signals. Green light and you go through without inspection; red light and your luggage or car may be inspected briefly or thoroughly. If you have an unusual amount of luggage or an oversize piece, you may be subject to inspection despite the traffic signal routine.

4 Money

The currency in Mexico is the Mexican **peso**. Paper currency comes in denominations of 20, 50, 100, 200, 500, and 1,000 pesos. Coins come in denominations of 1, 2, 5, 10, and 20 pesos and 20 and 50 **centavos** (100 centavos equal 1 peso). The current exchange rate for the U.S. dollar is around 11 pesos; at that rate, an item that costs 11 pesos would be equivalent to US\$1. The prices quoted in this book were converted using an exchange rate of 11 pesos to US\$1 and US\$1.80 to £1.

Getting **change** continues to be a problem in Mexico. Small-denomination bills and coins are hard to come by, so start collecting them early in your trip and continue as you travel. Shopkeepers everywhere seem always to be out of change and small bills; that's doubly true in a market.

Money Matters

The **universal currency sign (\$)** is used to indicate pesos in Mexico. The use of the symbol in this book, however, denotes U.S. currency.

Tips A Few Words about Prices

The peso's value continues to fluctuate—at press time, it was roughly **11 pesos to the dollar**. Also note that Mexico has a **value-added tax of 15%** (*Impuesto de Valor Agregado*, or IVA; pronounced “ee-vah”) on most everything, including restaurant meals, bus tickets, and souvenirs. Always ask to see a printed price sheet and always ask if the tax is included.

Many establishments that deal with tourists, especially in coastal resort areas, quote prices in dollars. To avoid confusion, they use the abbreviations “Dlls.” for dollars and “M.N.” (*moneda nacional*, or national currency) for pesos.

EXCHANGING MONEY

The rate of exchange fluctuates a tiny bit daily, so you probably are better off not exchanging too much of your currency at once. Don't forget, however, to have enough pesos to carry you over a weekend or Mexican holiday, when banks are closed. In general, avoid carrying the US\$100 bill, the bill most commonly counterfeited in Mexico, and therefore the most difficult to exchange, especially in smaller towns. Because small bills and coins in pesos are hard to come by in Mexico, the US\$1 bill is very useful for tipping.

Exchange houses (*casas de cambio*) are generally more convenient than banks because they have more locations and longer hours; the rate of exchange may be the same as a bank or only slightly lower. **Note:** Before leaving a bank or exchange-house window, always count your change in front of the teller before the next client steps up.

Large airports have currency-exchange counters that often stay open whenever flights are arriving or departing. Though convenient, these generally do not offer the most favorable rates.

A hotel's exchange desk commonly pays less favorable rates than banks; however, when the currency is in a state of flux, higher-priced hotels are known to pay *higher* than bank rates, in their effort to attract dollars.

The bottom line: It pays to shop around, but in almost all cases, you receive a better exchange by changing money first, then paying for goods or services, rather than by paying with dollars directly to an establishment.

BANKS & ATMs

Banks in Mexico are rapidly expanding and improving services. They tend to be open weekdays from 9am until 5pm, and often for at least a half-day on Saturday. In larger resorts and cities, they can generally accommodate the exchange of dollars (which used to stop at noon) anytime during business hours. During times when the currency is in flux, a particular bank may not exchange dollars, so check before standing in line. Some, but not all, banks charge a service fee of about 1% to exchange traveler's checks. However, you can pay for most purchases directly with traveler's checks at the establishment's stated exchange rate. Don't even bother with personal checks drawn on a U.S. bank—the bank will wait for your check to clear, which can take weeks, before giving you your money.

In most resorts in Mexico, the use of **ATMs** (automated teller machines) is considered safe—just use the same precautions you would at any ATM. Universal bank cards (such as the Cirrus and PLUS systems) can be used. This is a convenient way to withdraw money and avoid carrying too much with you at any time. The exchange rate is generally more favorable than that at a currency house. Most machines offer Spanish/English menus and dispense pesos, but some offer the option of withdrawing dollars. The **Cirrus** (☎ 800/424-7787; www.mastercard.com) and **PLUS** (☎ 800/843-7587; www.visa.com) networks span the globe; look at the back of your bank card to see which network you're on, then call or check online for ATM locations at your destination. Be sure you know your personal identification number (PIN) before you leave home and be sure to find out your daily withdrawal limit before you depart. Also keep in mind that many banks impose a fee every time a card is used at a different bank's ATM, and that fee can be higher for international transactions (up to \$5 or more) than for domestic ones (where they're rarely more than \$1.50). On top of this, the bank from which you withdraw cash may charge its own fee. To compare banks' ATM fees within the U.S., use www.bankrate.com. For international withdrawal fees, ask your bank.

You can also get cash advances on your credit card at an ATM. Keep in mind that credit card companies try to protect themselves from theft by limiting the funds someone can withdraw outside their home country, so call your credit card company before you leave home. And keep in mind that you'll pay interest from the moment of your withdrawal, even if you pay your monthly bills on time.

TRAVELER'S CHECKS

Traveler's checks are something of an anachronism from the days before the ATM made cash accessible at any time. Traveler's checks used to be the only sound alternative to traveling with dangerously large amounts of cash. They were as reliable as currency, but, unlike cash, could be replaced if lost or stolen.

These days, traveler's checks are less necessary because most cities have 24-hour ATMs that allow you to withdraw small amounts of cash as needed. However, keep in mind that you will likely be charged an ATM withdrawal fee if the bank is not your own, so if you're withdrawing money every day, you might be better off with traveler's checks—provided that you don't mind showing identification every time you want to cash one.

You can buy traveler's checks at most banks. They are offered in denominations of \$20, \$50, \$100, \$500, and sometimes \$1,000. Generally, you'll pay a service charge ranging from 1% to 4%.

The most popular traveler's checks are offered by **American Express** (☎ 800/807-6233 or 800/221-7282 for card holders—this number accepts collect calls, offers service in several foreign languages, and exempts Amex gold and platinum cardholders from the 1% fee); **Visa** (☎ 800/732-1322)—AAA members can obtain Visa checks for a \$9.95 fee (for checks up to \$1,500) at most AAA offices or by calling ☎ 866/339-3378. Call ☎ 800/223-9920 for information on MasterCard traveler's checks.

Be sure to keep a record of the traveler's checks serial numbers separate from your checks in the event that they are stolen or lost. You'll get a refund faster if you know the numbers.

American Express, Thomas Cook, Visa, and MasterCard offer **foreign currency traveler's checks**, useful if you're traveling to one country or to the euro zone; they're accepted at locations where dollar checks may not be.

Another option is the new prepaid traveler's check cards, reloadable cards that work much like debit cards but aren't linked to your checking account. The **American Express Travelers Cheque Card**, for example, requires a minimum deposit, sets a maximum balance, and has a one-time issuance fee of \$14.95. You can withdraw money from an ATM (for a fee of \$2.50 per transaction, not including bank fees), and the funds can be purchased in dollars, euros, or pounds. If you lose the card, your available funds will be refunded within 24 hours.

CREDIT CARDS

Credit cards are another safe way to carry money. They also provide a convenient record of all your expenses, and they generally offer relatively good exchange rates. You can withdraw cash advances from your credit cards at banks or ATMs but high fees make credit-card cash advances a pricey way to get cash. Keep in mind that you'll pay interest from the moment of your withdrawal, even if you pay your monthly bills on time, and most banks assess a 2% fee above the 1% fee charged by Visa or MasterCard or American Express for currency conversion on credit charges. But credit cards still may be the smart way to go when you factor in things like exorbitant ATM fees and higher traveler's check exchange rates (and service fees).

In Mexico Visa, MasterCard, and American Express are the most accepted cards. You'll be able to charge most hotel, restaurant, and store purchases, as well as almost all airline tickets, on your credit card. You generally can't charge gasoline purchases in Mexico. You can get cash advances of several hundred dollars on your card, but there may be a wait of 20 minutes to 2 hours.

Charges will be made in pesos, then converted into dollars by the bank issuing the credit card. Generally you receive the favorable bank rate when paying by credit card. However, be aware that some establishments in Mexico add a 5% to 7% surcharge when you pay with a credit card. This is especially true when using American Express. Many times, advertised discounts will not apply if you pay with a credit card.

5 When to Go

SEASONS

Mexico has two principal travel seasons: high and low. **High season** begins around December 20 and continues to Easter, although in some places high season can begin as early as mid-November. **Low season** begins the day after Easter and continues to mid-December; during low season, prices may drop 20% to 50%. In beach destinations popular with Mexican travelers, such as Acapulco, the prices will revert back to high season during the months of July and August, the traditional national summer vacation period.

Mexico has two main climate seasons as well: **rainy** (May to mid-Oct) and **dry** (mid-Oct to Apr). The rainy season can be of little consequence in the dry, northern region of the country. The Pacific coastal region typically receives tropical showers, which begin

around 4 or 5pm and last a few hours. Though these rains can come on suddenly and be quite strong, they usually end just as fast and cool off the air for the evening. **Hurricane season** particularly affects the southern Pacific coast, especially from June through October. However, if no hurricanes strike, the light, cooling winds, especially from September through November, can make it a perfect time to more comfortably explore the area. Most of coastal Mexico experiences temperatures in the 80s in the hottest months.

MEXICO CALENDAR OF EVENTS

January

New Year's Day (Año Nuevo). National holiday. Parades, religious observances, parties, and fireworks welcome in the new year everywhere. In traditional indigenous communities, new tribal leaders are inaugurated with colorful ceremonies rooted in the pre-Hispanic past. January 1.

Three Kings Day (Día de Reyes), nationwide. Commemorates the Three Kings' bringing of gifts to the Christ Child. Children receive gifts, much like on Christmas in the United States, and families eat a special *Rosca de Reyes* cake, with a small Christ child doll inside. Whoever receives the doll in his or her piece must host a tamales-and-*atole* party the next month. January 6.

February

Candlemass (Día de la Candelaria), nationwide. Music, dances, processions, food, and other festivities lead up to a blessing of seed and candles in a tradition that mixes pre-Hispanic and European traditions marking the end of winter. All those who attended the Three Kings Celebration reunite to share *atole* and tamales at a party hosted by the recipient of the doll found in the Rosca. February 2.

Constitution Day (Día de la Constitución). This national holiday is in honor of the current Mexican constitution, signed in 1917 as a result of the revolutionary war of 1910. It's celebrated through small parades. February 5.

Carnaval. Carnaval takes place the 3 days preceding Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. Transportation and hotels are packed, so it's best to make reservations 6 months in advance and arrive a couple of days ahead of the beginning of celebrations.

Ash Wednesday. The start of Lent and time of abstinence. It's a day of reverence nationwide, but some towns honor it with folk dancing and fairs.

March

Benito Juárez's Birthday. National holiday. Small hometown celebrations countrywide, especially in Juárez's birthplace—Guelatao, Oaxaca. March 21.

April

Holy Week. Celebrates the last week in the life of Christ from Palm Sunday through Easter Sunday with somber religious processions almost nightly, spoofing of Judas, and reenactments of specific biblical events, plus food and craft fairs. Special celebrations are held in Taxco. Some businesses close during this traditional week of Mexican national vacations, and almost all close on Good Thursday and Friday. Make reservations early and avoid weekend travel. Early April.

May

Labor Day, nationwide. Workers parade countrywide and everything closes. May 1.

Holy Cross Day (Día de la Santa Cruz). Workers place a cross on top of unfinished buildings and celebrate with food, bands, folk dancing, and fireworks around the work site. May 3.

Cinco de Mayo. A national holiday that celebrates the defeat of the French at the Battle of Puebla, although it (ironically) tends to be a bigger celebration in the United States than in Mexico. May 5.

Feast of San Isidro. The patron saint of farmers is honored with a blessing of seeds and work animals. May 15.

June

Navy Day (Día de la Marina), celebrated in all coastal towns with naval parades and fireworks. June 1.

Corpus Christi, celebrated nationwide. Honors the Body of Christ (the Eucharist) with religious processions, Masses, and food. Festivities include performances of *voladores* (flying pole dancers) beside the church and at the ruins of El Tajín. Dates vary.

Día de San Pedro (St. Peter and St. Paul's Day), nationwide. Celebrated wherever St. Peter is the patron saint, and honors anyone named Pedro or Peter. June 29.

July

The Guelagueta Dance Festival, Oaxaca. One of Mexico's most popular events. Villagers from the seven regions around Oaxaca gather in the city's amphitheater and dress in traditional costumes with "dancing" masks. The celebration goes back to

pre-Hispanic times to the fertility goddess for a plentiful corn harvest. Very popular internationally; make advance reservations. Last two Mondays in July (July 21 and 28 in 2008).

August

Assumption of the Virgin Mary. Celebrated throughout the country with special masses and in some places with processions. August 20 to 22.

September

Independence Day. Celebrates Mexico's independence from Spain. A day of parades, picnics, and family reunions throughout the country. The schedule of events is the same in every village, town, and city across Mexico, following that of the capital: At 11pm on September 15, the president of Mexico gives the famous independence *grito* (shout) from the National Palace in Mexico City. People crowd into the central plaza to hear it and to watch the traditional fireworks display that follows. A parade follows the following morning. September 15 to 16.

October

Oaxaca's Ninth Annual Food of the Gods Festival. Oaxaca, Oaxaca. A culinary exploration of the indigenous cultures of Oaxaca. Known globally for its culinary creativity, Oaxaca is the birthplace of chocolate. More information on this weeklong event is available at www.food-of-the-gods-festival.com. October 2 to 9.

Día de la Raza ("Ethnicity Day" or Columbus Day). Commemorates the fusion of the Spanish and Mexican peoples. October 12.

November

Day of the Dead. What's commonly called the Day of the Dead is actually 2 days: All Saints' Day—honoring saints and deceased children—and All Souls' Day, honoring deceased adults. Relatives gather at cemeteries countrywide, bringing candles and food to create altars and sometimes spending the night beside graves of loved ones. Weeks before, bakers begin producing bread formed in the shape of mummies or round loaves decorated with bread "bones." Decorated sugar skulls emblazoned with glittery names are sold everywhere. Many days ahead, homes and churches erect special altars laden with Day of the Dead bread, fruit, flowers, candles, favorite foods, and photographs of saints and of the deceased. On the 2 nights, children dress in costumes and masks, often carrying mock coffins and pumpkin lanterns, into which they expect money will be dropped, through the streets. Cemeteries around

Oaxaca are well known for their solemn vigils and some for their Carnival-like atmosphere. November 1 to 2.

Revolution Day. Commemorates the start of the Mexican Revolution in 1910 with parades, speeches, rodeos, and patriotic events. November 20.

National Silver Fair, Taxco. A competition of Mexico's best silversmiths and some of the world's finest artisans. There are exhibits, concerts, dances, and fireworks. Check local calendars or call ☎ **800/44-MEXICO** for details. Late November to early December.

December

Feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Throughout the country the patroness of Mexico is honored with religious processions, street fairs, dancing, fireworks, and masses. It is one of Mexico's most moving and beautiful displays of traditional culture. The Virgin of Guadalupe appeared to a young man, Juan Diego, in December 1531, on a hill near Mexico City. He convinced the bishop that he had seen the apparition by revealing his cloak, upon which the Virgin was emblazoned. Every village celebrates this day, often with processions of children dressed as Juan Diego and with *charreadas* (rodeos), bicycle races, dancing, and fireworks. December 12.

Christmas Posadas. On each of the 9 nights before Christmas, it's customary to reenact the Holy Family's search for an inn, with door-to-door candlelit processions in cities and villages nationwide. You may see them especially in Taxco. December 15 to 24.

Christmas. Mexicans extend this celebration and leave their jobs often beginning 2 weeks before Christmas all the way through New Year's. Many businesses close, and resorts and hotels fill up. Significant celebrations take place on December 23. In Oaxaca it's the "Night of the Radishes," with displays of huge carved radishes. On the evening of December 24 in Oaxaca, processions culminate on the central plaza.

Festival of the Radishes (Festival de los Rábanos), Oaxaca. Local artisans and sculptors set up stalls around the main square to display their elaborate pieces of art—made entirely from radishes! Balloons and birds crafted from local flowers add even more color. December 23.

New Year's Eve. As in the rest of the world, you'll find parties, fireworks, and plenty of noise. Special festivities take place at Tla-colula, near Oaxaca, with commemorative mock battles for good luck in the new year. December 31.

6 Insurance, Health & Safety

INSURANCE

TRAVEL INSURANCE AT A GLANCE

Check your existing insurance policies and credit card coverage before you buy travel insurance. You may already be covered for lost luggage, canceled tickets, or medical expenses. The cost of travel insurance varies widely, depending on the cost and length of your trip, your age and health, and the type of trip you're taking, but expect to pay between 5% and 8% of the vacation itself. You can get estimates from various providers through www.InsureMyTrip.com. Enter your trip cost and dates, your age, and other information, for prices from more than a dozen companies.

If you'll be driving in Mexico, see "Getting There: By Car" and "Getting Around: By Car," later in this chapter, for information on **collision** and **damage** and **personal accident insurance**.

TRIP-CANCELLATION INSURANCE

Trip-cancellation insurance will help retrieve your money if you have to back out of a trip or depart early, or if your travel supplier goes bankrupt. Trip cancellation traditionally covers such events as sickness, natural disasters, and State Department advisories. The latest news in trip-cancellation insurance is the availability of **expanded hurricane coverage** and the "**any-reason**" cancellation coverage—which costs more but covers cancellations made for any reason. You won't get back 100% of your prepaid trip cost, but you'll be refunded a substantial portion. **TravelSafe** (☎ 888/885-7233; www.travel-safe.com) offers both types of coverage. Expedia also offers any-reason cancellation coverage for its air-hotel packages.

For details, contact one of the following recommended insurers: **Access America** (☎ 866/807-3982; www.accessamerica.com); **Travel Guard International** (☎ 800/826-4919; www.travelguard.com); **Travel Insured International** (☎ 800/243-3174; www.travelinsured.com); and **Travelex Insurance Services** (☎ 888/457-4602; www.travelex-insurance.com).

MEDICAL INSURANCE

For travel overseas, most health plans (including Medicare and Medicaid) do not provide coverage, and the ones that do often require you to pay for services upfront and reimburse you only after you return home.

As a safety net, you may want to buy travel medical insurance, particularly if you're traveling to a remote or high-risk area where

emergency evacuation might be necessary. If you require additional medical insurance, try **MEDEX Assistance** (☎ 410/453-6300; www.medexassist.com) or **Travel Assistance International** (☎ 800/821-2828; www.travelassistance.com; for general information on services, call the company's Worldwide Assistance Services, Inc., at ☎ 800/777-8710).

Canadians should check with their provincial health plan offices or call **Health Canada** (☎ 866/225-0709; www.hc-sc.gc.ca) to find out the extent of their coverage and what documentation and receipts they must take home in case they are treated overseas.

LOST-LUGGAGE INSURANCE

On flights within the U.S., checked baggage is covered up to \$3,000 per ticketed passenger. On round-trip international flights originating in the U.S, liability limits are about \$1,400 per passenger. If you plan to check items more valuable than what's covered by the standard liability, see if your homeowner's policy covers your valuables, get baggage insurance as part of your comprehensive travel-insurance package, or buy Travel Guard's "BagTrak" product.

If your luggage is lost, immediately file a lost-luggage claim at the airport, detailing the luggage contents. Most airlines require that you report delayed, damaged, or lost baggage within 4 hours of arrival. The airlines are required to deliver luggage, once found, directly to your house or destination free of charge.

STAYING HEALTHY

In most of Mexico's resort destinations, healthcare meeting U.S. standards is now available. Mexico's major cities are also known for their quality healthcare, although the facilities available may be sparser, and the equipment older than what is available at home. Prescription medicine is broadly available at Mexico pharmacies; however, be aware that you may need a copy of your prescription, or obtain a prescription from a local doctor. This is especially true in the border towns, such as in Tijuana, where many Americans have been crossing into Mexico specifically for the purpose of purchasing lower-priced prescription medicines.

Contact the **International Association for Medical Assistance to Travelers (IAMAT)**; ☎ 716/754-4883, or 416/652-0137 in Canada; www.iamat.org) for tips on travel and health concerns in the countries you're visiting, and lists of local, English-speaking doctors. The United States **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** (☎ 800/311-3435; www.cdc.gov) provides up-to-date information

on health hazards by region or country and offers tips on food safety. **Travel Health Online** (www.tripprep.com), sponsored by a consortium of travel medicine practitioners, may also offer helpful advice on traveling abroad. You can find listings of reliable medical clinics overseas at the **International Society of Travel Medicine** (www.istm.org).

COMMON AILMENTS

SUN EXPOSURE Mexico is synonymous with sunshine, with most of the country blanketed in intense sunlight most of the year. Avoid excessive sun exposure, especially in the tropics where UV rays are more dangerous. The hottest months in Mexico are April and May in the south, and July through September along the Pacific Coast, including Baja California. The deserts of northern Mexico are extremely hot during summer months.

DIETARY RED FLAGS Travelers' diarrhea or *turista*, the Spanish word for "tourist": persistent diarrhea, often accompanied by fever, nausea, and vomiting, used to attack many travelers to Mexico. (Some in the U.S. call this "Montezuma's revenge," but you won't hear it called that in Mexico.) Widespread improvements in infrastructure, sanitation, and education have greatly diminished this ailment, especially in well-developed resort areas. Most travelers make a habit of drinking only bottled water, which also helps to protect against unfamiliar bacteria. In resort areas, and generally throughout Mexico, only purified ice is used. If you do come down with this ailment, nothing beats Pepto-Bismol, readily available in Mexico. Imodium is also available in Mexico and is used by many travelers for a quick fix. A good high-potency (or "therapeutic") vitamin supplement and even extra vitamin C can help; yogurt is good for healthy digestion.

Since dehydration can quickly become life-threatening, the Public Health Service advises that you be careful to replace fluids and electrolytes (potassium, sodium, and the like) during a bout of diarrhea. Drink Pedialyte, a rehydration solution available at most Mexican pharmacies, or natural fruit juice, such as guava or apple (stay away from orange juice, which has laxative properties), with a pinch of salt added.

The U.S. Public Health Service recommends the following measures for preventing travelers' diarrhea: **Drink only purified water** (boiled water, canned or bottled beverages, beer, or wine). **Choose food carefully.** In general, avoid salads (except in first-class

Over-the-Counter Drugs in Mexico

Antibiotics and other drugs for which you'd need a prescription to buy in the States are often available over-the-counter in Mexican pharmacies. Mexican pharmacies also carry a limited selection of common over-the-counter cold, sinus, and allergy remedies.

restaurants), uncooked vegetables, undercooked protein, and unpasteurized milk or milk products, including cheese. Choose food that is freshly cooked and still hot. Avoid eating food prepared by street vendors. In addition, something as simple as **clean hands** can go a long way toward preventing *tourista*.

HIGH-ALTITUDE HAZARDS Travelers to certain regions of Mexico occasionally experience **elevation sickness**, which results from the relative lack of oxygen and the decrease in barometric pressure that characterizes high elevations (more than 1,500m/5,000 ft.). Symptoms include shortness of breath, fatigue, headache, insomnia, and even nausea. Mexico City is at 2,100m (6,720 ft.) above sea level, as are a number of other central and southern cities, such as San Cristóbal de las Casas (even higher than Mexico City). At high elevations, it takes about 10 days to acquire the extra red blood corpuscles you need to adjust to the scarcity of oxygen. To help your body acclimate, drink plenty of fluids, avoid alcoholic beverages, and don't overexert yourself during the first few days. If you have heart or lung problems, talk to your doctor before going above 2,400m (7,872 ft.).

BUGS, BITES & OTHER WILDLIFE CONCERNS **Mosquitoes** and **gnats** are prevalent along the coast and in the Yucatán lowlands. *Repelente contra insectos* (insect repellent) is a must, and it's not always available in Mexico. If you'll be in these areas and are prone to bites, bring along a repellent that contains the active ingredient DEET. Avon's Skin So Soft also works extremely well. Another good remedy to keep the mosquitoes away is to mix citronella essential oil with basil, clove, and lavender essential oils. If you're sensitive to bites, pick up some antihistamine cream from a drugstore at home.

Most readers won't ever see an *alacrán* (scorpion). But if one stings you, go immediately to a doctor. The one lethal scorpion found in some parts of Mexico is the *centruroides*, part of the Buthidea family, characterized by a thin body, thick tail, and triangular-shaped sternum.

Most deaths from these scorpions result within 24 hours of the sting as a result of respiratory or cardiovascular failure, with children and seniors most at risk. Scorpions are not aggressive (they don't hunt for prey), but they may sting if touched, especially in their hiding places. In Mexico you can buy scorpion toxin antidote at any drugstore. It is an injection and it costs around \$25. This is a good idea if you plan to camp in a remote area where medical assistance can be several hours away.

TROPICAL ILLNESSES You shouldn't be overly concerned about tropical diseases if you stay on the normal tourist routes and don't eat street food. However, both dengue fever and cholera have

Tips **What to Do If You Get Sick**

Any foreign consulate can provide a list of area doctors who speak English. If you get sick, consider asking your hotel concierge to recommend a local doctor—even his or her own. You can also try the emergency room at a local hospital. Many hospitals also have walk-in clinics for emergency cases that are not life-threatening; you may not get immediate attention, but you won't pay the high price of an emergency room visit.

For travel abroad, you may have to pay all medical costs upfront and be reimbursed later. Medicare and Medicaid do not provide coverage for medical costs outside the U.S. Before leaving home, find out what medical services your health insurance covers. To protect yourself, consider buying medical travel insurance (see "Medical Insurance," under "Insurance," above).

Very few health insurance plans pay for medical evacuation back to the U.S. (which can cost \$10,000 and up). A number of companies offer medical evacuation services anywhere in the world. If you're ever hospitalized more than 150 miles from home, **MedjetAssist** (☎ 800/527-7478; www.medjetassistance.com) will pick you up and fly you to the hospital of your choice virtually anywhere in the world in a medically equipped and staffed aircraft 24 hours day, 7 days a week. Annual memberships are \$225 individual, \$350 family; you can also purchase short-term memberships.

appeared in Mexico in recent years. Talk to your doctor or to a medical specialist in tropical diseases about precautions you should take. You can also get medical bulletins from the U.S. State Department and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (see “Visitor Information,” earlier in this chapter). You can protect yourself by taking some simple precautions: Watch what you eat and drink; don’t swim in stagnant water (ponds, slow-moving rivers, or wells); and avoid mosquito bites by covering up, using repellent, and sleeping under netting. The most dangerous areas seem to be on Mexico’s west coast, away from the big resorts.

SAFETY CRIME

Crime in Mexico, especially in Mexico City, in selected cities along the U.S. border, and in some states affected by drug violence, has received attention in the North American press over the past several years. Many feel this unfairly exaggerates the real dangers, but it should be noted that crime rates, including taxi robberies, kidnappings, and highway carjackings, have risen in recent years. The most severe problems have been concentrated in Mexico City, where even longtime foreign residents will attest to the overall lack of security. Violent crime has also continued at high levels in Tijuana, Ciudad Juarez, Nuevo Laredo, Acapulco, and the state of Sinaloa. The U.S. Department of State recommends caution in traveling to the southern states of Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Guerrero due to sporadic incidents of politically motivated violence there. Check the U.S. State Department Consular Information Sheet (and any applicable travel advisories) for Mexico before you travel for any notable “hot spots.” See “Visitor Information,” earlier in this chapter, for information on the latest **U.S. State Department Consular Information Sheet** for Mexico.

Precautions are necessary, but travelers should be realistic. Common sense is essential. You can generally trust people whom you approach for help or directions—but be wary of anyone who approaches you offering the same. The more insistent the person is, the more cautious you should be. The crime rate is, on the whole, much lower in Mexico than in many parts of the United States, and the nature of crimes in general is less violent.

Travelers should exercise caution in traveling Mexico’s highways, avoiding travel at night, and using toll (*cuota*) roads rather than the less secure “free” (*libre*) roads whenever possible. It is also advised

that you should not hike alone in backcountry areas, nor walk alone on lightly frequented beaches, ruins, or trails.

All bus travel should be during daylight hours and on first-class conveyances. Although there have been several reports of bus hijackings and robberies on toll roads, buses on toll roads have a markedly lower rate of incidents than buses (second and third class) that travel the less secure “free” highways. The embassy advises caution when traveling by bus from Acapulco toward Ixtapa or Huatulco. Although the police have made some progress in bringing this problem under control, armed robberies of entire busloads of passengers still occur.

BRIBES & SCAMS

As is the case around the world, there are the occasional bribes and scams in Mexico, targeted at people believed to be naive—such as the telltale tourist. For years Mexico was known as a place where bribes—called *mordidas* (bites)—were expected; however, the country is rapidly changing. Frequently, offering a bribe today, especially to a police officer, is considered an insult, and it can land you in deeper trouble.

If you believe a **bribe** is being requested, here are a few tips on dealing with the situation. Even if you speak Spanish, don’t utter a word of it to Mexican officials. That way you’ll appear innocent, all the while understanding every word.

When you are crossing the border, should the person who inspects your car ask for a tip, you can ignore this request—but understand that the official may suddenly decide that a complete search of your belongings is in order. If faced with a situation where you feel you’re being asked for a *propina* (literally, “tip”; colloquially, “bribe”), how much should you offer? Usually \$3 to \$5 or the equivalent in pesos will do the trick. Many tourists have the impression that everything works better in Mexico if you “tip”; however, in reality, this only perpetuates the *mordida* attitude. If you are pleased with a service, feel free to tip, but you shouldn’t tip simply to attempt to get away with something illegal or inappropriate, whether it is crossing the border without having your car inspected or not getting a ticket that’s deserved.

Whatever you do, **avoid impoliteness**; under no circumstances should you insult a Latin American official. Extreme politeness, even in the face of adversity, rules Mexico. In Mexico, *gringos* have a reputation for being loud and demanding. By adopting the local

custom of excessive courtesy, you'll have greater success in negotiations of any kind. Stand your ground, but do it politely.

As you travel in Mexico, you may encounter several types of **scams**, which are typical throughout the world. One involves some kind of a **distraction** or feigned commotion. While your attention is diverted, a pickpocket makes a grab for your wallet. In another common scam, an **unaccompanied child** pretends to be lost and frightened and takes your hand for safety. Meanwhile the child or an accomplice plunders your pockets. A third involves **confusing currency**. A shoeshine boy, street musician, guide, or other individual might offer you a service for a price that seems reasonable—in pesos. When it comes time to pay, he or she tells you the price is in dollars, not pesos. Be very clear on the price and currency when services are involved.

7 Tips for Travelers with Special Needs

FOR FAMILIES

Children are considered the national treasure of Mexico, and Mexicans will warmly welcome and cater to your children.

Before leaving, you should check with your doctor to get advice on medications to take along. Disposable diapers cost about the same in Mexico but are of poorer quality. You can get Huggies Supreme and Pampers identical to the ones sold in the United States, but at a higher price. Dry cereals, powdered formulas, baby bottles, and purified water are easily available in midsize and large cities or resorts. Gerber's baby foods are sold in many stores. Dry cereals, powdered formulas, baby bottles, and purified water are all easily available in midsize and large cities or resorts.

Cribs, however, may present a problem; only the largest and most luxurious hotels provide them. However, rollaway beds to accommodate children staying in the room with parents are often available. Child seats or highchairs at restaurants are common, and most restaurants will go out of their way to accommodate the comfort of your child. Consider bringing your own car seat, as they are not readily available for rent in Mexico.

Every country's regulations differ, but in general children traveling abroad should have plenty of documentation on hand, particularly if they're traveling with someone other than their own parents (in which case a notarized form letter from a parent is often required). For details on entry requirements for children traveling abroad, go to

the U.S. State Department website (www.travel.state.gov); click on “International Travel,” “Travel Brochures,” and “Foreign Entry Requirements.”

Recommended family travel websites include **Family Travel Forum** (www.familytravelforum.com), a comprehensive site that offers customized trip planning; **Family Travel Network** (www.familytravelnetwork.com), an online magazine providing travel tips; and **TravelWithYourKids.com** (www.travelwithyourkids.com), a comprehensive site written by parents for parents offering sound advice for long-distance and international travel with children.

FOR GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

Mexico is a conservative country, with deeply rooted Catholic religious traditions. Public displays of same-sex affection are rare, especially outside of urban or resort areas. Women in Mexico frequently walk hand in hand, but anything more might cross the boundary of acceptability. However, gay and lesbian travelers are generally treated with respect and should not experience any harassment, assuming they give the appropriate regard to local culture and customs.

The International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association (IGLTA); ☎ 800/448-8550 or 954/776-2626; www.iglta.org is the trade association for the gay and lesbian travel industry, and offers an online directory of gay- and lesbian-friendly travel businesses; go to their website and click on “Members.”

Many agencies offer tours and travel itineraries specifically for gay and lesbian travelers. Among them are **Above and Beyond Tours** (☎ 800/397-2681; www.abovebeyondtours.com); **Now, Voyager** (☎ 800/255-6951; www.nowvoyager.com); and **Olivia Cruises & Resorts** (☎ 800/631-6277; www.olivia.com).

Gay.com Travel (☎ 800/929-2268 or 415/644-8044; www.gay.com/travel or www.outandabout.com) is an excellent online successor to the popular *Out & About* print magazine. It provides regularly updated information about gay-owned, gay-oriented, and gay-friendly lodging, dining, sightseeing, nightlife, and shopping establishments in every important destination worldwide. British travelers should click on the “Travel” link at www.uk.gay.com for advice and gay-friendly trip ideas. The Canadian website **Gay Traveler** (gaytraveler.ca) offers ideas and advice for gay travel all over the world.

FOR TRAVELERS WITH DISABILITIES

Mexican airports are upgrading their services, but it is not uncommon to board from a remote position, meaning you either descend stairs to a bus that ferries you to the plane, which you board by climbing stairs, or you walk across the tarmac to your plane and ascend the stairs. Deplaning presents the same problem in reverse.

Escalators (and there aren't many in the country) are often out of order. Stairs without handrails abound. Few restrooms are equipped for travelers with disabilities; when one is available, access to it may be through a narrow passage that won't accommodate a wheelchair or a person on crutches. Many deluxe hotels (the most expensive) now have rooms with bathrooms for people with disabilities. Those traveling on a budget should stick with one-story hotels or hotels with elevators. Even so, there will probably still be obstacles somewhere. Generally speaking, no matter where you are, someone will lend a hand, although you may have to ask for it.

Organizations that offer a vast range of resources and assistance to disabled travelers include **MossRehab** (☎ 800/CALL-MOSS; www.mossresourcenet.org); the **American Foundation for the Blind** (AFB; ☎ 800/232-5463; www.afb.org); and **SATH** (Society for Accessible Travel & Hospitality; ☎ 212/447-7284; www.sath.org). **AirAmbulanceCard.com** is now partnered with SATH and allows you to pre-select top-notch hospitals in case of an emergency.

Access-Able Travel Source (☎ 303/232-2979; www.accessable.com) offers a comprehensive database on travel agents from around the world with experience in accessible travel; destination-specific access information; and links to such resources as service animals, equipment rentals, and access guides.

Many travel agencies offer customized tours and itineraries for travelers with disabilities. Among them are **Flying Wheels Travel** (☎ 507/451-5005; www.flyingwheelstravel.com); and **Accessible Journeys** (☎ 800/846-4537 or 610/521-0339; www.disabilitytravel.com).

Flying with Disability (www.flying-with-disability.org) is a comprehensive information source on airplane travel. **Avis Rent a Car** (☎ 888/879-4273) has an "Avis Access" program that offers services for customers with special travel needs. These include specially outfitted vehicles with swivel seats, spinner knobs, and hand controls; mobility scooter rentals; and accessible bus service. Be sure to reserve well in advance.

FOR SENIORS

Mexico is a popular country for retirees. For decades, North Americans have been living indefinitely in Mexico by returning to the border and recrossing with a new tourist permit every 6 months. Mexican immigration officials have caught on, and now limit the maximum time in the country to 6 months within any year. This is to encourage even partial residents to comply with the proper documentation.

Some of the most popular places for long-term stays are Guadalajara, Lake Chapala, Ajijic, and Puerto Vallarta, all in the state of Jalisco; San Miguel de Allende and Guanajuato in Guanajuato state; Cuernavaca in Morelos; Alamos in Sinaloa; and increasingly destinations in Baja California.

AIM, Apartado Postal 31-70, 45050 Guadalajara, Jal., is a well-written, informative newsletter for prospective retirees. Subscriptions are \$18 to the United States and \$25 to Canada. Back issues are three for \$5.

Sanborn Tours, 2015 S. 10th St., Post Office Drawer 519, McAllen, TX 78505-0519 (© 800/395-8482; www.sanborns.com), offers a “Retire in Mexico” orientation tour.

Mention the fact that you’re a senior when you make your travel reservations. Although all the major U.S. airlines have canceled their senior discount and coupon book programs, many hotels still offer lower rates for seniors. In most cities, people over the age of 60 qualify for reduced admission to theaters, museums, and other attractions, and discounted fares on public transportation.

Members of **AARP**, 601 E St. NW, Washington, DC 20049 (© 888/687-2277; www.aarp.org), get discounts on hotels, airfares, and car rentals. AARP offers members a wide range of benefits, including *AARP: The Magazine* and a monthly newsletter. Anyone over 50 can join.

Many reliable agencies and organizations target the 50-plus market. **Elderhostel** (© 800/454-5768; www.elderhostel.org) arranges study programs for those aged 55 and over. **ElderTreks** (© 800/741-7956; www.eldertreks.com) offers small-group tours to off-the-beaten-path or adventure-travel locations, restricted to travelers 50 and older.

FOR WOMEN

Mexicans in general, and men in particular, can be nosy about single travelers, especially women. If a taxi driver or anyone else with whom you don’t want to become friendly asks about your marital

status, family, and so forth, my advice is to make up a set of answers (regardless of the truth): “I’m married, traveling with friends, and I have three children.” Saying you are single and traveling alone may send the wrong message. U.S. television—widely viewed now in Mexico—has given many Mexican men the image of American single women as being sexually promiscuous.

Check out the award-winning website **Journeywoman** (www.journeywoman.com), a “real-life” women’s travel information network where you can sign up for a free e-mail newsletter and get advice on everything from etiquette and dress to safety; or the travel guide ***Safety and Security for Women Who Travel*** by Sheila Swan and Peter Laufer (Travelers’ Tales, Inc.), offering common-sense tips on safe travel.

FOR STUDENTS

Because many Mexicans consider higher education more a luxury than a birthright, there is no formal network of student discounts and programs. Most Mexican students travel with their families rather than with other students, so student discount cards are not commonly recognized.

However, more hostels have entered the student travel scene. The **Mexican Youth Hostel Network**, or Red Mexicana de Albergues Juveniles (☎ 55/5518-1726; www.hostellingmexico.com), offers a list of hostels that meet international standards in Mexico City, Cuernavaca and surrounding areas, Oaxaca, and Veracruz. The **Mexican Youth Hostel Association (Asociación Mexicana de Albergues Juveniles; www.hostels.com)**, offers a list of hostels in Mexico City, Zacatecas, Guanajuato, Puerto Escondido, Uxmal, Palenque, Tulum, Cancún, and Playa del Carmen.

If you’re a student planning to travel outside the U.S., you’d be wise to arm yourself with an **International Student Identity Card (ISIC)**, which offers substantial savings on rail passes, plane tickets, and entrance fees. It also provides you with basic health and life insurance and a 24-hour help line. The card is available from **STA Travel** (☎ 800/781-4040 in North America; www.sta.com or www.statravel.com), the biggest student travel agency in the world. If you’re no longer a student but are still under 26, you can get an **International Youth Travel Card (IYTC)** from the same people, which entitles you to similar discounts.

8 Getting There

BY PLANE

The airline situation in Mexico is rapidly improving, with many new regional carriers offering scheduled service to areas previously not served. In addition to regularly scheduled service, charter service direct from U.S. cities to resorts is making Mexico more accessible.

THE MAJOR INTERNATIONAL AIRLINES

The main airlines operating direct or nonstop flights from the United States to Mexico include **AeroMexico** (☎ 800/237-6639; www.aeromexico.com), **Air France** (☎ 800/237-2747; www.airfrance.com), **Alaska Airlines** (☎ 800/252-7522; www.alaskaair.com), **American Airlines** (☎ 800/223-5436; www.aa.com), **Continental** (☎ 800/537-9222; www.continental.com), **Frontier Airlines** (☎ 800/432-1359; www.frontierairlines.com), **Mexicana** (☎ 800/531-7921; www.mexicana.com), **Northwest/KLM** (☎ 800/225-2525; www.nwa.com), **Taca** (☎ 800/400-8222; www.taca.com), **United** (☎ 800/538-2929; www.united.com), and **US Airways** (☎ 800/428-4322; www.usairways.com). **Southwest Airlines** (☎ 800/435-9792; www.southwest.com) serves the U.S. border.

The main departure points in North America for international airlines are Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas/Fort Worth, Denver, Houston, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Miami, New York, Orlando, Philadelphia, Phoenix, Raleigh/Durham, San Antonio, San Francisco, Seattle, Toronto, and Washington, D.C.

GETTING THROUGH THE AIRPORT

With the federalization of airport security, security procedures at U.S. airports are more stable and consistent than ever. Generally, you'll be fine if you arrive at the airport at least **1 hour** before a domestic flight and at least **2 hours** before an international flight; if you show up late, tell an airline employee and she'll probably whisk you to the front of the line. You can check the average wait times at your airport by going to the TSA **Security Checkpoint Wait Times** site (waittime/tsa.dhs.gov).

Know what you can carry on and what you can't. For the latest updates on items you are prohibited to bring in carry-on luggage, go to www.tsa.gov/travelers/airtravel.

Beat the ticket-counter lines by using the self-service electronic ticket kiosks at the airport or even printing out your boarding pass at home from the airline website. Using curbside check-in is also a smart way to avoid lines.

Bring a **current, government-issued photo ID** such as a driver's license or passport. Keep your ID at the ready to show at check-in, the security checkpoint, and sometimes even the gate. (Children under 18 do not need government-issued photo IDs for domestic flights, but they do for international flights to most countries.)

BY CAR

Driving is not the cheapest way to get to Mexico, but it is the best way to see the country. Even so, you may think twice about taking your own car south of the border once you've pondered the bureaucracy that affects foreign drivers here. One option is to rent a car for touring around a specific region once you arrive in Mexico. Rental cars in Mexico are now generally modern, clean, and well maintained. Although pricier than in the United States, discounts are often available for rentals of a week or longer, especially when arrangements are made in advance from the United States. (See "Car Rentals," later in this chapter, for more details).

If, after reading the section that follows, you have any additional questions or you want to confirm the current rules, call your nearest Mexican consulate, or the Mexican Government Tourist Office. To check on road conditions or to get help with any travel emergency while in Mexico, call ☎ **01-800/482-9832**, or 55/5089-7500 in Mexico City. English-speaking operators staff both numbers.

In addition, check with the **U.S. State Department** (see "Visitor Information," earlier in this chapter) for warnings about dangerous driving areas.

CAR DOCUMENTS

To drive your car into Mexico, you'll need a **temporary car-importation permit**, which is granted after you provide a required list of documents (see below). The permit can be obtained through Banco del Ejército (Banjercito) officials, who have a desk, booth, or office at the Mexican Customs (*Aduana*) building, after you cross the border into Mexico.

You must carry your temporary car-importation permit, tourist permit and, if you purchased it, your proof of Mexican car insurance (see below) in the car at all times. The temporary car-importation permit papers are valid for 6 months to a year, while the tourist permit is usually issued for 30 days. It's a good idea to overestimate the time you'll spend in Mexico, so that if you have to (or want to) stay longer, you'll avoid the hassle of getting your papers extended.

Whatever you do, don't overstay either permit. Doing so invites heavy fines, confiscation of your vehicle (which will not be returned), or both.

The following strict requirements for border crossing were accurate at press time:

- **A valid driver's license**, issued outside of Mexico.
- **Current, original car registration and a copy of the original car title.** If the registration or title is in more than one name and not all the named people are traveling with you, a notarized letter from the absent person(s) authorizing use of the vehicle for the trip is required; have it ready just in case. The registration and your credit card (see below) must be in the same name.
- **A valid international major credit card.** With a credit card, you are required to pay a \$29.70 car-importation fee. The credit card must be in the same name as the car registration. If you do not have a major credit card (American Express, Diners Club, MasterCard, or Visa), you must post a bond or make a deposit equal to the value of the vehicle. Check cards are not accepted.
- **Original immigration documentation.** This is either your tourist permit (FMT) or the original immigration booklet, FM2 or FM3, if you hold more permanent status.
- **A signed declaration promising to return to your country of origin with the vehicle.** Obtain this form (*Carta Promesa de Retorno*) from AAA or Sanborn's before you go, or from Banjercito officials at the border. There's no charge. The form does not stipulate that you must return by the same border entry through which you entered.
- **Temporary Importation Application.** By signing this form, you state that you are only temporarily importing the car for your personal use and will not be selling it. This is to help regulate the entry and restrict the resale of unauthorized cars and trucks. Vehicles in the U.S. are much less expensive and for years were brought into Mexico for resale. Make sure the permit is canceled when you return to the U.S.

If you receive your documentation at the border, Mexican officials will make two copies of everything and charge you for the copies. For up-to-the-minute information, a great source is the Customs office in Nuevo Laredo, or *Módulo de Importación Temporal de Automóviles, Aduana Nuevo Laredo* (☎ 867/712-2071).

Important reminder: Someone else may drive, but the person (or relative of the person) whose name appears on the car-importation permit must *always* be in the car. (If stopped by police, a non-registered family member driving without the registered driver must be prepared to prove familial relationship to the registered driver—no joke.) Violation of this rule subjects the car to impoundment and the driver to imprisonment, a fine, or both. You can drive a car with foreign license plates only if you have a foreign (non-Mexican) driver's license. You do not need an international driver's license in Mexico.

MEXICAN AUTO INSURANCE

Liability auto insurance is legally required in Mexico. U.S. insurance is invalid; to be insured in Mexico, you must purchase Mexican insurance. Any party involved in an accident who has no insurance may be sent to jail and have his or her car impounded until all claims are settled. This is true even if you just drive across the border to spend the day. U.S. companies that broker Mexican insurance are commonly found at the border crossing, and several quote daily rates.

You can also buy car insurance through **Sanborn's Mexico Insurance**, P.O. Box 52840, 2009 S. 10th, McAllen, TX (☎ 800/222-0158; fax 800/222-0158 or 956/686-0732; www.sanbornsinsurance.com). The company has offices at all U.S. border crossings. Its policies cost the same as the competition's do, but you get legal coverage (attorney and bail bonds if needed) and a detailed mile-by-mile guide for your proposed route. Most of Sanborn's border offices are open Monday through Friday, and a few are staffed on Saturday and Sunday. **AAA** auto club also sells insurance.

RETURNING TO THE UNITED STATES WITH YOUR CAR

You *must* return the car documents you obtained when you entered Mexico when you cross back with your car, or at some point within 180 days. (You can cross as many times as you wish within the 180 days.) If the documents aren't returned, heavy fines are imposed (\$250 for each 15 days late), your car may be impounded and confiscated, or you may be jailed if you return to Mexico. You can return the car documents only to a Banjercito official on duty at the Mexican Customs (*Aduana*) building *before* you cross back into the United States. Some border cities have Banjercito officials on duty 24 hours a day, but others do not; some do not have Sunday hours.

On the U.S. side, Customs agents may or may not inspect your car from top to bottom.

BY SHIP

Numerous cruise lines serve Mexico. Possible trips might cruise from California down to ports of call on the Pacific Coast. Several cruise-tour specialists arrange substantial discounts on unsold cabins if you're willing to take off at the last minute. One such company is **Cruises Only** (☎ 800/278-4373; www.cruisesonly.com).

BY BUS

Greyhound-Trailways or its affiliates (☎ 800/229-9424; www.greyhound.com) offer service from around the United States to the Mexican border, where passengers disembark, cross the border, and buy a ticket for travel into the interior of Mexico. At many border crossings there are scheduled buses from the U.S. bus station to the Mexican bus station.

9 Package Tours for the Independent Traveler

Package tours are simply a way to buy the airfare, accommodations, and other elements of your trip (such as car rentals, airport transfers, and sometimes even activities) at the same time and often at discounted prices.

One good source of package deals is the airlines themselves. Most major airlines offer air/land packages, including **American Airlines Vacations** (☎ 800/321-2121; www.aavacations.com), **Delta Vacations** (☎ 800/654-6559; www.deltavacations.com), **Continental Airlines Vacations** (☎ 800/301-3800; www.covacations.com), and **United Vacations** (☎ 888/854-3899; www.unitedvacations.com). Several big **online travel agencies**—Expedia, Travelocity, Orbitz, Site59, and Lastminute.com—also do a brisk business in packages.

Travel packages are also listed in the travel section of your local Sunday newspaper. Or check ads in the national travel magazines such as *Arthur Frommer's Budget Travel Magazine*, *Travel + Leisure*, *National Geographic Traveler*, and *Condé Nast Traveler*.

RECOMMENDED PACKAGERS

- **AeroMexico Vacations** (☎ 800/245-8585; www.aeromexico.com) offers year-round packages to almost every destination it serves, including Acapulco and Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo. AeroMexico has a large selection (more than 100) of resorts in these destinations and more, in a variety of price ranges.

- **Alaska Airlines Vacations** (☎ 800/468-2248; www.alaskaair.com) sells packages to Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo, and flies direct from Los Angeles, San Diego, San Jose, San Francisco, Seattle, Vancouver, Anchorage, and Fairbanks.
- **American Airlines Vacations** (☎ 800/321-2121; www.aa.vacations.com) has year-round deals to Acapulco, and other locations in Mexico. You don't have to fly with American if you can get a better deal on another airline; land-only packages include hotel, hotel tax, and airport transfers. American's hubs to Mexico are Dallas/Fort Worth, Chicago, and Miami.
- **US Airways Vacations** (☎ 800/235-9298; www.usairways.vacations.com) has deals to Acapulco and many other locations in Mexico. The website offers discounted featured specials that are not available through the operators. You can also book hotels without air by calling the toll-free number.
- **Apple Vacations** (☎ 800/365-2775; www.applevacations.com) offers inclusive packages to all the beach resorts, and has the largest choice of hotels in Acapulco. Scheduled carriers for the air portion include American, United, Mexicana, Delta, US Airways, Reno Air, Alaska Airlines, and AeroMexico. Apple perks include baggage handling and the services of a company representative at major hotels.
- **Classic Vacations** (☎ 800/635-1333; www.classicvacations.com) specializes in package vacations to Mexico's finest luxury resorts. It combines discounted first-class and economy airfare on American, Continental, Mexicana, Alaska, America West, and Delta with stays at the most exclusive hotels in Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo and Acapulco. The prices are not for bargain hunters but for those who seek luxury, nicely packaged.
- **Continental Vacations** (☎ 800/301-3800; www.covacations.com) has year-round packages to Acapulco, Ixtapa, and other locations throughout Mexico. The best deals are from Houston; Newark, N.J.; and Cleveland. You must fly Continental. The Internet deals offer savings not available elsewhere.
- **Delta Vacations** (☎ 800/654-6559; www.deltavacations.com) has year-round packages to Acapulco, and, Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo. Atlanta is the hub, so expect the best prices from there.
- **Funjet Vacations** (☎ 888/558-6654; www.funjet.com) is one of the largest vacation packagers in the United States. Funjet has packages to Acapulco and Ixtapa. You can choose a charter

***Finds* Out-of-the-Ordinary Places to Stay**

Mexico lends itself beautifully to the concept of small, private hotels in idyllic settings. They vary in style from grandiose estate to palm-thatched bungalow. **Mexico Boutique Hotels** (www.mexicoboutiquehotels.com) specializes in smaller places to stay with a high level of personal attention and service. Most options have fewer than 50 rooms, and the accommodations consist of entire villas, *casitas*, bungalows, or a combination.

or fly on American, Continental, Delta, AeroMexico, US Airways, Alaska Air, or United.

- **GOGO Worldwide Vacations** (☎ 888/636-3942; www.gogo.com) has trips to all the major beach destinations, including Acapulco. It offers several exclusive deals from higher-end hotels. Book through any travel agent.
- **Mexicana Vacations**, or MexSeaSun Vacations (☎ 800/531-7921; www.mexicana.com) offers getaways to all the resorts. Mexicana operates daily direct flights from Los Angeles to Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo.
- **Mexico Travel Net** (☎ 800/511-4848 or 619/474-0100; www.mexicotravelnet.com) offers most of the well-known travel packages to Mexico beach resorts, plus offers last-minute specials.
- **Pleasant Mexico Holidays** (☎ 800/742-9244; www.pleasant-holidays.com) is one of the largest vacation packagers in the United States, with hotels in Acapulco, Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo, and other resort locations.

10 Active Vacations in Pacific Coast Mexico

Golf, tennis, water-skiing, surfing, bicycling, and horseback riding are all sports visitors can enjoy in Pacific coast Mexico. **Scuba diving** is excellent, as is snorkeling, all along this coast. **Mountain climbing** is a rugged sport where you'll meet like-minded folks from around the world. A popular spot for this is in the mountainous areas surrounding Huatulco.

PARKS

Most of the national parks and nature reserves are understaffed or unstaffed. In addition to the reliable Mexican companies offering

adventure trips (such as the AMTAVE members; see below), many U.S.-based companies also offer this kind of travel, with trips led by specialists.

OUTDOORS ORGANIZATIONS & TOUR OPERATORS

AMTAVE (Asociación Mexicana de Turismo de Aventura y Ecoturismo, A.C.) is an active association of ecotour and adventure tour operators. It publishes an annual catalog of participating firms and their offerings, all of which must meet certain criteria for security, quality, and training of the guides, as well as for sustainability of natural and cultural environments. For more information, contact AMTAVE (☎ 55/5688-3883; www.amtave.org).

The **Archaeological Conservancy**, 5301 Central Ave. NE, Suite 402, Albuquerque, NM 87108 (☎ 505/266-1540; www.americanarchaeology.org), presents one trip per year led by an expert, usually an archaeologist. The trips change from year to year and space is limited; make reservations early.

Culinary Adventures, 6023 Reid Dr. NW, Gig Harbor, WA 98335 (☎ 253/851-7676; fax 253/851-9532; www.marilyn tausend.com), specializes in a short but special list of cooking tours in Mexico, featuring well-known cooks and traveling to particular regions known for excellent cuisine. The owner, Marilyn Tausend, is the coauthor of *Mexico the Beautiful Cookbook* and *Cocinas de la Familia* (Family Kitchens).

Mexico Art Tours (☎ 888/783-1331, or 480/730-1764 in the U.S.; fax 480/730-1496; 1233 East Baker Dr., Tempe, AZ 85282; www.mexicanarttours.com). Led by Jean Grimm, a specialist in the arts and cultures of Mexico, these unique tours focusing on the authentic arts and cultures of Mexico are accompanied by compelling speakers who are themselves respected scholars and artists. Itineraries include visits to Oaxaca, Chiapas, Guadalajara and Puerto Vallarta, Mexico City, and other locales. Special tours include a Day of the Dead tour, and one on the Art of Mexican Masks.

Oaxaca Reservations/Zapotec Tours, 4955 North Claremont Ave., Suite B, Chicago, IL 60625 (☎ 800/446-2922 or 773/506-2444; fax 773/506-2445; www.oaxacainfo.com), offers a variety of tours to Oaxaca City and the Oaxaca coast (including Puerto Escondido and Huatulco). Its specialty trips include Day of the Dead in Oaxaca and the Food of the Gods Tour of Oaxaca. The coastal trips emphasize nature, while the Oaxaca City tours focus on the immediate area, with visits to weavers, potters, markets, and

archaeological sites. This is also the U.S. contact for several hotels in Oaxaca City that offer a 10% discount for reserving online.

Trek America, P.O. Box 189, Rockaway, NJ 07866 (☎ 800/221-0596 or 973/983-1144; fax 973/983-8551; www.trekamerica.com), organizes lengthy, active trips that combine trekking, hiking, van transportation, and camping in the Yucatán, Chiapas, Oaxaca, the Copper Canyon, and Mexico's Pacific coast, and a trip that covers Mexico City, Teotihuacán, Taxco, Guadalajara, Puerto Vallarta, and Acapulco.

11 Getting Around

An important note: If your travel schedule depends on an important connection, say a plane trip between points or a ferry or bus connection, use the telephone numbers in this book or other information resources mentioned here to find out if the connection you are depending on is still available. Although we've done our best to provide accurate information, transportation schedules can and do change.

BY PLANE

To fly from point to point within Mexico, you'll rely on Mexican airlines. Mexico has two large private national carriers: **Mexicana** (☎ 800/531-7921; www.mexicana.com), and **AeroMexico** (☎ 800/237-6639; www.aeromexico.com), in addition to several up-and-coming low-cost carriers. Mexicana and AeroMexico offer extensive connections to the United States as well as within Mexico.

Up-and-coming low-cost carriers include **Aviacsa** (www.aviacsa.com), **Click Mexicana** (www.click.com.mx), and **Interjet** (www.interjet.com.mx). Regional carriers include **Aerovega** (www.aerovega.com), **Aero Tucán** (www.aero-tucan.com), and Aero Mexico's **Aerolitoral** (www.aerolitoral.com.mx). The regional carriers can be expensive, but they go to difficult-to-reach places. In each applicable section of this book, we've mentioned regional carriers with all pertinent telephone numbers.

Because major airlines can book some regional carriers, read your ticket carefully to see if your connecting flight is on one of these smaller carriers—they may use a different airport or a different counter.

AIRPORT TAXES

Mexico charges an airport tax on all departures that is included in the price of plane tickets. Passengers leaving the country on international flights pay roughly \$24—in dollars or the peso equivalent. Taxes on

each domestic departure within Mexico are around \$17, unless you're on a connecting flight and have already paid at the start of the flight.

Mexico also charges an \$18 "tourism tax," the proceeds of which go into a tourism promotional fund. Your ticket price may not include it, so be sure to have enough money to pay it at the airport upon departure.

RECONFIRMING FLIGHTS

Although Mexican airlines say it's not necessary to reconfirm a flight, it's still a good practice. To avoid getting bumped on popular, possibly overbooked flights, check in for international flights at least 2 hours in advance of travel.

BY CAR

Most Mexican roads are not up to U.S. standards of smoothness, hardness, width of curve, grade of hill, or safety marking. Driving at night is dangerous—the roads aren't good and are rarely lit; trucks, carts, pedestrians, and bicycles usually have no lights; and you can hit potholes, animals, rocks, dead ends, or bridges out with no warning.

The spirited style of Mexican driving sometimes requires supervision and reflexes. Be prepared for new customs, as when a truck driver flips on his left turn signal when there's not a crossroad for miles. He's probably telling you the road's clear ahead for you to pass. Another custom that's very important to respect is turning left. Never turn left by stopping in the middle of a highway with your left signal on. Instead, pull onto the right shoulder, wait for traffic to clear, then proceed across the road.

GASOLINE

There's one government-owned brand of gas and one gasoline station name throughout the country—**Pemex** (Petroleras Mexicanas). There are two types of gas in Mexico: *magna*, 87-octane unleaded gas, and premium 93 octane. In Mexico, fuel and oil are sold by the liter, which is slightly more than a quart (40 liters equals about 10½ gal.). Many franchise Pemex stations have bathroom facilities and convenience stores—a great improvement over the old ones. Gas stations accept both credit and debit cards for gas purchases, although some will only accept cash at night.

TOLL ROADS

Mexico charges some of the highest tolls in the world for its network of toll roads (called *cuotas*); as a result, they are rarely crowded.

Generally speaking though, using the toll roads will cut your travel time and will be safer than using non-toll roads (called *libres*).

BREAKDOWNS

If your car breaks down on the road, help might already be on the way. Radio-equipped green repair trucks operated by uniformed English-speaking officers patrol major highways during daylight hours to aid motorists in trouble. These “**Green Angels**” perform minor repairs and adjustments free, but you pay for parts and materials.

Your best guide to repair shops is the Yellow Pages. For repairs, look under “Automóviles y Camiones: Talleres de Reparación y Servicio”; auto-parts stores are under “Refacciones y Accesorios para Automóviles.” To find a mechanic on the road, look for a sign that says TALLER MECANICO.

Places called *vulcanizadora* or *llantera* repair flat tires, and it is common to find them open 24 hours a day on the most traveled highways. Even if the place looks empty, chances are you will find someone who can help you fix a flat.

MINOR ACCIDENTS

When possible, many Mexicans drive away from minor accidents, or try to make an immediate settlement, to avoid involving the police. If the police arrive while the involved persons are still at the scene, everyone may be locked in jail until blame is assessed. In any case, you have to settle up immediately, which may take days. Foreigners who don't speak fluent Spanish are at a distinct disadvantage when trying to explain their version of the event. Three steps may help the foreigner who doesn't wish to do as the Mexicans do: If you were in your own car, notify your Mexican insurance company, whose job it is to intervene on your behalf. If you were in a rental car, notify the rental company immediately and ask how to contact the nearest adjuster. (You did buy insurance with the rental, right?) Finally, if all else fails, ask to contact the nearest Green Angel, who may be able to explain to officials that you are covered by insurance. See also “Mexican Auto Insurance” under “Getting There,” earlier in this chapter.

CAR RENTALS

You'll get the best price if you reserve a car at least a week in advance in the United States. U.S. car-rental firms include **Advantage** (☎ 800/777-5500 in the U.S. and Canada; www.arac.com), **Avis** (☎ 800/331-1212 in the U.S., 800/879-2847 in Canada; www.avis.com), **Budget** (☎ 800/527-0700 in the U.S. and Canada; www.budget.com), **Hertz** (☎ 800/654-3131 in the U.S. and Canada;

www.hertz.com), **National** (☎ 800/227-7368 in the U.S. and Canada; www.nationalcar.com), and **Thrifty** (☎ 800/847-4389 in the U.S. and Canada; www.thrifty.com), which often offers discounts for rentals in Mexico. For European travelers, **Kemwel Holiday Auto** (☎ 800/678-0678; www.kemwel.com) and **Auto Europe** (☎ 800/223-5555; www.autoeurope.com) can arrange Mexican rentals, sometimes through other agencies. These and some local firms have offices in Mexico City and most other large Mexican cities. You'll find rental desks at airports, all major hotels, and many travel agencies.

Cars are easy to rent if you are 25 or over and have a major credit card, valid driver's license, and passport with you. Without a credit card you must leave a cash deposit, usually a big one. One-way rentals are usually simple to arrange but more costly.

Car-rental costs are high in Mexico because cars are more expensive. The condition of rental cars has improved greatly over the years, and clean new cars are the norm. You will pay the least for a manual car without air-conditioning. Prices may be considerably higher if you rent around a major holiday. Also double-check charges for insurance—some companies will increase the insurance rate after several days. Always ask for detailed information about all charges you will be responsible for.

DEDUCTIBLES Be careful—these vary greatly; some are as high as \$2,500, which comes out of your pocket immediately in case of damage. On the simplest car, Hertz's deductible is about \$1,000 and Avis's is \$500.

INSURANCE Insurance is offered in two parts: **Collision and damage** insurance covers your car and others if the accident is your fault, and **personal accident** insurance covers you and anyone in your car. Read the fine print on the back of your rental agreement and note that insurance may be invalid if you have an accident while driving on an unpaved road.

DAMAGE Always inspect your car carefully and note every damaged or missing item, no matter how minute, on your rental agreement, or you may be charged.

BY TAXI

Taxis are the preferred way to get around in almost all of the resort areas of Mexico, and also around Mexico City. Short trips within towns are generally charged by preset zones, and are quite reasonable

compared with U.S. rates. For longer trips, or excursions to nearby cities, taxis can generally be hired for around \$10 to \$15 per hour, or for a negotiated daily rate. Even drops to different destinations, say between Huatulco and Puerto Escondido, can be arranged. A negotiated one-way price is usually less than the cost of a rental car for a day, and service is much faster than traveling by bus. For anyone who is uncomfortable driving in Mexico, this is a convenient, comfortable alternative. An added bonus is that you have a Spanish-speaking person with you in case you run into any car or road trouble. Many taxi drivers speak at least some English. Your hotel can assist you with the arrangements.

BY BUS

Mexican buses are frequent, readily accessible, and can get you to almost anywhere you want to go. They're often the only way to get from large cities to other nearby cities and small villages. Don't hesitate to ask questions if you're confused about anything.

Dozens of Mexican companies operate large, air-conditioned, Greyhound-type buses between most cities. Travel class is generally labeled second (*segunda*), first (*primera*), and deluxe (*ejecutiva*), which is referred to by a variety of names. The deluxe buses often have fewer seats than regular buses, show video movies en route, are air-conditioned, and have few stops; some have complimentary refreshments. Many run express from origin to the final destination. They are well worth the few dollars more that you'll pay. In rural areas, buses are often of the school-bus variety, with lots of local color.

Whenever possible, it's best to buy your reserved-seat ticket, often via a computerized system, a day in advance on many long-distance routes and especially before holidays. Schedules are fairly dependable, so be at the terminal on time for departure. Current information may be obtained from local bus stations. See the appendix for a list of helpful bus terms in Spanish.

Bus Tip

Little English is spoken at bus stations, so come prepared with your destination written down, then double-check the departure.

FAST FACTS: Mexico

Abbreviations Dept. (apartments); Apdo. (post office box); Av. (*avenida*; avenue); *c/*: (*calle*; street); Calz. (*calzada*; boulevard). "C" on faucets stands for *caliente* (hot), and "F" stands for *fría* (cold). PB (*planta baja*) means ground floor, and most buildings count the next floor up as the first floor (1).

Business Hours In general, businesses in larger cities are open between 9am and 7pm; in smaller towns many close between 2 and 4pm. Most are closed on Sunday. In resort areas it is common to find more stores open on Sundays, as well as extended business hours for shops, often until 8pm or even 10pm. Bank hours are Monday through Friday from 9 or 9:30am to anywhere between 3 and 7pm. Increasingly, banks open on Saturday for at least a half-day.

Cameras & Film Film costs about the same as in the United States.

Doctors & Dentists Every embassy and consulate is prepared to recommend or refer local doctors and dentists with good training and modern equipment; some of the doctors and dentists even speak English. See the list of embassies and consulates under "Embassies & Consulates," below. Hotels with a large foreign clientele are often prepared to recommend English-speaking doctors. Almost all first-class hotels in Mexico have a doctor on call.

Drug Laws To be blunt, don't use or possess illegal drugs in Mexico. Most Mexican officials have no tolerance for drug users, and jail is their solution, with very little hope of getting out until the sentence (usually a long one) is completed or heavy fines or bribes are paid. Remember, in Mexico the legal system assumes you are guilty until proven innocent. (**Important note:** It isn't uncommon to be befriended by a fellow user, only to be turned in by that "friend," who's collected a bounty.) Bring prescription drugs in their original containers. If possible, pack a copy of the original prescription with the generic name of the drug.

U.S. Customs officials are also on the lookout for diet drugs sold in Mexico but illegal in the United States, possession of which could also land you in a U.S. jail.

Drugstores *Farmacias* (pharmacies) will sell you just about anything, with or without a prescription. Most pharmacies

are open Monday to Saturday from 8am to 8pm. The major resort areas generally have one or two 24-hour pharmacies. Pharmacies take turns staying open during off hours, so if you are in a smaller town and need to buy medicine during off hours, ask for the *farmacia de turno*.

Electricity The electrical system in Mexico is 110 volts AC (60 cycles), as in the United States and Canada. However, in reality it may cycle more slowly and overheat your appliances. To compensate, select a medium or low speed for hair dryers. Many older hotels still have electrical outlets for flat two-prong plugs; you'll need an adapter for any modern electrical apparatus that has an enlarged end on one prong or that has three prongs. Many first-class and deluxe hotels have the three-holed outlets (*trifásicos* in Spanish). Those that don't may have loan adapters, but to be sure, it's always better to carry your own.

Embassies & Consulates They provide valuable lists of doctors and lawyers, as well as regulations concerning marriages in Mexico. Contrary to popular belief, your embassy cannot get you out of a Mexican jail, provide postal or banking services, or fly you home when you run out of money. Consular officers can provide you with advice on most matters and problems, however.

The Embassy of the **United States** in Mexico City is at Paseo de la Reforma 305, next to the Hotel María Isabel Sheraton at the corner of Río Danubio (☎ 55/5080-2000 or 5511-9980); hours are Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 5:30pm. Visit www.usembassy-mexico.gov for addresses of the U.S. consulates inside Mexico. In addition, there are consular agencies in Acapulco (☎ 744/469-0556), Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo (☎ 755/553-2100), and in other locations throughout Mexico.

The Embassy of **Australia** in Mexico City is at Rubén Darío 55, Col. Polanco (☎ 55/51101-2200). It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 1pm.

The Embassy of **Canada** in Mexico City is at Schiller 529, Col. Polanco (☎ 55/5724-7900); it's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 1pm. At other times, the name of a duty officer is posted on the door. Visit www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca for addresses of consular agencies in Mexico. There is also a Canadian consulate in Acapulco (☎ 744/484-1305).

The Embassy of **New Zealand** in Mexico City is at Jaime Balmes 8, 4th floor, Col. Los Morales, Polanco (☎ 55/5283-9460;

kiwimexico@compuserve.com.mx). It's open Monday through Thursday from 8:30am to 2pm and 3 to 5:30pm, and Friday from 8:30am to 2pm.

The Embassy of the **United Kingdom** in Mexico City is at Río Lerma 71, Col. Cuauhtémoc (☎ 55/5242-8500; www.embajada.britanica.com.mx). It's open Monday through Friday from 8:30am to 3:30pm.

The Embassy of **Ireland** in Mexico City is at Bulevar Cerrada, Avila Camacho 76, 3rd floor, Col. Lomas de Chapultepec (☎ 55/5520-5803). It's open Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm.

The **South African** Embassy in Mexico City is at Andrés Bello 10, 9th floor, Col. Polanco (☎ 55/5282-9260). It's open Monday through Friday from 8am to 4pm.

Emergencies In case of emergency, dial ☎ 065 from any phone within Mexico. For police emergency numbers, turn to "Fast Facts" in the chapters that follow. The 24-hour **Tourist Help Line** in Mexico City is ☎ 01-800/987-8224 or 55/5089-7500, or you can now simply dial **078**. The operators don't always speak English, but they are always willing to help. The tourist legal assistance office (Procuraduría del Turista) in Mexico City (☎ 55/5625-8153 or 55/5625-8154) always has an English speaker available. Though the phones are frequently busy, they operate 24 hours.

Internet Access In large cities and resort areas, a growing number of five-star hotels offer business centers with Internet access. You'll also find cybercafes in destinations that are popular with expats and business travelers.

Language Spanish is the official language in Mexico. English is spoken and understood to some degree in most tourist areas. Furthermore, you will find that Mexicans are very accommodating with foreigners who try to speak Spanish, even in broken sentences.

Legal Aid **International Legal Defense Counsel**, 111 S. 15th St., 24th Floor, Packard Building, Philadelphia, PA 19102 (☎ 215/977-9982), is a law firm specializing in legal difficulties of Americans abroad. See also "Embassies & Consulates" and "Emergencies," above.

Liquor Laws The legal drinking age in Mexico is 18; however, it is extremely rare that anyone will be asked for ID or denied purchase (often, children are sent to the stores to buy beer for their parents). Grocery stores sell everything from beer

and wine to national and imported liquors. You can buy liquor 24 hours a day; but during major elections, dry laws often are enacted for as much as 72 hours in advance of the election—and those laws apply to foreign tourists as well as local residents. Mexico also does not have any “open container” laws for transporting liquor in cars, but authorities are beginning to target drunk drivers more aggressively. It’s a good idea to drive defensively.

Mail Postage for a postcard or letter is 8 pesos; it may arrive anywhere from 1 to 6 weeks later. The price for registered letters and packages depends on the weight, and unreliable delivery time can take 2 to 6 weeks. The recommended way to send a package or important mail is through FedEx, DHL, UPS, or another reputable international mail service.

Passports Allow plenty of time before your trip to apply for a passport; processing normally takes 3 weeks but can take longer during busy periods (especially spring). And keep in mind that if you need a passport in a hurry, you’ll pay a higher processing fee.

For Residents of Australia: You can pick up an application from your local post office or any branch of Passports Australia, but you must schedule an interview at the passport office to present your application materials. Call the **Australian Passport Information Service** at ☎ **131-232**, or visit the government website at www.passports.gov.au.

For Residents of Canada: Passport applications are available at travel agencies throughout Canada or from the central **Passport Office**, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Ottawa, ON K1A 0G3 (☎ **800/567-6868**; www.ppt.gc.ca).

For Residents of Ireland: You can apply for a 10-year passport at the **Passport Office**, Setanta Centre, Molesworth Street, Dublin 2 (☎ **01/671-1633**; www.irlgov.ie/iveagh). Those under age 18 and over 65 must apply for a 3-year passport. You can also apply at 1A South Mall, Cork (☎ **021/272-525**) or at most main post offices.

For Residents of New Zealand: You can pick up a passport application at any New Zealand Passports Office or download it from the website. Contact the **Passports Office** at ☎ **0800/225-050** in New Zealand or 04/474-8100, or log on to www.passports.govt.nz.

For Residents of the United Kingdom: To pick up an application for a standard 10-year passport (5-year passport for children under 16), visit your nearest passport office, major post office, or travel agency or contact the **United Kingdom Passport Service** at ☎ 0870/521-0410 or search its website at www.ukpa.gov.uk.

For Residents of the United States: Whether you're applying in person or by mail, you can download passport applications from the U.S. State Department website at <http://travel.state.gov>. To find your regional passport office, either check the U.S. State Department website or call the **National Passport Information Center** toll-free number (☎ 877/487-2778) for automated information.

Pets Taking a pet into Mexico is easy but requires a little planning. Animals coming from the United States and Canada need to be checked for health within 30 days before arrival in Mexico and require paperwork from your vet. If your stay extends beyond the 30-day time frame of your U.S.-issued certificate, you'll need to get another Certificate of Health issued by a veterinarian in Mexico.

Police In Mexico City, police are to be suspected as frequently as they are to be trusted; however, you'll find many who are quite honest and helpful. In the rest of the country, especially in the tourist areas, the majority are very protective of international visitors. Several cities, including Acapulco, have gone as far as to set up a special corps of English-speaking Tourist Police to assist with directions, guidance, and more.

Restrooms Public toilets are not common in Mexico, but an increasing number are available, especially at fast-food restaurants and Pemex gas stations. These facilities and restaurant and club restrooms commonly have attendants, who expect a small tip (about 50¢).

Smoking Smoking is permitted and generally accepted in most public places, including restaurants, bars, and hotel lobbies. Nonsmoking areas and hotel rooms for nonsmokers are becoming more common in higher-end establishments, but they tend to be the exception rather than the rule.

Taxes There's a 15% IVA (value-added) tax on goods and services in most of Mexico, and it's supposed to be included in the posted price. There is an exit tax of around \$18 imposed on

every foreigner leaving the country, usually included in the price of airline tickets.

Telephones Mexico's telephone system is slowly but surely catching up with modern times. All telephone numbers have 10 digits. Every city and town that has telephone access has a two-digit (Mexico City, Monterrey, and Guadalajara) or three-digit (everywhere else) area code. In Mexico City, Monterrey, and Guadalajara, local numbers have eight digits; elsewhere, local numbers have seven digits. To place a local call, you do not need to dial the area code. Many fax numbers are also regular telephone numbers; ask whoever answers for the fax tone ("*me da tono de fax, por favor*"). Cellular phones are very popular for small businesses in resort areas and smaller communities. To call a cellular number inside the same area code, dial 044 and then the number. To dial the cellular phone from anywhere else in Mexico, first dial 01, and then the three-digit area code and the seven-digit number. To dial it from the U.S., dial 011-52, plus the three-digit area code and the seven-digit number.

The **country code** for Mexico is **52**.

To call Mexico: If you're calling Mexico from the United States:

1. Dial the international access code: 011
2. Dial the country code: 52
3. Dial the two- or three-digit area code, then the eight- or seven-digit number. For example, if you wanted to call the U.S. consulate in Acapulco, the whole number would be 011-52-744-469-0556. If you wanted to dial the U.S. embassy in Mexico City, the whole number would be 011-52-55-5209-9100.

To make international calls: To make international calls from Mexico, first dial 00, then the country code (U.S. or Canada 1, U.K. 44, Ireland 353, Australia 61, New Zealand 64). Next, dial the area code and number. For example, to call the British Embassy in Washington, you would dial 00-1-202-588-7800.

For directory assistance: Dial ☎ **040** if you're looking for a number inside Mexico. **Note:** Listings usually appear under the owner's name, not the name of the business, and your chances to find an English-speaking operator are slim to none.

For operator assistance: If you need operator assistance in making a call, dial 090 to make an international call, and 020 to call a number in Mexico.

Toll-free numbers: Numbers beginning with 800 within Mexico are toll-free, but calling a U.S. toll-free number from Mexico costs the same as an overseas call. To call an 800 number in the U.S., dial 001-880 and the last seven digits of the toll-free number. To call an 888 number in the U.S., dial 001-881 and the last seven digits of the toll-free number.

Time Zone Central Standard Time prevails throughout most of Mexico, and all of the areas covered in this book. Mexico observes **daylight saving time**.

Tippling Most service employees in Mexico count on tips for the majority of their income—this is especially true for bellboys and waiters. Bellboys should receive the equivalent of 50¢ to \$1 per bag; waiters generally receive 10% to 20%, depending on the level of service. It is not customary to tip taxi drivers, unless they are hired by the hour or provide touring or other special services.

Useful Phone Numbers **Tourist Help Line**, available 24 hours (☎ 01-800/987-8224 toll-free inside Mexico; or dial 078). **Mexico Hot Line** (☎ 800/446-3942). **U.S. Dept. of State Travel Advisory**, staffed 24 hours (☎ 202/647-5225). **U.S. Passport Agency** (☎ 877/487-2777). **U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention International Traveler's Hot Line** (☎ 877/394-8747).

Water Most hotels have decanters or bottles of purified water in the rooms, and the better hotels have either purified water from regular taps or special taps marked *agua purificada*. Virtually any hotel, restaurant, or bar will bring you purified water if you specifically request it, but you'll usually be charged for it. Bottled purified water is sold widely at drugstores and grocery stores. Some popular brands are Santa María, Ciel, and Bonafont. Evian and other imported brands are also widely available.