



# OVERSEAS

## Haven Report



**San Miguel De Allende, Mexico:  
Small-Town Friendliness With Artistic Accents...**





© Mike Anderson

## San Miguel de Allende, México—Because It Feels Like Home

By *Mike Anderson*

With the astuteness seldom found in a young lady of her age, Leslie von Drashek asserted that, “No matter where you’re from, San Miguel is a place that feels like home.” Leslie was born in San Miguel de Allende of American parents, and grew up in and between two cultures and languages. At just 15 years old, she nailed perfectly the sentiment that I heard from North American expats all over town: San Miguel de Allende has the small-town friendliness and hominess that most expats crave, set in a remarkably beautiful and sociable colonial town.

San Miguel de Allende has been a retirement favorite for foreigners as far back as the late 1960s. Nestled among low hills, the semidesert valley is mostly flat in the historic center, great for walking, and chock full of delights for visitors and residents. The quantity of first-class restaurants and fine shopping per block is likely unmatched anywhere else in Mexico. The large hacienda-style houses have been divided into patio restaurants, coffee houses, upscale cantinas, and niche shops that the expats never seem to tire of visiting.

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## staff

**Kathleen Peddicord**  
Founding Publisher

**Sophia Titley**  
Editorial Director

**Cristian Landero**  
Graphic Design

If you have queries relating to your subscription, get in touch at:  
[CustomerService@OverseasLivingLetter.com](mailto:CustomerService@OverseasLivingLetter.com)

For editorial comments and contributions, reach us at:  
[Editorial@OverseasLivingLetter.com](mailto:Editorial@OverseasLivingLetter.com)

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Most of these establishments are owned and managed by Mexicans native to San Miguel. Their famous friendliness and graciousness is soothing and charming for the harried visitors from Toronto and Chicago.



*San Miguel's art center, the Instituto Allende*

San Miguel first became popular with artists and bohemians in the 1940s and 50s, after the establishment of the Instituto Allende. The institute gave classes in the fine arts attracting students internationally, and the artists began settling in. In those days, San Miguel real estate was laughingly inexpensive. The town is blessed with great weather and is full of high-energy foreigners who were entranced by the Mexican sense of style and colors. Over the years, the foreigners came to include more-and-more retirees and eccentrics that found their feet stuck to the sidewalks and plazas—they couldn't leave.

Perhaps the most important trend in San Miguel de Allende today is the steady population increase. This is deliberate policy of the city government. Although expats predominate as both buyers and sellers of choice real estate (in and around the historic center), the percentage of upper-class Mexicans is increasing, providing buying competition for the expats and pushing up prices. The expat population is growing again after a drop-off following the Great Recession. The trend is growth in population, upscale Mexicans, and real-estate prices. San Miguel's popularity as both a place to visit and to live has a long positive run ahead.

San Miguel is centrally located in Mexico, a good base for exploration of the country in all four directions. The colonial cities of Guanajuato and Queretaro are just 90 minutes away. Mexico City is about four hours away to the south, Morelia about three-and-a-half hours southwest, Guadalajara about four-and-a-half hours west.

The Texas border at Laredo is roughly 600 miles north—10 hours of driving. The closest beach on either the Pacific or Caribbean side is about 600 miles away.

## **A Sticky Adventure**

The Parróquia of San Miguel is the standout architectural feature that first traps the eye. Every day, most any time of day or evening, the park benches of the central park (El Jardín) across from the Parróquia are full of foreigners and Mexicans admiring the church facade and reading, people watching, or playing with their children. The park and church are a magnet for the townsfolk.

Equally intriguing along the streets radiating out from the Jardín are markets, spicy foods, colorful houses overflowing with bougainvilleas and flowers, musical parades in the street, unexpected architectural details, and neighborhood festivals. Add brilliant skies, the small courtesies bequeathed by friendly faces, the stoicism of devout Catholics, and the smiles of pretty girls, and you can easily get stuck here. Many first-time visitors are looking at properties within three to four days of their arrivals.



*The Parróquia at night*



San Miguel is not one of the low-cost standouts of expat living. Years of serving both a large resident expat community and hordes of foreign visitors has caused the price of real estate to surge to prices often equal to North American prices. Consequently, prices in the restaurants and shops in town are comparable to prices found in the less expensive areas of the United States. Depending on where your back-home area is, you will find the cost of living in San Miguel to be roughly the same to much cheaper. The cost of living in San Miguel is somewhat cheaper than where we lived in the American South and Southwest.

Property taxes are negligible, and the moderate weather translates to low utilities bills. Overall, groceries, restaurants, and entertainment expenses run 25% to 35% cheaper than in our last U.S. residence in the American South. In the historic center, we walk everywhere, so our transportation costs are minimal.

For expats, San Miguel is a social town par excellence. Opportunities to meet other expats abound. Classes in two-to-three-dozen subjects are available at all times, and the number of charitable organizations is reported to exceed 100. Volunteer work is an excellent means to make new friends among both expats and Mexicans.

In 2008, the historic center of San Miguel de Allende (and the close-by Santuario de Atotonilco) gained UNESCO World Heritage Site designation. In 2013, *Condé Nast Traveler* magazine named San Miguel de Allende as the best city in the world.



Frieze in chapel of Atotonilco

## An Easy Climate

The combination of a southern latitude (20° 55' N) with a high altitude (1,889 meters, or 6,197 feet) gives San Miguel moderate weather throughout the year. My wife, a natty dresser, despairs of my wardrobe of shorts and T-shirts from March through November and jeans and long-sleeved shirts from December through February. San Miguel has two pronounced seasons. Mid-May through mid-October is the rainy season, with average monthly rainfall of 12.11 centimeters (4.77 inches) during the wettest months. The rains cool the temperatures throughout the summer making June through September very pleasant. Mid-October through mid-May is the dry season, and May is the hottest month, averaging 28°C (83°F), so we never need air conditioning. January has the coldest temperatures, averaging 17°C (45°F), and you may want a bedroom space heater for three to four weeks. The sun is bright year-round. San Miguel doesn't suffer from any type of natural disaster: snow, floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, nor earthquakes. I heard one expat brag that that all four seasons occur every day: winter at dawn, spring in late morning, summer in the afternoon, and fall in the evening.



Chupícuaro mask

## Historical Highlights Of San Miguel

The archeological record indicates that central Mexico, which includes the San Miguel area, was first settled around 500 B.C. to 200 B.C. near Chupícuaro by agrarian groups, the Otomi, who subsisted on maize and other local grains and vegetables. Subsequently, the Otomi were displaced by



different Chichimeca tribes, skilled hunter-gatherers, with P'urépecha tribes nearby. These tribes were heavily influenced culturally by the Teotihuacán groups from the area of modern-day Mexico City through about A.D. 700 to A.D. 900, when Teotihuacán was mysteriously abandoned. The Guachichiles tribe of the Chichimecas remained in the area as the dominant tribe, mostly as hunter-gatherers and fierce warriors.



*Cañada de la Virgen*

Between the years 950 and 1100, small towns were formed by indigenous peoples associated with the Toltecs, leaving about 100 archeological remains close to San Miguel. (The most visible of these is readily accessible at La Cañada de la Virgen, a few kilometers southwest of San Miguel.) The Chichimecas and other nomadic tribes continued to inhabit the area until the arrival of the Spanish.

The Spanish initially moved with livestock into the areas west of San Miguel in the late 1520s and began serious exploration of the Guanajuato hills in the 1540s. Both gold and silver were discovered in 1540s, and soldiers were sent to establish protection for mining operations in 1548. Gold was also discovered in the area northwest of San Miguel, now called Zacatecas.

The area that became San Miguel was on the strategic transport route from the mines of Guanajuato and Zacatecas to Querétaro and Mexico City. In 1555, the viceroy of New Spain ordered the creation of a village and fort to protect the route. The village became the Villa de San Miguel. Construction began on the first church in San Miguel around 1565. The Spanish brought cattle that quickly overran the lands inhabited by the Chichimecas, and violent confrontations were common between 1546 and 1598. The Chichimeca tribes continued

fighting the Spaniards and the swarms of adventurers and laborers attracted to the mineral wealth until the late 1590s, when the Spaniards finally bought peace with grants of agricultural land and tools. With the solidification of the Spanish language and Christian religion among the indigenous tribes and widespread intermarriage, the indigenous tribes were largely assimilated and most of the indigenous culture was lost. Subsequent discoveries of new silver deposits, especially the rich vein of nearby Valenciana, made central Mexico the richest in Mexico and the world capital of silver mining for three centuries.

Now at peace in 1600, San Miguel developed a thriving industry of textiles, leather goods, and iron products over the next 300 years. The nearby agricultural area between Guanajuato and Queretaro, known as the Bajío, was especially fertile, supplying wheat, sheep, and other livestock to the rest of Mexico.



*Battle for independence at the Alhóndiga fortress in Guanajuato*

Guanajuato and the surrounding area were declared an *intendencia* (province) in 1790, and it's from this *intendencia*, with its great wealth and impoverished lower classes, that the War of Independence started in 1810. A priest from the nearby town of Dolores, Miguel Hidalgo y Castillo, raised a peasant army that marched through the town of San Miguel de Allende to nearby Guanajuato. The royalists attempted to defend themselves within a large fortress-like granary, the Alhóndiga de Granaditas, but were defeated by the insurgents, the first major battle of the War of Independence and the first victory. The war lasted until 1821 when independence was finally won.

Even after independence was won, Mexico remained a turbulent country during much of the 1800s, as federalists and centralists battled for control of the country, often fighting



within the state of Guanajuato. This political turbulence nearly destroyed the mining industry until the late 1870s, when the dictator Porfirio Díaz established stability and reactivated mining. However repressive his dictatorship, Porfirio Díaz was responsible for many modernizations throughout Mexico, which included expanded electric and telephone service, railways, and water works. However, his repressive governance provoked a civil war in 1910, La Revolución, which forced his resignation in 1911. Mexico remained unstable for another two decades, and central Mexico suffered another war in 1923, the Cristero conflict, which pitted the secular government against the Catholic clergy. The insecurity persisted until the center-left Partido Revolucionario Institucional established a political hegemony that provided stability and the appearance of democracy up to the start of the 21st century.

### The Renaissance Of San Miguel de Allende

The War of Independence, the Revolución, and the subsequent political instability were not kind to San Miguel de Allende. No longer important as a transport hub for the diminished mining in Guanajuato and Zacatecas, the town stagnated, and by the time of the Great Depression, much of the town was in ruins. In many respects, this neglect of San Miguel was a blessing—the abandonment of the town left the 18th century buildings and monuments intact and unmodernized.

The renaissance of San Miguel began in about 1937 with the arrival of an American writer and artist, Stirling Dickinson, and a wealthy Peruvian artist, Cossio del Pomar. Cossio purchased and renovated several properties in town and attracted many famous artists, actors, writers, musicians, and other creative people that combined efforts to restore San Miguel. But Cossio's principal contribution was the establishment of an art school. The first school opened in an ex-convent that had been the quarters of a cavalry regiment. Cossio arranged private financing to restore the ex-convent. With Stirling Dickinson, they attracted some of the biggest names in Mexican art, such as Diego Rivera and Jose Chavez Morado, marketed their curriculum throughout North

and South America, and opened the doors of La Escuela Universitaria de Bellas Artes in 1938.



Mural at the Instituto Allende

The first group of twelve students arrived in a town without a single restaurant or adequate lodging, but the opening of the school quickly created a commercial boom among the townspeople. Stores, eateries, lodgings, and cantinas popped up to service the students and faculty. The school was adversely affected by declining enrollments during World War II, but the post-war G.I. Bill kick-started enrollments again as American veterans took advantage of the education subsidies





to attend the school, starting in 1946. Gifted artists and teachers settled in San Miguel during this period and were significant in converting San Miguel de Allende into a world-class artist colony.

In 1949, Cossio del Pomar reopened the school in its current location, renamed the Instituto Allende, with Dickinson as director of arts. The institute flourished throughout the 50s and 60s without major effect on the growth of San Miguel.



*Bellas Artes Cultural Centro*

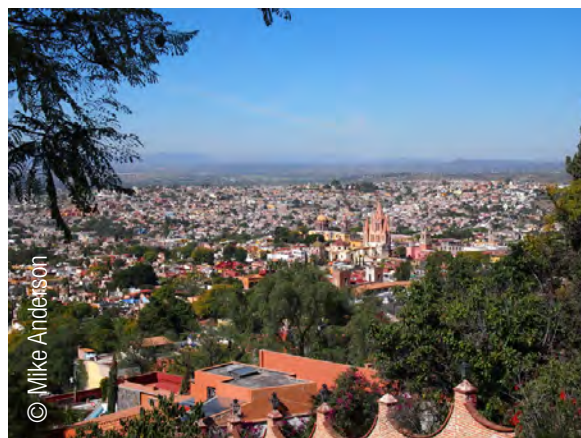
Two other cultural developments added to San Miguel's allure as an art and cultural center in the 1960s. The Mexican government opened the Centro Cultural Ignacio Ramirez (commonly called Bellas Artes) in the town center, which was directed by the Carmen Masip de Hawkins, a dynamo that participated in the establishment and administration of the public library, the Angela Peralta Theater, and the Chamber Music Festival. Several movies were filmed in San Miguel during this same period.

The explosion of foreigners moving to San Miguel began in earnest in the 1970s. With a total estimated population of about 15,000, including 1,000 expats in the early 1970s, the expat population increased to about 2,500 in 1990 and now sits at some 175,000.

The desirability of San Miguel de Allende as a residence for both foreigners and Mexicans produced a bubble in real estate prices that provoked construction of gated communities and new neighborhoods around the periphery of the town's historic center. Prices topped-out in 2007-2008 when the Great Recession roiled the United States. Many U.S. purchasers of San Miguel property, needing to consolidate their finances up north, put their properties for sale at the same time, saturating the market

with bubble-priced houses. Sellers with an urgent need to sell took losses of up to 40%. Sellers without any urgency have slowly adjusted their prices downward to market prices. Now, demand is rising again.

The continued popularity of San Miguel de Allende has had other side effects: increased traffic, scarce street parking, and ugly cellphone towers, as well as price inflation in the restaurants and other tourist related services.



*Cityscape of San Miguel*

## Modern San Miguel

The urban population of San Miguel is estimated to be 75,000. Estimates of the number of expats vary wildly, even among knowledgeable expats, from 7,000 to 14,000. The estimates are further confused by the number of partial-year expats, perhaps 50%, and the back-home loss of expats during the recession years of 2008 to present. About 70% of the expats are estimated to be American, 20% Canadian, and 10% from all other countries.

The city administration is effective. There is no litter in the streets of the historic center nor graffiti. The city employs a graffiti squad that responds immediately to citizen reports of new graffiti and removes it within hours. The city also repairs plaster work and repaints house facades in the historic center. San Miguel is steadily, if slowly, improving its road network, especially around the town periphery. New overpasses, traffic circles, bypasses, signage, and even a couple of traffic lights make it possible to get in-and-out of town bypassing the congested traffic in the center. Popularity has brought traffic congestion and parking scarcity to the center. A big, modern mall, Plaza Luciérnaga, on the road to Querétaro features your



typical mix of fast foods, department store, full-service grocery store, movie theater, boutiques, and even an Office Depot. Elsewhere around the periphery, there are three other large grocery stores.

Most of the new housing construction is on the edges of town, or farther away in enclosed, theme developments: vineyards, equestrian, or golf.



City street

## The Historic Center

The historic center is a time warp back to the 18th century. Spanish-colonial architecture dominates, replete with close to 50 public fountains (and hundreds of private patio fountains). Most streets are still cobblestoned, either round or flat stones that make walking in high heels a perilous adventure. Streets are crooked, sidewalks are narrow, and the balconies and walls overflow with flowers and bougainvilleas. Some 20 churches, ranging from plain to stunningly beautiful, are scattered throughout the town.

The predominate building material for the original public buildings and churches was stone in beautiful hues of speckled grays, reds, and pinks. Older residences were constructed in stuccoed rock or adobe, with stone door and window lintels, painted in extravagant colors that would be considered sinful in North America.

The large buildings in the historic center have been increasingly divided into restaurants, hotels, and tourist shops. It seems that just about every doorway has been converted to commercial use. San Miguel is a fully mature tourist destination approaching international service levels.



Fun in the Jardín

The Jardín is the central park and social center of the town. The wide street area between the Jardín and the Parroquia is constantly full of children and parents, toy and ice-cream vendors, mariachis and hat vendors, and often the *mojigangas* (giant paper-mache figures) that adorn the wedding parades originating at the church. The church side of the park is the favorite people-watching spot for both Mexicans and foreigners. Two other parks are popular: Parque Juárez, three blocks south of the Parroquia with the grounds of the Casa de la Cultura just to its east, and Parque Guadiana, a few blocks south of the Instituto Allende, off the Ancha de San Antonio.

San Miguel's 60-year artistic heritage is evident everywhere, from the patios of the Instituto Allende, to the dozens of art galleries and handcraft shops.

## Handcrafts In San Miguel de Allende

San Miguel de Allende is famous for its tin handcrafts, such as mirrors, decorations, lamp shades, frames, signs, etc. The finish of the tin can be silver, tarnished, or hand painted in different colors. Other notable handcrafts are paper-mache figures, fruits, and toys; iron work in chairs, lamps tables, and railings; decorative items in pewter; and hand-loomed wool rugs.





*Vineyards outside of San Miguel*

Mexican and expat artisans work in iron, silver, bronze, pewter, stone, glass, paper-mache, and leather among other media.

## San Miguel's Economy

San Miguel's old-world charm, its designation as a World Heritage Site in 2008, and its historical importance to Mexican independence have made San Miguel one of the significant visitor attractions in Mexico. Under normal travel conditions, San Miguel receives millions of tourists per year who inject billions of pesos into the local economy. San Miguel has 112 lodgings of all categories, with 2,013 rooms. There are 95 restaurants and clubs and three golf courses. The mix of tourism is approximately 94% Mexican and 6% foreign. Within the small group of 6% foreign visitors, 61% (36,700) are Americans. Additional draws for visitors include large cultural events, such as *Semana Santa* (Holy Week), the Guanajuato International Film Festival, the automobile rallies, the Chamber Music Festival, the Cervantino Festival in nearby Guanajuato, the Jazz Festival, the Hot-Air Balloon Festival, and the San Miguel Writers' Conference.



*A great family tourist destination*

A huge percentage of San Miguel's economy is dependent on the tourism industry. The number of foreign tourists dropped dramatically with the global pandemic and in years prior due to the news of narco-violence that has been reported internationally for years. Even the safest cities such as San Miguel de Allende have been tainted by the news of narco violence that's committed hundreds of miles away. Tourism has increased steadily, beginning in 2013, with Mexican tourism (94%) the largest component. The Mexican tourists in San Miguel tend to be middle and upper-class and are as willing to spend money as their foreign counterparts.

San Miguel also benefits from educational tourism, primarily at the Instituto Allende and Bellas Artes and at private Spanish schools. At the moment, there are groups of Japanese, Korean, North American, and European students studying Spanish here.

Lesser economic influences include the municipal government that derives its revenue from property taxes and subsidies from the federal government, agriculture (10.6%), and light manufacturing (6.5%) in the areas surrounding the urban area.

## Location And Access

San Miguel is easily accessible on a modern road system, with two nearby airports (León's BJX, and Querétaro's QRO). Shuttle service to or from the León or Querétaro airports costs 363 pesos (US\$28) and takes one-and-a-half hours. There is no direct bus service to the León or Querétaro airports. There are frequent daily flights to Houston and Dallas (two-hours-and 15-minutes flying time), Los Angeles (three-and-a-half-hours flying time), and Mexico City (one-hour flying time).

While being well connected to a major highway to the east (Highway 57), San Miguel is fortunate to be located away from the major highways, reducing substantially the amount of traffic and its problems of noise and pollution.

San Miguel has good first-class bus service to nearby cities. These buses are excellent, comfortable, inexpensive, and safe, and there is a 50% discount for senior residents. The 90-minute trip to Guanajuato costs 124 pesos (US\$9.54). There are frequent first-class buses to Mexico City (three-and-

a-half hours, costing 375 pesos, or US\$28.85), Querétaro (one-and-a-half hours, costing 100 pesos, or US\$7.69), Guadalajara (five-and-a-half hours, costing 509 pesos, or US\$39.15), León (two-and-a-half hours, costing 183 pesos, or US\$14.08), and to all other major cities through the above cities. Most of these first-class buses are superior in comfort to first-class airline seating.

## Bringing Your Pets

Officially, travelers bringing their dogs or cats into Mexico must obtain these documents beforehand:

- A Health Certificate issued by an official authority or by a licensed veterinarian
- Proof of vaccines against rabies

The pet should be transported in a container free from bedding or cloth materials. See these Web pages for detailed requirements:

- [Mexican Embassy in Canada](#)
- [SENASICA](#)

Several residents of San Miguel report that they have never been asked for the above documents for entry by land at the northern border. I still recommend that you obtain them.



Expats at a Literary Sala presentation



Coming by plane is a different situation, the airlines may require these documents as will Mexican customs. Not all airlines or airports can handle pets. One expat commented that United Airlines has an excellent reputation shipping pets. Check with the airlines to make sure they have pressurized cargo areas for pets and that your destination airport can process the pet upon arrival.

## The Expat Community

San Miguel's expat community is large. There is no reliable count, but several knowledgeable folks estimate between 7,000 and 14,000 people, divided roughly into three groups:

1. Retired, semiretired, and second-home expats. Most of these folks own their houses, probably half in the town center and half in the surrounding neighborhoods. Some of these folks have side businesses, but most live from their back-home investments and pensions.
2. As many as 50% of expats stay just two to six months per year, usually the winter months.
3. Long-term visitors that stay here for a few weeks to a year. These are often students at the Instituto Allende or Spanish



schools. They usually take vacation rentals or rent apartments. San Miguel's expats are moderately significant economically to the town. The upscale restaurants and shops depend on the expats, foreign tourists, and middle-class Mexican tourists and residents for their sales. It's impossible to separate the expat economic input from tourism's inputs. According to Greg Gunter with Coldwell Banker SMART, expats make about 79% of real estate purchases (and are 63% of the sellers), with 21% made by Mexicans. The expats hire maids, gardeners, and other service help, paying above-average wages. Construction and remodeling of expat-owned housing and new housing projects adds another economic input. Indirectly related to the spending of the expats is the expanding Mexican middle-class whose income is derived from providing these same tourist services.

## Culture Shocks

Mexican society is quite different than North American society in many ways. From skulls on your dinner table to respect for personal space, there are plenty of differences for new expats to adapt to. I have tried to list all the elements of traditional Mexican culture that many new arrivals—be they North American, English-speakers, or otherwise—may find strange, disturbing, even shocking...

The Sanmiguelenses are friendly to the resident foreigners among them, but outside of the tourist related services, the expats are ignored unless they take the first step to make contact. However, once you initiate contact, the Sanmiguelenses are warm and engaging. You build friendships with the Mexicans over time just as you would back home.

There is an unfortunate tendency for the expats to sequester themselves, driven mainly by lack of Spanish skills and cultural differences. Many educated Mexicans perceive the expats as socially stand-offish and culturally backward due to differences in social conventions. Developing deeper friendships among the Sanmiguelenses will usually require better Spanish language skills and openness to Mexican cultural differences. I've personally discovered that helping the Mexicans learn English is a good way to make friends and smooth your own path to learning Spanish and understanding the culture.

I volunteer to teach English privately and some of my best friends are the young students I teach or study with.



*Expats and Mexicans socialize at a photography exhibition*

Socializing with expats is a totally different matter. They are super friendly and are pleased to meet new residents and draw you into their circles. If you're not careful, you can easily over-schedule your dinners, coffee-breaks, side-trips, and other activities with the expats. Besides private entertaining, expats socialize regularly at art and book presentations, charitable organizations, bridge clubs, and in a multitude of classes. They are also among the strongest attendees at the cultural events in Bellas Artes and the Peralta Theater. The cultural, social, and charitable areas are where the expat influence is strongest.

Many expats volunteer with nonprofit organizations. Curiously, the overwhelming majority of the American expats are staunch Democrats.

## LGBT Living

San Miguel is one of the few small towns in Mexico where LGBT folks are well tolerated and integrated into the town's activities. This is likely caused by San Miguel's artistic history and its acceptance of eccentrics of all types for several decades. The strong tourist presence, the large expat community, and the well-educated Mexican upper- and middle-class have also secularized the town's otherwise Catholic culture, making San Miguel more comfortable for LGBT folks.

## San Miguel's Cost Of Living

Warren Hardy, a 14-year resident from Tucson, Arizona, stated, "Even though San Miguel de Allende is a bit more

expensive than other expat locations, it is still 30% cheaper than most places in the USA. The quality of life is a millionaire's lifestyle."

## Utilities And Maid Service

Utility costs are reasonable because moderate weather means the houses don't have heat or air conditioning. Typical monthly costs will be around 842 pesos (US\$65) for electricity, 837 pesos (US\$64) for gas, 175 pesos (US\$14) for water, 389–999 pesos (US\$30–US\$77) for telephone with DSL Internet service (depending on DSL connection speed and free voice time to Mexican and U.S. phones), and 789 pesos (US\$61) for cable TV. Maids commonly earn 2,880 pesos (US\$222) per month for twice-weekly cleaning of a big house. The maid has holidays off, one to two weeks of vacation per year, and the obligatory *aguinaldo* (Christmas bonus) of two weeks' salary in mid-December.



A popular restaurant, Cafe Rama

## Food And Restaurant Expenses

San Miguel provides most of life's necessities and amenities in town or close by. Your basic groceries, fresh breads, and tortillas are available in small stores throughout the town and large supermarkets (Gigante, Soriana, Aurrera, and Comercial Mexicana) on the town's edges. Fresh fruits and vegetables are found in the markets and small stores. I estimate that our food expense is comparable to the cheaper regions of the United States, like Oklahoma or Arkansas. In general, I'd say that fresh foodstuffs are 35% to 50% cheaper than in the American South and Southwest (we lived in Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Alabama), and processed goods are 10% more expensive. Jim Dobson-Kelley and Iven Kelley-Dobson, three-year expats

from Wichita, Kansas, estimate that the cost of an upscale restaurant meal was about the same as the equivalent meal in Wichita, Kansas, but with much better service in San Miguel. They also estimated the cost of groceries to be about 50% less in San Miguel.

A few restaurants that provide low-cost daily specials, the *comida corrida*, are scattered throughout the historic center. Mexican fast-food items, such as tacos and *gorditas* provide a tasty meal for around 40 pesos (US\$3.08). Midrange, you'll find numerous restaurants that cater to Mexican visitors with a-la-carte menus and *comida corrida* selections at 90120 pesos (US\$6.92–US\$9.23).

Mexico has a wealth of rich, delicious traditional cuisine, as any North American can attest. We gringos have been borrowing Mexican delicacies and reworking them according to local tastes everywhere from Texas to Toronto for over a century, which is to say, since we discovered them.

Some Mexican dishes are *muy tipico*, however, there are many you've likely never heard of, and some that might even shock you. Traditional Mexican food covers everything from the familiar fare of tacos, quesadillas, and tortillas to the less known breads baked for religious holidays and all the way down the line to the industrious use of eyeballs, testicles, feet, spinal cord, and brains.

At the top end of the cost scale are fine restaurants where a thick steak or slab of salmon will set you back 200–250 pesos (US\$15.38–US\$19.23).

## Getting Around

San Miguel has a good urban bus system with frequent buses, every 5–10 minutes for the most popular routes. Buses cost 5 pesos (38 cents) for adults and 3 pesos (22 cents) for senior residents, children, and students.

Taxis constantly circulate through the streets and the average cost is 35 pesos (US\$2.69) to any location within town. Free street parking for private cars is tight during the day, and the public parking lots are expensive, about 20 pesos (US\$1.54)



per hour. Having a car in the center of San Miguel is a hassle and I don't recommend it unless you have your own garage.



Expats line up to enter the Peralta Theater

## Whatever Will I Do There?

There is so much to do in San Miguel, it's hard to know where to start. A variety of cultural activities are sponsored by the state university and the state and city governments throughout the year, including theater, symphony, concerts, dance, opera, chamber music, and film festivals. These activities are sometimes free or low cost for residents. More common are the events organized by galleries, shops, clubs, restaurants, and other private organizations. These include photo expositions, book readings and fairs, art inaugurations and fairs, music of all types, flamenco, tango, and contemporary dance, puppet festivals, wine festivals, flea markets, etc.

If there was ever a craft, art, or activity that you wanted to learn, San Miguel is the place. A perusal of the classified ads in the English newspaper, *Atención*, and other event magazines found ads for classes for about three-dozen activities, from writing to tango, jewelry, yoga, painting, sewing, paper making, sports, salsa dancing, various languages, cooking, and on and on. These classes are excellent places to meet other expats and Mexicans.

A favorite activity of both expats and Mexicans is the Tuesday *tianguis* located on the edge of town on the road to Querétaro. Imagine a huge flea market combined with a traditional Mexican vegetable market, a place where you can easily spend four to six hours stocking up on foodstuffs, clothing, farm implements, small animals, antiques, and just about anything else used or

new that you might want. Bargaining over price is common and part of the fun.



Buying sausages at the Tianguis

Many expats mentioned that volunteering in San Miguel's several dozen charitable organizations was among their most satisfying experiences—a chance to contribute back in community service. The activities of these organizations cover food assistance, animal protection, English instruction, clothing and medical assistance for orphans and elderly, and education scholarships for children.



English-reading in the public library

TV buffs have the choice of cable and satellite systems, with some programs and many movies in English. Avid readers in English will find several thousand volumes in the public library located on Mesones. The local daily English newspaper, *Atención*, is sold in local newsstands along with the national daily English newspaper, *The News*, published in Mexico City.

Everyone that lives in San Miguel's center gets some daily exercise by virtue of their regular errands, because they are

walking for several blocks every day. For the more energetic folks, there is hiking, rock climbing, swimming, bicycling, dance classes, aerobics, and yoga. San Miguel boast three golf courses, but the nearby cities of León, Irapuato, Valenciana, and Querétaro provide several more.



**It's a walking town!**

U.S.-style shopping is available at the big, modern mall located on the southwest edge of town, a 15-minute bus ride from the center. The nearby towns of Querétaro, León, and Irapuato have the big-box stores familiar to North Americans—Costco, Sams, Walmart, Home Depot, Sears, Office Max, etc.—as well as upscale Mexican boutiques. León is the leather manufacturing capital of Mexico, featuring hundreds of shoe and leather goods stores.



**Street parade**

## Religious Festivities

San Miguel is a chaos of religious festivities; there must be at least one street festival every week somewhere in the town. Celebrating the patron saints of their neighborhoods, these one-night festivals have loud and energetic Spanish rock or

Mexican *bandas*, tons of food, toys, and primitive carnival games and rides for children. During Semana Santa (Holy Week), the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ are celebrated with street parades and re-enactments in the churches, attended by thousands of devout believers.



**Voladores flying around the pole**

The patron saint of San Miguel is, of course, San Miguel, and the festivities occur at the end of September. Although parts of the festivities occur throughout the town, the most spectacular events center on the Jardín and the Parroquia. There are dancers, parades, bands, *mojigangas* (paper-mache giants), incredible fireworks, horses and riders, *voladores* (men flying around a tall pole), more parades, more fireworks, and even a bullfight.



**Altar in a private house**

Yet another favorite is El Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), November 1–2, when the plazas and the townsfolk build altars honoring their departed relatives. The famous artistic Mexican skeletons and skulls are displayed throughout the town.



## Proud And Patriotic



*Independence Day Parade*

Mexicans are very proud and patriotic and celebrate their independence and the Revolution in mid-September with noisy parties and beautiful fireworks. The senior politician in each town re-enacts the *grito* (battle cry) that called the Mexicans to war against the Spanish colonizers. In San Miguel, the festivities include *charros* (Mexican cowboys) and parades centering on the Jardín and the Allende Museum.

## Side-Trips And Handcrafts



*The iconic oven cones in nearby Pozos*

San Miguel is well located at Mexico's geographic center and is a good base for exploring the region. Around San Miguel, there are several other preserved colonial towns, such as Dolores Hidalgo, Guanajuato, Zacatecas, Pátzcuaro, and the historic sections of Guadalajara, Querétaro, and Morelia. Several towns within the state of Guanajuato produce traditional, high-quality handcrafts, a real treasure trove for collectors.

## Our Favorite Pastime



*People watching in the Jardín*

Our favorite routine activity is the late-afternoon strolls through the streets and plazas, stopping for refreshments in the cafes, people watching, and listening to the buzz of people swirling around on all sides. Around the Jardín, mariachis vie for paying customers, and *estudiantinas* (serenading troubadours) stroll through the streets accompanied by *majigangas*. This is when the tranquility of San Miguel is most evident. Lovers claim cafe tables and park benches, parents herd their rambunctious children towards home, and students greet their schoolmates with friendly kisses and earnest smiles. Foreigners that make even the smallest effort at social interaction are rewarded with greetings and smiles—you appreciate that you are welcome here.



*Mexico's famous calacas (skeletons)*

My wife and I are long-time collectors of Mexican and Guatemalan handcrafts and have filled our house beyond its capacity with these colorful artworks. The handcraft market attached to the west side of the regular market has a good selection of handcrafts from all over Mexico. Prices are good compared to the stores, and bargaining is common. We also

make periodic trips to the surrounding towns, ever in search of unusual and authentic pieces.

## The Property Market



*Typical street in the historic center*

The historic town center of San Miguel is static, there are very few buildable spaces, and these are often occupied by the ruins of 200- to 300-year-old houses. All new growth is on the town edges, and these are typically modern areas without historic charm. Due to San Miguel's popularity, finding a suitable residence to purchase in the historic center can be a challenge. Prices are high, and every house is different. You'll have to visit every candidate property in the acceptable neighborhoods to determine if the price, location, and the house are suitable for your needs and tastes.



*Interior patio of a private house*

Leading up to the Great Recession of 2008, prices bubbled in the most desirable neighborhoods, as much as 20% annual appreciation in 2006 and 2007 in the historic center. In 2008, many houses throughout San Miguel came on the market as

their North American owners needed to consolidate their back-home finances. Every block of the historic center and close-by neighborhoods seemed to have three or four houses for sale. However, except for a few urgent sellers, prices did not drop significantly. Over the years since, sellers without any urgency to sell have slowly adjusted their prices downward from bubble-price to market price. Since mid-2013, demand is rising again to meet declining prices, the market has stabilized, and prices in the lower range (less than US\$500,000) are expected to start rising again.

In the historic center, the common metrics of square footage and comparables have only recently become useful. New changes in the laws regarding reporting of real estate sales now require actual prices to be recorded. This has facilitated the growth of an MLS (multiple listing service) with comparables. The town's real estate agencies are becoming more knowledgeable and professional at the same time that Mexican property owners have seen the price advantage of reaching more buyers through professional agencies.



*Colonial architecture houses*

San Miguel is an old town and is still very traditionally Mexican. Many of the Mexican-owned houses in the center have been in the same family for several generations, and because of their age, the houses may need substantial renovation. There are also hundreds of houses that have been remodeled by foreigners, usually with modern fixtures and different degrees of fidelity to colonial architecture. According to Joanie Barcal of Allende Properties, 63% of recent sellers are North Americans. These houses are often substantially more expensive than the still original houses but may be worth the price if their remodeling suits your tastes.



There are alternatives to the historic center for foreigners looking for their new homes, including communities built for the tastes of foreigners. Most of the new housing construction is on the edges of town, on the road to Dolores Hidalgo or farther out in the country in enclosed developments themed around vineyards, equestrian, or golf. Examples of these new developments are Viñedo San Miguel (vineyard), Zirándaro (golf), Los Senderos (vineyard), Otomí (equestrian), Ventanas (golf), and Capillas de Piedra (in-town condos).

improving neighborhoods changes over time, so ask when you begin your property search.



*The historic center is the most valuable location*

The value of properties are primarily determined by their neighborhood, secondarily by the size and features of the house. In the historic center, a garage adds significant value (and price) to the house. Greg Gunter of Coldwell Banker SMART says the historic center (Centro Histórico) is number one in desirability for all buyers, foreign and Mexican, in spite of high prices. Number two is Colonia Guadiana a few blocks south of the Parque Juárez. Number three is the more affordable east and north sides of Colonia San Antonio. Other popular and improving neighborhoods are Los Balcones, the west side of Atascadero, La Colina (85% upscale Mexican), the far north side of the Centro Histórico, and the east side of San Juan de Diós. The list of popular and



*Aldama street between the Parróquia and Parque Juárez*

Even within the historic center, the location of the house is important. Joanie Barcal of Allende properties drew a map of the best area: the narrow streets and totally charming houses bounded by Calles Umarán and Correo on the north, Calle de Jesús on the west, El Parque Juárez and El Chorro on the south, and Calle Barranca on the east.

In general, the neighborhoods immediately surrounding the historic center are improving through a slow gentrification. When you begin your search for a residence, ask your real estate agent to show you these improving areas—you may find the right combination of location, features, and price.

San Miguel also has undesirable neighborhoods that are rundown, even unsafe. These are generally located at the edges of town, farthest from the historic center. With some exceptions, you should avoid the neighborhoods north and west of the river, west of Calle Refugio in Colonia San Antonio, southern parts of Colonia Allende, the Barrio del Valle del Maiz, and wherever else your agent recommends.

## **Bargain Houses**

Even in the historic center, bargain houses appear from time-to-time, but these are quickly sold to other Mexicans by word of mouth, without ever becoming visible to the general market. It is possible to find and purchase these bargains if you are willing to invest the time to cultivate Mexican acquaintances, hook into the word-of-mouth network, and then do the foot work to track down these bargains. To get started, you need to speak at least basic Spanish, be super friendly, and be



*Narrow, crooked alleyway with small houses*

fearless in approaching shopkeepers and strangers in the street to ask them if they know of someone who is thinking about selling a house. Always attempt to get the direct contact information of the owners, avoiding any middlemen. To get the lowest initial price, ask a Sanmiguelense friend to first contact the owner and request the price, then make your visit to see the house.

## Real Estate Agents



*Colonial houses in the center*

San Miguel has many honest real estate agents and some that are less reputable. The process of buying with a real estate agent is

similar to that practiced in North America, except that many of the disclosures and paperwork common in North America don't exist in San Miguel. The agents will have mostly new, upscale or already remodeled properties whose higher price affords the common 6% (plus IVA) commission they charge the sellers. Keep in mind that real estate agents do not have an enforceable legal responsibility to the buyer or the seller. Therefore, the professional agencies subscribe to the AMPI (Asociación Mexicana de Profesionales Inmobiliarios) code of ethics and do internal auditing to control abuses by their agents. About half of San Miguel's 180 agents belong to the AMPI.

## Cash Is King, Financing Is Unlikely

Real estate purchases by foreigners are always cash deals with very few exceptions. Loans are available to foreigners, but qualifying is difficult and the interest rates are unreasonable by North American standards (around 11% to 17%). Seller financing is possible but infrequent.

## Closing The Purchase



*Houses close to Parque Juárez*

There are no restrictions on foreign buyers in Mexico's interior other than the requirement to agree to be treated like a Mexican regarding property disputes. Each foreigner on the new property title must sign this agreement (*convenio*) with Relaciones Exteriores (Mexican Foreign Relations). The agreement is free, but you'll likely pay about 2,500 pesos (US\$192) each to the lawyer and the notary that processes the paperwork with the government. Because the sellers might not make any disclosures of the property's condition, the buyers should arrange for their own inspections. If you're uncomfortable with inspecting by yourself, take along an architect, builder, building inspector, or a knowledgeable



expat friend. Contracts and closings are handled by notary. I have bought and sold on just a handshake, but I recommend you get a contract, required if you give the seller earnest money in advance or use a real estate agent. A contract (*Contrato de Compra-Venta*) will usually include a (negotiable) 10% buyer's deposit. A good notary will handle all the legal and logistic aspects of a house purchase, and it's customary that all the closing costs, except the seller's capital gains tax, are paid by the buyer. In San Miguel, the notary's fees, filing fees, and miscellaneous taxes will cost around 1.7% of the *avaluo fiscal* (appraised value, usually the purchase price). From the time of making the contract with the seller to the end of closing will take three to five weeks.

The closing process is straightforward: The notary will examine the existing title (*la escritura*) for problems. He'll check that the property taxes (*predial*), condo fees, and utilities are paid up-to-date and check the IDs of the seller to ensure the seller has the right to sell the property. Then the notary files a notice (*aviso preventivo*) with the civil registrar that the property is under contract. This notice prevents any other transactions or liens to be processed against the property. The notary obtains a certificate (*certificado libre de gravamen*) that the property is free of liens from the civil registrar. If everything looks good at this point, the notary will order an appraisal (*avaluo*), begin processing the *convenio* with Relaciones Exteriores, and ask the buyer to arrange for the purchase monies.

The notary will prepare the new title, and when the *convenio* arrives, he'll schedule the closing. At the closing, the notary will read the provisional title out loud in Spanish (a translator will be present for non-Spanish speakers), and the buyer, seller, and notary will sign the provisional title. The buyer will pay the seller the purchase price minus the seller's capital gains tax, usually with a certified bank check or through a third-party escrow company, and the buyer will pay the notary. The payment to the notary will include the notary's fees, taxes, and seller's capital gains tax that is subtracted from the seller's proceeds.

Finally, the notary will file the provisional title with the civil registrar and obtain the permanent title for the buyer. The title is fee-simple, like in the United States. The annual property tax (*predial*) for the property will be based on the *avaluo fiscal* (appraised value of the property, probably the purchase price).

## A Timely Opportunity



San Miguel is a green oasis in the semidesert

Right now may be a good time to make a property purchase in San Miguel. Rising demand from Mexicans, Canadians, and Americans have stabilized prices. The bottom is in, and prices are expected to rise, especially in the under US\$500,000 segment. According to Joanie Barcal of Allende Properties, current trends in real estate purchasers include younger U.S. families, upscale Mexicans, baby boomers, more Canadians, and more properties purchased for buy-and-hold purposes.

## San Miguel's Rental Market

I believe that you should rent first for several months before you start a serious house search. San Miguel has a good choice of fully furnished and equipped vacation rentals (see sidebar below). It's easy to get carried away by the beauty and romance of San Miguel. Make sure you really do like the climate and the town before purchasing a home. Your rental period should include both the rainy season (mid-May through mid-October) and the dry season. Almost all vacation rentals are located in the Centro Histórico or in the safest neighborhoods, but check the map to be sure. Rents for vacation rentals run between US\$400–US\$1,300 per month, with a large selection around US\$600–US\$800 for a small apartment that includes all utilities and Internet

### San Miguel Hotels And Vacation Rentals

I recommend [TripAdvisor](#) for finding hotels, inns, and B&Bs. For vacation rentals, try [AirBnB](#), [FlipKey](#), and [VRBO](#).

about US\$800 per month up to US\$2,400 and beyond with a large selection around US\$800 Vs. \$1,000, depending on location, size, and luxury level. Vacation rentals seldom require a lease, and the deposits are minimal (as low as US\$100) for foreigners, as foreigners are considered to be low-risk. If your rental term is less than one year, the convenience of a vacation rental may be well worth it.



Houses large and small for rent around town

Unfurnished long-term rentals are generally about 20% to 25% cheaper than vacation rentals after factoring in the utilities. In the historic center, finding a suitable long-term unfurnished rental can be a challenge because of the popularity of the Centro. Housing is slightly cheaper as you move away from the Centro towards the periphery neighborhoods. You can expect to pay around US\$500–US\$700 per month for a decent unfurnished house, US\$100 less for a smaller apartment, and there are discounts for leases of one year or more. Deposits are usually equivalent to one month's rent, and a fixed-term lease may be required. Foreigners generally do not need a lease cosigner.

## Health Care

### Routine Health Care

Routine health care is inexpensive and of good quality in San Miguel. You can usually get in to see a doctor the same day, and most of the doctors and dentists speak basic-to-

good English. The doctors will spend time with you and often provide their home and cellphone numbers so you can contact them directly. Many doctors make house calls. Several expats commented that the cost of a routine office visit was the same or less than their copays back in the United States, around US\$30. Specialists are available in town in private practice or in Querétaro. Fees are in the range of 500–800 pesos (US\$38–US\$62) per visit. Expats reported high levels of satisfaction with quality and cost both with doctors and dentists.

### Hospital Care

Many expats recommend the private Clínica Tec 100 and several also recommended the public Hospital General. Others recommended hospitals are in nearby Querétaro and in León as excellent, clean, professional, and with a standard of personal attention that's just a faint memory in North America. In Querétaro, two private hospitals, Hospital Ángeles and Médica Tec 100, received praise from expats who used them.

In León, the two standout hospitals are Arranda de la Parra and Hospital Ángeles. These hospitals have the latest medical technology from Europe and the United States, and many of the doctors are trained in the United States. Our son had an appendectomy several years ago, and we know expats here that have had care for much more serious problems, such as a stroke. The total cost of care averaged between 5–10 times cheaper than the cost of equivalent care in the United States, but the level of service was much better. Hospital Arranda de la Parra in León has integrated hotel rooms for family members of patients.

Many expats commented that they would return to the United States or Canada for serious or more expensive procedures or surgery, where they would be covered by Medicare or Canada's health service. Several expats said that they had air evacuation service insurance in case they need emergency airlift up north.

### Public Health Insurance

Public health insurance is available for folks of any age at the IMSS (Instituto Mexicano del Seguridad Social, see Rolodex). For example, costs for folks 60–69 years old is 4,400 pesos (US\$338) per year and ages 50–59 pay 3,057 pesos (US\$235) per year. This public plan has exclusions, restrictions, and



waiting periods for existing conditions but may be a good option for folks still in good health.

The second public health insurance plan is Seguro Popular. They charge from zero to 2,775–11,378 pesos (US\$213–US\$875) per year, depending on your economic profile. If you are retired with a small pension and rent, you'll likely pay nothing. If you own your house and have a larger income or pension, you'll pay US\$213–US\$875 per year, depending if it is for yourself or your entire family. There are no restrictions for existing conditions or waiting periods.

### Emergency Services

In a medical emergency, you can call the general emergency number at 066, the Centro de Emergencias (Emergency Center) at 415-152-0911, or call the Cruz Roja (Red Cross) at 415-152-1616 for ambulance service to your front door. Both the Hospital General and the Clínica Tec 100 have ER services.

### Pharmacies

Pharmacies are located along the main streets through town. We use the Simi pharmacies for generic drugs that are often 30% to 60% cheaper than name-brand drugs. To check if your prescription is available in generic form, take in your prescription drug packaging that contains the name of the active ingredients. Generics are often not available for antibiotics, hormones, or high-blood-pressure medicines.

For nongeneric medicines, the ISSEG chain of pharmacies usually has the best price and selection. You should take in your prescription or drug packaging so that the pharmacies can match your brands with the Mexican equivalent. Several expats commented that medicine prices were roughly equivalent in San Miguel as in the United States and Canada.







## Getting Down To Business

San Miguel presents both opportunities and pitfalls for expats wanting to start a brick-and-mortar business. The pitfalls are due to such factors as the scarcity of good walk-by locations, high rents, and the fierce competition from the agile Sanmiguelenses.

Tax permits and business permits are easily and quickly obtained unless your business involves alcohol or some other heavy regulated product or service.



*Friendly neighbors*

### Banking

Bank accounts are available to any foreigner, even U.S. citizens, if you have a valid passport, valid resident visa, tax ID number from your back-home country (U.S. Social Security number for Americans), proof of your residence in San Miguel, and an initial deposit of 5,000 pesos (US\$385) at Banamex. Other banks will vary. Santander requires 750 pesos and Banorte requires 1,000 pesos for an initial deposit. However, you probably don't need or want a local bank account unless you're buying a house (you'll need the account to transfer the purchase money) or opening a business. The banks have friendly and secure online access, debit and credit cards, and standard checking accounts with paper checks. The Mexican tax authority, SAT, views large cash deposits as evidence of unreported income or money laundering, so be careful with cash deposits.

For Americans, all bank accounts held outside the United States must be declared with the U.S. Treasury if the sum of all accounts exceeds US\$10,000 at any time during the year. Two



*Small businesses inside every doorway*



regulations affect Americans: FBAR and FATCA. Check the Internet for more information on these and your tax preparer for the process to comply. The penalties for not reporting your financial accounts are very severe, so don't ignore it.

All the banks in San Miguel have exterior ATM machines that are connected to the international network, with menus in Spanish and English. You can use a debit card to draw out funds in pesos, up to about 4,000 pesos (US\$308) per day from your foreign bank account. At Banamex, ATM cash withdrawals incur a 31-peso (US\$2.38) withdrawal fee, so it makes sense to withdraw the largest amount possible each time you need money.

The peso exchange rate is approximately 20 pesos per U.S. dollar, and at Banamex, US\$500 in cash can be changed per day, up to US\$1,500 dollars per month, with your passport. Banorte will change US\$300 per day, limited to US\$1,500 per month. Credit cards are accepted at most hotels, tourist shops, and restaurants, and U.S. dollars are sometimes accepted. Otherwise, you should plan on having pesos for just about all transactions. The official inflation rate here is less politicized than the U.S. rate, currently 4.07% annualized. Go [here](#) for the current official exchange rate, then click on “*Tipo de Cambio*” on the left side.

### Utilities

Getting utility service (electric, water, telephone and Internet, or satellite or cable TV) is pretty straightforward. You'll bring an ID and some proof of ownership or occupancy of the property, such as a rental contract, property title, receipt for property tax, or another utility bill already in your name. If you have the most recently paid utility bill, bring it also.

It just takes a few minutes to change the name on the service, and deposits are usually not required. If the service has not been paid up-to-date, you will have to pay the amount owed. In general, the utility services are friendly and helpful and do what they can to help you get signed up.

Utilities are usually paid in cash or by check or credit card in the offices of the utility companies.

You can also pay utility bills in the banks, supermarkets, and Oxxo and Extra convenience stores for a small fee.

### Taxes



Relaxing in the afternoon

Mexico made significant changes to its tax code in January 2014. Mexico has several taxes that affect Mexicans and foreigners alike. I can ascertain no difference in tax treatment for foreigners except that the foreigners voluntarily pay the official taxes and the Mexicans avoid them whenever practical. For Americans, the United States has a double-taxation treaty with Mexico and allows Americans residents in Mexico to deduct or credit Mexican taxes paid on their U.S. tax returns. This is a complex area and you must consult your accountant regarding U.S. taxes.

The tax with the most impact on foreign residents in Mexico is the value added tax (IVA), currently at 16%, which is embedded in most products and services. If you own real estate, you will pay a negligible annual property tax. If you have a business or sell capital property, you will pay an income tax (Impuesto Sobre la Renta) that might approach 35% of net income (after deductions are taken).

### Do You Speak Spanglish?



Learning Spanish is key to socializing with the Mexicans

English is spoken in the larger hotels, restaurants, and shops that are associated with tourism. Many professional people, such as bankers, notaries, professors, doctors, dentists, and immigration officials speak at minimum basic English, as it is a requirement of their university studies. Otherwise, the use of English in San Miguel is limited.

If you don't speak at least basic Spanish, your interactions with Mexicans will necessarily be limited to the English-speaking people in the mainstream tourist industry and to other expats. The tourist industry not only has sanitized your Mexico experience to remove the rough edges (where all the interesting stuff is), but also repackages Mexico to fit the incorrect stereotypes that tourists bring with them from abroad. In short, without basic Spanish, you won't see authentic San Miguel. So take some classes and enrich your life.

### Spanish Schools

San Miguel has six or seven private Spanish schools and a few private tutors. Three of the schools received multiple recommendations: Warren Hardy Spanish (rave recommendations), the Instituto Allende, and Liceo de la Lengua Española de San Miguel. In addition, the public library offers free conversation practice with volunteers on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons.

You will get a lot of daily practice just doing routine activities such as eating out, shopping, and attending events. After acquiring a basic level of Spanish, I recommend that you watch the *telenovelas* (soap operas) on TV. The *telenovelas* use a lot of street Spanish and common slang that will help you understand everyday Spanish. I promise you that your enjoyment of San Miguel will multiply as you learn Spanish and use it with the Sanmiguelenses. The more Spanish you speak, the better it gets. A big smile, intermediate-level Spanish, and assimilation of the cultural differences will win you invitations to their parties and into their homes.

### Wrap Up

San Miguel is a special place to live and a great vacation spot, but it won't be suitable as a residence for everyone.

The congested traffic in the historic center and the scarcity of street parking is one of the most tedious elements of daily life here. Especially on weekends and holidays, the influx of



*Fresh cut flowers in the market*

Mexican visitors slows traffic to a crawl. Mexicans love their cars and want to park as close to the Jardín as possible. Even though all of San Miguel is accessible by car, parking is tight. San Miguel is a great walking town, and you'll learn to get around without a car.

There has also been a gradual loss of Mexican authenticity to the area as it has become more populated by expats over the decades. Some find this to be a significant downside, including myself and several of my expat friends, but I can see how this can make it more palatable to the ever-more expats coming in each year.

The stores and restaurants in the historic center have uniformly become premium priced at levels for international tourism. There are a lot of restaurants with fusion or international menus. This is a plus for diversity, but a minus for Mexican authenticity.

There's a perception of increased street crime, indeed more crime in general, which I believe is a natural result of a larger population and economic problems of the recession. My personal opinion, living here every day, is that the perception is worse than the reality.

San Miguel is definitely not suited for wheelchair mobility, nor for folks with walking disabilities. There are few wheelchair ramps, sidewalks are narrow and rough, and the cobblestone streets in the center are congested with cars.

You'll be successful in San Miguel if you are adventurous, physically active, enjoy diverse activities, can assimilate and enjoy the cultural differences of Mexico, and are willing to learn some Spanish.



## Get Started

Find an inn, B&B, or vacation rental for at least two weeks. Vacation rental rates are quite reasonable, starting as low as US\$350 per week for a fully equipped apartment. Spend a week just enjoying the plazas, museums and monuments, and the relaxed lifestyle.



*Coffee with friends in the library cafe*

Talk to the resident foreigners you meet in the streets and sidewalk cafes. Don't be bashful, just introduce yourself and ask them to tell you about their life here. By the end of the first week, you'll have a good idea of the match between you and San Miguel. Use the second week to investigate

neighborhoods, rentals, Spanish schools, and to arrange for your return trip.

I recommend that you rent for at least six months before committing to buy a house. Six months will give you time to discover not only San Miguel's enchantments, but also its rough edges. Many of San Miguel's rough edges have to do with the city's street layout. Sidewalks are narrow and rough. The cobblestones in the streets require your attention for safe walking. Lack of garages and street parking mean you may have to carry groceries by hand for a block or two.

You will also determine if you prefer the panoramic views provided by the hills to the easier walking convenience found in the flat areas of the historic center. Use this rental period to figure out the bus system and improve your Spanish. With a good map, systematically discover the town's several neighborhoods, visit the surrounding towns, talk to every resident foreigner you run into, and peruse real estate agents and their listings.


## It Feels Like Home

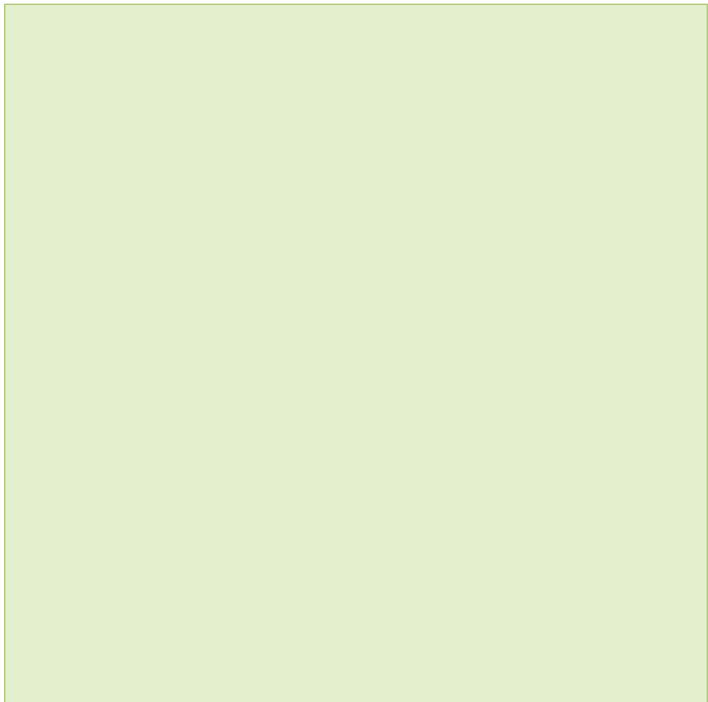
Leslie von Drashek had told us, "No matter where you're from, San Miguel is a place that feels like home." After spending two

weeks living in San Miguel, interviewing expats and riding the pulse and currents of the town, I finally grasped what Leslie had said. Home is not necessarily your back-home, where you're bombarded by the news of screeching politicians, gloomy unemployment statistics, the war-of-the-week, or grisly crime. Rather it's the home embedded in the innermost recesses of your psyche—the place where you know you belong.



*The Parque Juárez is a favorite for joggers and lovers*

And even though my wife and I live right next door in the spectacular town of Guanajuato, we understood just what Leslie meant—we felt right at home in San Miguel de Allende. 



## Video Resources

[San Miguel Overview](#) | [El Jardin](#) | [Tianguis Market](#) | [Wedding Parade](#) | [Sanctuary of Atotonilco](#)



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- What it would cost you to live there, including detailed monthly budgets...
- Whether it's better to rent or to buy, given the local market right now...
- What to take with you, what to ship, and what to leave behind...
- Which visa options would make most sense for you and how you qualify...
- Who to contact for legal help, health insurance, banking, shipping, residency, taxes...

Read our correspondents' firsthand reports every month. Email them your questions (yes, they'll respond!). Search the archives, available to you free, for more information on the locations that interest you most.

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Kathleen Peddicord  
Founding Publisher,  
Live and Invest Overseas™

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