

Ay, caramba!

Hotfoot it to the smart secret Mexico and its new kicks. By Agnes Simpson

Why should Americans have Mexico all to themselves? If ever there was a time to make a land-grab, it's now. We might have dipped our toe into Mexico's coasts but few have ventured into its colonial heartlands, to those cobbled and crumbling towns where spice-coloured houses lead to a small, pink church, and slow living is a civic duty. Mexicans even have a word to describe the delicious activity of mooching from town to town in a bumbling, seemingly without purpose fashion: *puebloando*. A handful of new hotels here – from a colonial grandee, to boutique gems – demand your attention. Then, of course, it's back to the beach, to Tulum, the little hippie hangout that just gets cooler and cooler. As a double act

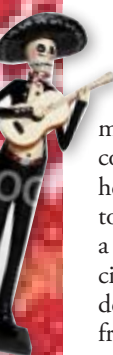
– culture and then crash, they make Mexico an irresistible ripe fig of beauty.

After you shrug off the desert scrub and dry riverbeds, San Miguel de Allende – in the centre of the country, three to four hours from Mexico City – is a hill town of preposterous prettiness. It's where Mexico's indigenous and colonial mix makes the most sense, where the tropes of the country – the romping, historical murals of Diego Rivera, the surrealism of Frida Kahlo, the tequila and textiles, the hectic, gothic mash of Catholic imagery and leering skeletons – all find their meaning. Rich settlers understandably built their country houses here in the 16th century and the town still has the languid atmosphere of a summertime retreat. The attraction is clear: San Miguel is Mexico with the edges rubbed smooth, a hip take on colonialism

with an eye to the tourist buck.

Out of season the pace is slow, shade-loving. Houses are painted the colours of a sunset – umber, ochre, sienna, cadmium – and walls are strewn with bougainvillea. Knobbly streets lead to churches painted with sugar-almond frescos (where I spot a nun watching over a coffin as white and shiny as a Ford Mondeo), to shaded squares where jacaranda trees drop purple petals at the feet of mariachi bands. Chihuahuas seem to be something of a fad in San Miguel. I spy three men walking their Liza Minnelli dogs in the enchanting, wooded Parque Benito Juárez. I sit on a bench and listen to the birds calling up the dusk.

Every second shop here is an artisan's studio selling sculptures and vivid, swirly paintings of moons. The market is full of pressed-tin mirrors and those delicate star-shaped





Left, the central Mexican town San Miguel de Allende. Above, the foyer of Be Tulum hotel, in the Caribbean-coast town Tulum. Below, Casa de la Real Aduana hotel, Pátzcuaro

lanterns that would look beautiful hung in a constellation. Boutiques like Insh'ala, selling Madeline Weinrib-esque cushions, and design emporium Once wouldn't look out of place on the Fulham Road.

It makes sense that mega-hotel group **Rosewood** chose this dinky town for its latest opening. It's a new build but the estancia-like interiors – dark-wood floorboards, high ceilings and locally woven rugs – mean it looks like it's been here forever. (I overheard one guest ask about the hotel's colonial history, only to be told the building was finished just a few months ago.)

The pool is divine – long enough for proper lengths, with Beverly Hills-style cabanas to retreat from the sun, and a separate pool for children. The spa is delicious too: you can have a massage that culminates in a dip in San Miguel's thermal pools. The rooftop bar has me at 'hello'. The breeze is fresher up high, the sky bigger; white-linen shades flap above low-slung sofas. Mexican gentlemen in good shoes drink red wine while a clutter of women gossip over frosted cocktails. The main attraction here is the sunset, which lights up the domes of the cathedral. There is the sound of a drumming band, the occasional rip of a firework. 'No reason,' says a waiter.

The **Hotel Matilda** is Rosewood's sexy, sassy neighbour. It is named after the American owner's mother, whose portrait by Diego Rivera – a girl in a white gymslip holding a bow and arrow – hangs in the drawing room. If I don't get the measure of the place from the chill-out tunes, the greige velvet club chairs and the playful display of books (placed spine backwards), then I nail it by the time I notice all the staff are wearing Converse trainers. Matilda wears its impeccable design like a girl wears couture with biker boots. With a wink.

Sugar-cube buildings sit around an infinity pool. Bedrooms are lush with studded leather headboards, silk cushions and huge bottles of delicious potions by Malin+Goetz in the marble bathrooms. Make time for the spa, an underground gem staffed by women so kind you could cry. (My injured shoulder was treated as if it were a matter of life or death, rather than a grumbling irritation.) Make time too for the restaurant, where the chef is the sort of man who makes his own salt, and the chocolate ice cream – the perfect balance between scoop and gloop – is a glory.

Matilda is full of little oddities that make for greatness. The loo at the bar is, for instance, wallpapered with a photograph of thousands of naked people, specially commissioned from artist Spencer Tunick. And it speaks volumes that the concierge recommends I visit a spit and sawdust cantina, La Sirena Gorda (The Fat Mermaid), a ▷



◁ proper swing-door number serving fish tacos and tequila, not a sanctified tourist hotspot. I could have stayed for a week.

We push on into the central highlands and come to Pátzcuaro, a pine-scattered Indian hill town above a silver whisper of a lake, and a stone's throw from the ancient Indian settlement of Tzintzuntzan. Pátzcuaro is to San Miguel de Allende as Dartmoor is to the Cotswolds. It feels elemental – even the colours of the buildings are terracotta and mud. Spanish and Indian influences rub up close. Churches squat on the visible foundations of ancient temples. In the market, tiny women with sepia-toned skin are wrapped in indigo blankets; streets are crammed with low, adobe houses. Contrast this with the Plaza Mayor, a Spanish square with arched corridors. The shops there sell calacas – skeleton figurines – up to all manner of undead deeds: mariachi, equestrian and cigar-smoking calacas. Pátzcuaro is *the* place to be for the spooky Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) festivities, those famous nights in November when the Mexican spirits of the dead return to earth to continue in their mortal activities.

The town heaves with cotton embroidery, hand-woven textiles, lacquer work... all of which can be found at Casa de los Once Patios. It's a magical, out-of-time place, a former convent with doors through thick stone, and wooden staircases leading to dim workshops where men sit before enormous looms, lit like a Caravaggio painting. I buy copper pans (an eighth of the price of those from an Antibes flea market) and cross-stitched napkins.

Of course, shopping on holiday is dangerous territory, treasures so often turning to tat when installed at home. But with its mix of Purépechan ceramics and Picasso prints, **Casa de la Real Aduana** shows you how it's done. It's a five-room hotel that's only a few years old and which no one seems to know about. You dream of places like this: a 16th-century former customs house set around two overgrown courtyards, owned by bohemian couple Gemma Macouzet and Didier Dorval (she's Mexican, he's French), with Mexican-style eggs for breakfast and bedrooms painted with age-old frescos. It's enchanting. I wander around, agog at Gemma and Didier's art collection, thinking: 'So this is how to make your Cindy Sherman work alongside a pre-Hispanic icon.'

If you're lucky, they'll take you for tequila (sipped, not slugged) at La Surtidora café. Or perform a spontaneous recital on the piano, or blast you with obscure African drum music. They're the kind of erudite, charming, philosophy-spouting couple that feature in

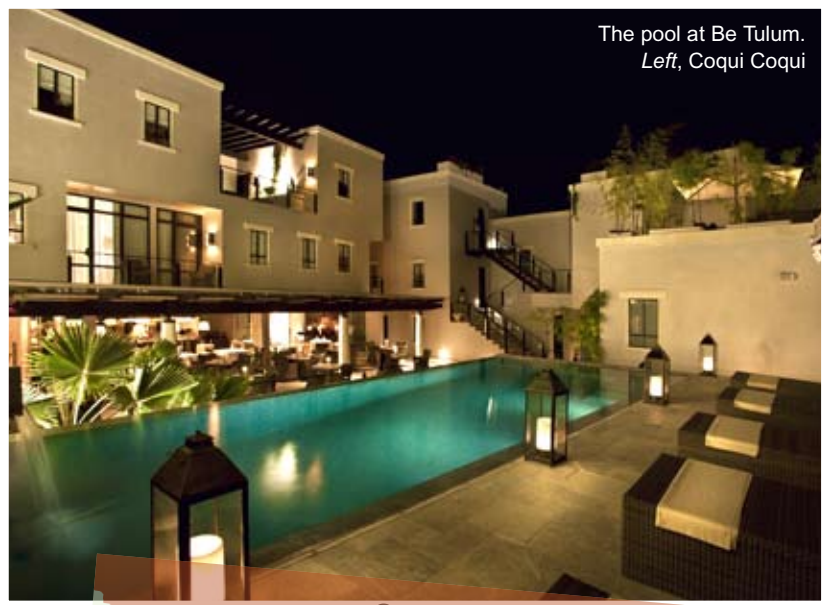


Rosewood San Miguel de Allende hotel



Above and below, Rosewood San Miguel de Allende. Right, a room in Coqui Coqui hotel, Tulum





The pool at Be Tulum.
Left, Coqui Coqui



Shoes are optional, steaks are cooked over a fire and watermelon cocktails are served in jam jars



heaven on earth doesn't stay a secret for long and in the 12 years since, Tulum's white-sand beaches and cliff-perching Aztec ruins have been well and truly discovered. Driving to the fresh new **Be Tulum** along the beach road – sea on one side, jungle on the other – I count hotel after hotel. But luckily, resorts of a multinational scale are sequestered to Cancún. The guesthouses here are low-rise and candlelit: this is the hippie dream with a high thread count. There's a rigorous eco-mentality at work that means saltwater runs from every tap and shower, and plastic cocktail straws are verboten.

I would happily never leave my room at Be Tulum, with its wood floors, lace curtains, leather butterfly chairs and – the money shot – a spiral staircase up to a roof terrace with views over the beach and jungle and a little pool for splashing about in

under the stars. But that would be to waste the barefoot restaurant, a pale wood dugout on the beach serving fish cooked with chilli. Or the huge daybeds slung with blue striped cushions – much nicer than puny sunloungers. It's ridiculously photogenic, so it seems only natural that, yes, that is Geri Halliwell doing a photoshoot five yards away as I munch on a papaya at breakfast. No one blinks. In Tulum, even the sea is relaxed, as if it just can't be bothered to work up a swell.

But it's a sign of quite how hip this tiny beach has become that, at Christmas and New Year, Coqui Coqui – a gorgeous seven-room residence carved from stone – becomes overrun with supermodels (Kate Moss), actresses (Eva Mendes) and fashion folk, (Vladimir Restoin Roitfeld). It's an off-duty star, crazy-chic. Much of this has to do with Coqui Coqui's owners, male model and perfumer Nico Malleville, and his green-eyed, pixieish wife Francesca Botano. She designs the glamorous silk shawls and Marni-like leather sandals on sale in the shop. And Nico's flower fragrances, oils and soaps are arranged on glass cabinets in reception as elegantly as a display in Dover Street Market. Still, for all star attraction, **Coqui Coqui** doesn't look like much on paper – no pool, no air-con, flighty

hot-water supply – but it works its charms deftly. All concrete floors and polished plaster bathrooms, the rooms have only what you need and nothing more, leaving you feeling cleaner than a week in rehab (though I challenge any woman to feel good about herself lying next to supermodel Anja Rubik on the beach). For the rest there's a fabulous little coconut-smelling spa, but thankfully it's without a whiff of pretension.

Francesca – a gorgeous Italian firecracker – takes me to new restaurant, Hartwood. It's a relaxed, alfresco place, run by upstate New Yorkers. Shoes are optional, steaks are cooked over a fire and watermelon cocktails are served in jam jars. It says everything about Tulum, this little place by the sea that strikes the perfect balance between rustic charm and stealth glamour. It's a good metaphor for Mexico too, a country that works its magic from the inside out. A country that, frankly, is way too good to leave to the Americans. □ *Abercrombie & Kent (abercrombiekent.co.uk or 0845 618 2161) organises a 12-day trip to Mexico from £3,995 a person, based on two sharing, including B&B accommodation, transfers and privately-guided excursions.*

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