

GO GO? TELL US THIS AND MORE, DURING O

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Life moves at leisurely pace in picturesque colonial town

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San Miguel de Allende wakes up slowly.

It's after 9 a.m. on a Tuesday, and shopkeepers brush brooms along rough cobblestone streets around the main square. A shoeshine man waits for a pair of dusty shoes to buff. An Indian woman, wrapped in a blue-fringed shawl, hobbles toward the plaza, a tub of freshly cut flowers on her shoulder.

Newspaper vendors — boys no older than 10 — say English-language newspapers will be out later. Sleeping dogs know it's too early to ask for food.

People seem unrushed in San Miguel de Allende, a gorgeous colonial gem tucked in a valley about 200 miles northwest of Mexico City. There is time for conversation in this tiny, spectacular town, a crossroads for natives, Ameri-

can expatriates, students attending Instituto Allende Art and Language School, and visitors.

Everyone has a story. Like the artist who left California 30 years ago to paint Indian women, or a scruffy boy who hawks newspapers to cafe patrons and says he charges two additional pesos (about 20 cents) for commission.

A peasant woman with caramel skin and waist-length braids stands before a Nativity scene in the plaza. She crosses herself and sits on a bench.

She tells a stranger she's traveled two hours from her home on a ranch.

"Where do you live?" a stranger asks, offering a map and pen and paper to close the language gap.

Wagging her finger, the woman smiles warmly, and says she does not

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know how to read or write. But she's a good conversationalist. She begins asking questions so she won't have to answer them.

San Miguel, with its narrow lanes, hand-wrought brass adorning carved wooden doors, and towering faux-Gothic cathedral, resembles a medieval city.

During the Spanish conquest, San Miguel was a frontier outpost, populated by Chichimeca Indians. It served as a byway for donkeys toting silver and gold to Mexico City.

While missionaries converted Indians to Catholicism, churches were built. The imposing La Parroquia, a 17th century parish church, was redesigned in 1880 by an Indian artisan who patterned it after a French cathedral depicted on a postcard.

San Miguel de los Chichimecas, as the town was then known, thrived, but fell into oblivion after the War of Independence.

Today, city pride centers on native son Ignacio Allende, the town's namesake. Allende, along with Miguel Hidalgo, Mexico's "Father of Independence," were leaders in the war.

In 1926, the government declared San Miguel a national monument. After World War II, U.S. soldiers came to study. Many never left, and today, nearly 5 percent of the 61,000 residents are American.

Travelers arrive in San Miguel from a road that skirts the city from above. The city's many churches are well-lit, and the town looks as if it belongs on a Christmas card. Though it is set

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in a brushy valley, San Miguel is a mile above sea level.

We arrived at our hotel, Casa de Sierra Nevada, in time for a steamy bath and crackling fire. Mexico's heartland basks in sunny, 70-degree days, but nights turn chilly.

Casa de Sierra Nevada's rooms cost up to \$200 a night, but it's a worthwhile indulgence. A collection of five mansions built in 1850, Sierra Nevada has welcomed many famous travelers, including George Bush.

Our room, one of 18, had a king-size bed with blush-colored wooden headboard, gilded pineapple lamps, and colorfully framed mirrors. The marble bathroom was appointed with Mexican ceramics and glassware.

We began exploring San Miguel with a trek up the steep lookout. From here, the sandstone city, with its domes and spires, looks biblical. For miles, there are undulating cactus-strewn hills.

We ambled down a different route, and found Parque Benito Juarez, a leafy respite where Old World rituals and modern passions occur in tandem. Boys played basketball wearing garb scrawled with American sports

teams logos, while nearby, women did their daily washing in pink stone tubs.

Our brisk walk ended at Cafe del Jardin in the plaza. This is the place to sip coffee, eat breakfast, pore over newspapers, or mingle. Dogs swagger in for a helping. Beggars troll incessantly. A vendor toting a burlap sack unloads celery stalks.

After breakfast, we laced through streets filled with art galleries and shops selling ceramics, silver, wood furniture, woven cotton, and folk art. Calle Zacateros is paved with handcrafted gold and silver jewelry.

For more prosaic finds, try Mercado Ignacio Ramirez, which spills onto the plaza outside the impressive Oratori de San Felipe Neri church. It sells cheap clothing, American toys, and Mexican-made tapes and records.

To seek respite from the streets, duck into La Biblioteca Publica, where you can pick up the English-language newspaper Atencion San Miguel, and read in a sun-splashed courtyard.

San Miguel eases slowly into each day. Nightlife most likely is the culprit. At last count, there were more than 170 restaurants, plus music and entertainment for everyone's taste.

For our last night, we ate at La Vendimia, a highly rated and charming restaurant with a fireplace and strolling mariachis. Restaurant owner Federico Escobar joined us while we sipped cappuccino. Though he was short-staffed that evening, Escobar took the time to tell a few stories, and to listen to ours.



STAFF PHOTO BY TINA TRASTER

San Miguel de Allende lies 200 miles northwest of Mexico City.

In San Miguel, there's time for that.

For more information, call the Mexican tourist office at (800) 44-MEXICO.