

8 of Mexico's Most Beautiful Colonial Cities

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We know there are questions around travel amid the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. Read our note [here](#).

When the Spaniard Hernán Cortés arrived at the coastal area now known as Veracruz in 1519, powerful Aztecs ruled Mexico. Within a few years, for better or for worse, Cortés overtook the Aztecs and declared present-day Mexico to be Nueva España (New Spain). Over the next 300 years, Spaniards brought their architecture, religion, social customs, and language to the colonized land. While remnants of earlier, native civilizations persist, the colonizers built impressive towns and cities filled with cobblestone streets, domed and tiled buildings, fountains, and European-style plazas. To experience a different side of Mexico than the traditional tourist-filled beach destinations, check out these eight colonial cities.



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Veracruz

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Cortés founded Veracruz soon after arriving in 1519, making the city Mexico's first Spanish settlement and a major trading port. Soon after, pirates regularly descended upon the port city to steal the Spaniards' silver, gold, and jewels en route to Spain. Today, Veracruz is a bustling city on the Gulf of Mexico with palm tree-lined streets and marimba (Afro-Caribbean) music and dancing filling the plazas. Visitors find the atmosphere relaxed, yet energetic as they stroll the historic Paseo del Malecón and visit the Plaza de Armas with its stunning arches, fountain, and busy sidewalk cafés. A cathedral, the Palacio Municipal, and other majestic buildings face the plaza. If you're a fan of the 1980s film *Romancing the Stone* starring Michael Douglas and Kathleen Turner, you might recognize the [Fort at San Juan de Ulua](#), which served as a backdrop for some scenes. Spaniards built the fort in 1518 to fend off pirates and later foreign invaders. Stop by the [Museo de la Ciudad de Veracruz](#) to see historical artifacts dating back to colonial times and archaeological treasures. To see more archeological wonders, visit the Mesoamerican pyramids and elaborate carvings of the prehistoric city [El Tajín](#), a UNESCO World Heritage Site dating back to the early ninth century. Veracruz has beaches, but they are not the primary attraction. It is also home to one of Latin America's largest aquariums, the [Acuario de Veracruz](#). To reach Veracruz, visitors can fly from the U.S. and other Mexican cities or drive about 225 miles from Mexico City across high-speed toll roads.

Puebla

Credit: [arielcione](#)/ iStock

If you drive between Mexico City and Veracruz, you will travel through the charming colonial city of Puebla. As you approach the

city center, you can't miss the magnificent domed buildings and churches showcasing Spanish and Moorish architectural influences. The Spanish also brought a Moorish craft called talavera, a durable, colorful ceramic mostly used for tiles called azulejos. Craftspeople still make traditional talavera tiles and pottery here, while artistic azulejos adorn many historic interior and exterior walls.

Puebla's colonial center is well preserved, with cobbled stone streets and colorful cafés and shops surrounding its main zocalo (plaza). The massive, Baroque-style [Catedral Basílica de Puebla](#) with its twin bell towers, soars above 200 feet. Spectacular, yellow, talavera azulejos cover the cathedral's dome, while the cathedral built in 1575 contains Mexico's largest church organ. Sixteenth and 17th-century architecture is so abundant here, UNESCO added the [Historic Centre of Puebla](#) to its World Heritage Site List in 1987.

Puebla also boasts the world's largest pyramid, the [Great Pyramid of Cholula](#), built by the Aztecs to honor the god of Rain. Another of Puebla's claims to fame is the poblano pepper, which originated in the region and inspires many national dishes. You'll also find several museums, parks, and even golf courses. To reach Puebla, visitors can drive about two and a half hours (about 85 miles) from Mexico City or fly from the U.S. or other Mexican cities.

Campeche

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If you head east from Puebla and Veracruz along the Gulf of Mexico, you'll reach another Baroque colonial port city named Campeche. Campeche, a [UNESCO World Heritage Site](#), was also a favorite city for pirates to plunder during the 1700s. In addition to gold, silver, and timber, a red dye (from local logwood trees) became a valuable trading commodity. To protect the city from pirates, the Spanish built a 26-foot wall around the city in an irregular hexagon shape.

Today, much of the wall, including two gates and seven bastions (large, walled protected areas adjacent to the fortified fort walls), still stand. Some of the bastions now house museums and other visitor attractions.

Campeche, with its walls, beautifully restored haciendas, narrow streets, and pastel-colored houses is one of Mexico's hidden gems. Like other Mexican colonial cities, a large cathedral known as the Catedral de la Concepción Inmaculada, stands just off the town's central plaza. You can also visit the [Fort of San Miguel](#), which houses an archeological museum. One of the best ways to explore the city is to ride on a tranvía de la ciudad (city tram), which offers bilingual commentary as it passes by picturesque, colonial neighborhoods and numerous cultural attractions.

Ancient Mayans populated the area, and you can visit Calakmul, one of the largest Mayan archaeological centers ever discovered.

The [Calakmul Biosphere Reserve](#) is located in the world's second-largest tropical rainforest after the Amazon. To reach Campeche, visitors can fly from Cancún or Mexico City. Fast roads connect Campeche to Cancún (about five hours) and Mérida (about two hours).

Oaxaca

Credit: [Elijah-Lovkoff](#)/ iStock

Oaxaca (pronounced wa-HAH-ka) is a city within a state of the same name that borders the Pacific Ocean. The state's spectacular terrain varies greatly — from tropical rainforests to lush valleys, mountains, and rugged coastlines jutting above stunning beaches. The city of Oaxaca is far inland (about 160 miles from the coast), but is known for its Mixtec and Zapotec cultural influences alongside its Spanish colonial history.

Well-preserved and vibrant, the city of Oaxaca boasts numerous museums, impressive architecture and delicious food. Founded in 1529, Oaxaca was New Spain's first colonial city laid out in a grid with 100 square-yard blocks. The main plaza is closed to traffic, so enjoying a meal or drink in one of the many sidewalk cafes surrounding the tree-lined square is the perfect way to people-watch and relax. The 19th-century [Palacio de Gobierno](#) sits on the plaza's southern edge and is renowned for an impressive stairway mural that depicts three eras of the region's history. Shopping in the city's covered markets, Central de Abastos and Mercado Benito Juárez, is a treat. Here, you'll find locally handmade arts, crafts, coffee, textiles, pottery, and wood carvings.

Just outside Oaxaca is [El Tule](#), Mexico's oldest living tree. The Montezuma cypress tree isn't very tall, but very stout and very old — as in 1,500 years old. Nearby is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the [Historic Centre of Oaxaca and Archaeological Site of Monte Albán](#). The 1,500-year-old site includes dams, canals, terraces, pyramids, and mounds carved out of a mountain. The second part of the site, Monte Albán, is an outstanding example of a pre-Columbian ceremonial center, once inhabited by a succession of Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Olmecs. To reach Oaxaca, you can fly from the U.S. and cities in Mexico. From Mexico City, it's about a 5.5-hour drive on high-speed toll roads.

Guanajuato

Credit: [ferrantraite](#)/ iStock

Guanajuato, with its nearby silver mines, is another Mexican site that landed on the [UNESCO World Heritage Site List](#). Guanajuato led the world in silver extraction during the 18th century, bringing the city enormous wealth; explore the city's mining history via subterranean streets and the "Boca del Infierno," a nearly 2,000-foot mineshaft.

Churches such as the [Templo La Valenciana](#) and [Templo de la Compañía](#) showcase some of Central and South America's finest examples of Baroque architecture.

The city also hosts one of Latin America's most important annual events, the [Festival Cervantino Internacional](#). Art enthusiasts should check out the painter and muralist Diego Rivera's birthplace at the [Diego Rivera House Museum](#), featuring some of his earlier works. For a macabre experience, visit the [Museo de las Momias](#), where over 100 well-preserved mummified bodies are on display. Workers discovered the bodies while exhuming an old cemetery in 1853, and the minerals in the local water supply, coupled with the region's low humidity, reportedly acted as a natural preservative.

Guanajuato lies in the mountains of north-central Mexico in a state of the same name. Visitors can fly into the Bajío International Airport, about 25 miles from the city. The nearest large city airport is in León, which is about an hour's drive. From Mexico City, it takes about four and a half hours to drive roughly 225 miles on high-speed toll roads.

Querétaro

Credit: [Bryan Busovicki](#)/ Shutterstock

Querétaro is another beautiful old mining city perched in the mountains about 90 miles southeast of Guanajuato. Unlike most parts of Mexico where the indigenous people fought off Spanish conquerors during the 16th century, the local population of Otomí people here fought beside them to defeat the Aztecs, their enemies. As a demonstration of loyalty, the Otomí leader converted to Catholicism and founded Santiago de Querétaro in 1531.

This collaboration was just one example of the city's diversity, with local populations of Otomí, Tarascan, Chichimec, and Spanish residents coexisting peacefully. Many historical events also happened here including the signing of the [Treaty of the Guadalupe](#)

[Hidalgo](#), which ceded many of Mexico's northern territories to the U.S. in 1848 and ended the Mexican-American War.

Bring your walking shoes so you can explore this city's Baroque plazas, churches, mansions, museums, and alleys. Be sure to check out the nearly one-mile, 75-foot-tall aqueduct completed in 1738 to carry water from nearby springs. This impressive feat of civil engineering contains 75 massive arches and is part of the [Historic Monuments Zone of Querétaro](#) on the UNESCO World Heritage Site List. When you're ready for a break, sample local wines and cheeses — the area has become one of Mexico's top wine-producing regions in recent years. Visitors can fly into the city's modern airport from Mexico City and other Mexican cities, or drive the roughly 130 miles from Mexico City on high-speed toll roads.

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