

Seduced by Guanajuato's artful charms

Heritage site pulsates with music and history

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In Guanajuato romance flutters through the air like so many rose petals released from the flower.

I sauntered down a street called "Alley of Kisses," narrow enough to inspire seduction and believed to bring good luck to any lovers who kiss there. A poet recited poetry through my window at dawn, waking me with the cadence of his words. I strolled through tiny plazas, called "plazuelas" scattered throughout the city. Guanajuato, Mexico, is as much an interactive work of art as it is a city.

In Guanajuato there is always a party going on. I followed the "callejoneadas," Pied Piper-like street parties led by fun-loving student musicians and actors wearing 17th-century attire. They led locals and tourists through the historical city (a World Cultural Heritage Site) by night, stopping to perform slices of the city's legends while ascending and descending Guanajuato's steep cobblestone streets.

Day or night, Guanajuato delights with its lively assortment of extravagant baroque Mexican and neoclassical cathedrals, theatres and mansions. It was founded in the 1500s when rich deposits of silver were found, spurring speculators and adventurers to settle there and build a bold city.

A quick gondola ride up the steep San Miguel Hill from the centre of town ends in a dazzling panoramic view of the city, which looks like several handfuls of children's blocks strewn at the bottom of the valley.

Because of the steep hillsides, flooding was a serious problem through most of the city's history. After near devastation by flooding in 1780, tunnels to divert overflows were built. Now dams control flooding and the tunnels are underground roadways, which divert traffic from the town centre and act as an imaginative backdrop for a history lesson.

During the 1800s Guanajuato was the cradle of the Mexican Revolution and is part of a historic tourist trail that links it to Celaya, Hidalgo Dolores and San Miguel de Allende, other significant centres in the revolution.



CREDIT: Anne Georg

Guanajuato looks like colourful children's blocks strewn at the bottom of a valley.



CREDIT: Anne Georg

Guanajuato callejoneadas are Pied Piper-type street parties led by fun-loving musicians.

Vestiges and monuments from this great era make for a fascinating history lesson.

Guanajuato is a comprehensive classroom in which to learn about Mexican culture. It is the birthplace of Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, whose childhood home has been converted into a museum.

The Don Quixote Museum of Iconography is a lyrical meander through the imagination of international artists, including Dali and Picasso, who created images inspired by Man of La Mancha.

The city also hosts the well-attended annual Cervantes International Art Festival throughout October. Like Don Quixote's quest to restore dignity to knight-errantry, Guanajuato's mission is to capture the essence of an artful city without pretence and with just a dash the macabre.

The creepiest attraction in Guanajuato is the Museum of Mummies. It contains naturally mummified bodies found in a local cemetery between 1869 and 1958. The bodies were dug up when many people couldn't pay the tax levied by the municipality on bodies buried in the cemetery.

These "accidental" mummies date from 1833, when Guanajuato was suffering under a virulent cholera epidemic. It appears, by the look of horror on some of the faces, that dying people were buried alive. Each of the mummies has a short description of the individual's life attached to it, written in the first person. It is very strange and particularly popular during the national Day of the Dead celebrations in November.

As part of the tradition, In Plazuela Mexiamore, a free outdoor film festival featured Mexican films with a death theme. I went to one of the city's theatres and saw a play in which a young woman must choose between her brash boyfriend and her ancestors, who are singing, dancing cadavers.

Characters dressed as witches lounge languidly on staircases and devils swing lanterns outside of cathedrals, good-naturedly inviting passersby to join them on tours of the dark side of the city.

Street musicians wander through the restaurants, seeking to serenade diners.

In Guanajuato, romance, magic and mystery are as ubiquitous as the guitar chords that waft through the air and as seductive as a poet's words sashaying through an open window at dawn.

If You Go

- Arrive from Mexico City with Primera Plus or ETN bus line - approximately 4.5 hours
- Stay at El Zopilote Mojado on Mexiamore Plazuela
- www.elzopilotemojado.com

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CLOSE WINDOW