

Our Mex mix of big adventures (it's time to go wild)

The travel theme for 2022 is 'Go Big' and this sentiment certainly fits the bill for intrepid **SUZANNE MORPHET**

I scream as I jump. Not from fear, although launching oneself into the air from the top of a 4m-high waterfall should give one pause.

No, it's a scream of pleasure, a cathartic release of stress and frustration from nearly two years of being confined to our geographical borders.

Now, I'm in Mexico, in a state I've never before visited, and doing things that a wiser, pre-COVID version of myself would probably say to leave to younger, braver people.

But I'm having none of the wise talk.

"Uno, dos, tres", says Angel, one of our guides from Las 3 Tzimoleras, an adventure tour company in Chiapas, Mexico's southernmost state.

Angel holds my hand as I pause on the rocky lip of the waterfall and look down at my 27-year-old daughter and others in our group who've already jumped and are bobbing in the turquoise water below.

The Rio San Vicente is surely one of the most beautiful rivers I've ever seen, with three big waterfalls and numerous small terraces and ledges. Branches of stately sabino trees form a green canopy over parts of it. Through an opening, I can see sugar cane fields in the valley below.

We were ferried here in the back of an open-air four-wheel-drive truck on a rutted road from the nearby town of Tzitol, just 60km from the Guatemalan border. Even that bumpy ride was fun. But now the real adventure begins. With water pushing at my calves and thundering from below, I take a deep breath — and jump.

The sport of canyoning sounds crazy. Walking and scrambling over wet rocks, jumping from one waterfall and floating to the next, and rappelling down drops deemed too big to jump, seem like a recipe for injury at the very least.



Rappelling on the Rio San Vicente.



Suzanne Morphet, left, and her daughter.



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Surrounded by greenery on the Rio San Vicente.



Half-day boat tours are a good way to go.

The adrenaline-fuelled form of recreation is thought to have started in the early 1980s in the French and Spanish Pyrenees. It's been growing worldwide ever since, including in Mexico, which has plenty of rivers and limestone karst geology that, over thousands of years, gives rise to gorgeous waterfalls.

On the San Vicente, the rocks aren't slippery, so it's not as foolhardy as it first appears, and our local guides are skilled and experienced.

At the top of the Bride's Veil — the tallest falls at 60m — we take turns rappelling down one side, blinded by the spray, deafened by the thundering water. At the bottom, a few of us swim upstream to get behind the falls. When we jump through the pounding curtain of white water, it feels almost baptismal, a cleansing of our former COVID lives.

A couple of days after our adventures on the Rio San Vicente, we're on another river — the Grijalva — this time in a long, narrow motorboat that takes us through the Sumidero Canyon. Formed around the same time as the American Grand Canyon, its sheer walls are almost a kilometre high in places.

Launching from the public dock in Chiapa de Corzo, one of the oldest towns in Latin America, we sip icy micheladas — a cocktail of beer,



Canyoning is thought to have started in the early 1980s.

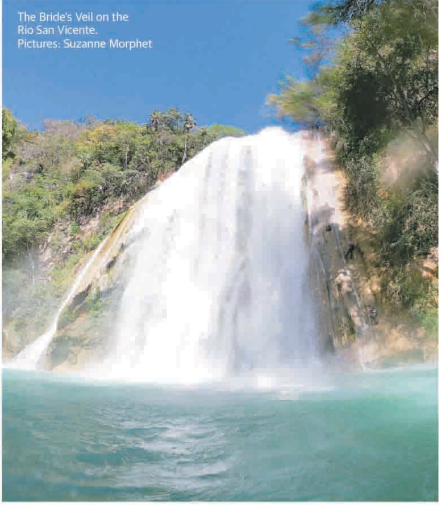
tomato juice, lime and chilli — and sit back to enjoy the breeze and a parade of wildlife. Herons, egrets and kingfishers take flight while crocodiles silently slip below the surface.

Not all adventures in Chiapas focus on water. One day we ride horseback in the Chiapas highlands to the community of San Juan Chamula, where indigenous Tzotzil Maya maintain much of their traditional culture.

This includes mixing their ancestral beliefs with modern Catholic rituals. Inside the local

church, hundreds of candles flicker in the darkness and copal incense permeates the air. Pine needles are strewn on the floor — there are no pews — and people sit in small groups with burning candles and other paraphernalia.

A family of four appears to be having a picnic. The young girl is eating Cheezies and drinking from a bottle of Coca-Cola. But then we notice that the girl's mother has one hand inside a plastic bag and protruding from that bag are a pair of scrawny yellow chicken legs. The legs are twitching.



The Bride's Veil on the Rio San Vicente.
Pictures: Suzanne Morphet

Our guide, Ramses Borraz Balinas, confirms the woman is silently wringing the bird's neck. "They come to the temple when they have a problem," he whispers. "It could be someone is sick, your sheep are sick, you have a bad neighbour."

Sacrificing a chicken is often seen as the answer, and drinking Coke is part of the ritual. Balinas explains, because burping is thought to allow evil spirits to escape. I'm happy to be back outside in the natural world for our final adventure, which is close to the state capital of Tuxtla Gutierrez. "Outside" is a bit of a misnomer, because our tour takes place deep inside a cave, where we follow the

path of a partially dry riverbed. Wearing helmets with headlights, we scramble over slick rocks and climb through cavernous passageways. Two hours in, we're at the halfway point and now the river has enough water that we can jump into cool pools and schuss down small falls, our laughs and screams echoing off ancient walls. For our final plunge, we're near the exit of the cave and there's enough daylight to illuminate the narrow chasm several metres below us, with a pool of inky black water. Stepping on to the rocky brink, this is the scariest jump yet. Somehow it also seems like a perfect metaphor for the future. Taking a big breath, I leap into the deep unknown.

Suzanne Morphet was a guest of ATME Adventure Travel Network and the Chiapas Tourism Office. They have not seen or approved this story.



Mexico has plenty of gorgeous waterfalls.