

Turning pages of Aztec story



SUZANNE MORPHET discovers that Mexico is layered with natural and man-made treasures, plus fascinating history

With two long coastlines and reliably warm weather, it's not surprising that Mexico is best known for fun in the sun at all-inclusive beach resorts.

But any country with more than 10,000 years of human history has got to offer more than modern pleasures. And this year, thanks to COVID and a two-month workation, I got to discover some of what makes Mexico a fascinating destination.

MEXICO CITY

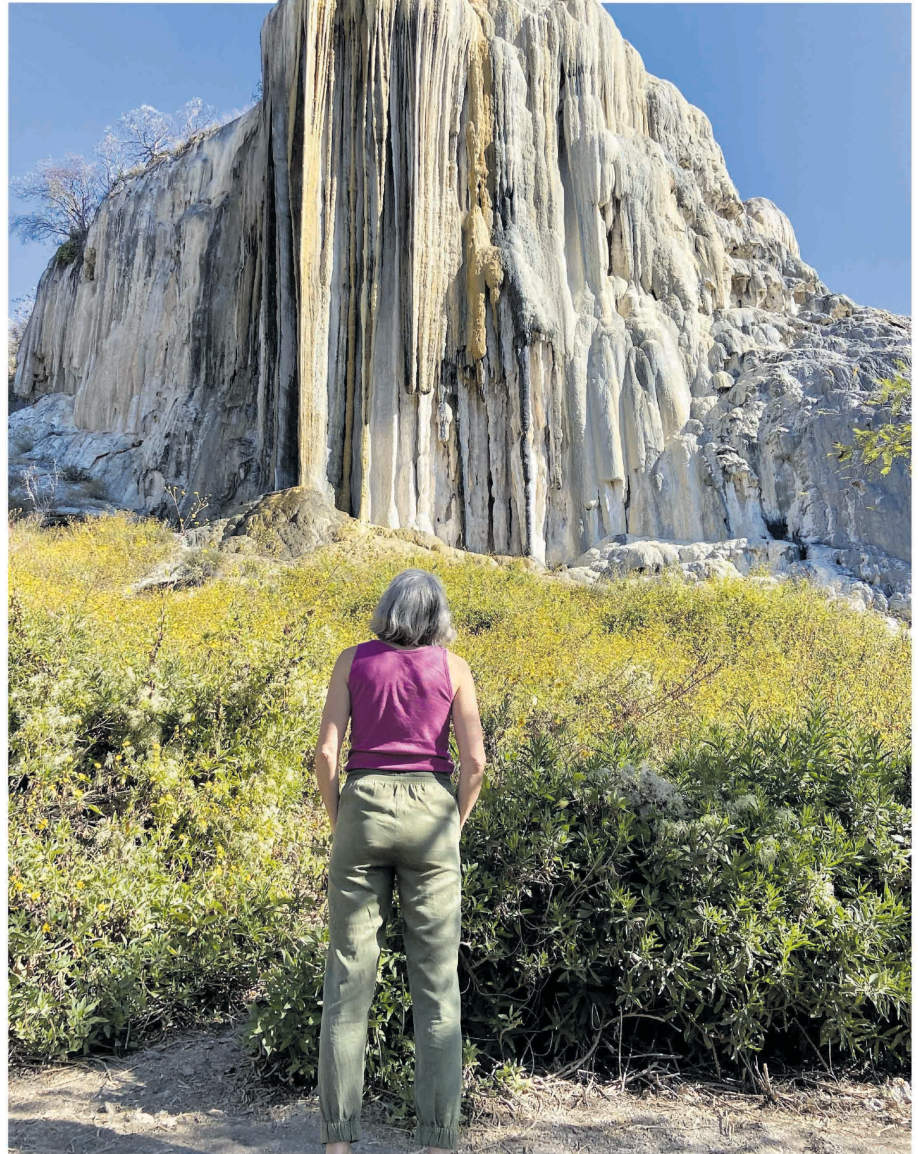
When Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortes arrived in the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan in 1519, he found a city "as large as Seville or Cordova", with streets that "are very wide and straight . . . half land and half water and are navigated by canoes."

Today, the city that was built on the ruins of Tenochtitlan is home to the largest Spanish-speaking population in the world, almost 22 million people.

While exploring the historic city centre by bicycle one afternoon, I learn that archaeologists are still making new — and sometimes grisly — discoveries, like the tower of human skulls that was uncovered in 2015.

"They wanted the skulls and hearts," says my guide — Gaby Hernandez — owner of Poray Biclatur. The Aztecs believed their sun god — Huitzilopochtli — needed daily nourishment, she explains, "so people from outlying areas were captured and sacrificed."

The next day I take a boat tour of Xochimilco, the network of canals and man-made islands just south of the city that is the only reminder of how people lived and farmed here in pre-Hispanic times. On one small island



The writer looks up at the petrified waterfalls at Herve el Agua, near Oaxaca City. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet

local women show us how to press corn tortillas and cook them on a woodfired comal, a tool the Aztecs also used to char food and give it more flavour.

YUCATAN

The Yucatan is a peninsula, a state, and also perhaps, a state of mind. This is where some of Mexico's major resorts, including Cancun, hug the Caribbean coast. It's as hot and flat as those tortillas we enjoyed back in Xochimilco, 1300km to the west.

In the Yucatan state capital of Merida, red and pink bougainvillea sprawl over the whitewashed walls of colonial buildings and the modern homes of Americans and Canadians who spend their winters here.

The Yucatan peninsula is also where the Maya built their cities and temples as early as 200BC, and where they studied astronomy and developed their own written language using pictures and characters.

Numerous Maya ruins survive, including the UNESCO World Heritage-designated sites of Chichen Itza and Uxmal (oosh-mal).

In the local Maya dialect, Ux means three, explains our Maya guide at Uxmal as we run our hands over the sun-baked stones of the massive Pyramid of the Magician. "That's why it's called Uxmal," he continues. "They left and returned three times, adding on to it each time."

It's thought the Maya repeatedly abandoned Uxmal because of drought. But the Yucatan does have natural underground water sources called cenotes; thousands of them. They're big holes where limestone bedrock has collapsed and filled with fresh water. The Maya used them for practical and ceremonial purposes.

We drive deep into the jungle where we find one with no one around except a young Maya man who charges us 50 pesos each to enter. Climbing down a rickety-looking staircase hanging off one side, we plunge in, our laughter ricocheting off the walls.

Further south, close to the border with Belize, we find another delightful swimming hole, this one a freshwater lagoon big enough to sail on. The Bacalar Lagoon is said to have seven shades of blue and is poised to become the next big thing on the resort-studded Mayan Riviera.

OAXACA

Mexico's state of Oaxaca (waa-HA-kuh) has everything — stunning beaches, art and architecture, food and drink, up-close wildlife experiences and more Indigenous cultures than you can count on two hands. It even boasts the biggest tree in the



The Mayan ruins at Uxmal are a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



The colours of Oaxaca City. Above, a pedestrian-only street leads through the historical centre. Right, blossoming trees. Below, murals adorn many buildings.



world — by circumference. The Montezuma cypress is about 2000 years old and 54m around.

We begin in the state capital — Oaxaca de Juarez — named for national hero and Mexico's first Indigenous president, Benito Juarez.

At 1500m above sea level, the weather is just about perfect. The baroque Church of Santo Domingo dominates Oaxaca's historic centre, its interior walls gleaming with gold leaf.

Cobblestone streets are lined with shops offering woven rugs

and alebrijes — creatures carved from copal wood and painted in brilliant colours. Overhead, eye-popping pinatas twirl in the breeze.

In the countryside, we see fields of bluish-green agave plants. After seven years they'll be harvested to make mezcal, the traditional alcoholic beverage.

"In Mexico, people say mezcal is the love of your life because you drink it with respect and slowly, like small kisses," says Ricardo Gonzalez Aragon, a mezcal maker and tour guide who's showing us

some of the local sights outside the capital, including Hierve el Agua, a petrified waterfall with a natural infinity pool.

After a few days in the capital, it's time to head to the coast, a six-hour drive on winding, mountainous roads.

Descending into the tropical night, the moist air feels more like the Mexico we knew before this adventure began — a land of sun, sand and people on holiday.

But Oaxaca's beaches don't have big resorts. What they do have are the right conditions for four

species of sea turtles. Locals used to eat their eggs. Now, they work to conserve them.

One evening at sunset we walk to the water's edge near Ventanilla with a pail of baby turtles. Hatched hours earlier in a protective enclosure, it's time to set them free.

They're tiny, the size of corks in wine bottles. Turning the pail on its side, we watch them scramble out and get swept away by the next wave.

Our journey is ending while theirs is just beginning.



Mexico City is so big and densely populated that urban planners have recently installed a Cable Bus to transport commuters more quickly.

WYNTK what you need to know

■ We used budget airline Volaris to fly between major cities, as well as long distance bus line ETN, and the occasional rental car. Main highways are in good condition. ETN buses have reservable seats that are comparable to those on business class flights.



A turtle ready to be released.

TRAVEL CLUB

ROUND THE WORLD DINNER WITH STEPHEN SCOURFIELD

7-10pm, Thursday October 13, 2022

The University Club of Western Australia Banquet Hall

Registered Members
and Non-Members: \$150 per person
Gold Members: \$120 per person*

To book, visit www.westtravelclub.com.au/events
*Conditions apply. Gold Members limited to two tickets per booking.



Round the World Dinner is BACK!

Travel Editor Stephen Scourfield will once again work with Executive Chef Costa Simatos and Composer Steve Richter to bring to vibrant life a series of courses, stories and music from around the world.

It's not just the places we love, it's the whole experience of being on the move. However close to home or however far, it is about getting glimpses of the world, travelling with the like-minded and meeting new people.

Round the World Dinner has partnered with Imagine Holidays, a company that will truly open up the evening to all sorts of experiences. Imagine Holidays specialises in travel both around Australia and the rest of the world, offering cruising, rail and touring, with tours built around special events.

