



San Miguel de Allende:

A Colonial Town Sizzling With Culture and Art

by Monica Frim

Rooftop gardens with expansive views of the city and surrounding mountains are standard features of private homes and businesses in San Miguel de Allende.

Photography by Monica Frim and John Frim

Miles from any ocean, San Miguel de Allende offers no all-inclusive resorts with swim-up bars, beaches, sunset cruises or deep-sea fishing opportunities. Yet Americans, Canadians and Europeans swarm to this cobblestoned colonial oasis in Mexico's mountainous center not only for vacations, but to live year-round. More than 10,000 Americans, many of them artists and writers, have packed up their bags and settled in this sun-dappled paradise where the cost of living is low in spite of the fact that some of the grander colonial houses can cost millions of dollars. Museums, art galleries and specialty boutiques abound alongside winding streets and alleys with vibrant façades, their colors more reminiscent of exotic spices and fruits than stucco and plaster. Walls painted turmeric, papaya, persimmon, paprika, hot tamale, margarita green and morning glory blue sport masses of bougainvillea that tumble and blush with abandon from canopies and balconies to the streets below. Gumdrop-shaped

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL DESTINATIONS

Diplomatic Connections dedicates a section of each publication to national and international destinations. We are continuously asked for more information about different places to travel to. For this installment, join Monica Frim on her travels to San Miguel de Allende, Mexico — a colonial town frequented by international visitors looking to immerse themselves in the splendid mountainous landscape, vibrant colors, museums, art galleries and local culture.

Photography by John Frim PhD and Monica Frim

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mulberry trees, called Mexican laurels, adorn the central square, called El Jardín (appropriately, the Garden). The trees are hollowed from the inside out and flattened into giant leafy wheels, to prevent grackles from roosting and sully the Parisian-styled iron benches below.

The colors may dazzle, but it's the perpetual sunshine that is largely responsible for bringing in the people and keeping them there. With more than 320 days of sunshine a year practically guaranteed, San Miguel is a year-round destination with only one stretchable season: spring. The rain may fall mainly on the plain, but it usually comes in short bursts and drizzles with cloud cover rarely lasting more than a few hours. Temperatures, however, can range from near freezing at night to sweltering during the day, although the mercury tends to balance out in the high 70s. It's a good idea to carry a sweater.

With a climate so close to perfection, it's easy to see why San Miguel has become a dream destination for so many. Factor in safety (you can walk the streets day or night, away from Mexico's well-publicized gang and drug wars); a speed limit of 20 kilometers per hour (12 miles per hour) with courteous drivers who always give pedestrians the right of way (but

it's best to walk or take a bus or taxi, as both are extremely cheap and finding a parking spot can be a nightmare); lavish year-round festivals with daylong parades, street dances and fireworks; world-class spas, ultra-modern hotels and restaurants with roof-top bars; and delicious international fare... what's not to like?

The colonial city is a UNESCO World Heritage site whose history is as much a draw as its contemporary art and literary scene. For the past eight years, San Miguel has hosted an Annual International Writers' Conference and Literary Festival with world-class speakers, instructors and agents that has made it the self-proclaimed "Creative Crossroads of the Americas." But San Miguel has long been a center for creative thinkers and doers. Founded in 1542 by Father Juan de San Miguel (de Allende was added in 1826 in honor of Ignacio Allende, a leader of the Mexican independence movement who was born in San Miguel), the town grew more on the promise of the surrounding hillside silver deposits than on the original Franciscan principles of its founder.

As with many early colonizing efforts, this one, too, evoked the ire of the indigenous people, and later, the Criollos (people of Spanish ancestry born in the New World). Skirmishes were prevalent during San Miguel's heyday as

Flat-topped laurel trees provide shade for vendors and visitors at San Miguel de Allende's most popular square, El Jardín.



A private rooftop patio with a glass top that serves as both a table and skylight. Guests seated at the surrounding benches can peak through the table into the kitchen below or out over the rooftops to the Parroquia, San Miguel de Allende's most prominent landmark.



Monica Frim poses with giant dancing dolls during their break at a fiesta.

a commercial/military center and stopover along the silver route from Zacatecas. They reached their apogee in the early 19th century during the War of Independence from Spain. Then, after independence (San Miguel was the first municipality in Mexico freed from Spanish rule), the town began to wane as its cattle farmers dissipated and its thriving textile industry lost its momentum. Furthermore, the mines were deserted and the beautiful mansions, palaces and churches that were built in the 17th and 18th centuries were abandoned to the point that San Miguel de Allende became almost a ghost town. Porfirio Díaz, Mexico's repressive dictator of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, tried to breathe some life into the moribund economy with the building of railways, aqueducts and dams. However, his fall from power during the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and the ensuing political unrest caused San Miguel de Allende to slip further into decline.

Then a strange thing happened. Expatriate artists and writers discovered their muses among the colonial castles and mansions of the mile-high town. Or perhaps they were

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The courtyard of a renovated colonial home.

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A decorative brass door knocker on an old door.



A statue honoring Ignacio Allende, a hero of the Mexican War of Independence, looms over the Plaza Civica.



drawn by that magical light that changed by the hour beginning with the soft pastels of dawn and ending in an evening blaze of gold and ochre. Or perhaps the light reminded world travelers of other places where art reigned supreme — Florence without the Arno or Paris without the Seine.

Who knows what the 27-year-old Stirling Dickinson was thinking back in 1937 when, after months of traveling through Mexico, he rode from the dilapidated train station in San Miguel de Allende in a horse-drawn cart to the main square. He watched the morning sun pop over the mountain ridges in the east and ignite the pink neo-Gothic spires of the Parroquia church, then decided on the spot to make San Miguel de Allende his home.

Within months of his arrival, Stirling Dickinson became the propelling force in turning San Miguel de Allende into an international art center. He built a house in the ruins of an old tannery. In 1938, he became the co-founder and director of Escuela Universitaria de Bellas Artes — known not only for its programs for foreign students and wealthy Mexicans, but also for low-cost workshops in Mexican weaving and pottery for local students. Later, he recruited hundreds of American veterans of World War II on G. I. subsidies to the school, an act that got the ball rolling for more painters, sculptors, writers and crafts people to follow. When the Instituto Allende opened in 1951, Dickinson was its director until his retirement in 1983. Today, the Insituto Allende offers BA, MA and MFA degrees, Spanish lessons, and houses a cultural center with handicraft workshops.

San Miguel is full of galleries and studios that house a revolving treasure trove of wares, not only from local expatri-

ate sculptors, painters and artisans but also from traditional crafters from all across the country. Ironware, ancient carved doors, one-of-a-kind jewelry, modern furniture, lamps, hand-painted pottery, decorative household items and handicrafts of varying quality (with price tags to match) fill shops along alleys that undulate like cobblestoned ribbons throughout the town.

At the Mercado de Artesanías in the center of town, piñatas, blown glass, locally-painted pots, embroidered shawls and tablecloths can be had for a fistful of pesos. But, you might want to dig deeper if your heart's desire is a contemporary sculpture or painting from one of the 50-or-so studios housed within the Fábrica La Aurora, a former textile factory complete with old textile machines and hydraulic turbines, on the edge of the town. For the best in genuine folk art, you can't beat the Galería Atotonilco about five miles north of San Miguel de Allende where Mayer Shacter, an American ceramic artist, has filled a modern 3,000 square foot gallery with Mexico's finest artisanal fare. Mayer travels throughout the country in search of quality crafts and picks up only the best: Huichol yarn paintings and beaded skulls, lacquered gourds and plates, boxes of inlaid wood, traditional serapes, puppets, dance masks, pottery, jewelry, and sculptures in various materials and sizes.

Back in town, the Jardín is San Miguel's favored meeting place. Here, young lovers share fruity drinks and ice creams bought from street vendors and perimeter cafés, wizened grannies reminisce in the shade of the laurels, foreign students practice their Spanish or peck away on iPads or laptops, strolling mariachi bands punctuate the air with



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Mexican ceramics are part of a large art collection at the Galería Atotonilco.



Potted plants on a rooftop patio

melodious trills and toots, swarthy Mexican men play chess, vendors in traditional costumes hawk handmade dolls, balloons and baskets; and tourists jostle cameras among trees and pillars that hold up the arcade in their efforts to capture as much of the adjacent Parroquia church as possible.

Known for its sandy pink neo-Gothic spires, the Parroquia towers above the town. Amazingly, the parish church (it is not a cathedral in spite of its size) was redesigned and rebuilt circa 1900 without architectural plans by a Mexican-Indian stone mason, Ceferino Gutierrez, to replace an earlier church. Gutierrez drew inspiration from postcards of European cathedrals and traced simple plans in the dirt on the ground to show his workmen what he wanted them to do each day. Inside, an eclectic interior boasts many icons from the 17th and 18th centuries, the most unusual being a life-size image of Christ known as “El Señor de la Conquista”

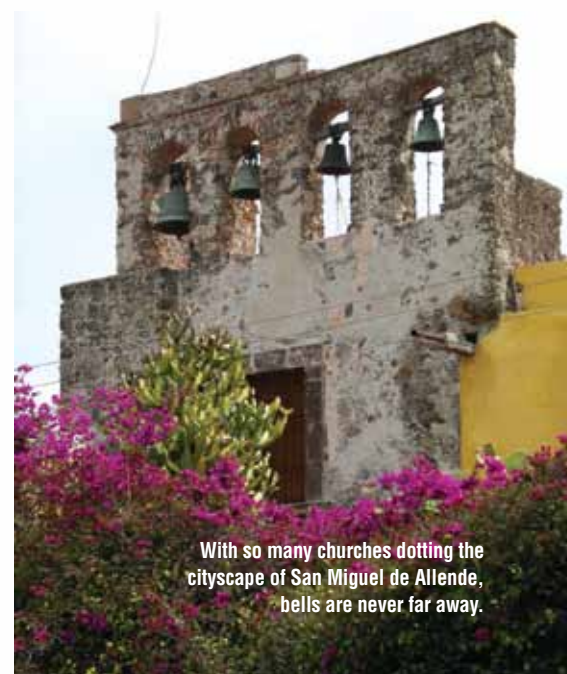
that weighs only 14 pounds. Tarascan Indians of the 16th century reputedly built it out of corn stalks and the mucilage of orchids to keep it light so that it could be easily carried in parades.

The best way to experience San Miguel de Allende is by taking one of the many self-guided walking tours outlined in the brochures and handouts available at hotels. Some must-sees include: the birthplace of Ignacio Allende, an asymmetrical baroque mansion opposite the Parroquia; the adjacent house of the Counts of Canal with its forged iron work and elaborately carved wooden doors; a slew of churches with amazing histories and unusual architectural styles; and numerous cultural buildings that were once the manors of rich and powerful colonial families.

It is even possible to get a sneak peak at the luxurious mansions that hide behind the plain walls and carved doors



A flower vendor at a street-side arcade



With so many churches dotting the cityscape of San Miguel de Allende, bells are never far away.

FEATHER WEIGHT

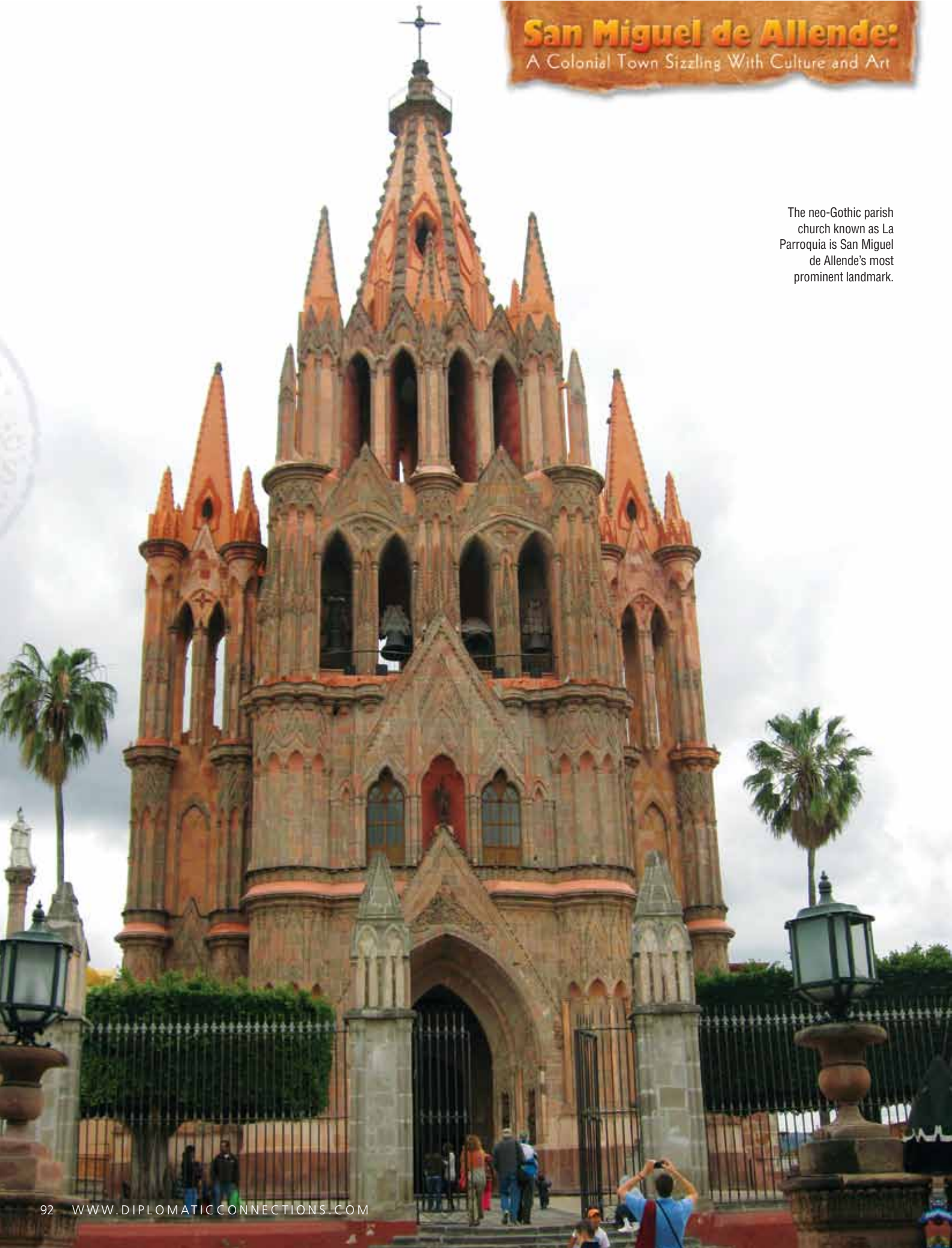


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The neo-Gothic parish church known as La Parroquia is San Miguel de Allende's most prominent landmark.



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A swimming pool amid the ivy-clad courtyard of a private home.



of the streets surrounding the central square. Every Sunday, the Biblioteca, San Miguel's partially open-air library and café combo that has an impressive history of its own, offers house and garden tours of a rotating crop of more than 300 homes — from colonial mansions to converted factories to tiny adobe houses.

San Miguel de Allende was declared a National Monument to the Colonial Period in 1928 with stipulations that no colonial homes could be torn down. As a result, an amazing surge of creativity developed and merged new elements with old. Staid stone walls, thick as small trucks, were pierced with peak holes and sculptural niches while new walls and unique staircases were designed to link multi-level buildings into large single-family homes with open-air living rooms and expansive rooftop views. Inside, large open spaces magically appeared and became repositories for massive artworks such as masks, sculptures and murals. Modern conveniences such as heated tile floors and the latest in kitchen and bath designs were plunked among ancient walls and pillars, the transition from old to new so smooth you'd swear it had always been there. Courtyards boasting walkways through luscious gar-

dens with fountains, swimming pools and ponds somehow tie any disparate elements together to create amazing homes, hidden from the street-side so that passersby would have no idea of what lay behind the plain façades.

Such massive renovations all come at a price, even when labor and materials are cheap, and not all homes on the tours belong to the rich and famous. For just as San Miguel de Allende's population is a mix of Mexicans and expatriates, so too, their homes reflect the varied financial circumstances of their owners. Or renters. For visitors who opt not to stay in the hotels may wish to rent anything from a tiny room in a private home to mega mansions with hilltop views.

To get to San Miguel de Allende, visitors can fly into either León, Guanajuato or Mexico City. Local airport transportation can take you directly to your hotel or vacation rental in San Miguel de Allende. Expect to spend about an hour-and-a-half on the road from León or four hours from Mexico City. It's worth the drive, or being driven, rather than renting a car not only because it's cheaper and easier but because once you've arrived in San Miguel de Allende, a car is really not necessary. You can walk everywhere and if you chose side trips to nearby attractions, taxis are cheap and reliable. ■

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