HOW TO SELL

Mexico's Colonial Cities

PRODUCED BY

TRAVEL WEEKLY

BEYOND THE BEACHES
A COLONIAL CITY SAMPLER
TOURS & ACCOMMODATIONS
PRIME PROSPECTS
INSIGHTS FROM EXPERTS

THE PLACE YOU THOUGHT YOU KNEW
Mexico’s colonial cities offer travel agents myriad opportunities to expand their sales—and their customer base—beyond the destination’s renowned beach resorts.

“There’s definitely a renewed interest in visiting colonial destinations because of the cultural aspect that these cities offer,” said Alison Buckneberg, spokesperson for MLT Vacations. “People are interested in places where they can experience amazing history, as well as incredible hospitality and food.”

Mexico’s colonial-era destinations extend from the Baja peninsula to the Yucatán peninsula. Each destination bears a distinctive colonial imprint in the form of architecture, art, music, handicrafts, festivals and cuisine shaped by some aspect of Spanish rule in Mexico, which extended over three centuries.

From the well-known landmarks of Guadalajara, Oaxaca and Puebla to the lesser-known interior cities of Guanajuato, Querétaro and Morelia, colonial Mexico holds a rich vein of business for agents. Mining that business—and the lucrative commissions that go with it—is supported by heightened consumer interest in Mexico in 2012. “With the attention focused on Mexico this year because of the Mayan calendar, it’s a great time for agents to entice their clients to destinations beyond the beaches,” said Buckneberg.

Agents who are unfamiliar with the range of product offerings to colonial Mexico might be pleasantly surprised. Mainstream and specialty operators have developed extensive tours, short excursions, and even day trips to colonial destinations that include attractions such as visits to cooking schools, wineries and artisan studios. Accommodations on overnight programs are unique: rather than all-inclusives with dozens of swimming pools, colonial tour programs feature stays in luxury boutique hotels, historic haciendas and hand-crafted mansions that once housed nobility.

“It’s a whole new world from what many agents have come to expect from Mexico,” said Zachary Rabinor, director general and CEO of Journey Mexico. “But the ones who take the time to learn about colonial cities and promote them to the right clients can certainly create a great niche for themselves.”
The capture of the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan by Hernán Cortés in 1521 launched a colonial period in Mexico that spanned three centuries. During that era, Mexico was known as New Spain, and its vast natural resources made it the crown jewel of the Spanish empire. Wealth from those resources financed further Spanish exploration (or exploitation, depending on your perspective) of the New World. It also helped Spain establish an infrastructure of impressive cities across Mexico, inspired by European ideals of culture, language and religion.

Today’s Mexico is filled with vestiges of its colonial era, evidenced in the streets, churches and plazas of hundreds of cities and towns. Foremost among them is the capital of Mexico City, built on the ruins of Tenochtitlan. The colonial cities of Mexico extend across the country’s heartland. Known for their monumental architecture, connection to Mexico’s independence from Spain in 1810 and the Mexican Revolutionary War, they share a distinctive European flair. Here’s a sampling:

**AGUASCALIENTES.** Located in north-central Mexico, this 400-year-old city is named for the thermal springs in the area. In addition to colonial architecture, churches, haciendas, theaters and markets, the city’s annual Feria de San Marcos is the largest fair in Mexico.

**GUANAJUATO.** Founded in the mid-16th century, Guanajuato is considered the birthplace of Mexican independence. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, the town is famous for its underground silver mining sites, University, basilica, artist’s workshops and Cervantino festival, dedicated to the author of Don Quixote.

**MEXICO CITY.** One of the most densely populated cities in the world, Mexico City is the continent’s largest and oldest capital. Its central historical zone is a UNESCO World Heritage Site known for its colonial architecture and notable palaces, Metropolitan Cathedral, ornate mansions and monuments that surround the Zocalo, or constitution square.

**MORELIA.** During the colonial era, Morelia was home to wealthy Spanish families who sponsored the construction of numerous private and municipal buildings. Today, Morelia’s city center is a UNESCO World Heritage site comprised of more than 200 significant structures. Markets and shops are known for their variety of indigenous crafts from nearby villages.

**QUERÉTARO.** Founded in 1531, Querétaro’s colonial history includes a prominent role in the Mexican independence movement. Its pedestrian-friendly city center is a UNESCO World Heritage Site filled with colonial buildings, plazas, churches, museums and fountains. The city’s most iconic feature is located outside the historic district: a huge 18th-century aqueduct built at the request of the local convent.

**SAN LUIS POTOSÍ.** Known as the “City of Gardens,” San Luis Potosí was a mining center and birthplace of the Mexican revolution. Its central zone is noteworthy for its colonial-era plazas, cathedral, churches, museums, governor’s palace and gardens, and is part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site marking the trade route between Mexico City and New Mexico.

**SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE.** This city is an artist’s colony with a booming expat American population. Embodying the architectural style known as Mexican Baroque, the city’s cobblestone streets are lined with churches, gardens, plazas, mansions, art galleries and even a famous cooking school. The city’s center is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

**ZACATECAS.** Zacatecas is a former silver mining powerhouse. One of Mexico’s highest cities (8,000 feet), the UNESCO World Heritage Site is known for pink-stone buildings, winding streets and Mexican Baroque-style buildings and monuments.
The Colonial Tour Product

Many options in operators, itineraries and pricing

Tour operators are reporting strong sales increases for Mexico in 2012, and that’s shining an added spotlight on the country’s colonial cities. Destinations traditionally included in tour programs, including Oaxaca, Puebla, Guadalajara and Mexico City, now share top billing on itineraries with lesser-known (for now) cities in Mexico’s colonial heartland. Renowned for their beauty, artistic and historic appeal, colonial cities like San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato and Morelia regularly appear on the tour itineraries of mainstream and specialty operators. An array of offerings including pre-packaged tours, independent journeys, and FIT options provide agents with a variety of products to sell.

**UNIQUE PRODUCT**

Colonial tours in Mexico are a separate product; the visitor experience on these tours is distinct from a stay in one of the country’s beach resorts. Generally speaking, the colonial tour experience is more intimate and immersive in Mexican history, culture and art.

Even if the tour destination is a sprawling city, colonial roots are typically concentrated in a central historic district, often a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Clients on colonial tours can expect to spend a great deal of time strolling through cobblestone streets lined with historic mansions, people-watching in central plazas, and interacting with local artisans.

“The colonial tours are all about staying in the center of town, meeting the locals, and having an experience that you wouldn’t expect. This isn’t cookie-cutter stuff, and it definitely is not sitting around the pool at an all-inclusive,” said Tommy Thomson, owner of tour operator Mexico Colonial Cities.

The colonial cities are known for handicrafts, ranging from copper and silver jewelry to embroidery and textiles, painting, pottery, sculpture and basketry. Each city has its own unique artisan history and products shaped by the colonial era and the region’s natural resources. Tours almost always emphasize visits to galleries, workshops and studios as well as churches, museums and monuments.

Colonial tours are increasingly focusing on culinary experiences as well. Encounters with local chefs, winemakers, artisanal cheese shop owners and even cooking school sessions are popular tour inclusions.

**MAJOR OPERATORS**

Many of the larger, multi-destination U.S. tour operators offer a number of different tours and programs featuring colonial cities across Mexico.

**Insight Vacations**’ “Mexico’s Great Colonial Cities” tour is a seven-night roundtrip program from Mexico City that provides an extensive overview of the colonial highlights of Mexico’s interior. The tour includes Morelia, the colonial town of Pátzcuaro, Querétaro, San Miguel de Allende and Guanajuato, with optional extensions in Mexico City.

**TRAVCOA** offers a nine-night “Mexico’s Colonial Past” tour from Mexico City to San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato, Morelia, Pátzcuaro and surrounding villages of the indigenous Purépecha people.

**Classic Vacations** features colonial cities on its Central Mexico World Heritage Sites regional tours. The company’s six-night “Route of the Independence” tour begins in Mexico City and includes Querétaro, San Miguel de Allende and Guanajuato.

**MLT Vacations**, which manages Delta Vacations and United Vacations, currently sells more than 30 tours in eight colonial cities, including Guadalajara, Mérida, Mexico City and Oaxaca. MLT will launch **Aeromexico Vacations** later this year; that will expand the operator’s reach and product to additional colonial cities.

Other major U.S. operators focus their colonial product in Mexico on specific city options and/or FIT travel.

**Travel Impressions** offers packages to Mexico City, Mérida, Guadalajara, Guanajuato/Leon, →

**TOURS AND OPERATORS**

A wide variety of operators sell colonial Mexico tours of varying length. This small sampling is intended to show the range of product length and pricing options agents have to sell. Rates were taken from operator websites in April 2012.

- **Mexico’s Colonial Past**—9 nights, $5,075, TRAVCOA
- **Colonial Mexico Trip: Exploring the Heartland**—6 nights, $2,190, Journey Mexico
- **Mexico City Mini-Tour Program**—6 nights, $485, Insight Vacations
- **Mexico’s Great Colonial Cities**—7 nights, $1,995, Insight Vacations
- **Mexico Colonial Cities Tour**—6 nights, $1,225, A Closer Look Tours

**OPPORTUNITY AWAITS**

“The colonial cities will never bring in the massive numbers that visit the coast, but they don’t have to,” said Mark Ohan, senior agent with Ohan Travel in Baltimore, Md. “Agents are looking for new product out there, and if it’s available they can sell it, if they set their mind to it. There’s a huge opportunity right now.”
Oaxaca and San Miguel de Allende. The company also sells a city tour of Mexico City, Mérida, Guadalajara and Cuernavaca/Taxco. Pleasant Holidays and Funjet Vacations offer packages to Mexico City. And GOGO Vacations has “a lot of product available to the colonial cities on an FIT basis,” said James Tedesco, director of marketing.

SMALLER OPERATORS
Tour operators that only sell Mexico (many are based in Mexico), or focus on the destination, also sell all-colonial itineraries. Some of these include the destinations offered by major U.S. operators; many include additional lesser-known destinations and unique features. Some of these operators also offer private colonial tours, day trips, and special-interest (ex: culinary) tour programs.

A Closer Look Tours’ six-night “Mexico Colonial Cities Tour” starts in Guadalajara and visits Guanajuato, San Miguel de Allende, Morelia and Pátzcuaro. The company also sells a five-night Oaxaca tour focusing on cuisine, handicrafts, and the renowned archaeological sites surrounding the city of Oaxaca.

Journey Mexico’s program includes a six-night “Colonial Mexico Trip: Exploring the Heartland,” which travels from Mexico City or León to Guanajuato, Pátzcuaro and Morelia. The seven-night “Mexico’s Great Colonial Cities”, roundtrip from Mexico City, visits Morelia, San Miguel de Allende, Querétaro and Guanajuato. And a six-night private journey from León, “Mexico’s Colonial Heartland,” visits Guanajuato and San Miguel de Allende. Journey Mexico also offers a three-night “Taste of Puebla Culinary Trip.”

The nine-night “Colonial Treasures” program from tour operator Mexico Colonial Cities, roundtrip from Mexico City, features Zacatecas and Guadalajara, as well as Querétaro, San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato, Guadalajara, Morelia and Pátzcuaro. The company also sells a five-night “Independence Route Tour” that includes Mexico City, Querétaro, San Miguel de Allende and Guanajuato. A six-night “Mexico City Mini Tour” program uses Mexico City as a base for day trips to some of the most popular sites and colonial cities in the area.

FOR YOUR CLIENTS: INSIDER TIPS
Agents can show off their colonial city savvy by giving clients these tips about sights and attractions:

Morelia: The famous monarch butterfly migration takes place from November to March. An excursion to the El Rosario Butterfly Sanctuary is well worth the 70-mile jaunt. Naturalists remain baffled as to how one hundred million butterflies make the trek each year to Mexico from the U.S. and Canada.

Mexico City: Among the highlights of the historic city center and UNESCO World Heritage Site are sweeping murals by Diego Rivera at the National Palace; the Metropolitan Cathedral, which the Spanish built over an Aztec temple; and the huge pyramid of Templo Mayor.

Guanajuato: The Jardín de la Unión botanical garden is the central meeting place for the city, and a great place to people-watch. And, the Hidalgo Market, with its graceful iron and glass design, is the work of Gustave Eiffel of Eiffel Tower fame.

San Miguel de Allende: If your clients visit in September, they might get to see the town’s “Sanmiguelada” which replicates Spain’s famous “Pamplonada,” or running of the bulls.

Zacatecas: The Teleférico cable car between the city’s two highest hills crosses over the entire historic district, offering great photo opportunities.

Querétaro: If clients are overnighting in the city, recommend the “Night of Legends” city tour. It combines history with street performances, with actors in costume leading guests through colonial mansions, retelling the legends and history of the town. Clients can purchase it through their hotel.
Accommodations in colonial Mexico are as varied as the cities themselves. Large metropolitan destinations, such as Mexico City and Guadalajara, naturally offer the widest range of hotels in their historic colonial districts. Mid-size cities such as Querétaro that attract both business and leisure travelers feature familiar American business brands as well as small luxury hotels in the city center. Towns known primarily for their colonial and artistic attractions, such as San Miguel de Allende and Guanajuato, are distinguished by their upscale boutique properties. And the colonial cities of the Yucatán Peninsula offer historic haciendas for the traveler.

“We have more than sixty hotels and resorts for travel agents to help their clients experience the charm and culture of Mexico’s colonial cities,” said Alison Buckneberg, spokesperson for MLT Vacations. While other mainstream and specialty tour operators may work with a smaller range of properties, selections are plentiful. From well-known international brands to intimate, family-run properties, accommodations in colonial cities are available to suit every taste, interest and budget. Depending on the destination and time of year, rates range from $100 to close to $400 per night for luxury properties in the heart of Mexico City or San Miguel de Allende.

BIG BRANDS, BOUTIQUE HOTELS
American hotels chains are well represented in Mexico’s colonial cities, and their numbers are expanding. Agents whose clients are most comfortable with familiar names will find Westin, Sheraton, Wyndham and W properties in the major colonial cities. Marriott International, Hilton Worldwide and Intercontinental Hotel Group have recently opened new properties in Mexico City, Guadalajara, Guanajuato, Querétaro and Mérida; offerings include Courtyard by Marriott, Doubletree by Marriott, Fairfield Inn, Holiday Inn Express, Hilton Garden Inn, and Hampton Inn.

Mexican-based brands in colonial cities include the Quinta Real collection of boutique hotels and Fiesta Americana Hotels; clients
YOU’VE SIMPLY GOT TO GO.

Because of the unique characteristics of Mexico’s colonial destinations, there’s no substitute for a first-hand visit to the cities, said Kristen Fernandez, a travel advisor with Park Avenue Travel, New York. “It’s really hard to describe them to clients unless you go there yourself. These destinations are magical. Places like San Miguel de Allende come alive with their galleries, music and cuisine.

But, most clients have never heard of them, so you really have to be smart about pushing them. I tell my clients it’s like going to Spain without the time and expense of flying to Europe,” said Fernandez.

DISTINCTIVE PROPERTIES, NICE COMMISSIONS.

“You need to dedicate time and energy into developing your expertise. I think there’s a tendency to think “cheap and easy” when it comes to Mexico sales. But, you wouldn’t think of calling yourself an African Safari specialist if you’ve never been to Africa. You have to come visit the colonial cities. The rewards are huge in terms of client satisfaction and also nice commissions because of the truly distinctive properties you will find there,” said Zachary Rabinor, director and CEO of Journey Mexico.

may be familiar with these brands from their properties in Mexico’s major beach destinations. The Spanish chains Riu, NH and Melia also have properties in Mexico’s larger and mid-size colonial cities. In the smaller colonial towns, the pedestrian experience is key. Boutique properties housed in centrally-located historic villas, mansions and other buildings are prevalent. Hotels in the smaller towns often feature high-end amenities ranging from marble bathtubs to state-of-the-art sound systems, as well as colonial décor, furnishings and antiques.

TOUR OPERATOR FAVORITES

A number of properties feature prominently in colonial Mexico tour itineraries. The Four Seasons Hotel in Mexico City is one of them. The AAA Five-Diamond property on Paseo de la Reforma features a spa, children’s program and babysitting services, among other amenities.

In the colonial cities of Mexico’s interior, tour operators tend to favor a select group of boutique properties. With styles ranging from contemporary hip to colonial elegance, the hotels are known for their distinctive décor (often no two rooms alike) intimate settings and service. In San Miguel de Allende, a few luxury boutique and spa properties are mainstays on upscale tour itineraries. They include the 67-room Rosewood San Miguel de Allende and the 37-room Casa de Sierra Nevada, which is a member of Orient Express Hotels & Resorts. Both properties feature spas, pools, colonial décor, facilities for weddings and proximity to the historic city center. The former features a children’s program; the latter is home to the Sazon Cooking school; visits and classes are included on a number of tour itineraries.

Another popular option in San Miguel de Allende is the Hotel Matilda, whose holistic spa was named to the 2011 Conde Nast Traveler Hot List. In Morelia, the Villa Montana Hotel and Spa includes 36 casita-style units and is a member of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World.

The Hotel Villa Maria Cristina in Guanajuato is a 13-suite property located in a former private mansion. The 17-room Quinta las Acacias, also in Guanajuato, is housed in a 19th century mansion. And the Casa de La Real Aduna in Pátzcuaro is a small luxury hotel in a former 16th century manor. In central Querétaro, La Casa de la Marquesa features 13 rooms in an 18th century building. And, the 49-suite Quinta Real Zacatecas is housed in the former grandstand of the San Pedro bullfighting ring.

Noteworthy in Yucatán (besides the haciendas, please see sidebar) is the 17-room Rosas y Xocolate in Mérida. Built in space previously occupied by two colonial mansions, its spa features a unique “Xocolatherapy” technique which uses 100% pure cocoa paste.

“If there’s a unifying theme to these popular colonial properties, it’s authenticity,” said Zachary Rabinor, director general and CEO of Journey Mexico. “They provide a taste of what colonial Mexico was like. More importantly, they provide an intimate connection to the people and artisans that make colonial Mexico so distinctive to this day.”

COLONIAL HACIENDAS

Mexico’s Yucatán Peninsula is garnering headlines in 2012 with its connection to the Mayan world. But, archaeological sites aren’t the only attractions of the region. The Spanish first arrived on the shores of the Yucatán, and eventually established cities such as Merida, Campeche and Valladolid. Each is known for its colonial history, as well as surroundings that include important pre-Columbian archeological zones.

The Yucatán Peninsula is also known for colonial-era haciendas that have been converted into uniquely attractive accommodations. Preserving their colonial-era architecture, décor and ambience, many were former plantations, ranches or sisal-growing estates.

Today, the noteworthy haciendas in the region include the 18-suite Hacienda Xcanatún in Merida, built in a restored 18th century farm. The haciendas of the Luxury Collection by Starwood Hotels and Resorts are popular options as well. These intimate, historic properties include the Hacienda Puerta Campeche, the Hacienda Temozón, Hacienda Uayamon, Hacienda San Jose, and Hacienda Santa Rosa.

For clients interested in a private villa or hacienda for a family gathering or perhaps a small destination wedding, the tour operator Catherwood Travels specializes in them.

Above: Rosewood San Miguel de Allende, Colonial Room; above right: Anticavilla Hotel in Cuernavaca, formerly a colonial manor house, Small Luxury Hotels of the World
“THE BIGGEST PYRAMID IN THE WORLD?
WITH A CHURCH ON TOP?”

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