



Left: The Mansion del Cupatitzio Hotel in Uruapan.
Below: Santa Clara del Cobre Square.



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If you didn't know better you'd swear you were in Madrid, had Mexicans turned the tables and taken over the Spanish capital. Strolling musicians charm cafe-goers with both modern and traditional sounds, as waiters hustle to bring you that delectable cup of coffee or *naranjada*—orange juice with sparkling mineral water. A well-preserved historical center, which spans more than four centuries, buzzes with non-stop activity as little boys run to a soccer game, *quinceañeras* in poofy dresses step out of church and entire families head out for an afternoon walk, surrounded by hundreds of years of religious devotion and civic momentum.

Never mind what Virginia may say—Morelia is for lovers: young newlyweds walking hand in hand, old crusty couples shuffling along toward their next great meal. An air of aristocracy and swirls of bougainvillea dominate this UNESCO World Heritage site, capital of the state of Michoacan. There's always a quiet hum of what is taking place and what is to come here—a mix of big-city possibilities and colonial discretion that makes it one of the most exciting yet least known romantic destinations in Mexico.

This is the real Mexico—no imported frills or plastic settings, but the real enchilada, so to speak.

Founded in 1541, graceful Morelia is home to many historic structures that date back centuries, and walking through the city is the best way to discover all its treasures (Morelia has idyllic weather due to its high altitude, so don't worry about passing out from the heat; in fact, a light wrap is recommended for evenings). The city that began its days as Valladolid and underwent a name change in 1828 to honor Mexican Independence hero Jose Maria Morelos, is probably most recognized for its arches—really an aqueduct built in 1785 to bring clean water to its inhabitants. The town cathedral is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful in the country; it was constructed of indigenous pink volcanic stone and features regal interiors and majestic twin towers that rise into the sky and are lit up at night. Next door is the Plaza de Armas, where locals and visitors often choose a bench and sit for hours watching the world go by, while across the street, under the *portales*, cafes and bars flutter with people.

A very short walk from the cathedral is the 17th century Government Palace, which houses remarkable murals depicting the history of Mexico and of Michoacan. A number of museums also hold regional treasures; among these are the Michoacan Regional Museum and the Colonial Art Museum. *Casa de las Artesanias*, housed in a former monastery, is the place to go to stock up

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Left to right: Flowers abound in Morelia; Morelia's cathedral, considered one of the most beautiful in the country; and accommodations at the Hotel Posada La Basilica in Patzcuaro.

on crafts and local buys spanning the entire state—from guitars to ceramics to gorgeous woven apparel, while the *Mercado de Dulces* will soothe those with a sweet tooth with an impressive amount of native candies.

Tell your clients to take their time walking the streets of Morelia; it's not swarming with tourists and its colonial feel has been upheld by municipal ordinances that require that new construction follow in the city's architectural footsteps, ensuring that its Old World charm stays intact.

Rest & Play

Our favorite Morelian retreat for its sheer romantic ambiance is **Villa Montaña Hotel & Spa**, which overlooks Morelia from a privileged hilltop vantage point. This member of the **Small Luxury Hotels of the World** is our idea of the supreme Mexican hideaway: original artwork and statuary adorn its halls and varied lush fauna creep up its walls. Each sumptuous suite is different, yet all have a fireplace for cool yet cozy evenings, while the hotel's outstanding cuisine is often accompanied by the melodies of a nearby piano. The hotel is just 10 minutes away from Morelia's historic district, and like the city, holds on to the enchantment of another era. Villa Montaña has a *Relaxation for Two* package through Dec. 20 that includes 2-night accommodations, breakfast daily, a 3-course dinner with a bottle of red or white wine en-suite, and a 1-hour massage pp. Rates start at \$730 for a jr. suite.

Minutes away is one of the most dramatic and challenging golf courses in the world:

the Tres Marias Golf Course, which slopes and soars between mountains and valleys. This 27-hole Jack Nicklaus design, which hosted the *LPGA Corona Championship* this past April, is impressive enough to blow away even non-players; every golf enthusiast must try their hand here.

Side Trips

The state of Michoacan is one of the most visually stunning in all of Mexico, with historic towns scattered across a landscape of highlands and lakes. One of the state's most popular attractions is its Monarch Butterfly Sanctuary in the easternmost part of the state. Every year, from October through March, millions of the winged beauties fly from the U.S. and Canada to hibernate. Here are a few other places worth a visit:

Patzcuaro: Another colonial gem in Mexico's heartland, Patzcuaro competes with Morelia in historical riches, yet has a more isolated atmosphere. Its lovely main square, Plaza Vasco de Quiroga, is flanked by restaurants and small shops, while cobblestone streets snake their way around town and lead to pretty churches and ancient mansions. One sure stop is the House of 11 Courtyards, which was once a Dominican convent and is now home to a number of artisans showing off their wares. For a stay or a great meal, there's the **Hotel Posada La Basilica**, an 18th century property with charming guestrooms and outstanding views of the town and lake, which share the name of Patzcuaro.

Santa Clara del Cobre: This is no longer a mining town yet many of its inhabitants

still work with copper, producing beautiful jewelry, kitchenware and decorative pieces. In fact, the heart of Santa Clara del Cobre is a plaza adorned with copper light posts and a gazebo and surrounded by tiny shops selling the local specialty.

Tlalpujahua: This small town is big in ambition. It is one of the world's most prolific exporters of glass sphere and holiday ornaments. These are hand-blown and decorated, with astounding yet inexpensive results. Tlalpujahua is also home to the Virgin of Carmen Church, whose baroque interiors and painting of the virgin are worth a visit.

Uruapan: A producer of coffee, avocados and chocolate, Uruapan is intrinsically Mexican and blessed with the tropical Barranca del Cupatitzio National Park, where the Cupatitzio River begins. Right next door is the quietly elegant, hacienda-style **Mansion del Cupatitzio Hotel**—57 rooms, gorgeous gardens and wireless Internet. Stop here and indulge in five-star fare such as fresh trout sprinkled with macadamia nuts. ●

Contact Information

Hotel Posada La Basilica: (434) 342-1108

Mansion del Cupatitzio Hotel: 52 (452) 523-2100; mansiondelcupatitzio.com

Villa Montaña Hotel & Spa:

52 (433) 314-0231;

villamontana.com.mx or slh.com

All hotels mentioned above may also be accessed at tesorosmichoacan.com.