

# TRAVEL

Travellers are reminded to check on public health restrictions that could affect their plans.

## All aboard the tequila train

Uncovering the layers of Mexican liquor, one spiky agave plant at a time



GUADALAJARA TOURISM BOARD

JENNIFER WEATHERHEAD HARRINGTON SPECIAL TO THE STAR

"Take a shot of tequila after you have breakfast with salsa picante," says the waiter at my hotel in Puerto Vallarta, "then you'll feel much better."

It's not even 8 a.m., I'm congested in 40-degree weather — and he seriously wants me to take a shot? I have a flashback to my 20s, when tequila and I had a love-hate relationship. But more than a decade and a few trips to its birthplace later, I've become the person who sips tequila, admiring its depths and complexities, and yes, will even take a pre-8 a.m. shot.

I'm not alone. Mexico's most famous liquor is having a renaissance and expected to increase in market value to \$14.7 billion (US\$) by 2028, overtaking vodka as the bestseller. The drink's growing popularity has tequila bars popping up (there are nine in Toronto alone), and we're willing to pay top dollar for a perfectly Instagrammable bev.

George Clooney has put his star power behind Casamigos, the label he co-founded. Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson has his own tequila, Teremana Blanco. Even Kendall Jenner is in on it, with her 818 brand. While critics have questioned whether celeb ventures

amount to cultural appropriation, there are plenty of family-run distilleries producing top-shelf bottles worthy of a splurge. And there's no better spot to dip your toes into the sally rimmed world of tequila than in its source: the town of Tequila.

Here, at the foot of the Tequila Volcano in the Sierra Madre Mountains, blue agave has been used in everything from food to distilling since the 16th century. Today, with a population of about 30,000, Tequila's worn cobblestone streets are lined with colourful souvenir shops, cafés and a lively plaza where it's not unusual to see mariachi bands rehearsing while vaqueros (cowboys) stroll by.

Outside town, millions of spiky blue agave plants dot the rolling hills. They thrive here due to the region's rich volcanic soil — which gives them earthy, spicy and herbaceous qualities — growing for seven years before being harvested.

Tequila's grandparent spirit is

mezcal, made from agave. But tequila is made specifically from the coveted blue (azul) agave and can be produced only in designated regions within the state of Jalisco, much like champagne can only be made in the Champagne region of France. With around 150 licensed distilleries producing 1,000 brands, visiting here is an intro to tequila beyond margaritas and palomas.

Look up distilleries in Tequila and you'll find all the ones you'd recognize from your local bar. There's even a tequila train, the Jose Cuervo Express, which takes visitors on a two-hour journey from Guadalajara to Tequila. It leaves at 9 a.m. and the tequila starts flowing 30 minutes later, with tastings that help you discern between blanco (unaged, clear and most common for cocktail mixing), reposado (golden, with woody depth from aging in oak barrels for two to 12 months) and añejo (the gold standard, with caramel, oak and creamy flavours, barrel-aged for at least one year).

The train ride, thankfully, comes with food (chips and guac) before stopping in Tequila to tour agave fields, meet jimadores (blue agave farmers), visit distilleries and, you guessed it, enjoy more tastings. You can head back to Guadalajara the same day, but a night in town means you can explore more distilleries the next day, such as La Fortaleza.

Housed in a distressed pink building, it's owned and run by Guillermo Erickson Sauza, the fifth generation in his family to produce tequila. More than 125 years ago, his great-great-grandfather was one of the first to export tequila to the United States. His grandfather fought for the designation of tequila to be reserved for ones made in Mexico. And it's that last name sounds familiar, it's the name of the famous Sauza tequila brand, which his grandfather sold in the 1990s.

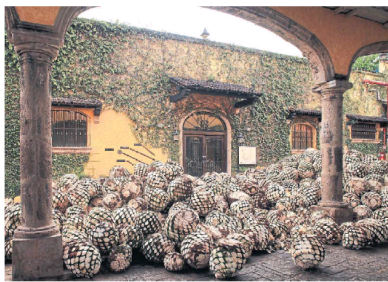
Today, La Fortaleza uses traditional techniques — such as crushing agave hearts with a volcanic stone — to produce small-batch tequila, resulting in unique flavours and variations in colour. There's a straightforward way to spot what's high quality: "You have to look for that 100 per cent blue agave on the bottle. Otherwise, it has ad-

ditives like cane sugar — that's where you get lower-quality tequilas," says Sauza, as we sip añejo in the distillery's cool, dimly lit cave.

The effect is an intimate atmosphere to focus on the flavours, like the brand's blanco, which has citrus, mango and even cannabis notes, with a buttery cream-soda finish. The reposado is sweet and spicy, with hints of cinnamon, vanilla, cloves and pink pepper. It's utterly unlike the burning fire I used to send down my throat in my 20s.

The town of Tequila isn't the only place to dive deeper into the Mexican spirit. About 45 minutes outside Guadalajara are the hills of El Arenal, considered the gateway to the agave growing region. It's where you'll find Cascahuin, a family-run distillery that's been producing tequila without any additives for four generations.

"The most common misconception is that tequila is taken in a shot with salt and lemon," says Cascahuin's owner, Chava Rosales, adding that it pairs perfectly with the local cuisine of ceviches, moles and stews. "Tequila must be sipped slowly in order to really know its flavours and aromas."



MUNDO CUERVO

The town of Tequila, with an 18th-century cathedral at its centre.

A pile of agave piña, the pineapple-like heart of the agave plant, harvested for spirits.



JENNIFER WEATHERHEAD HARRINGTON

Cazuela, a potent cocktail made with citrus and tequila blanco, served in a large clay bowl.

take in Mexico's most famous liquor, without ever having to do a shot.

Tequila, beyond the town With an 18th-century cathedral at its centre, the town of Tequila veers slightly on the touristy side. For local goods, the Cleofas Mota food market serves fresh tortillas and tacos, while the Municipal Palace sells colourful clay artwork and pottery. Then, spend the night at the Hotel Solar de las Animas, whose rooftop bar has views of the blue-hazed agave fields, backed by the Tequila Volcano.

Nearby Guadalajara has a culinary and bar scene that rivals Mexico City. Tequila can be found at nearly every table at casual afternoon charrería show (Mexican rodeo) it flows like the lasso, while at the most raucous lucha libre (Mexican wrestling), it can hit you like a

punch. To truly tempt the taste buds, there's La Tequila in Guadalajara's trendy Zapopan area. An unpretentious spot for both novices and those who have graduated past salt-seasoned margarita rims, it has 200-plus kinds of tequila behind the bar ready for mixing, sipping and splashing into entrees and desserts.

On the outskirts of Guadalajara is Tlaquepaque, known for its pottery and, more importantly, its tequila cocktail: cazuela. It's a potent mix of sliced limes, grapefruit, oranges, grapefruit soda and a hefty amount of tequila blanco, served in a large clay bowl. Spend an afternoon with your hands around one of these drinks on the tree-lined patio of El Abajeño.

Writer Jennifer Weatherhead Harrington travelled as a guest of the Guadalajara Tourism Board, which did not review or approve this article.

**"Tequila must be sipped slowly in order to really know its flavours and aromas."**

CHAVA ROSALES CASCAHUIN DISTILLERY

refer@daa

pressreader.com | 1-844-774-6000