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Second CITY

*Guadalajara,
Mexico's second
largest city, is
primed for a
tourism boom*

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Guadalajara Cathedral. Photography by Matt Gush.

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It was a warm afternoon in Guadalajara, but a group of foreign visitors were tucked far away from the sun, into the corner of what was once an upscale home in the popular neighborhood of Tlaquepaque. They were laboring over an oversized vat of warm *cajeta*, a form of dulce de leche syrup, taking turns stirring the gooey caramel sauce with a gigantic spoon. After a few minutes, the store manager smiled and took over.

This is just one example of how Mexico's second-largest city is providing new, regionally authentic experiences for travelers. The shop, Lugo, is one of several culinary venues at Nuestros Talleres, an attraction in the Tlaquepaque district that not only sells a variety of delicacies, but also gets visitors involved in the process of making them (if they so desire).

Considering Guadalajara's current boom in international arrivals, as well as an unprecedented surge in hotel growth, the city's fresh approach to tourism seems to be working.

Recent visitor numbers are record-breaking, according to Rocío Lancaster, general director of promotions for the Jalisco Ministry of Tourism, the organization that promotes tourism for the state. International arrivals to Guadalajara's Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla International Airport jumped an impressive 4.9% in the first quarter of 2019, compared to the same period the year before.

"This is the largest growth in international arrivals of any Mexican city," Lancaster said.

The reasons for growth in leisure travel interest in Guadalajara are many, she adds.





Second City

Guadalajara, Mexico's second largest city, is primed for a tourism boom

By Mark Chesnut

The Cathedral of the Assumption of Our Lady is located on the central plaza of Guadalajara. Below (from left): A mariachi band; a charro rider; the Jose Cuervo Express

"People are taking notice of Jalisco's cultural roots as the birthplace of tequila, mariachi and *charrería* — the rodeo-style sport that dates to 16th-century horsemen culture," Lancaster said. "And they have a wide variety of experiential activities to choose from."

Indeed, as the capital of the state of Jalisco, Guadalajara is an ideal spot to tap into the excitement of some of Mexico's most legendary traditions, including spirits, music and horsemanship. Visitors can also explore UNESCO-recognized sites; wander a well-preserved historic city center; indulge in cutting-edge cuisine; and check into a fast-growing number of hotels at a wide range of price points.

The city's evolution is noticeable, according to Ben Gritzewsky, senior independent travel advisor for Mexico at travel management company Frosch.

"Guadalajara has always been a lovely, lively, provincial but sophisticated city, and I have seen it become a true metropolis and ever-hotter vacation destination," he said. "The contemporary sensibilities of a prosperous, progressive population, combined with unique historical attractions and traditions, provide visitors with a wide array of customizable experiences. And, as the home of mariachis and the gateway to tequila country, Guadalajara is considered the most 'Mexican' city. Its extraordinary colonial monuments, museums, folklore, hospitality and mild climate are among the big draws for travelers."

Zachary Rabinor, president and CEO of tour operator Journey Mexico, says that the city's growth in popularity is the logical result of changes in traveler preferences.

"The evolution has been organic," he said. "It mirrors the consumer's interest in cuisine, art, design, and combining work and play."

Rabinor notes that Journey Mexico has upped its Guadalajara offerings to include hacienda culture; *charrería*; and culinary and tequila experiences that showcase small-batch, lesser known producers.

Tia Stephanie Tours is another operator increasing its presence in Guadalajara. In October, it will debut its *Charros, Mariachis and Tequila of Jalisco* itinerary, which will include visits to the Jose Cuervo facilities in the town of Tequila, as well as a private *charrería* demonstration.

As tourism products and services continue to expand, the Jalisco state government aims to boost the city's profile even more, according to Lancaster.

"Investment by the state of Jalisco in developing its Magical Towns, as well as infrastructure connecting places such as Guadalajara and Puerto Vallarta, make the area so much more accessible," she said. "Guadalajara

is creating several sustainable initiatives, and for the first time, Jalisco has hired an agency for the promotion of the state in North America. Both the Jalisco Ministry of Tourism and Guadalajara Tourism Board are working with an expert agency to promote the attractions, hidden gems and new developments that travelers need to know."

More Hotel Options

Guadalajara is also enjoying unprecedented hotel investment, Lancaster says.

"There is 5 to 10% growth in hotel room inventory every year in Guadalajara," she said. "New brands, such as JW Marriott, are opening properties, as well as Aloft, Fiesta Americana and City Express. Sixteen hotels are currently under construction in Guadalajara, and eight will apply for permits this year."

With more than 2,000 new rooms debuting within a two-year period, there are certainly plenty of fresh options for travelers — and the government is doing its part to make sure all properties are prepared to serve a growing international clientele.

"The focus that is being given to hospitality is incredible," Lancaster said. "The Jalisco government offers a training program for suppliers as part of a service for the overall hospitality industry. This includes English courses and training for professional guides in the downtown area and all over the state."

It's not like welcoming international visitors is a new concept for Guadalajara, of course. As a major hub for corporate travel in Mexico, the city welcomes plenty of business travelers to its major meeting and convention facilities — including Expo Guadalajara, which bills itself as the largest such venue in Mexico.

"The evolution of Guadalajara on the business side is primarily because it's considered Mexico's Silicon Valley, hosting 40 percent of the country's IT industry, with more than 650 specialized companies," said Martha Paredes, director of sales and marketing for Grupo

Presidente, which operates several hotels in the city, including the recently renovated Presidente InterContinental Guadalajara.

In addition to strong business bookings, Paredes says the flagship property is reporting growth in destination weddings, especially from bookings by Mexicans and Mexican-Americans who live in the U.S.

"They come to Guadalajara to have a traditional wedding that reminds them of their culture," she said.

InterContinental's parent company, IHG, is among the hoteliers ramping up a presence in Guadalajara. In addition to recently adding 50 rooms to its Holiday Inn Express Guadalajara Aeropuerto property, IHG plans to debut new

The region is known for its tequila production.



New Hotels on the Scene

Guadalajara's hotel boom is good news for travelers, whether they prefer top-of-the-line luxury or more budget-friendly options.

Sixteen new properties and more than 2,000 rooms will debut in 2019 and 2020 alone, including the 150-room THOMPSON GUADALAJARA; 150-room INDIGO ANDARES; 200-room ALOFT PUNTO SUR; 220-room JW MARRIOTT; 180-room HOTSSON; 160-room COURTYARD BY MARRIOTT; 130-room CANDLEWOOD SUITES; 126-room FIESTA INN AEROPUERTO and FIESTA INN CIUDAD JUDICIAL; 190-room HYATT CENTRIC; 140-room HOTEL INDEPENDIENTE; 180-room HOTEL PABELLON; and 120-room HILTON GARDEN INN.

Other recently opened hotels in Guadalajara include the 348-room HARD ROCK HOTEL GUADALAJARA; the 225-room HILTON GUADALAJARA MIDTOWN; and the 117-room BARUK HOTEL DE AUTOR, all of which opened in 2018. Also last year, HOTEL 1970 POSADA GUADALAJARA joined Hilton's Curio Collection after a \$6.5 million renovation.

properties under the Staybridge Suites, Hotel Indigo and Holiday Inn Express brands by the end of 2021.

Gerardo Murray, regional vice president of marketing for Mexico, Latin America and the Caribbean at IHG, says Guadalajara's tourism growth is the result of two factors: the destination's continued importance as a business hub, and the government's ongoing efforts to promote the region for leisure travel.

"There is a lot of technology, manufacturing and industry around the area," he said. "And on the tourist side, there's the focus of the government to keep developing new products."

In fact, Guadalajara's role as a magnet for business travelers is likely contributing to its growth as a vacation spot, according to Murray.

"What we have seen is that people who attend a conference will stay over the weekend and bring their families to enjoy the city," Murray said.

Rabinor of Journey Mexico agrees that business travel provides a boost to leisure bookings — he says it's a growing trend for travelers to tack on pre- and post- days around work trips, conferences and meetings.

"These extensions have helped spread the word about the amazing culinary, art, design and cultural opportunities for travelers," Rabinor said. "This encourages repeat visits and word-of-mouth growth in arrivals."

A Tale of Two Cities

The appeal of Guadalajara and its outlying towns is especially evident in UNESCO-recognized sites such as Hospicio Cabanas, a 19th-century former hospice in the city, and nearby Tequila's agave landscape and ancient industrial facilities. The 86,000-plus acres of fields in Tequila is the basis for the area's burgeoning tourism industry, which attracts visitors for day trips from Guadalajara as well as overnight stays. As tourism destinations,

Tequila and Guadalajara are, in many ways, inextricably linked, since travelers often combine the two in one trip. And both destinations have shown inventiveness in creating reasons to visit.

Among the newest ways to learn about Tequila's eponymous spirit is via a visit to the Skywalk, which debuted in May at the Sauza distillery. Featured in two of the facility's VIP tours, the new viewing spot provides an insider's look at the bottling and packaging process. And travelers looking for an only-in-Tequila hotel experience should consider a stay at Matices Hotel, located on the scenic grounds of La Cofradia distillery, where guestrooms are set in large-scale recreations of tequila barrels.

In October, Matices will open 20 new barrel rooms, as well as a swimming pool and a tequila barrel spa with spirit-infused treatments. Hotel guests can sign up for decidedly destination-appropriate activities, including tastings, tequila bottle design classes and even blue agave plant adoptions that allow clients to return and harvest the plant when it's grown.

In Guadalajara, visitors seeking immersive experiences can head to Nuestros Talleres for an insider's introduction to the region's sugary delights. Top spots for this include Lugo, which specializes in cajeta; Cristina Taylor, which showcases the craft of artisanal chocolate making; and Nuestros Dulces, which shares the secrets of traditional sweets such as date-nut rolls. And, a few blocks away, at the Nunez Panduro workshop, visitors can witness the talents of a multigenerational family renowned for their hand-carved statues.

Charrería provides even more authentic tourism experiences in Guadalajara. Visitors can witness the skills of *charros* (horsemen) by visiting Lienzo Charros de Jalisco on Sundays, or they can join local operator Andares de Mexico for its Charrería Tour, a four-hour excursion that includes an arena visit, demonstrations and even charro classes. Travelers looking for a more in-depth introduction should plan a visit next year, when the National Charros Association commemorates its 100th anniversary with events including a large-scale celebration in September 2020.

In fact, Guadalajara hosts several annual events that cater to various interests, including the International Mariachi Festival in late August, as well as COME food festival and Guadalajara International Film Festival, both of which take place in March.

Overall, according to the Ministry of Tourism's Lancaster, Guadalajara's strength lies in its diversity of experiences.

"We have the best of both worlds," she said. "We have the essence of Mexico — with the preservation of customs and traditions — and the allure of a modern city, with all the services and infrastructure a visitor could want." ●

The Details: Office of Visitors and Conventions of Guadalajara (www.visitguadalajara.com)



Left: Trains from Guadalajara to Tequila are a major draw for tourists. Below: Guadalajara has an old-world feel.



Left: Matices Hotel, at La Cofradia distillery in Tequila, features rooms shaped like barrels. Below: At Nuestros Dulces, visitors can sample traditional sweets from the region.

