

ESCAPE YOUR COMMUTE...

The commute. You either love it or loathe it. For some it's a magic window of time to yourself before a busy day ahead. For others it's a stressful battle for space. Either way, we think it's the perfect opportunity to escape for a while and imagine yourself somewhere entirely different. So, print this out and get yourself to Mexico. Magical beaches, vibrant cities and lush jungle await...

...TO THE MEXICO WE LOVE

Mexico has it all; breathtaking mountains, ancient cities and a vibrant nightlife. Whether you choose the Caribbean or the Pacific coast of Mexico, you'll find white sand, coral reefs and deep blue waters. For total peace and quiet, we recommend slinking off the mainland to one of Mexico's secluded islands, such as Holbox, where you can get up and close to some of the most amazing wildlife on earth – quick swim with a whale shark anyone?

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FLAVOURS

Like most cuisines from across the foodie globe, the difference between your preconceptions and the actual everyday food tend to be worlds apart. And Mexico is no different. So forget thoughts of soggy burritos dripping with chilli sauce and mind numbing Tequila washed down with salt and lime (what a combination eh?), Mexico's food and drink is up there with any of the great cuisines of the world.

From the infamous (and often amazing) street food of barbacoa and tacos to unique Oaxacan dishes of 'chapulines colorados' (toasted grasshoppers) to the now rather happening and trendy 'alta cocina Mexican' (that's fine dining to you and me) of Mexico City, Mexico's cuisine is an endless treasure trove to tickle your taste buds.

Here's a few things not to miss...



Chapulines Colorados



Valle de Guadalupe wine region



Try a tippie of the local Mezcal



Mexican street food

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Alta cocina Mexicana

Fine cuisine seems to have been making a shift the last few years in Mexico. With Mexican haute cuisine (alta cocina Mexicana) taking over and many restaurants specialising in an upscale return to tradition, rather than a pure reinvention.

Moving away from French and Spanish influences and concentrating on high-quality local ingredients, there's been an obvious trend in creating a truly modern, sophisticated and a distinctly Mexican cuisine. And we love it.

Leading the trend (in our eyes anyway) are the Pugol restaurant in Mexico City where head chef Enrique Olvera serves the highest quality contemporary dishes inspired by street food, and the restaurant Manzanilla over in Baja California's Ensenada where traditional and regional flavours are delightfully washed down with a glass (or three if you prefer) of the finest wines from the Valle de Guadalupe. Mmm,mmm.

Drink

Tequila, it makes us happy...Well, until the hangover kicks in at least. Far from our perceptions of the drink here in the UK, Mexico's most famous export is actually a drink to be sipped and enjoyed slowly, like a fine malt whisky. Just make sure you go for the higher end, 100% blue agave to avoid the need to suck on a lime to get rid of the taste.

Once a drink only for fashionista's and local hippsters, Mezcal bars are now opening up all over Mexico and is definitely the drink of the moment. Similar to tequila yet almost exclusively produced on a small-scale it uses traditional distilling methods making it a much purer and smoother drink. Not exactly top of the list when you're thinking of great wine making countries but there are a few emerging regions bringing Mexican wine to the attention of the world's top wine buffs. Most notably the scenic Valle de Guadalupe on along Baja California's northern coast and the city of Ensenada seem to leading the way. Most of Mexico's wine is still only sold within the country so snap it up and enjoy as much as you can while you're there.

Eat on the street

Mexico truly is the king of street food. And while there a many fine restaurants throughout the country, sometimes tucking into a taco on a local market stall is the ultimate way to get a true taste of Mexico. Small stalls are literally everywhere throughout Mexico's markets and the quality and variety are never ending so it's best to wonder around and see what tickles your fancy.

THE WEIRD AND WONDERFUL

There's no doubt about it, Mexico and festivals go hand in hand. From wild and euphoric carnivals to the intriguing (and sometimes bizarre) ancient traditions of Mexico's deep rooted past, there really never is a dull moment in the Mexican calendar. Forget drunken revelry in mud soaked fields; think brightly coloured cultural events that take control of your senses. Here's a quick rundown of some of our must-do's.

Day of the dead

We know what you're thinking, 'Day of the Dead'? Sounds like a tacky festival put together by horror film fanatics. Well luckily, it's not. Celebrated throughout the night of November 1st (all Saints day) and the day of the 2nd (all souls day) Day of the Dead is a spectacular and moving festival that's celebrated throughout Mexico.

The festivals traditions originate from the belief that the souls of the dead return to visit living relatives each year to eat, drink and celebrate your ancestry. Brightly coloured flowers, candles and skulls (a symbol of life, not death) are laid in grave yards to help guide the souls out. Streets become lined with locals wearing painted masks and elaborate costumes - a true assault on the senses.



Day of our Lady of Guadalupe

Every year from the 1st to the 12th of December the streets of Puerto Vallarta come alive with religious fever, festivities and processions. Our lady of Guadalupe (or The Virgin Mary to you and me) is Mexico's patron saint and over the centuries is thought to have created all manner of miracles.

The celebration sees tens of thousands of pilgrims make their way to the Basilica de Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe (some even making the latter part of the journey on their knees) to witness the site of her appearances. Don't worry though, if you don't fancy trekking on all fours you can wonder through the street fares where there's a host of amazing food, local crafts and traditional dance performances.

Night of the witches

Ever feel like you need to rid yourself of all the past years negative energy? Hmm...maybe, maybe not. But if you did feel like some serious cleansing is in order head down to the town of Catemaco for The Noche De Brujas (night of the witches).

On the first Friday in March wizards, witches, shamans and healers from across the country descend on the town of Catemaco to perform a mass cleansing ritual designed to rid them of all negative energy from the year passed.

A bizarre mix of other worldly indulgence, ancient indigenous beliefs and stunning dance performances it's the perfect place for a dabble into the dark arts and an insight into the countries mysterious old world traditions.



Mondays on the Hill, Oaxaca

Celebrated on the last two Mondays of July (hence the nick name 'Mondays on the hill') the Guelaguetza festival is a traditional and long running folk lore festival held to appease the gods for plentiful rain and a fruitful harvest.

Dating back to colonial times the Guelaguetza Festival brings together the wonderfully diverse communities of the Oaxaca region where they gather on the ancient Cerro del Fortin hill to perform to the gods, (and the crowds). Wearing traditional dress, groups perform unique folk dances before offering (the literal meaning of Guelaguetza) local gifts and home grown products to the crowd. Sounds right up our street.

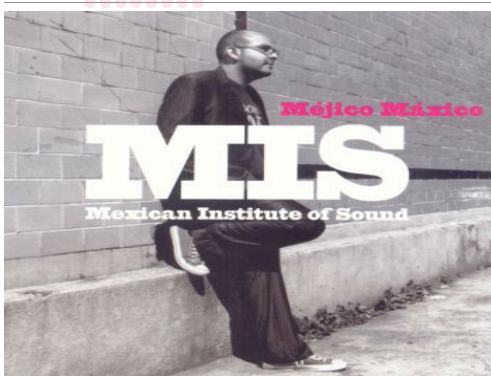
SIGHTS AND SOUNDS



Street music



Rodrigo y Gabriela



Mexican Institute of Sound



Mexican Mariachi

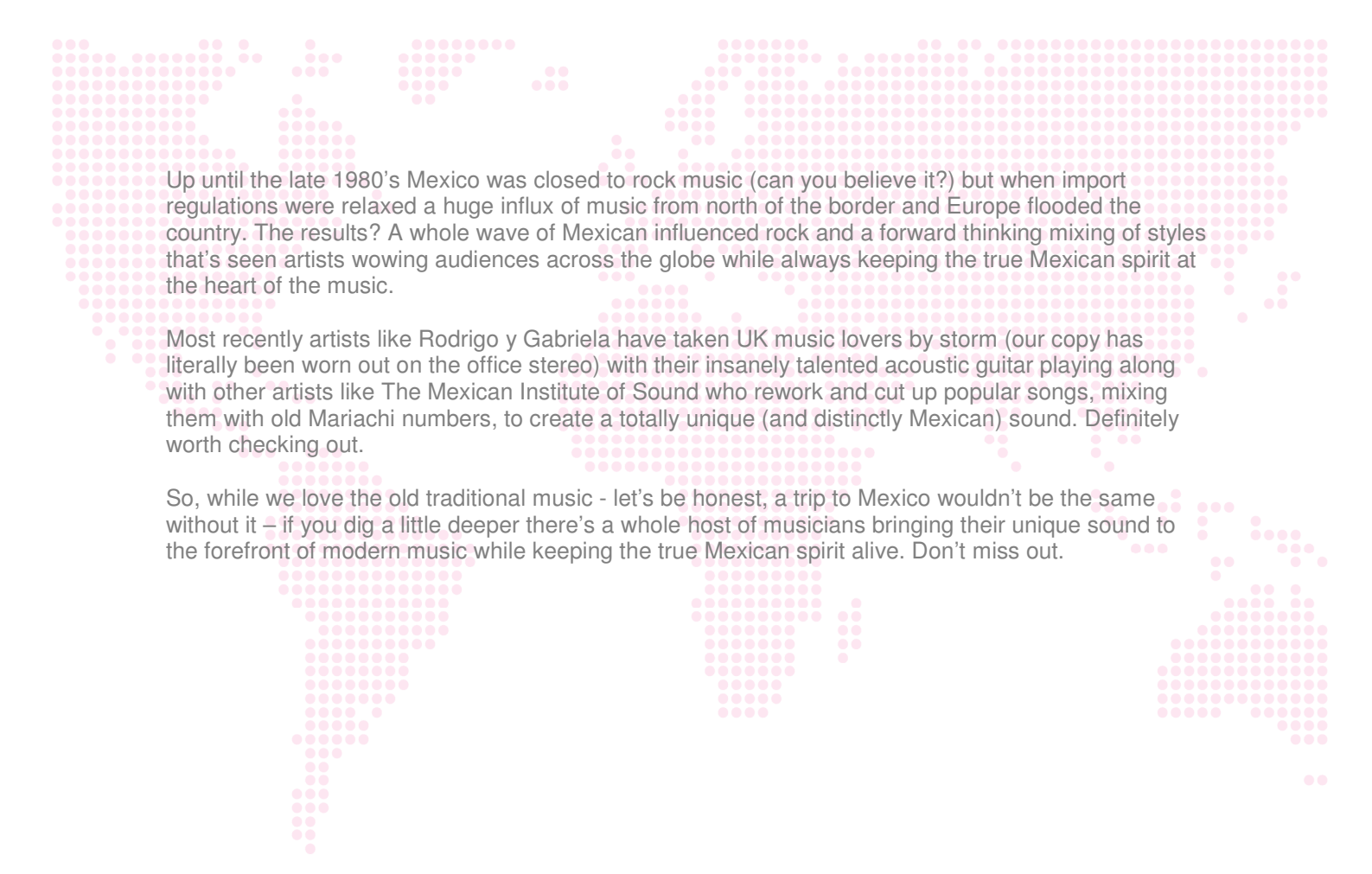
Think Mexican music and what's the first thing that pops into your mind? Yep. Probably the same as most people. Four old guys strumming away on odd sized guitars at a wedding in the sunshine. Well, while Mexico has managed to hold on to its amazing musical traditions (and we love them) don't be fooled into thinking this its all it has to offer.

Like Cuba, the 1940's and 1950's were the so called 'golden age' of music in Mexico when classic songs like "Besame Mucho" filled the air from radio's and cinema screens across the globe. Though (unfortunately) this marvelous era died out by the 1960's (along with the great cinema of the time) this certainly wasn't the day the music died.

From the national sounds of the Mariachi, where a spot of 'zapateado' (foot-stamping) along with the lively rhythms is utterly infectious, to the 'Tex-Mex blend of Mexican, European and Bohemian rhythms of Norteño (music from the north), these forms of traditional music are most certainly alive and well throughout the country.

And trust us. If you spend any time in Mexico you'll have quite a job on your hands to avoid live music of some sort. Definitely a good thing in our books.

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Up until the late 1980's Mexico was closed to rock music (can you believe it?) but when import regulations were relaxed a huge influx of music from north of the border and Europe flooded the country. The results? A whole wave of Mexican influenced rock and a forward thinking mixing of styles that's seen artists wowing audiences across the globe while always keeping the true Mexican spirit at the heart of the music.

Most recently artists like Rodrigo y Gabriela have taken UK music lovers by storm (our copy has literally been worn out on the office stereo) with their insanely talented acoustic guitar playing along with other artists like The Mexican Institute of Sound who rework and cut up popular songs, mixing them with old Mariachi numbers, to create a totally unique (and distinctly Mexican) sound. Definitely worth checking out.

So, while we love the old traditional music - let's be honest, a trip to Mexico wouldn't be the same without it - if you dig a little deeper there's a whole host of musicians bringing their unique sound to the forefront of modern music while keeping the true Mexican spirit alive. Don't miss out.