



Transportation in Mexico
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Roads

In general the roads in Mexico are pretty good. The highway system is being improved throughout the country, and normally even minor roads hold a good standard. Therefore, from this perspective, the only real difference from the road-systems in other (developed) countries is the presence of the notorious road bumps – Topes.

They probably serve their purpose well, limiting the traffic speed, since the Mexicans in general show up an extremely ego-minded and at times reckless attitude when they sit behind the wheel.

But being good for road safety, they are a real nuisance when driving.

You normally find them in urban areas only, but it happens you will find them on highways as well, close to payment installations or intersections. And as I recall it, there is also one between San Cristóbal de Las Casas and Palenque in Chiapas in the middle of nowhere! Therefore you would better stay alert and take it easy cruising around the country.

I have over-looked a few. The car survived, but some bumps (for example the semi-domed metal ones) will probably do nasty things to your car - and to you perhaps...

Also: Right turn in front of red light is legal.

Toll Roads

You will probably use the toll roads (autopistas) to move faster and safer over larger distances. The tolls (cuotas) vary greatly, normally in the range of 20-100 pesos (1½ - 7 USD).

On www.paisano.gob.mx you can find a route and price calculator if you want to know the time to travel and the expenses in advance. Only in Spanish.

Another service that could be handy on the toll roads is: Los Ángeles Verdes (The green angles)

They offer free services like repairs on site and advices via phone of various kinds.

They operate between 8 am and 6 pm every day. You call 078 on the phone all over the country. More information on

http://www.sectur.gob.mx/wb/sectur/sect_9453_angeles_verdes

Gasoline

For the moment, august 2009, you pay about 8 pesos for one litre (magna lead free).

When visiting gas stations, the general advice in the country is to check if the meter stands at 0 litres from the beginning, since cheating apparently occur. I have never experienced any problems.



Public transportation

Works well. For long distance you can choose between airplanes and buses. Don't know about train connections, but don't think they are worth it only from a transportation point of view. On short distance you can choose between buses, combis or taxis.

Buses

The buses run perfectly all across the country.

Use first class buses to connect over larger distances, and second class buses locally to be able to get off exactly where you want.

On first class buses you will find toilets, more or less clean, and be presented for one to several b-class movies depending on the distance to travel.

I haven't tried it yet, but on ETN you're supposed to use headphones to hear the sound. This is not a concept used in general, therefore if you're not watching the movie you will have to suffer or put on your own equipment.

Some companies include a snack and a drink in the ticket price. Probably depending on the route.

Second class buses are often a bit run down, crowded, and of course always moving sloooooowwwly...

Collectivos - Combis

You can also choose to use the colectivos or combis (van-size vehicles). They normally run frequently throughout the day and you get on and off as you please.

If they fill up they go, otherwise they still run by a schedule depending on the time of the day.

Here in Aguascalientes I can travel a distance of about 50 km for 23 pesos (less than 2 USD).

Of course they can be crowded and it is not easy to use them if you bring a lot of equipment. I expect them to be faster than the second class buses.

And it is amazing: Just as you thought that now we are more than full, he pulls over again and - vupti - two more persons squeezed in...

Taxis

Of course they run everywhere, and the price probably depends on locality. Here in Aguascalientes I have to pay about 20 pesos to travel a distance of 3 km (10 pesos to start off).

In general there are no problems using the taxis, but do get sure you make your payment inside the car and receive your change there as well. We have tried once to pay outside and the driver then had to get inside the car to fetch the change, and well inside he took off with spinning wheels and our money.

In the big cities, in bus stations and airports, the general system, and advice, is to use the official taxis operating at the site. You pay in advance at a special counter and then wait in a designated line until it becomes your turn.



Mexico City and the state of Mexico

Driving your own vehicle with peace in mind, in Mexico City, can be a little complicated:

Because of the big problems with air pollution in the city, some years ago the administration decided to introduce a system to be able to control the amount of vehicles circulating the streets at the same time.

This system is called: HOY NO CIRCULA (Today doesn't circulate).

Depending on the last digit of your license plate you are not allowed to drive the streets within Distrito Federal and the state of Mexico (The latter surrounding the DF area) between 5 am and 10 pm on week days.

The rule goes as follows:

Hoy No Circula:

Monday: 5 and 6 (yellow)

Tuesday: 7 and 8 (pink)

Wednesday: 3 and 4 (red)

Thursday: 1 and 2 (green)

Friday: 9 and 0 (blue)

The colours refer to a special mark on the license plate where the colour follows the last digit as indicated.

So if your plate ends on 5 you cannot use your car on a Monday in the mentioned time span.

To be excused from this rule, your car should have a special hologram attached to one of the windows that shows a single 0 or a double 0. But reading this you are probably just a tourist renting a car, and have no intentions obtaining such a permit.

Ok. To make it a little more complicated, I think last year, they introduced another system: HOY NO CIRCULA SABATINO (Today doesn't circulate on Saturdays).

Extending the restrictions to Saturdays as well, the rule goes as follows:

Hoy No Circula Sabatino:

First: 5 and 6 (yellow)

Second: 7 and 8 (pink)

Third: 3 and 4 (red)

Fourth: 1 and 2 (green)

Fifth: 9 and 0 (blue)

So the first Saturday of the month you have to walk if your license plate ends on 5. The lucky ones which have plates ending on 9 or 0 will therefore only rarely be affected by this rule. The restricted area and the banned time span is the same as with the first rule.



And now to make it really complicated, there exists a third system called:
DOBLE HOY NO CIRCULA (Today doesn't circulate double)

This system is used to be able to handle day-to-day situations. When a particular area of the city is affected extraordinarily by pollution, this rule moves into action. It says that if an area is severely affected it should only be allowed for vehicles to circulate every second day (in that part of the city).

One day vehicles with license plates ending with an even digit are allowed to circulate, and the next day those with odd digits. And of course still taking into consideration the first two rules.

I presume this information will be made public via the radio and probably the Internet. But being a tourist you probably never will be able to obtain such information in time, if at all.

Let's continue, because if you thought this was it, you are wrong!

To keep foreigners (or at least their vehicles registered outside of DF and the state of Mexico) out of the city, there is a special limitation on circulation for these. It states that:

On week days it is not allowed the above mentioned vehicles to circulate between 5 am and 11 am.

Here you might think, come on!, the police can't check this on the fly with so many cars on the streets. Of course driving the big streets at good speed the chance is minimal that they will catch you, but once you're on the smaller streets with slow traffic they spot you easily, because the license plates here in Mexico have the name of the state, where the car is registered, printed with big types.

And they do nail you. I've tried it...

The penalties for violating these rules are rather severe:

In the state of Mexico a fine the size of minimum 30 days wages and in the DF, 20 days wages, PLUS your vehicle will be detained until clear of the banned time frame (I don't dare to think about the bureaucracy and time delays before you really get your car back).

So if you violate the rules, the police have every right to confiscate your car and fine you.

Of course in such a situation it will be hard for you to complain if he wants to follow the rules. 'Luckily' this probably only happens on rare occasions, since to help you avoid having all your plans destroyed, he will be more than willing to let you stick a few bills into his back pocket. In fact he most likely will insist on it!

I had to pay 1100 pesos last year, and he had all the right since I was driving an Aguascalientes car at 1030 am (without knowing about the rule of foreign cars at that time).

I know this makes me at least a morally corrupt person. But again it's not like they cry from the rooftops about these rules, and the car rental didn't inform me about the rules either (don't think they knew). If I had known about the rule, of course I would have waited half an hour extra in the hotel room.



The strictness of the penalties is of course related to a real desire to keep out as many cars as possible from the area. But it is rather obvious that nobody wants to be without his car, if it can be avoided, and the police know this, and know how to profit from it.

Unfortunately the police, we are talking about the federal police, do not limit their behaviour to just bending the rules a little. No, they pure and simple break them as well.

Within the same visit last year I was so naïve (out of my Danish faith in the authorities, I guess) to address a police officer who had not given me any attention none what so ever, to ask for directions. There was only him to start with. He persuaded me to move the car to a place with less focus and in a few minutes he had 3 colleagues with him, and the show started: He could lead me to the place I was seeking. I said: "Ok, but I don't want to pay anything" (I had heard about their bad reputation). Then he found out it was a 'foreign' car and then it went like: "El vehículo no circula". This of course was not true (the last digit was ok and it was afternoon). I tried to make him understand this. But it was too late, he had caught a fat rat and wouldn't let go.

I ended up paying him, the four of them, 2000 pesos. But of course, this included the service of stopping the passing traffic, so that I could easily enter the lane again and move off. Very considerate!

I had the right on my side you might say, and could have rejected to pay anything letting the system show its justice. But in the moment when it happened, I was thinking, that now that there were four of them, they would easily be able to make up some kind of violation I had made, and I would have been even worse off then.

Lesson learned and therefore the following recommendations:

Recommendations if you are going to drive yourself in Mexico City:

Make sure your car is registered in the Distrito Federal or the state of Mexico (like rental cars out of the airport). It will not catch the attention of the police since you will be just one in a million (or millions).

Check which day the vehicle is not allowed to circulate, and obey it.

When needing to ask for directions or general advice, NEVER ask the police, if avoidable (this is a general advice among people here, not just caused by my own bad experience). Ask instead at gasoline stations or common people in the street.

If you do get into illegal trouble with the police (on their part) or other authorities for that matter, you can report it at http://200.34.175.29:8080/wb3/wb/SFP/dgac_proforma - only in Spanish. Perhaps not to get justice on your own part, but to put a face on the crime within the system.

And finally: WHEN you get lost driving around the city and trapped by the one-way system, don't panic! You can always flow with the stream to the nearest ring road, circle around the centre and give it another go when you reach the part of the city where you're heading.



And to end the story about the traffic problem: Of course the rules are not having the effect they were supposed to. With corruption at all levels it has been proven fairly easy to obtain one of the 0-00 all-time-drive permits, and perhaps more ironically: Those people who simply need a car, or want to drive a car no matter what, to go to work and to do their daily business, they have bought a second car, to be able to drive legally all days...