

Traveling advice

Birding Mexico

Doing bird trips in Mexico is often straight forward. You are rarely long from civilization, and can acquire help and most of your daily necessities throughout the country.

Birding

Birding in Mexico is both easy and difficult.

It is easy in the sense that you are normally allowed to move about as you please. Meaning that even on private properties in the countryside you'll not be thrown out, as long as you act with respect. This is especially true on Ejido land, Community properties, which is land shared by a whole village. Many of these also act like a kind of protections of wildlife and therefore are good places to bird.

Much land in Mexico is fenced which is one of the things that makes it difficult to bird. Both because of the psychological effect of not feeling welcomed, a fence does signal Stay Out, but also physically, because it is difficult to get away from roads and into the area when you have to pass one fence after another (always barbed wire). Cattle is very common throughout Mexico, both in the highland and the lowland, and this is actually the main reason why there are so many fences throughout the landscape: To make the cattle stay on the property.

Cattle gates between the different properties should be left open or closed, exactly as you found them. This is probably the most important rule to follow if you don't want trouble with the owners.

Another good rule to follow is to present yourself whenever you meet people on their properties. They can have hundreds of good reasons to think that you're no good news, so being able to disarm their suspiciousness by telling them that you are a simple birdwatcher is important.

Most landowners don't really care about the birds on their land, so when they feel assured that you're not there to steal their cows or land then they relax and only see you as a harmless birder or a simple fool! Birding as an activity is still not known or understood in most of Mexico. Wild birds are animals that you kill or trap, or don't bother about.

In general nobody will bother you when you walk around birding, but birding in city parks can sometimes be a problem, if you bring a large camera.

At least in Guadalajara the parks have a policy that requires that professional photographers have to pay a fee for shooting in the park. The rules are very specific about this emphasizing the professional element of the activity. Nevertheless I have often been approached by the wardens, in different parks, who want to see my permit because I carry my Canon 400 mm f 5.6 around fully exposed.

The wardens are always simple people without much education or intelligence(?) and they always assume before they ask. Apparently they can't grasp the idea that a big camera can be used only as hobby tool.

I always explain to them their own rules and say that I want to talk to the director of the park if there is a problem. They've always let me be after this, but it does leave you with a bad sensation . If you're less idealistic about this, paying the fee will not ruin you!

Traveling

Mexico is investing heavily in highways throughout the country which means that you can travel comfortably from any part of the country to another by land. Normally they maintain two systems: a toll road and a free highway. In many parts the free highway is as good and fast as the paid version but in general you move faster and safer (less accidents) using the latter.

You'll also soon find out that as good and well-maintained the intercity highways are in Mexico, as horribly bad are the streets maintained inside, almost, every city. I've experienced this consistently whether it is a small village or a big metropolis like Guadalajara. Politics..!?

The intercity bus system is excellent in Mexico. Always a comfortable and punctual solution. However, domestic flights between longer distances is often a cheaper and faster solution, and they work too. Volaris, Interjet and Vivaaerobus are budget solutions, operating with the same limitations as you'll find in most parts of the world.

Hitch-hiking is not that common in Mexico, but moving locally you can probably often get a ride.

Traveling by night is in general best avoided. Not so much because of the risk of being attacked or robbed, but because both animals and people move about freely without light. The toll roads should be fairly safe in that regard.

When you ask for directions or advice in general please don't count too heavily on it. Double check if possible. The Mexicans don't like to be left with the impression of not knowing, or not being able to help, so rather than leaving you empty-handed they prefer to give you an answer they think might be correct, or worse, an answer they think will please you!

And while walking around along sidewalks whether it be in a large city or a small village, ALWAYS pay attention to where you put your feet. The risk of falling into a hole or flat down because of uneven bricks or something unexpected sticking out of the ground is almost 100% guaranteed if you're not having your eyes on where you'll put your next step. BE OBSERVANT - NO BIRDING FROM SIDEWALKS!!!

Traffic

Mexico allows the right turn at red lights.

Be aware that waiting at red lights take an eternity here in Mexico. Normally they only allow one direction to continue at a time, meaning it takes 4 directions before a whole cycle has been completed. Sometimes you have to wait up to a few minutes.

Intersections vary a lot in terms of how the traffic is executed.

Sometimes you'll have a left-turn lane ,on the left side of the road, as you would normally expect it in many countries, but sometimes, and in some states more than others it appears, you'll have to use the right-most lane, often constructed as a lateral separate lane to turn left. Without knowing what to expect it's easy to miss a turn, and you'll have to find your way back somehow.

Unless signed otherwise you normally are allowed to turn right on the red light as mentioned, and along one-way streets going left it is also allowed to do a turn on a red light, but I think they have to be signed specifically with that permission.

One-way streets are very common throughout Mexico, and going back to a previous spot along the road often requires a good knowledge of how the street's directions in the area are organized. A gps system at hand is invaluable!

Along bigger roads you normally have a fast-flowing center lane and a slow-flowing lateral lane. You'll normally use the lateral lane to make turns and stops. To change from the center lane to the lateral or viceversa use the appropriate exits to do so. It is normally not allowed to change over in intersections.

When behind the wheel many Mexicans turn into Free Spirits, let's call them that, politely. Bypassing on the right side is not a problem here, so always check your mirrors on both sides before changing lanes.

And using the emergency lane to take advantage and then squeeze themselves into the waiting line is a very common practice. This also happens a lot in intersections where instead of waiting in line to make a left turn they just pull in in front of you.

On the free highways in the mountains, normally just one lane, the trucks can be a nuisance, but in general the truck drivers seem to be very smart knowing what they do, and often, when the view ahead is limited, they'll use the directional indicator to tell you that you can pass by them without problems.

Parking in the street is always complicated in bigger cities, but generally there are many parking lots around, especially in the center of the cities. The trick is to find them, and also remember that most of them close for the night.

Speed bumps are used EVERYWHERE in Mexico and is a general pain in the beep. They are not well maintained and often not warned about beforehand with signs or painting, why you really have to pay attention to the road ahead of you. Normally you

won't find them along highways outside the cities or villages, however, there is no guarantee for this. Especially in Chiapas they tend to show up in unexpected places.

Emergencies

Call 911 for any type of emergency. However, the number is recently implemented and sounds like there are several problems with this service. Older numbers will be obsolete soon, so no alternatives...

Car rental

Plenty of options. Some more expensive than others. I've come to find that Alamo is pretty good in Mexico even though they seem to disfavor non-American citizens pricewise.

The insurance system is different than in many other places, and as I understand it, even though you have coverage elsewhere (credit card) this is normally not accepted as valid, and you have to buy the insurance of the rental company, and in general the rental prices are higher than expected here in the country.

If you have an accident involving others while driving a rented vehicle in Mexico of course the first thing to do, beside first aid and so, is to contact your rental company. And then be aware that no matter what, unless human lives require it, you are not allowed/supposed to move the vehicle before an insurance agent has written his report, on site. This means that even if the accident was minor and you are now blocking the whole highway system into Guadalajara, you have to leave your car where it is.

Food

Mexican food is good and comparatively cheap. Street food, take-away or formal restaurants. You'll find it all in most places since Mexicans love eating out or while on the move. However, you'll definitely get along easier if you're a carnivorous creature. Not that Mexicans don't eat vegetables but, as in the good old days, in Northern Europe at least, they are more often used to accompany the meat dishes. Even re-fried beans, frijoles refritos, can be prepared with pork fat, manteca, so vegetarians be aware!

Preferably go where the locals go. The food is normally better there. Meaning that sometimes it can be better to choose a street vendor rather than an established restaurant. In health terms a well-visited place is also more likely to be in your favor.

Perhaps it is best to peel fruit and avoid ice cubes and fresh salad in general on a short trip. And though many people love seafood, and Mexicans serve it everywhere, I recommend avoiding it too. At least shellfish, mariscos.

However, if your stay is longer, I would recommend that you plunge into it all as soon as possible to adapt yourself faster, accepting a day or two out of circulation if you get hit.

Drinking water should come out of a bottle, though it normally isn't dangerous to drink tap water, but no need to risk anything and it certainly doesn't taste better in most places. No problem brushing teeth in it, though.

Buying your food (fruit and vegetables) in a tianguis, street market, is cheaper and normally better than buying it in the supermarket, but since it is easier to find a Walmart or Soriana, you'll probably prefer that solution if your schedule is tight.

It's a myth that Mexicans always eat spicy food. Many Mexicans even don't like it, and that is perhaps why you'll normally have to add the hot flavor yourself as chilies or salsas served on the side. Always try a little on a finger first, but when it goes wrong, salt or sweet liquids are the best way to eliminate the burn. Bubbles is a no go - especially mineral water - ouch!!

Shopping

Supermarkets, gas stations and many shops are open every day, though some smaller shops do close on weekends, as well as banks and official institutions do. Smaller shops often close in the afternoon a few hours.

Electricity

Same type of outlets as in the United States, two flat pins parallel to each other. Voltage is 127 (110).

Money

In many shops, supermarkets, restaurants and gasoline stations you can pay with credit- or debit cards. Visa and Mastercard are the ones mostly accepted. Also in cash machines.

Cash machines are very common throughout except in smaller villages. I don't know if the daily redraw limit is the same for all banks, but I can get 3500 pesos each day. Apparently some banks don't accept certain cards, and in general I have more success with foreign banks like Scotiabank, Santander or HSBC, but Mexican Bancomer or Banamex are local options that normally work too.

If you want to bring cash it should be US dollars which can be exchanged easily in exchange booths throughout, or used directly to pay in some places.

People

The Mexicans are an open, friendly and outgoing people which makes it easier when traveling. There's almost always someone who'll try to help you if you need it (again, have in mind earlier comment under section Travel).

The biggest problem, however, could be the fact that many don't speak English, so if your Spanish is none-existing or very rusty it might be a problem. But never give up. Always try something. Being a people that still live very much in the moment, their improvising skills are very good, and most often they'll come up with a temporary solution that works.

Accommodation

In most places where tourists normally go there are plenty of options to choose from ranging from the bottom to the top. But also outside these areas most often you'll easily find a hotel since the Mexicans travel a lot within their own country. A standard double room that most visiting birders would find acceptable costs around 50 USD per night (January 2018).

Climate

Being a large country and housing many different geographical zones the climate differs a lot depending on where you go.

In general the coastal zone is hot and humid, Baja California being the exception. There you'll find it dry but in general very hot.

In the highland the climate differs greatly. The great central plateau in the northern part of Mexico is normally very dry and hot in the dry season between Nov and June. In the southern highland, Oaxaca, Chiapas, the climate tends to differ more, with more clouds and rain throughout the year, as you will also find Yucatan and the Gulf coast in general, just that it always is humid in this zone.

When it rains it is normally in the afternoon and at times very powerful, causing local flooding for several hours afterward. This can happen both in the highland and on the coast. But it also happens that a day goes totally clouded from the morning and delivers a gentle steady rain throughout the day.

In winter, Dec-Feb it can get very cold in higher lying exposed regions, Chihuahua, with temperatures below zero Celcius, but in general this is rare and you normally have to climb to the very highest parts - the summits along the volcanic axis - to expect snow and frost.

Security

Talking security in Mexico of course it is unavoidable to mention drug crimes. But please! The media has done an excellent job blowing the facts totally out of proportions, and while it is true and sad that many people have been killed, there are still millions more, Mexicans and foreigners, who keep living their daily lives here in the country without getting into that kind of trouble.

But of course I'm not giving you any guarantees whatsoever. Bad things can happen everywhere if you're open to it. The best advice is that you always use your common sense, but if a bad situation still occurs only try to play hero if you know what you're doing. It's probably better just to accept quickly and start thinking about how you're going to replace your lost items when you get home. Wise people have insurance for this.

Pocket thieves are probably not more widespread or better than in any other country, so as long as you take your precautions you should be safe.

The more you enjoy your stay and the more relaxed and confident you move about in the streets the less likely you are to attract negative attention as if being the weakest creature on the savannah, easy to attack.

The biggest problem to tourists, as I have experienced it, is the federal police. In both Mexico City, Yucatan and Baja California Sur I've experienced that the police pulls me over, and want to fine me on false charges, speeding. You argue, explain and complaint but as a tourist you're extra vulnerable, and they know it. Legally, I think, they can confiscate your driver's license because you're a foreigner, to guarantee that you will pay your fine before leaving the country. I haven't had a chance to test what will happen if you actually accept to pay the fine as the rules prescribe. Perhaps you can even complain and reject to pay anything because they, of course, will not be able to prove that you violated any rule. But that is probably just wishful thinking since they probably know exactly what to do to avoid any problems on their part. I've paid them an amount and then been able to continue with my driver's license.

In general the advise goes that you should try never to have to deal with the police. This also means when asking for advice. Always ask ordinary people in the street, or in a shop or the gasoline station. And remember the advice under the Travel section!

Health

Diseases and infections

Malaria and other tropical diseases are supposed to no longer be a threat in Mexico. Dengue and similar diseases occur, but should not present severe problems to otherwise healthy people.

Normally the only recommended vaccinations to get before a visit to Mexico are Diphtheria, Hepatitis A and Tetanus. But always consult the authorities in your home country to make sure.

Medicine

Bring all your medicine with you from home is the safest thing to do. But if the situation requires it you can probably visit, and pay, a doctor here to make you a prescription (providing documentation for your need, likely needed). There are pharmacies (farmacias) on practically every street corner so you should have no problem getting the medicine you need once you have a prescription. It is a super competitive business here in Mexico and many are existing by selling generic rather than original products.

Medicine against diarrhea, pain-killers etc can be bought without prescription, but antibiotics for example cannot.

Dangerous animals, mushrooms or plants

Dangerous animals are rare to come by. 10 years in Mexico and I still haven't seen a wild rattle snake! However they are here and some are lethal, so it is always best to be alert. Don't try to approach, touch or grab any kind of animal you're not familiar with. But even the squirrels in the local park it is best not to touch since they carry all sorts of bacteria on their claws and a single accidental scratch can cause an infection.

Snakes and scorpions like to hide in the dark during the day, so as long as you avoid turning over larger rocks or sticking your hands into dark holes, you should be safe. For the same reason, don't leave bags lying open on the ground unattended since these animals might think they are good hiding places.

Spiders are also wide-spread and some are dangerous yes, like the Black Widow, however, it is rare to see them.

But if it happens that you encounter any of these animals, just stay calm and walk slowly away from them. They are less interested than you in getting into a conflict, and are not likely to attack you.

If you find them in a more complicated place, like your house or room, also stay calm and go and ask for help from someone competent.

Mainly in southern Mexico army ants, as fascinating as they are, soon can become a nuisance if you get stranded in the middle of their movement and they start to bite you. It hurts but they are rarely harmful to humans.

Crocodiles on both coasts can get big, and stories go that now and then they attack and kill children or domestic animals. But in general they possess no threat to humans if you stay out of their watery home. However, they are nocturnal creatures and in the darkness they often walk from one water body to another. But being more adapted to the wet environment I doubt that they would attack for prey when on land. Again, use common sense and enjoy these magnificent creatures from a distance.

Iguanas in Mexico can become pretty big, mostly on the coasts, and they look very aggressive and dangerous. However, they are mostly herbivorous and otherwise only eat smaller animals. They too normally prefer to retreat when humans give them too much attention. As with the squirrels the biggest threat on their part probably is if you get a scratch from their claws causing an infection, so don't touch them.

In the oceans I'm sure you'll find thousands of dangerous fish, plants and animals, but normally you would not get in contact with them if you only bath or swim along public beaches (which it is recommended only to do). Again, don't touch if you get close to a marine animal or plant, jellyfish included since many have burning effects.

Mosquitoes is probably the category of animals that is the biggest nuisance to humans in Mexico. In places they can be plenty, also in the dry season in wet areas and the lowland. And even in the cities in the highland you'll find them (perhaps a new tendency, and often a problem because many houses have not been adapted to the new situation meaning they don't have mosquito blinds on the windows, meaning that it is either hot biteless suffocation with windows closed or a nice but biting breeze during the night).

Sand flies is a problem in some areas especially on the Pacific coast, but mostly come out at dusk, so you normally have a chance to plan your escape.

Long sleeves and pants and repellent is the answer to minimize the attacks from the mosquitoes. If you don't have the opportunity to sleep under a mosquito net or don't have protection on the windows it can help to keep a fan going in the room since they don't like the turbulence.

Chiggers (near-invisible mites) DO occur in many places, even city parks. They prefer wet grass and shrub and therefore mostly is a problem in the rainy season. They are a true pestilence because you normally get a lot of bites and they itch terribly. They normally go after the softer parts in the groin area or the buttocks but also favor arm pits, belly or back, or ankles. The effect of the bites last several weeks!

The treatment consists in dabbing alcohol on the bites which kills the mites.

However, even though this stops the attacks from going worse, it doesn't eliminate the itching, or perhaps slightly, but not completely. Once you have them, expect the suffering to last a week or two. The unfortunate of us have had up to 100 bites at the same time! Not sure if repellent works to prevent the attacks. Or if protecting your legs with long boots, which is normally what is recommended, really helps. But worth a try, since it can be difficult to avoid stepping into habitats where they live while you are birding. OBS: Be aware that normally it takes 2-3 days before the bites become visible and feelable. If you suspect that you might have been passing through a chigger locality don't hesitate to apply alcohol to your whole body when you get back. And change all your clothes and wash them immediately!

Without knowing them I'm sure there are many plants and mushrooms that are dangerous to either ingest or touch. Don't take any chances. However in general you can move about through the vegetation without problems and sitting on the ground or grass is also not a problem (look out for ants though). There are many thistles and other plants with spines, but these should be easy to avoid once you learn about their presence.

In the dry season you'll find out that many plants use a velcro- effect to have their seeds distributed. Some are really big and you'll feel them when they glean to your shoes, socks and pants. But other than stinging they are harmless.

Weather and nature

Hurricanes, earthquakes, lightning, flooding and forest fires. You can experience it all here in Mexico, but most likely you won't. And if you do, follow the instructions and advice of the locals and authorities.

The biggest threat from the natural forces is probably landslides or falling rocks when you move about in the mountains in the rainy season.

Normally the larger roads crossing through these areas have been secured along exposed stretches, but not always, and almost all minor roads have not.

The best advice, of course, is to stay away from these areas when it rains. If you can't, for some reason, I don't have other to say to you than Good Luck. Of all the threats in Mexico, this is the one I fear most, since you're probably doomed if it hits you. You can't predict it. Theoretically the best thing to do is to speed through these high risk zones minimizing the time you spend at each meter, but this should of course be done

without jeopardizing yourself otherwise. Don't think it feels much better to take a 400 meter steep dive into a canyon because you couldn't control your car around that unprotected bend up ahead...

And more water: Walking through canyons and creeks though seeming completely dry and safe should absolutely be avoided if heavy rain is on its way. Seek up to higher grounds immediately because it is a matter of minutes before the rain will start running down the mountain sides and gather at the bottom as a fast running river.

Sun burn and dehydration is a natural risk in a country where the sun is strong and often shining from a blue sky. Protect yourself and drink plenty of water and electrolytes are the everlasting recommendations to prevent this.

Altitude sickness should only rarely be a problem when birding in Mexico since most birding is done at lower than 3000 masl. But descending to a lower altitude, drinking more water and resting afterward is the recipe for a good recovery.