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San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, a charming and popular home to American retirees, artists

By Richard Basch

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So many Americans live in Mexico's San Miguel de Allende, some call it the 51st State, or even Aspen South. This historic yet cosmopolitan community in the mountains of central Mexico is a destination for retirees, artists and vacationers looking for charm and affordable luxury.

Four hours by car north of Mexico City in one of the country's smallest states, Guanajuato, San Miguel retains much of the visual appeal of its Colonial past with winding cobblestone streets, parks and piazzas built hundreds of years ago.

There are no traffic lights and no buildings more than two stories in the centro. Rules abound about what can and cannot be constructed to preserve the town's rich heritage.

Founded by Juan de San Miguel, a Franciscan monk, in 1542, the town became a rest stop on the Spanish Camino Real, the Royal Road, for transporting the country's silver wealth from the mines west to the seaport of Veracruz for shipment to Madrid.

The town was renamed San Miguel de Allende in honor of Ignacio Allende, a hero of the Mexican Revolution who was born there, after he gave his life in the war of independence from Spain in 1811.

American migration began after World War II, when GI artists discovered they could use their education grants to study outside the United States.

Today, upwards of 5,000 Americans and Canadians live in town full time. American retirees accounted for an estimated 2,500 of the town's 70,000 residents, according to an AARP magazine article in spring 2004 about living cheaply in Mexico. While noting that prices were climbing, it quoted local writer Archie Dean as saying it was still possible to live well for as little as \$700 a month.

But while many Americans have found that they can stretch their retirement dollars there, San Miguel is increasingly expensive. It is hard to find a place to stay for less than \$100 per night. Many of the art galleries, once so enchanting and affordable, are now owned by someone from the United States with prices to match.

San Miguel is home to many of the rich and not a few of the famous. Still, if you can get yourself into a piece of property, life can be pretty inexpensive. Food can come from nearby Queteraro, where there is a Costco.

There is charm and sweetness to life in San Miguel.

In the center of town sits El Jardín, the town square, a small, lush grove of trees adjacent to La Parroquia, a church built in the 19th century by local artisans and designed after postcards of European cathedrals. La Parroquia is a marvel of pink stone, boveda ceilings and extreme devotion by those who built it and who love and protect it. "Meet you in front of the Parroquia" is a remark commonly heard on the streets.

This time of year, the Jardín has a manger scene with live animals, including goats, sheep and burros, surrounding a baby Jesus in a manger. Festivities include nightly posadas, parades, through the town. Children dressed as Jesus, Mary, Joseph and the Wise Men lead revelers singing and playing Mexican religious songs.

The downtown is a wonderland, a marvel of decorations and seasonal lights. You could also fill your entire Christmas gift list in a matter of hours at the weekly Tuesday market.

Not far from town, luxurious mineral baths are available for a \$7 admission fee. The Escondido spa is a wonder of health and comfort set in a lush, green landscape.

Want to learn Spanish? The Warren Hardy School conducts classes every other day for three hours for a two-week period. It also organizes socials to integrate speaking opportunities into

your learning and widen your circle of friends. More info is available at www.warrenhardy.com online.

Another pleasure of San Miguel is the large English-language collection at the library in the center of town. Started by American guests and built into an old hacienda, this is another hub of activity. With a theater, a restaurant and classes in everything from English as a second language to computers, the biblioteca is an institution of significance. It sponsors a home and garden tour every Sunday for a fee of \$15, with all profits donated to an education fund for local children.

As a spot for relaxing and letting the world pass by, San Miguel continues to delight.

• *Staff contributed to this report. Richard Basch is a writer and photographer who moved to Tucson last year from San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. He can be reached at watchthebirdie@baschstudio.com.*

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