



Blue Dot Travel





MEXICO AND CUBA

Mexico is the world's largest Spanish-speaking country and with around 130 million people, ranks as the eleventh most populous nation. Pre-Columbian Mexico dates to about 8,000 BC and is identified as one of five cradles of civilisation. It was home to many advanced Mesoamerican civilisations, including the Olmec, Toltec, Teotihuacan, Zapotec, Mayan, and Aztec peoples. The first contact with Europeans was in the early 16th century. In 1521, the Spanish Empire conquered and colonised the territory from its politically powerful base in Mexico-Tenochtitlan (part of Mexico City). Three centuries later, the territory became a nation state following its recognition in 1821 after the Mexican War of Independence. Mexicans are some of the friendliest people you'll ever meet and they are usually eager to share their wealth of history and abundant culture with travellers from other countries. Our tour of Mexico starts in Mexico City. Then it moves southeast taking in the UNESCO heritage sites of Monte Alban, the greatest of the Zapotec cities, Teotihuacan, the most sacred of the Aztec sites and the Mayan sites of Palenque, Uxmal and Chichen Itza. We will savour some excellent Mexican food and music and reach the Yucatan Peninsula on the Caribbean coast after travelling through the heartland.

Cuba is an archipelago of islands in the Caribbean. The island of Cuba itself is by far the largest, at approximately 110,000 square kilometres. It's also the most populated, with around 11 million inhabitants - over 2 million living in the capital, Havana. The first humans arrived in Cuba around 5,000 years ago from South America. In 1492, Christopher Columbus landed on the islands and claimed them for Spain. Small colonies were developed with the core aim of searching for gold, however, after minimal success, most turned to tobacco and sugar farming. The clichés of Cuba are a must see. Locals dancing the salsa, mambo and rumba, the men leisurely smoking their big fat cigars and drinking rum, plus reminders of the revolutionary figure, Che Guevara. Of course, the quintessential postcard of Cuba is the 1950s Buicks and Chevys – spotted all over the country.



Departure, Friday 30th October DEPART FOR MEXICO

Blue Dot will provide a flight itinerary that suits your needs. Depending on connections, it is possible that we will have an overnight stop on the way.

Day 1, Saturday 31st October ARRIVE MEXICO CITY

One of the world's largest metropolises, Mexico City is also the oldest urban centre in the Western Hemisphere, having been known then as Tenochtitlan. Spanish conqueror Hernan Cortés and his men were awestruck by the sight of the imposing temples of the Aztecs. Reporting back to King Carlos V, Cortés struggled to convey the majesty of what he had seen. Nowhere is Mexico's explosive past better depicted than at its central plaza, the Zocalo. Surrounded by some of the finest colonial-era buildings lie the remnants of one of the Aztecs' principal monuments, the Templo Mayor. Its mysterious shapes are a haunting tribute to the pre-Hispanic civilisation that flourished here long ago. The group will be picked up at the airport and transferred to the hotel, where we will stay for three nights. **D**

Day 2, Sunday 1st November MEXICO CITY & SURROUNDS

Today, the group will visit the home of renowned Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, now a museum in Coyoacan, a former colonial village in southern

Mexico City. It still has its own identity, with narrow colonial-era streets, plazas, cafes and a lively bohemian atmosphere. We will walk through the main plaza, past churches and beautiful old buildings, including the house of the conqueror Hernán Cortés. Later, we'll visit the National Museum of Anthropology, home to an amazing collection of ancient artifacts. Later in the afternoon, we'll take in the "Day of the Dead" festival, which celebrates deceased loved ones. Dinner is at your leisure tonight. **Note that this is a huge annual event for the locals. There are no toilets, chairs or other comforts. We will observe the parade from the best available position on the day. B/L**

Day 3, Monday 2nd November TEOTIHUACAN PYRAMIDS & GUADALUPE

Today we'll visit Teotihuacan Pyramids and the Guadalupe Shrine. On the way, a stop at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, where three cultures converge: Aztec, Spanish, and contemporary Mexican. We'll continue to the Basílica of Guadalupe, Latin America's most revered religious shrine. Here, the Virgin of Guadalupe is said to have appeared before an Indian named Juan Diego in 1531, and an image of her was



miraculously emblazoned on his cloak. We will then continue driving another hour to Teotihuacan, one of the most impressive cities of the ancient world, held sacred by the Aztecs. We'll explore its temples, palaces and pyramids, including the Quetzalpapalotl Palace Complex, the Temple of the Feathered Conches, the Pyramid of the Moon, and the immense Pyramid of the Sun, one of the biggest in the world. On the way back, we'll visit Mexico City's Zocalo (main square), one of the biggest public squares in the world, the Cathedral Metropolitana – the biggest church in Latin America, and the Palacio Nacional (if it is open), which hosts Diego Rivera's murals depicting the history of Mexico. Then, we'll drive along the famous boulevard Paseo de la Reforma, built during the short-lived reign of Emperor Maximilian to connect the main square and his castle in Chapultepec. **B/L/D**



Day 4, Tuesday 3rd November TO OAXACA

Today we drive to Oaxaca, located in a valley surrounded by the Sierra Madre del Sur, which was once the centre of the Mixtec and Zapotec civilisations. Today's Oaxaca is a combination of pre-conquest, colonial and modern influences. The early Zapotecs developed a great civilisation at nearby Monte Albán centuries before the birth of Christ. After the Spanish conquered Oaxaca in 1533, the city quickly took on a Spanish flavour, with ornate buildings, churches, elegant archways, balconies, decorative grill work and charming plazas. Yet despite its colonial heritage, the city remains fundamentally Indian at heart, which is what gives it its charm. Check into your hotel for three nights. **B/D**



Day 5, Wednesday 4th November MONTE ALBAN & OAXACA

Today, we will visit Monte Alban – a World Heritage Site – spectacularly situated on a mountain 400 metres above the Oaxaca Valley, a few kilometres west of Oaxaca. Monte Alban is the greatest of the Zapotec cities, and it came to dominate the region's cultural, religious, and economic life. It is also a triumph of engineering: the mountaintop was levelled to create the ceremonial site. We will explore the Gran Plaza, Ball Court, Observatory, Palace and other beautiful structures. Later, we will walk through the streets of Oaxaca's colonial city centre, along the Cathedral – with its attractive baroque facade, the Iglesia de Santo Domingo – a church with a breathtaking interior that dazzles with gold ornaments, and the Casa Juarez – where Mexico's great liberal reformer and President Benito Juarez lived. **B/D**



Day 6, Thursday 5th November MITLA ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

We will visit the Tule Tree "Arbol del Tule", one of the world's largest trees, thought to be over 2000 years old, and after that, we will continue to the archaeological site of Mitla, located 46km southeast of Oaxaca. Mitla was an important Zapotec city after the decline of Monte Alban, and it was later occupied by the Mixtecs. The Spanish destroyed many of Mitla's temples, and the stones were used to build the Iglesia de San Pablo, the Catholic church that dominates the site. **B/L**

Day 7, Friday 6th November OAXACA – TUXTLA GUTIERREZ

Today is mainly a day of transfers. To avoid a long road trip over mountainous terrain, we'll fly to Tuxtla Gutierrez via Mexico City, arriving late in the afternoon at our hotel, where we stay just one night (flight schedule to be advised). **B/D**



Day 8, Saturday 7th November SAN CRISTOBAL DE LAS CASAS

San Cristobal de las Casas is a characteristically indigenous Chiapaneca town nestled in the heart of the jungle highlands. We will drive to the town of Chiapa de Corzo, located 70km west of San Cristobal, on the Grijalva River. From here, a boat (shared) will take us through the magnificent Sumidero Canyon, nearly a kilometre deep and 14km long, carved out by the Grijalva river over millions of years. As we navigate between towering sheer rock walls and along beautiful caves and waterfalls, we can see a variety of unusual plants, as well as many animals and birds, including monkeys, crocodiles, iguanas, herons, and kingfishers. Back in Chiapa de Corzo, we have time for a walk through this pleasant colonial town, founded by the conquistador Diego de Mazariegos in 1528 around a giant Ceiba tree sacred to the Indians. We can also admire the somewhat curious Moorish-style fountain, La Pila. Check in to the hotel, where we will stay for two nights. **B/L/D**



Day 9, Sunday 8th November CITY TOUR – INDIAN VILLAGES OF SAN JUAN CHAMULA – ZINACANTAN

We will explore on foot the colonial city centre of San Cristóbal de las

Casas. We will visit the cathedral, on the north side of the pretty main square, with its lavish interior and gold-encrusted pulpit. We then walk a few blocks to the impressive 16th-century Dominican church Templo de Santo Domingo, with its intricate pink facade and gilded Baroque interior. Time to browse the handicraft market in front of the church, where Tzotzil Indians from the surrounding hills come to



trade. We then drive 10km into the Chiapas highlands, to the Tzotzil Indian villages of San Juan Chamula and Zinacantan. The Tzotzils descend from the ancient Maya and maintain some unique customs, costumes and beliefs. We then drive to the nearby village of Zinacantan, with its pretty church and handicraft market. **B/L**



Day 10, Monday 9th November VILLAHERMOSA AND PALENQUE

We have a long day today, so we'll leave early and have breakfast along the way. Then, we'll stop at The La Venta Museum - a unique open-air museum in Villahermosa that combines natural scenery with a collection of original Olmec artifacts and monumental sculptures. After lunch in Villahermosa, we have a few more hours of driving before reaching our hotel in Palenque. In the foothills of the Tumbala Mountains, the ancient Maya site of Palenque sits on a ledge overlooking the swampy plains that stretch northward to the Gulf coast. Palenque reached its height between 500 and 700 A.D., when its influence extended throughout the Usumacinta River basin. The elegance and craftsmanship of the buildings, as well as the lightness of the sculpted reliefs with their Mayan mythological themes, attest to the creative genius of this civilisation. **B/L/D**



Day 11, Tuesday 10th November CAMPECHE

On the way to Campeche – our next stop – we'll visit the UNESCO-listed archaeological site of Palenque. The city flourished between 600 and 800 AD, when its influence extended throughout the Usumacinta River basin. The site, surrounded by rainforest where toucans and howler monkeys live, comprises some 500 buildings spread over 15 square km, of which only a few have been



excavated. We will explore the magnificent ruins, including the Temple of the Inscriptions – the tallest and most stately of Palenque's buildings; the Temple of the Sun – crowned with a prominent roof comb; the Palace – with its maze of corridors and rooms, and many other beautiful buildings. Campeche, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is located on the Gulf of Mexico and was the principal seaport on the Yucatán Peninsula from the 16th to the 18th centuries. Subsequently, it was a major target of pirates such as Lorenzillo, Diego "The Mulatto" and William Parker. The Spanish Crown ordered the city's fortification to protect the port from attacks. Take a walking tour of the colonial township before checking into the hotel for one night. **B/L/D**



Day 12, Wednesday 11th November CAMPECHE – MERIDA

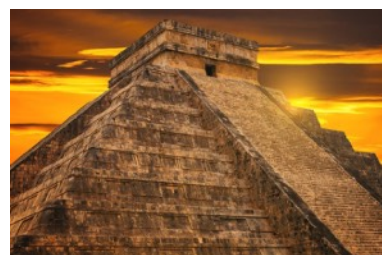
Depart from Campeche to Mérida, stopping at the archaeological site of Uxmal, a World Heritage Site, located 80km south of Mérida. Its architecture is characterised by low horizontal palaces around courtyards, decorated with symbolic motifs and sculptures depicting the long-nosed rain god Chaac. We will explore the magnificent buildings, including the House of the Magician, which dominates the site, the Nunnery, and the House of Turtles. Built more than 450 years ago on the site of T'ho, an ancient Mayan city, Merida is the social and economic centre and capital of the state of Yucatan. Merida's downtown area features a large, tree-shaded central square. The city's main boulevard, Paseo Montejo, is home to impressive European-style mansions with pastel shades and elaborate trim reminiscent of lavishly iced wedding cakes. Though a bustling city of about 700,000, Merida retains its colonial charm and has a laid-back tempo that delights visitors. It is a good base for exploring the Mayan archaeological sites of Chichén Itzá and Uxmal. Check into the hotel for two nights. **B/D**



Day 13, Thursday 12th

November CHICHEN ITZA & PARQUE IKKIL

The archaeological site of Chichén Itzá – one of the New 7 Wonders of the World – is the best-preserved of Yucatán's Mayan sites. We will explore the magnificent ruins set in a dense jungle, including the Pyramid of Kukulcan – its height and striking geometric design dominating the whole site, the Great Ball Court – the largest and most impressive in Mesoamerica, the Sacred Cenote – a natural well used for human sacrifice, and many other beautiful temples. Then we will visit Parque Ikkil. The Cenote Ik Kil is just down the road from the famous pyramids of Chichén Itzá. One of the most ethereal qualities of this cenote is the light filtering in from above, illuminating the mini waterfalls, vegetation, and vines that wrap around the edges and hang directly from above like a curtain. The sinkhole is 130 feet deep, and visitors will descend 85 feet down winding stone steps. (Your guide will brief you on the physicality and requirements). There's a farewell to Mexico dinner planned tonight at a local restaurant. **B/L/D**



WELCOME TO CUBA

Day 14, Friday 13th November HAVANA

This morning, we'll transfer to the airport for our flight to Havana, Cuba. Flights to be confirmed. **B/D**



Day 15, Saturday 14th November HAVANA

After breakfast, a guided walking tour of old Havana, the city's heart and a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1982. Nowhere in Latin America will you find such fine examples of Spanish colonial architecture. We will stop at various bars during the tour for



refreshments and live music. You'll visit the room where Ernest Hemingway lived and wrote for many years, as well as numerous other key sites around the city, including the central plazas. Free

time for lunch, then in the afternoon, we will complete our tour of the old town, including a visit to the Revolution Museum and the Havana Club Rum Museum. Tonight's dinner is at Guajirito Cultural Center in Old Havana (which pays homage to revered musicians of the Buena Vista Social Club) with live music and dancing. **B/D**



Day 16, Saturday 15th November PINAR DEL RIO

After breakfast, we'll depart for Viñales Valley, stopping at the lookout point of "Los Jasmines" to admire the valley's unique and picturesque



landscape, with its "Mogotes," rocky summit formations capriciously placed by nature. The tour continues by bus to "La Cueva del Indio" where we will sail in traditional boats along an

underground river that passes through the interior of some of the Haystack Hilllock Mountains. Lunch is at "El Palenque de los Cimarrones" a local restaurant where the group will enjoy a delicious Creole meal. We'll then visit the Mural of the Prehistory and return to the hotel in Havana. Evening at leisure in Old Havana. **B/L**

Day 17, Saturday 16th November CIENFUEGOS & TRINIDAD

After breakfast at the hotel, depart for Cienfuegos, stopping for a coffee break at Fiesta Campesina. The first settlers to this area were French colonists coming from Louisiana. They gave the town its unique French Colonial style with a "real" Cuban feel. We'll visit the beautiful opera building, walk around the square and have lunch at a local restaurant (Villa Lagarto). Then, we'll transfer to Trinidad – a wonderful colonial town built on the foothills of the Escambray Mountains. The town was founded in 1515 by Diego Velázquez, one

of the original Spanish settlers who arrived with Columbus. We will check into the Grand Iberostar Hotel (or similar) for two nights. Dinner tonight is at your leisure. We suggest one of the local restaurants within walking distance of the hotel. **B/L**



Day 18, Sunday 17th November TRINIDAD

After breakfast, we'll start our day with a Trinidad Old Town walking tour. Trinidad was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1988. Enjoy its winding cobbled streets, magnificent churches, museums, and a good choice of restaurants and bars. There is a busy street market selling handmade souvenirs and some antiques. We'll visit



the Plaza Mayor in the centre of the old town, the Iglesia Parroquial de la Santísima Trinidad, El Palacio Brunet, now the Romantic Museum, the Alejandro von Humboldt Natural History Museum, the Casa de Sánchez Iznaga and the Palacio Ortiz. We will also visit the craftsman market and the Canchanchara, one of the most famous bars in Trinidad. Lunch is at Museo 1514, a local restaurant. Then we will go on to the picturesque "El Valle de los Ingenios" dotted with the ruins of sugar mills, manor houses, slave quarters and warehouses. Dinner is at your leisure tonight. **B/L**



Day 19, Monday 18th November HAVANA

After breakfast, we'll return to Havana for our last night in Cuba. We'll be taken to the wonderful San Carlos de La Cabaña fortresses to get a great view of Havana from the opposite side



of the bay. Spend 30 minutes walking through the fort before a fleet of American classic convertible cars from the 50s will whisk us away to see the sights of the old city. We'll drive along the famous Malecon, Havana's 7 km long seafront promenade and on to other iconic sites, including the Hotel Nacional and Revolution Plaza. You are free to explore any particular areas of interest in the afternoon or soak up this fabulous city. Check in to the Hotel Palacio Los Corredores (or similar). Our farewell Cuba dinner tonight is at a local restaurant, Paladar Los Mercaderes, with a special seafood menu. **B/D**

Day 20, Tuesday 19th November DEPARTURE

Transfer to Havana airport for the flight home or on to your next destination. **B**



Icon indicates a day where there is **moderate physical exertion**. A basic level of fitness is required: eg. A trek over 'mostly flat' terrain or climbing several flights of steps without the support of handrails or elevators.



Icon indicates a day where there is a **particularly active section**. A good level of fitness is required: eg. A longer trek over non-groomed, uneven terrain, or ascending to reach a panorama. May also include exposure to higher altitude. An alternate activity may be offered if you choose to sit out an active section. Please call - we are happy to discuss each tour in more detail.