

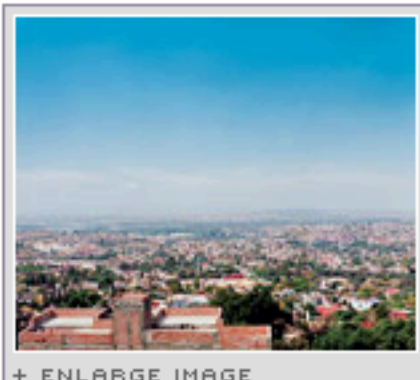
San Miguel de Allende: An Artsy Expat Community

The little town of San Miguel de Allende in Mexico has become a reinvention destination for scores of midlife women.

By Laura Fraser; Photographs by Coral Von Zumwalt

Falling for San Miguel de Allende

As I navigate the cobblestoned streets of San Miguel de Allende on a cool morning, little appears to have changed in the many years since I was last here. The serene courtyards of the town's 17th-century colonial houses are still concealed by ochre-colored adobe walls. Street vendors still sell cups of fresh jicama and fruit in the shade of jacaranda trees that shrug off their purple blossoms during the heat of the day. People still sit on benches around the lively central square, staring at the towering pink La Parroquia church.



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When I first visited San Miguel -- I was 9 and on a trip with my mother -- the Instituto Allende, an accredited fine arts school, was a hot spot for those seeking their inner artist. But today this entire town in central Mexico's high desert plains is reinvention central. Everywhere I look are women just like me: from the United States and over 40. English is heard as often as Spanish.

Ten percent of San Miguel's 80,000 residents are expatriates of the United States, many who've moved here to launch second careers as business owners or jewelry designers, jazz composers or chocolatiers.

"Women come for a vacation and then sell their homes back in the States," says Camilla Sands, a 52-year-old tour guide and an ex-advertising executive from Tacoma, Washington. "San Miguel has a way of doing that to you."



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Finding Her Passion in San Miguel

For Cheryl Finnegan, 45, the decision to move struck her at a yoga retreat. "I had a successful marketing career at Levi Strauss, was married to an auto industry executive, and lived in a posh neighborhood of San Francisco," Finnegan says. "We had nothing but money, and there was a void in my life. My personal shopper sat next to me at Thanksgiving. I needed a change."



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Finnegan chucked it all, including her marriage, and enrolled in a six-month yoga program in San Miguel. She stayed six months more, burning through her savings, and realized that she never wanted to leave. "I fell in love with the town's spirit," she says. "And I discovered a talent for jewelry design that I never knew I had."

Finnegan began making crystal-studded belt buckles and accessories decorated with folk-art images of Mexican saints, which she sold to funky boutiques in Los Angeles for \$50 to \$400. "I chose icons with calming and protective traits," she says. "The Virgin of Guadalupe is one of my favorites because for me she symbolizes undying love."

When a photo of Britney Spears wearing one of Finnegan's belt buckles appeared on a magazine cover in 2004, her company took off; it's now a multimillion-dollar business. In the converted garage that houses her office and workshop, Finnegan introduces me to her staff of mostly young Mexican women, who are paid U.S.-level wages. Tacked to the walls are photos of celebrities -- Lucinda Williams and Angela Bassett, among others -- wearing her designs.

"My artisans are not only skilled, they're fast. I can have a design ready for production within five days. Back home, it could take months," Finnegan says. Not that running a business in Mexico is simple: Many of her artisans, for example, don't have phones. "There's one in the house three doors away, so if you call Grandma, she'll run down the street to find someone," she says. Despite the complications, Finnegan can't imagine turning back now. "My workshop has tripled in size in three years, and I'm employing extended families," she says. "I'm doing what I love and, I hope, making a difference."

A San Miguel Real Estate Entrepreneur

San Miguel has a collegial vibe that has helped many women create high-profile careers south of the border. Sharon Des Jardins, 59, moved to Mexico from Portland, Oregon, in 1995. Her plan was to explore the country for a few years, then move back to the U.S. Today the former travel agent owns a real estate business in San Miguel and includes herself among a group of single entrepreneurs, women who love to network.



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The dynamic Des Jardins found that the longer she stayed in San Miguel, the clearer it became that there were dozens of women ready, willing, and able to purchase houses. "Buyers are in awe of the architecture here," she says. "But they also like the active social scene and the restaurants and galleries."

So with just \$15,000 in savings, she launched Mexico Luxury Homes in 2006. After paying \$1,500 for a "deed," permission to start a business, she hired a full-time secretary and rented an office for \$1,100 per month. She made her first sale, for \$1.3 million, a month later and has since sold homes to producers and Pulitzer Prize winners.

One morning she took me on a tour of a 300-year-old colonial house with ornate archways, terraces, balconies, and a \$1.2 million price tag; a home in the historic center of town averages \$800,000. Her company now brings in about \$7 million a year.

An Insider's San Miguel

If you ask Camilla Sands, she'll tell you that the secret to San Miguel is to get behind the stone walls to its gardens of cascading greenery, blooming succulents, and citrus trees. Her customized tour company for women, Simply San Miguel, was founded partly to provide access to these hidden pleasures. "I wanted to give other successful, curious, and overworked women the same experience I had of feeling renewed by this city," Sands says.



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"In my 20s, I attended the Instituto Allende for a summer, so the city always existed in my mind as a kind of Camelot," she says. When she came back for a visit the year she turned 40, she bought a half acre of land on the edge of town for \$17,000 and talked her husband into selling their boutique ad agency in Tacoma, Washington, and moving to Mexico within five years. Today the couple is building four rental houses on their property, and Sands seems to have business cards from everyone in town. "The women in this community love to spread the word about newcomers."

The Magic of the City

One morning I chat with a woman in a cafe whose friend shares my love of regional cooking, and she passes me her number. When I need a place to stay, Cheryl Finnegan puts me in touch with Delphine Schiavone, who runs a bed-and-breakfast. Schiavone invites me to a tango class, where I meet Roberto, who offers to show me a 200-year-old house with turquoise shutters that's for sale. Sands and Finnegan, in turn, tell me about an architect who can transform that tiny casita into a jewel box. I'm drawing floor plans and daydreaming about the views from the terrace (before I decide to say no). More than 37 years have passed since I first visited this magical Mexican town, yet I feel right at home.



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Contributing Editor Laura Fraser recently bought a small lot in San Miguel's historic district, where she plans to build a house.

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