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THE HISTORIC SAN ANDRÉAS CATHOLIC CHURCH—AN AJJIC LANDMARK—WAS COMPLETED IN 1749.



WATER COLORS

Serene Ajijic is home to a vibrant community of artists and expats. By Liz Laing

As I sit atop my stubborn horse on the cobblestone streets of Ajijic, watching the backs of my fellow travelers become smaller and smaller, I've come to regret my decision.

When the *caballero* (horseman) had asked me, "*Rapido o lento?*" (fast or slow), I had quickly answered, "*Lento, por favor,*" envisioning my horse running through the village streets at breakneck speed while I clung to its neck. No, I had been looking forward to the rhythmic clomping of my horse's hooves as I meandered gracefully through the scenic town and along the shore of Lake Chapala.

Now, even my daughter's horse has passed me by, and though I have tried everything, my mare still won't budge. But all is not lost; we are riding with Sarah Sellars, a local 17-year-old who has grown up on horses in Ajijic. Sarah has the magic touch, and thanks to a couple of tongue clicks and nudges, soon I am catching up with the rest of our group and we're seeing the sights of Ajijic at a slow-moving pace that matches the laid-back appeal of this charming lakeside town.

Located about 30 miles south of Guadalajara, Ajijic (which is pronounced ah-hee-HEEK and means "where the water spills over") is an artist's haven on the north shore of Lake Chapala. Several small towns make up the area lining Lake Chapala, but Ajijic attracts a wealth of Mexican as well as foreign artists, who work in a variety of media.

Color is everywhere. Custom-painted storefronts and brightly colored homes add to the charm. Bougainvillea bursts from balconies, hanging baskets, fences and borders—its delicate blossoms contrasting with the heavy, hand-carved wooden gates of some of the local residences. The Sierra Madre Occidental range surrounding Ajijic helps to keep a temperate year-round climate, and the range's rumpled, treeless slopes are covered in a rich palette of greens, from lemony-lime to deep avocado.

After riding several blocks, we're greeted by the sights and sounds of the *tianguis*, an outdoor market held Wednesday mornings near Bugambilias Plaza, on the east side of town. Under the shade of the plaza's trees and canvas awnings, local artisans and craftsmen display a colorful



A VENDOR WEIGHS FRESH FISH FOR SHOPPERS AT THE WEDNESDAY MARKET NEAR BUGAMBILIAS PLAZA.

PETER DONALDSON / ALAMY

array of merchandise, including handmade jewelry and native Huichol Indian art. Fresh produce glistens under the morning sun—giant fresh strawberries, brilliant peppers (fresh and dried), ripe avocados and tomatoes, and mouthwatering watermelons. I'm drawn to a cup of crimson pomegranate seeds, plump and juicy.

We ride a few more blocks and arrive at the lake. Mexico's largest natural lake (roughly 55 miles long and 825 square miles), Lake Chapala is a tranquil backdrop to Ajijic, and it's easy to see why this town has attracted so many retirees from Canada and the United States. By some estimates, there are more than 7,000 expats living "Lakeside"—in the towns around Lake Chapala—and Ajijic has the largest concentration.

The first wave of expats began making their way to the area in 1925; another wave found the lakefront in the 1960s; and baby boomers, too, have found homes in Ajijic. In addition to the inviting climate, expats are attracted by the friendly people and a low cost of living that allows many to indulge in luxuries they otherwise couldn't afford.

Ajijic's size makes a variety of arts activities, such as theater, film, dance, poetry events and a wide spectrum of music, very accessible. The area also hosts a range of

outdoor activities, such as hiking. At the top of Colon Street, for instance, a rocky trail leads into the hills, passing by a sweet little chapel visible from town. Farther on, the trail offers a breathtaking panoramic view of Ajijic, the surrounding mountains and the expansive lake, dotted with boats.

Many an enchanted evening is available by hiring one of these boats at the Chapala pier for a sunset cruise.

And then, there are the nearby thermals. Five pools at the natural hot springs in nearby San Juan Cosala offer one of the most natural "spa" experiences around, for just \$10 a day. Plus, visitors can glide down waterslides and explore a steam cavern.

OUR SMALL GROUP OF RIDERS, eager for a lunch break, dismounts outside the lovely, serene garden setting of La Nueva Posada. Owned and operated for the past 27 years by a friendly Canadian family, La Nueva Posada is an elegant, old-world inn located on the Lake Chapala shore. Large, colorful paintings depicting scenes of local life are for sale, proudly displayed on easels. They blend perfectly into the lush, manicured tropical gardens and the scenic waterfront. The grand dining room is rich in colonial Mexico charm, and here I savor every spoonful of my creamy *sopa azteca* (a delicious tortilla soup topped with sour cream, avocado, cojito cheese and tortilla strips) and delight in each bite of spinach enchiladas.

After a relaxing lunch, it's time to get back in the saddle for a trot through town. The large, hand-laid cobblestones of Ajijic's streets can be bumpy to drive on, but clomping along on a horse is just fine. The heart of the town comprises many shops and restaurants, along with a few historic buildings, such as the chapel of the Virgin of the Rosary, built in the 16th century, and a former monastery at Hidalgo and Cinco

DETAILS

AJIJIC is a 30-minute taxi ride, about \$25, from the Guadalajara airport. There's no need to rent a car, as everything in Ajijic is within walking distance.

DINING

LA BODEGA offers a nice atmosphere, and the international menu makes this a great place to take guests. Sit outside on a covered patio overlooking a grassy lawn. Live music and dancing provide a popular outlet for evening entertainment.

LA VIEJA POSADA is a favorite destination offering international cuisine and authentic Mexican ambiance. Live music and dancing on weekends.

LA NUEVA POSADA serves continental cuisine in the grand dining room or in the lovely garden facing Lake Chapala. The atmosphere is sophisticated and comfortable, with plenty of Mexican colonial charm.

LA TASCA, located across from La Nueva Posada, is a popular nightclub that features live classical guitar on the weekends. Enjoy a fabulous meal with a picturesque view.

LOS TELARES is an upscale restaurant and bar serving lunch and dinner, including very good stuffed-salmon steak.

SECRET GARDEN serves Mexican and Indian dishes (all vegetarian) on Hidalgo, just off the plaza. Enjoy flan while watching butterflies dance in the garden.

AJIJIC TANGO features outstanding dishes from Argentina. Beef is its specialty. Twinkling lights on the patio add a magical touch.

LODGING

LA NUEVA POSADA is a romantic boutique hotel that is comfortable and sophisticated. Located on the shores of Lake Chapala, a few blocks from the town center, the hotel has a lovely swimming pool. Double room is \$68-\$85 (breakfast included). Donato Guerra #9; +52-376-766-1344, www.mexconnect.com/MEX/rest/nueva/index.html.

de Mayo streets, which has been converted into a luxurious private dwelling.

Soon, we're riding past San Andrés Catholic Church, founded in the 1500s and completed in 1749. Every year, at the end

rodeos, music and folkloric dancing are all part of the fun. Celebrants gather in the central plaza, where there's plenty of food and drink available each night.

On the seventh day of the festival, the

peal of church bells fills the early morning air for an hour, and loud fireworks burst in the sky. This lively activity, meant to arouse mortals as well as their ancestors, can be traced back to the Huichol Indians, who inhabited the area when the Spanish arrived in the 16th century.

Another annual event is the Holy Week passion play just before Easter, which is quickly becoming known as one of the most extravagant productions in Mexico. Spectators line the streets to watch locals re-enact the trial of Christ.

Costumes range from simple peasant attire

SWAN INN AJJIC is an elegant bed-and-breakfast conveniently located in town. Double room is \$75-\$85. 16 de Septiembre #18; APDO 934; +52-376-766-0917, www.swaninnajjic.com.

VILLA DEL ANGEL is an exquisite bed-and-breakfast located on a hillside above town, and reminiscent of a European villa. Suites are \$95-\$150, depending on the size. Juarez Privada #3; +52-376-766-0783, www.villadelangel.com.

to the red cloaks, gold helmets and shields of Roman soldiers.

Another event gaining popularity is the Carnival "Mardi Gras" parade on Fat Tuesday, usually held in February prior to Lent, when a lively procession of brightly decorated floats and people sporting a rainbow of costumes topped with large papier-mâché heads makes its way through the streets.

In festive and nonfestive times alike,



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BOATS ARE AVAILABLE FOR HIRE ON LAKE CHAPALA.

of November, this usually sleepy village comes alive for a nine-day celebration—the Fiesta de San Andrés—honoring the patron saint of Ajijic. Each day of the celebration, different groups organize fireworks and activities. Daily processions,

Mexicans and non-Mexicans live together harmoniously in Ajijic, gathering in the plaza and sharing conversation as the smells of carne asada and fresh tortillas waft through an open-air stand.

“The people are the No. 1 reason why I chose to live in Ajijic,” says Sally Sellars, Sarah’s 85-year-old grandmother. “They are very friendly and caring and have a strong sense of humanity.” Sellars moved to Ajijic 15 years ago from Pasadena, California, after her husband passed away, and her daughter and granddaughter soon joined her.

Ajijic has attracted writers and artists from around the world for years. D.H. Lawrence wrote most of *The Plumed Serpent* in nearby Chapala, and it’s said that W. Somerset Maugham lived in Ajijic in the late ’30s as he finished *The Razor’s Edge*. Tennessee Williams is said to have hosted nightly poker games at the Ajijic Posada in the ’40s.

Much of the charm that attracted the intellectuals of previous generations remains in Ajijic and continues to inspire its current residents. I’m drawn to 16 de Septiembre street, which is lined with galleries and art studios. I wander into an art studio where I meet Enrique Velazquez, who shares the space with his wife, Belva, also an artist. Together, they produce a popular calendar, *Nuestro Querido Mexico*, depicting life in Ajijic. Velazquez, who works primarily with watercolors, moved to Ajijic from Guadalajara for the ambiance and the picturesque views. The tourism and expat culture in Ajijic also make it a great marketplace for the arts, he says. Velazquez draws inspiration from the landscapes, the streets of the pueblo and the character of the Mexican people.

After returning our horses, we explore the village on foot. I browse quaint shops selling handicrafts, household items, jewelry, art and clothing by local artists and craftspeople. Colorful, hand-painted ceramic butterflies line a wall of one shop; masks in an array of tropical colors adorn the fuchsia-colored wall of another.

We stop at a small *tienda* where we buy a soda and ask for a *bolsita*—a plastic bag with a straw—to take the drink with us:

Glass bottles are returned to the distributor to be reused. This tiny convenience store carries a variety of goods, but my absolute favorite item is a *bolillo*—a large, circular bun baked fresh every day. We walk to this tienda every morning just for these warm, delicious breads for breakfast.

As we walk along Constitución, I notice a strong, sweet smell—dozens of mangoes have fallen from the trees, littering the *avenida*. More sweet scents come from just inside the doorways of residences, where homemade candy, cookies and other treats are proudly displayed for sale on small tables. I resist this temptation as I think about the next day's *bolillo*.

Instead, I indulge in a siesta.

Refreshed that evening, we walk to La Bodega, a favorite restaurant of locals. The menu here is eclectic and international, and as we sit in the garden, with dozens of lights shaped like *estrellas* (stars) hanging above the open-air patio, we're rewarded with a magical, balmy night. In the mood for some live music, after dinner we head to La Vieja Posada, the town's most popular nightspot, for margaritas and dancing. A high-energy band plays American pop songs, encouraging locals and tourists to take a turn on the dance floor.

As we chat with the Sellarses, we learn that Sarah, our expert horsewoman, will soon be leaving for college in New York City. And as Sarah looks forward to leaving for the Big Apple, Ajijic's laid-back atmosphere will continue to lure tourists, retirees and artists from around the world.

As I return to my own bustling city life, I dream about the peacefulness and slow-paced lifestyle that I found in Ajijic.

But next time, I'll get a faster horse. 🐎

Liz Laing is a freelance writer living in Los Angeles, California.

GETTING THERE



Alaska Airlines offers daily flights to Guadalajara. To book a complete Alaska Airlines Vacations package to Mexico, visit the Web at alaskaair.com or call 800-468-2248.