

Don't Miss Guanajuato

San Miguel de Allende is a very popular Mexican destination for photographers, so popular that Santa Fe Workshops holds five weeks of workshops there every year. Many visitors to San Miguel get there from the León airport and on the way they pass through the outskirts of another town, Guanajuato. Most don't stop. This is a mistake.

Guanajuato (pronounced guan-a-HWAT-o) is somewhat larger and even more colorful and striking than San Miguel. A town of about 100,000 people, it is at an elevation of 2000 m, or 6700 ft. The downtown is fairly small, about 1 km long and about 300 m wide, and there are three more or less parallel main streets (two in some places). They are all worth exploring on the first morning of a visit, and lead to the main plazas and churches. The churches are colorful, and have shapely domes, and are certainly of interest. A city map can be found, as of this writing, at: <http://www.dq-guanajuato.com/dq-guanajuato/guanajuatocity.pdf>



Man in hat

From the photographer's point of view the most important features are the *plazuelas*, or little plazas, and, even more important, the *callejones*, or alleyways, that radiate from them. Some of the *plazuelas* are on the main thoroughfares but others can only be found by wandering down the side streets. They are great places for people-watching, and the buildings surrounding them provide many opportunities for interesting images.

The *callejones* are even better. Many of the buildings lining them are extremely colorful—even more so than those on the streets of San Miguel, and their decorations are often more fanciful. Moreover, *callejones* are inhospitable to cars and so the views of the buildings are unimpeded, although pedestrians, who can make good features in compositions, are plentiful. While some of the *callejones* branch off of the main streets, many

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Yellow door



Red and green stairs



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can best be found by wandering. Two days was not enough time to explore more than a fraction of the *callejones*.

One of the most famous sights, shown on some city maps, is the *Callejon de Beso*; so named because people on balconies on opposite sides can kiss across the alley.

Another feature worthy of a photographer's time is the *Mercado Hidalgo*, a large building housing a bustling market. Unfortunately, it is quite dark inside and lit by fluorescents, so flash is needed and there are few clear views. Some of the stands immediately outside the main building provide better shots and are ideal for people photographers. As in most Mexican towns, there are food vendors who have stands in many places on the streets and are good foreground subjects.



View from El Pipila

For those who like to photograph peeling paint, torn posters, and decaying cars Guanajuato provides plenty of opportunities. A good thing to do on the afternoon of the first day is to go up the



Man and doors

funicular behind the *Teatro Juarez*. There is a good view of the city from a terrace, called *El Pipila*, near the top and if one wanders around even better viewpoints can be found. Close by, there is a building with a sign “*Sanitarios*” and a tiny shop, where for a small fee the proprietress will let a photographer go out on a platform (the roof of another building) where there are unobscured views, though the angle is not quite as good as from the terrace

As in San Miguel, the light can often be quite harsh, and for many situations it is useful to use a tripod and make several exposures of a scene and employ the High Dynamic Range (HDR) technique in Photoshop to combine them. People are very polite and don't seem to mind dodging a tripod in the *plazuelas*. In the *callejones* one can just set up in the middle of the road.

Much of Guanajuato is built on hillsides, and is remarkable because a lot of the traffic that

goes through the city passes under the buildings and local streets through tunnels that were once riverbeds. The town is also known for its annual Cervantes festival, celebrating the author of *Don Quixote*, and it is promoted as the Cervantes capital of the Americas. Statues of Quixote and Sancho Panza are in a park on the outskirts of downtown. There are several museums in the city, one celebrating the birthplace of the artist Diego Rivera and another showing a collection of mummies exhumed from crowded cemeteries.

Unlike San Miguel, Guanajuato does not really cater to expatriates, and there are no handwritten signs in English advertising apartments or restaurants. Guanajuato is a Mexican city, whereas San Miguel is an international one.

For a photographer who enjoys color, Guanajuato is a wonderful place. It is well worth spending two or three days there, or even more. Don't miss it. ■



Three towers

Vendor

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