



BELMOND
CASA DE SIERRA NEVADA
SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE



PRESS KIT

Belmond Casa de Sierra Nevada introduced by Maggie O'Sullivan

OVERVIEW

In 2016 San Miguel de Allende came third in Travel & Leisure's annual World's Best City awards. It's easy to see why: from its pink neo-gothic cathedral of La Parroquia de San Miguel Arcángel unfurl steep cobbled streets lined with stucco houses in vibrant shades of ochre, mustard and vermillion, garlanded with bougainvillea. A jumble of eclectic shops, gourmet restaurants, pavement cafés and organic delis open onto pretty squares lined with jacaranda trees and bathed in a luminous mountain light.

Set in Mexico's central highlands, 265 km northeast of Mexico City, San Miguel was founded in 1542 by Fray Juan de San Miguel, a Spanish Franciscan monk. In 1810, thanks largely to the valiant efforts of local hero and Spanish army captain Ignacio de Allende y Unzaga, San Miguel declared independence from Spain and in 1826 the town was elevated to city status with Allende's name coupled to its own.

Since then, the colourful colonial city has been 'discovered' many times: by artists and writers in the early 20th century; by WW2 veterans taking advantage of the GI bill to enroll in local art schools; by the beat generation in the early Sixties, by hippies in the late Sixties, and more recently by Texas oil billionaires, second-home owners and culture-loving holidaymakers. The result is a kind of vibrant, well-heeled Bohemia; an authentic slice of Mexico, certainly, but one without the neon signs, the fast food restaurants or, crucially, the hassle. Even the city-centre Starbucks is beautiful, set in a historic building.

In 2008, the city's historic centre was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site and at its heart, steeped in more than 400 years of history, is Belmond Casa de Sierra Nevada.

HISTORY & BACKGROUND

In 1959, about the time Beat writers Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg were downing tequilas in La Cucaracha bar, the Palomino family were turning a former 16th-century convent into a comfortable inn, three minutes' walk from La Parroquia. With its plain façade shielding the internal courtyard gardens, flanked by vaulted arcades, from the heat and dust, the convent was typical of the structures of that period. Even today, the collection of buildings that now makes up the hotel offers very little clue to the treasures that lie within.

Having passed through several owners over the years and expanded into a number of adjacent properties, Belmond Casa de Sierra Nevada was bought in the 1970s by Peter Wirth. It was Wirth, a member of the Swiss dynasty of hoteliers that own The Hassler Hotel in Rome, who took the hotel up a gear, turning it into Mexico's first member of Relais & Châteaux.

In 1997 the hotel expanded still further into the nearby historic Casa del Parque building, which had served as a fort in the 17th and 18th centuries, and Casa Principal, the former residence of the Archbishop of San Miguel de Allende. In 2006 the hotel became part of Belmond (previously Orient-Express Hotels) who embarked on a programme of sensitive refurbishment.

FEATURES

Understated, authentic and inviting

The hotel is made up of six historic casonas, or residences. The casonas are all individually decorated in styles that reflect the hotel's historic location and feature shady colonnaded courtyards, filled with fragrant bougainvillea and jasmine, and lit by lanterns as night falls. Hummingbirds hover above the flowering shrubs, while fountains sparkle under brilliant blue skies. It's a luxurious sanctuary from the world, certainly, but not a sanctuary from San Miguel itself: the vibrant city is just as present inside the hotel as outside, allowing guests to feel a deep connection with their surroundings, whether they're watching the sunset from their terrace or lying by the pool.

Divided between the casonas are the hotel's 37 rooms and suites. Each is unique, filled with Mexican art, antiques and exquisite local fabrics, while traditional features include carved stone fireplaces and wood-beamed ceilings. The beds are dressed with fine linens and soft pillows; traditional Mexican Talavera tiles in the bathrooms lend an air of rustic charm. Many of the suites have balconies which not only provide great views of the city and the casa courtyards, but are fantastic vantage points from which to watch the spectacular sunrises and sunsets.

The standout suite is, without doubt, the Presidential Suite, a sympathetic marriage of contemporary comfort and colonial charm. Located in Casa Palma, a former 18th-century mansion, it features two furnished terraces, one of which offers unparalleled views of the city, and a private plunge pool.

Gourmet cuisine created by Juan Antonio Juárez Arzola

San Miguel de Allende is a foodie paradise, with a growing number of top-flight restaurants and an annual food festival that is among the biggest in Mexico. At the heart of its culinary excellence is Belmond Casa de Sierra Nevada's Andanza, considered to be one of the finest restaurants in the city.

Presiding over the kitchen is the supremely talented Juan Antonio Juárez Arzola. Locally born Antonio was inspired to cook by watching his mother and grandmother in the kitchen, and went on to study gastronomy at the Technological University of San Miguel de Allende. While studying, Antonio did a year and a half's internship in the kitchens at Belmond Casa de Sierra Nevada.

Having worked in the Hotel Hacienda de Guadalupe and the Hotel Imperio de Angeles, also in Guadalupe, for a number of years, Antonio returned to Belmond Casa de Sierra Nevada where he had the good fortune work with chefs Gonzalo Martinez and Felipe Ramirez, who were to become what he calls his 'greatest influences'.

At Andanza Antonio seeks to create Mexican dishes with international influences, based on traditional Mexican cooking, such as roasting the ingredients to achieve smoky notes in dishes, which, he says, not only gives a genuine flavour of Mexico but also helps to preserve the roots of its cuisine by keeping the ancient techniques alive.

Antonio also oversees the hotel's Sazón cookery school, where guests can learn how to recreate traditional regional dishes or discover the techniques used to create a modern masterpiece.

Laja Spa

Laja Spa pays tribute to the Laja River, which flows through the mountains and into San Miguel. Treatments are available in three beautiful air-conditioned colonial-style treatment rooms and combine ancient practices with 21st-century understanding and techniques. For those who like it hot, Belmond Casa de Sierra Nevada also offers a traditional Mexican temazcal. Temazcal is an ancient Mexican ritual intended to cleanse the mind, body and spirit. It's performed in sauna-like temperatures courtesy of heated stones onto which an aromatic

mixture of medicinal herbs such as rosemary, St Mary's thistle and squaw mint and copal – a resin used by the Mayans as incense – are placed to eliminate toxins from the body. Indigenous chanting, meanwhile, helps to purify the spirit. According to tradition, the treatment is divided into four sessions, with the door thrown open for some much-needed fresh air after each session.

The temazcal is a wonderful cleansing, rejuvenating and empowering experience, though perhaps not one for the claustrophobic.

Only at Belmond Casa de Sierra Nevada

From horseback riding in the Mexican countryside to revitalising visits to a local hot spring, Belmond Casa de Sierra Nevada offers a number of curated tours designed to enhance the guest experience. These include:

Walking tour: San Miguel de Allende

One way to explore San Miguel is simply to step out of the hotel and plunge right in. However, this tour offers a deeper introduction to the city's history and tradition on a two-and-a-half-hour walk through the historical downtown area. The tour includes visits to • La Parroquia de San Miguel Arcángel • House of Don Ignacio Allende • House of Count of La Canal • Convent of the Immaculate Conception • Art school el Nigromante (Bellas Artes) • Angela Peralta Theater • Convent of San Francisco • Church of San Felipe Neri.

Market Tours, Class and Tasting

Mexicans generally do their food shopping at the town's markets rather than in supermarkets. Every Tuesday morning guests are invited to accompany chef Juan Antonio Juárez Arzola to the town's open-air market with its mind-boggling array of fresh produce. As well as giving the low-down on all the wonderful ingredients that make Mexican cuisine so special, Antonio reveals how to select the very best. Back at the hotel's Sazón kitchen, produce is then transformed into delicious salsas and traditional Mexican dishes.

Tour: Guanajuato City

Guanajuato City is around an hour's drive from San Miguel. Proclaimed a World Heritage Zone by UNESCO in 1988, this beautiful city is primarily known for its art and culture, hosting one of the premier arts and cultural festivals in Mexico in honour of Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, author of Don Quixote de la Mancha. Guanajuato City was also the home town of leading muralist Diego Rivera. The eight-hour tour includes • Pipila lookout • Underground Streets • Juarez Theater • Don Quijote de la Mancha Museum • Basilica of the Lady of Guanajuato • Diego Rivera's House.

PEOPLE

Don Gustavo , Butler

'One of the greatest joys of our stay at Belmond Casa de Sierra Nevada was being greeted every morning by Don Gustavo'... 'Gustavo is a jewel – I wish I could take him home'. These are just two comments on a popular review website, which carries dozens of tributes to the hotel's popular butler, Don Gustavo.

Gustavo Vazquez Rodríguez, better known as Don Gustavo, was born in a small town called San Francisco del Rincon, around two hours' drive from San Miguel de Allende. At the ripe old age of 40 he joined Belmond Casa de Sierra Nevada as a busboy and over the next two decades worked his way up through the ranks to reach the position of much-treasured butler.

'Working at Belmond Casa de Sierra Nevada is more than just a job – it is a pleasure,' he says. 'I enjoy meeting new people every day and helping them get the most out of their stay.'

It's not so much what Don Gustavo does for guests, which might be anything from bringing them their morning coffee – 'always with a rose' – to more complicated travel arrangements, such as the grace and warmth with which he does them that has earned him such affection over the years. Every task, no matter how small, is imprinted with his own personal seal, making everyone feel that they are a valued friend – which for Don Gustavo, they are.

'For me, the greatest joy is seeing how pleased guests are with what I have done for them and that they want to return the affection they received during their stay,' he says.

As one of his colleagues adds: 'Over the years, Don Gustavo has become a key figure at Belmond Casa de Sierra Nevada and a hugely valued member of the team. His affection for our guests is totally genuine.'