It’s always golden hour in SMA.
SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE

Best City in the World?

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San Miguel
WHERE ON EARTH

San Miguel de Allende
Mexico

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I’D BEEN HEARING a lot of people talk about San Miguel de Allende for several years. Expats rave about the easy living. Artists, both students and pros, go on about the inspiration they get from the architecture, museums and from fellow creators. Gastronomes enthuse about the abundance and quality of the restaurants. Nightlife lovers rave about the bar scene. Shoppers model their designer clothes, cute bags and jewelry, and display the paintings and housewares they bought there. Everyone talks about the city’s mix of expats, international vacationers and weekenders from Mexico City. It’s little wonder that *Travel + Leisure* voted San Miguel de Allende the best city in the world two years running.

...It seems like golden hour lasts throughout the day...
Having finally visited myself, I understand what all the fuss is about. San Miguel de Allende, or SMA for short, is a feast for the eyes and for the tongue. As a photographer and a food lover, I was particularly enamoured by the light and by the cuisine.

During my winter visit, it seems like golden hour lasts throughout the day. I can’t put my camera down as the sun spotlights one side of the street and then the other, illuminating the Baroque Spanish architecture of this UNESCO World Heritage city. The golden effect is enhanced by the rich yellows, mangos and ochres of the buildings. Crowning the spectacle are the pink towers of the neo-Gothic church in the town square, Parroquia de San Miguel Arcángel.

San Miguel de Allende is very walkable (though comfortable shoes are de rigueur for all the cobblestones). Several streets in the centre of town are closed to cars, so it’s easy to find the perfect angle for photos. I could spend every afternoon eating handmade paletas (popsicles) in the shade of the Parisian-influenced central park, Jardin Allende, to whet my appetite for these top food and drink experiences:

Meat-centred Bovine, a half block from Jardin Allende in the UNESCO zone, is by chef Paul Bentley from Australia. This hip space also features inventive cocktails and several seafood and vegetable dishes. On a hot February day, I was delighted by a lunch of tomato and peach salad.

Rooftop bar QUINCE is famous for its cocktails and views of the city’s pink cathedral. It’s open for dinner and Sunday brunch. Try the tenderloin on risotto made with aji peppers or sea bass ceviche. In-house bakery Boulangerie Bleu provides pastries and sorbet.»
Cook it

Serves 4

Chicken in Almond Sauce with Coriander Rice

SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE is famous for grilled and rotisserie chicken joints. Here’s a more traditional chicken recipe, with a sauce thickened with almonds, a reflection of San Miguel’s Spanish colonial heritage.

1. HEAT half the olive oil in a skillet and sauté the onions until softened and translucent. Add the garlic and sauté for about 30 seconds more, until the garlic is fragrant but not browning.

2. SCRAPE the mixture into a blender along with the tomato purée, almonds, cumin, paprika, salt and pepper. Blend to a smooth sauce, adding ¼ cup of the chicken stock if necessary to loosen the mixture.

3. HEAT the remaining olive oil in the skillet and brown the chicken pieces on both sides. Deglaze the pan with the white wine, scraping up any brown bits from the bottom of the pan. Add the remaining chicken stock, cover with a lid and simmer over low heat for 15 minutes.

4. ADD the blended almond sauce and the sliced green pepper. Cover the pan again and cook for about 5 minutes, until the sauce is heated through and the peppers have softened.

5. STIR the chopped coriander and green onion through the cooked rice and season with salt and pepper. Serve with the chicken. Provide a bottle of Mexican hot sauce such as Cholula or Valentina for those who like to spice things up!

Chicken Thighs 4, skinned and deboned
Olive Oil 2 Tbs, divided
Onion 1 small, chopped
Garlic 3 cloves, chopped
Tomato Purée 1 cup
Raw Almonds 100 g
Cumin Powder 2 tsp
Hot or Sweet Paprika 2 tsp
White Wine ½ cup
Chicken Stock 1 cup
Salt and Freshly Ground Black Pepper to taste
Green Bell Pepper 1, thinly sliced
Cooked Rice 2 cups
Fresh Coriander a generous handful, leaves and stalks finely chopped
Green Onion 1, finely chopped

Modelled after the popular ZIBU in Acapulco, ZIBU Allende has an intriguing menu of Mexican-Thai fusion by chef Eduardo Palazuelos. ZIBU also provides breakfast to guests at Live Aqua Urban Resort San Miguel de Allende. Upstairs at the Spice Market, dine family style at the long centre table or watch the sunset with a cocktail on the terrace. Save room for dessert, either a dish of thinly sliced and fried carrot with caramel or molten chocolate cake.

Sitting in the columned courtyard of the decade-old SMA institution, The Restaurant, I feel a little like I’m in Morocco. Californian chef Donnie Masterton calls his menu global comfort food, but it has several healthy choices that taste anything but. I could eat his shaved Brussels sprouts and kale salad with pecorino daily.

Chef Enrique Olvera is frequently named as one of the best chefs in Mexico. His SMA restaurant, Moxi, serves Mexican gastronomy tasting menus and à la carte dishes like pork belly with red mole.

A bit warily, I sip Casa Dragones tequila from a champagne-like flute at Live Aqua’s stunning upstairs bar. It is nothing like the shots of throat-burning fire I usually avoid. These small-batch tequilas are named for the Dragones of Allende, Mexico’s heroes of independence. Chefs love the acidity of Casa Dragones’ sipping tequilas and blancos, which, like the tannins in wine, help them pair exceptionally well with food.

The magic combination of San Miguel’s altitude, hot days, cool winter nights, and summer rains is ideal for growing grapes. Just outside town, boutique Cuna de Tierra vineyard has, so far, won 43 medals. Book either a wine tasting or lunch with wine pairings. Bring home a bottle of wine and of their olive oil.

The newest property in town is luxe Live Aqua Urban Resort San Miguel de Allende. It sits on the edge of a steep gully near an 18th-century dam. Though just a few minutes’ walk to the main square, I hear nothing but birds while swinging in a hammock above the long pool. The resort’s 153 sophisticated rooms feature black and white photographs, glassed-in bathrooms with soaking tubs, and turntables with a selection of LPs. Massive sculptures and water features turn every view into the layout for a design magazine.
Photos this spread clockwise from top left: Cocktail trio from Bovine; Towering pink Parroquía de San Miguel Arcángel; Pouring Casa Dragones tequila at Live Aqua’s cigar bar; Dessert at Cuna de Tierra Vineyard; You won’t believe it’s healthy kale and Brussels sprout salad from The Restaurant; Bovine’s tomato peach salad; Fruit plate at Live Aqua SMA.