

Import-Export Opportunities in Mexico



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Opportunities in Mexico

“I have seen those things which were brought from the new golden land. A sun all of gold and a moon all of silver...wondrous weapons...strange clothing and all manner of marvelous things for many uses. In all the days of my life I have seen nothing that so rejoiced my heart.”

Back in 1520, it wasn't only the German artist Albrecht Dürer who marveled at “the subtle genius of men in distant lands.” The new golden land was Mexico—and the treasures which so amazed him had been sent by the Aztec emperor Moctezuma to the King of Spain.

Profit from NAFTA

There's far more than rug making going on south of the border. Angels and cherubs...devils and monsters...intricately wooden carved crèches...lurid masks decorated with bones and teeth...fantasy animals...skeletons awaiting the Day of the Dead.

Many of Mexico's arts and crafts have gained collector status north of the border—and price tags in U.S. stores usually bear scant resemblance to price tags in Mexican stores. Almost \$11 for a ceramic butter dish? Back home, U.S. citizens are often asked to pay such crazy sums—and they are doing so. Maybe they don't realize that the mark-up is usually at least 50%—and sometimes it's a lot, lot more.

One of the great things about sourcing goods in Mexico is that for most items, you won't have to pay any customs duties. Thanks to NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), goods from Mexico aren't subject to duty tax in the United States and Canada.

Launched on January 1, 1994, NAFTA is one of the most successful trade agreements in history. It was fully implemented on January 1, 2008, and tariffs are now eliminated between the three countries. Of course, with governments, the main focus is on agriculture, not arts and crafts.

Make money in Mexico: Start an Import-Export business by Glynna Prentice

A fun way to fund your Mexico vacations is by having an Import-Export business: buying local products in Mexico, like handicrafts, and selling them back home when you return. Mexico makes so many handicrafts that you have plenty of options, from Mexican rugs to silver to pottery and more.

Several regions of Mexico are particularly known for their handicrafts. The state of Oaxaca is one. Many villages within an hour's drive of the capital, Oaxaca, specialize in handicrafts. Here you'll find hand-loomed rugs; the famous black-glazed pottery; fantastical wooden animals called *alebrijes*; beaten-tin mirrors, boxes, Christmas-tree ornaments and wall decorations; and pottery figures for tables and gardens.



Mexico is a treasure trove of handicrafts including rugs, pottery, and woodwork

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The colonial highlands are another handicraft-rich area. Taxco specializes in silver, including jewelry, crucifixes and other items. San Miguel de Allende has striking tin stars studded with glass that are used as lamps. Pátzcuaro is known for articles made of copper, while other towns specialize in pottery wall decorations, blown glass, and leather goods.

And San Cristóbal de las Casas, in the southern state of Chiapas, is known for weaving, pottery, furniture, and amber jewelry, among other things.

For the best prices, go directly to the craftsmen themselves. Locating their workshops and meeting the best craftsmen can be an adventure (or a vacation) in itself.

Of course, you need to do your homework beforehand, too. Study your home market to see what kinds of handicrafts may sell—and where you can sell them. And in Mexico, especially at first, buy a good sampling of styles and colors to see what sells best back home.

And try to avoid the biggest pitfall of the Import-Export business—liking your merchandise so well that you don't want to part with it!

Kitsch or collectibles?

But while Mexico can be a treasure trove for importers, it can also be the equivalent of a junk store. Sombreros...pink plastic flamingos wearing sunshades...pewter skull necklaces with flashing red glass eyes. Tourist zones are often cluttered up with nasty mass-produced junk not even produced in Mexico! It might come from China or elsewhere in Central or South America—where the labor is even cheaper than in Mexico.

Remember this: while you are considering importing goods into the United States from Mexico, a growing number of Mexican entrepreneurs are importing goods from elsewhere. Be careful.

Places such as Acapulco and Cancun do have authentic Mexican folk art and unique pieces as well as junk—but they are probably not the best locations to find it at a reasonable cost.

That's not to say all tourist zones are bad news—or that what you find in these areas is all mass-produced. In San Miguel de Allende, grannies in the town's craft market painstakingly make tiny bead purses. Each must take hours to produce, yet they sell them for around \$2 apiece. As it also has numerous up-market shops and galleries, San Miguel de Allende is a great town to get an introduction to quality Mexican merchandise. Items don't only come from Jalisco province, but from other parts of Mexico, too.

Although they're also on the gringo tourist trail, the same reasoning applies to the Guadalajara "craft suburb" of Tlaquepaque. Again, you'll see a fantastic range of items from all corners of Mexico. The nearby pottery suburb of Tonalá is where to go for pottery. Ceramics of every description are sold in the large street market on Thursdays and Sundays as well as in dozens of ceramic shops and studios.

Puerto Vallarta and Mexico City are also good hunting grounds. Although shops and galleries are aimed at tourists, there are so many that the stiff competition keeps prices reasonable.

Fonart (Fondo Nacional para el Fomento de las Artesanías Mexicanas; *website: www.fonart.gob.mx*) stores will also give you an idea of what's available throughout the country. A Mexican government institution for the development of folk art, Fonart promotes the sales of handicraft objects produced in Mexico. Products are assured to be "100% Mexico, hecho a mano" (100% Mexican, made by hand). Although it's a non-profit organization, merchandise here is no cheaper than in Mexican retail shops and galleries. Better value exists in markets—so long as you know the items are genuine.

For inexpensive shoes and apparel, the website www.quebarato.com.mx will also give you some ideas of local pricing. Ladies leather *huaraches* (sandals) for MX\$150 (\$12.09); "100% artesanal" *huipil* blouses for MX\$500 (\$40.32); ladies' Capri pants for MX\$65 (\$5.20).

As always, the most rewarding sources are likely to be places where products are actually made by individual artisans. You want hand-loomed textiles? Then go to villages where hand-loomed textiles are produced. (In many places, even the yarn is hand-spun.) Like in Ecuador, artisan "fair trade" cooperatives have been set up.

Here's a list of some well-known artisan towns and their specialties:

- **Taxco:** Silver and costume jewelry
- **Guadalajara:** Gold jewelry, leather goods, and blown glass
- **Tonalá:** Pottery and ceramics
- **Tlaquepaque:** Pottery, glass, and leather goods
- **Puebla:** Onyx and Talavera pottery
- **San Miguel de Allende:** Wrought-iron and tin work
- **Dolores Hidalgo:** Hand-painted tiles and Talavera sinks
- **Tlaxcala:** Hand-blown glassware

- **Michoacan:** Copper pots, plates, and vessels
- **Oaxaca:** Black pottery, yin work, hammocks, rugs, embroidered clothing
- **Temoaya:** Hand-woven rugs
- **San Pedro Tenayac:** Textiles
- **Meteppec:** Arboles de la vida (trees of life) ceramics
- **Tocuaro:** Carved wooden masks
- **Cuanajo:** Carved furniture
- **Tzintzuntzan:** Ceramics, woven goods, and straw handicrafts
- **Santa Fe de la Laguna:** Pottery
- **Santa Clara del Cobre:** Copper craft
- **Patzcuaro:** Guitars and other fine wooden articles and carvings

Mexico is still a land with a wealth of booty. Everywhere you go, you'll find gold and silver, folk art, and handmade crafts.

Oaxaca

Mexico is a huge country with one of the world's most fascinating cultures. The southern province of Oaxaca (pronounced Wa-HAK-a) is rich in artesanía traditions, and it could be that you'll find a unique line of treasures here, too. Apparently Oaxaca province has over 6,000 mestizo communities—and around one million Indians belonging to 17 different ethnic groups.

Oaxacan handicrafts are rarely mass-produced. And many collectors believe that the variety and beauty of the handicrafts here is the best in Mexico. The range is vast. As well as *alebrijes* (more on these fantasy animals and monsters in a moment), it includes tannery, leather work, tin smithing, ceramics, stonework, and jewelry—handcrafted silverware combined with turquoise, coral, or jade stones. Black clay is made into pots and other distinctive artifacts. And, of course, cotton textiles and wool tapestries.

A *huipil* is a loose rectangular garment with a hole in the middle for the head and made from cotton, or wool, or even silk. They can be in the form of a blouse or a long dress and are worn by indigenous women in Mexico and Guatemala.



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Oaxaca is famous for its handmade handicrafts

In Southern Mexico and Guatemala, hundreds of styles reflect different regions and villages. Each area has its own distinct *huipil*, identified with a unique shape, design, style, and color. In addition, *huipiles* often tell the stories of the women who make and wear them.

A *rebozo* is a long scarf or shawl used in Mexico as a wrap and as a carry-all for all sorts of things...even babies. They also double beautifully as table runners, brightly colored tablecloths, and bedspreads on broad wooden looms.

Like the neighboring Chiapas province, Oaxaca is not a wealthy region. For the indigenous tribes people, having a family member who can make either practical or decorative items often means the difference between getting by—or a life of abject poverty.

Both here and in Chiapas, many Indian families are descended from pre-Hispanic civilizations. Imbued with ancient magic, their designs often come with symbols that date back centuries. As Oaxaca City serves as a marketplace for *artesanias* from all across the province, you don't necessarily have to journey to outlying towns and villages.

If you're in the market for one-of-a-kind pottery, it's worth going to Atzompa, a small town near Oaxaca City. Most famous for its glazed tiles, you'll also find an array of greenish-glazed decorative items as well as jars, vases, dishes, and flower pots. Impossible to shape on a potter's wheel, some of the pots are huge, nearly six feet tall. Each potter's shop is dedicated to manufacturing different types of pieces.

The Central Valley of Oaxaca specializes in the carving of colorful wooden animal figurines known as *alebrijes*. The word *alebrije* apparently denotes "a difficult tangled thing, shaped in confusing or fantastic figures." The beautiful carvings often depict a wide range of beasts from the

realm of dreams and nightmares: winged blue horses, frogs with hands, lilac-colored armadillos. You can also find realistic figurines of lions, jaguars, iguanas, dogs, snakes, birds, and goats. They are usually made from copal, a soft, aromatic wood.



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These colorful alebrijes come in a variety of beasts from the realms of dreams and nightmares

Two villages (San Antonio Arrazola and San Martin Tilcajete) originally produced most pieces. Nowadays the craft has expanded to a dozen or so villages in the Central Valley region. The price of *alebrijes* ranges widely: small ones sell locally in the villages for upward of a couple of dollars, while larger ones generally go for 150 to 300 pesos (\$12 to \$24). For all sizes of *alebrijes*, the prices sought in design and specialty stores in the United States are astonishing—they can be up to 10 times more expensive than pieces sold locally.

You'll find a good range of *alebrijes* on a local online website: <http://granate.com.mx>. Prices start at 60 pesos (\$4.84) for 1.4" x 2.8" blue pigs with multi-colored legs. Many other weird and wonderful *alebrijes* are \$16 to \$20.

You'll also find very reasonable Zapotec rugs. Prices start at 620 pesos (\$50) for a rug of 1.3 x 3.2 feet. Some stores in Teotitlan del Valle with online shopping charge more than twice as much for similar products.

Other Oaxaca villages and markets to check out can be found at www.oaxacaoaxaca.com.

Huichol beadwork

Huichol Indians live in the more remote regions of the Sierra Madre Mountains in the provinces of Jalisco and Nayarit. Descendants of the Aztecs, they belong to a pre-Hispanic world of shamanism. They sell a lot of their work through outlets in Puerto Vallarta and Guadalajara.

Beaded eggs, beaded animal heads, and unique yarn “paintings” all relate to Huichol tradition and belief. Much of these traditions are fueled by the use of the hallucinogenic peyote cactus.

The brilliantly colored beadwork is unbelievably intricate. Gourds, masks, and carved wooden objects such as jaguars, wolves, horned toads, and other animals are firstly coated with beeswax.

They are then decorated with glass beads pressed into the wax. Each individual bead is picked up with a cactus thorn, then placed one by one in the wax. Prices for beadwork objects vary—you’ll find beadwork eggs for \$2.50 in Puerto Vallarta. On craft websites run by Americans, similar eggs are being offered for \$10. For larger pieces such as jaguar heads, Stateside prices can be up to 10 times more than in Mexico.



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Intricately designed Huichol masks like this one can be picked up in Mexico for much cheaper than you’ll find in the U.S.

Beads pressed into wax have their origins in the Huichol’s gourd offering bowls. The beads are sometimes used to pick out waxen deities to whom petitions and prayers are sent. In pre-Hispanic times, the Huichol used seeds, nuts, maize kernels, bone fragments, coral, jade, pyrite, turquoise, and shells as decorations. The introduction of glass beads transformed simple offerings into a fabulous art form.

You thought you were just buying beadwork? Understanding some of the Huichol beliefs can turn a simple shopping expedition into a mystic journey into the spirit world. Like the beaded animal and bird heads (a doubled-headed eagle represents the shaman's power to see in all directions), color is often highly symbolic. Blue represents Rapawiyeme—Rapa is the Huichol tree of rain. Black is the Pacific Ocean, the place of the dead, and also the great rain serpent. Red symbolizes Wirikuta, the birthplace of deer, the eagle, and peyote.

What's the real cost and the gringo cost? We searched in Spanish: *arte huichol precio* (price) and found a nativity (*nacimiento*). One seller on www.mercadolibre.com.mx has one with 15 figures for 2,250 pesos (\$181.45). Beaded earrings were on sale for 60 pesos each (\$4.80) or even less if you bought in large quantities. The website <http://arte-shop.idoneos.com> turned up white ceramic pigs for 36 pesos (\$2.90).

Take a look at www.novica.com and you'll see the least expensive pieces of similar-sized Huichol art beadwork sculptures there range from \$69.95 to over \$200. Stateside shoppers are paying way over the odds. At a rough guess, for anything you see on this site, divide by a third. Then you're getting into the region of the real price you can get such items for in Mexico.

Other hot items

Fine talavera pottery, tiles, and dinnerware are also sought-after collectibles. Introduced from Spain in the 16th century, this vibrantly colored pottery is similar to majolica. It is tin-glazed with intricate designs, often of flowers. A number of towns produce talavera, but beware of imitations.

The most prized pieces originate from Tlaxcala, but you'll find plenty in Puebla's craft markets and galleries. You may have to pay \$20 for a large plate or a vase with a lid—but you should easily be able to sell it for double this, at least in the States.

Mexico's best hammocks—both plain and striped—are made in the Yucatan. The city of Merida is a good hunting ground—here hammocks are mostly sold by weight. They usually come in four sizes calculated on the number of pairs of string at each end. The smallest is the *sencillo* (single), woven across approximately 50 pairs of string. Next is the *doble* (double) with 100 pairs of string; the *matrimonial* (marriage-size) has 150 and a *matrimonial especial* usually has at least 175 pairs of string at each end. Family-sized hammocks can weigh up to nine pounds, and have as many as 300 pairs of string at each end. Prices start at \$18.99 for a single-size hammock. These weigh almost one-and-a-half pounds and will support a person weighing up to 326 pounds. Double-sized hammocks cost \$25.99 and matrimonial hammocks start at \$31.99 through Hammocks Rada at www.cmerida.com.

Travel from Mexico City to Acapulco and you'll pass through the state of Guerrero. Carved wooden dance masks of animals, demons, and grotesque mythical monsters are a tradition here. They are carved from a light wood similar to balsa. Old masks that have been used in dances and ceremonies are collector's items, expensive, and hard to come by. Many new masks are equally well-crafted and relatively inexpensive at less than \$10.

More about Mexico...

There is only one place in the world where you can enjoy an affordable overseas lifestyle, live right on the beach for pennies on the dollar, yet remain within minutes of the U.S. by car.

With its moon-lit fiestas, languid white-sand beaches, ancient colonial towns set in the rugged Sierras, and Mayan pyramids rising from the misty Yucatan jungle, it's no wonder so many people are starting new lives in Mexico.

A move to Mexico means you can still enjoy the amenities you were accustomed to north of the border, including cable TV, high-speed Internet, and modern home appliances. And if you prefer, you can even bring all of your favorite things with you without paying import taxes.

Goods and services cost less, so you can afford the kinds of luxuries only the very wealthy enjoy up north: a maid, a cook, and a gardener for example. In your retirement here, you'll have the time to volunteer at the local school, golf in the mornings, relax on the beach...and savor life.

Whether your vision of the ideal lifestyle overseas involves shopping, fishing, sunbathing, diving, biking, mountain climbing, parasailing, collecting crafts, visiting archeological sites, partying, going to concerts, attending the theater, or fine dining, in Mexico you can engage in all of these activities, and more.

Climate and landscape

Mexico is such a diverse nation that everybody can find exactly what they want here. You don't have to choose between water and mountain views; you can have both.

And because of the geographic diversity, you can also choose what climate you want to enjoy during your Mexican retirement: from hot and dry in the north, to hot and humid in the south, to spring-like temperatures all year round in the colonial highlands.

Cost of living

The key to smart shopping in Mexico is local shopping. You'll pay about a dollar per kilo (that's about 2.2 pounds) for fresh fruit like mangos, oranges, or pears. A kilo of avocados sells for about \$1.55—which is roughly what you'd pay for one avocado in the U.S.

While it is true that you can find just about any U.S. product you're used to having—from Campbell's Soup to Tide—it's also true that you'll probably pay more for the convenience of a brand name. But if you shop at the local produce markets and the stores where locals buy, you're sure to pay less for your goods.

Senior citizens' benefits program

Foreigners who hold a valid residency visa for Mexico can now take part in Mexico's senior citizens' benefits program.

The program, for adults aged 60 and over, offers discounts on a wide range of services. These include discounts on health-related services (hospitals, doctors' visits, lab tests, medical devices, pharmacies, and dental work); cultural activities; travel-related costs, including airline tickets, buses, car rentals and purchase, and hotel accommodation. Discounts can range up to 50% off the full price of a given good or service.

Health care

Health care in Mexico is first rate. Private clinics and hospitals are staffed by expert physicians (many of whom trained in the U.S., Europe, or in Mexico's own world-renowned teaching hospitals), and medical care and prescription drugs will cost you only a fraction of what you would pay in the U.S.

Every mid-size to large city in Mexico has at least one first-rate hospital. And a big plus is that the cost of health care in Mexico is generally one-half or less of what you might expect to pay in the U.S.

Prescription drugs manufactured in Mexico cost, on average, about 50% less than what the same drugs cost in the U.S.

Of course, the costs of medical care will vary by physician, hospital, and your condition. On average, an office visit with a doctor—specialists included—will cost 350 to 500 pesos (about \$28-\$40). A house call (which doctors in Mexico still make) will cost about the same. Lab tests will

cost about a third of what they cost in the U.S. A CAT scan often costs about 25% of U.S. prices. An overnight stay in a private hospital room costs about 350 to 500 pesos (\$28-\$40). A visit to a dentist for teeth cleaning costs about 250 to 400 pesos (\$20-\$32).

Our favorite locations in Mexico

Lake Chapala



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The area around Lake Chapala, in central Mexico, is home to the largest North American expat community in the world—as many as 25,000. Obviously, it’s doing something right.

The lake itself, the largest in Mexico, makes a scenic backdrop to the villages along the shore. Lakeside, as this area is called, usually refers to the villages along Lake Chapala’s north shore: Ajijic, Chapala, Jocotepec, San Juan Cosala, and San Antonio. As many as 15,000 expats live full or part-time on the lake’s north shore; up to 40,000 live in the state of Jalisco.

With so many expats in the area, you’ll find plenty of English speakers (as well as four local English-language newspapers and magazines). You’ll also find plenty of U.S. and Canadian-style amenities. There’s also no shortage of activities. Over 80 special groups are active in the Lakeside area that you can get involved with. These include everything from orchid growing to Scrabble... from writers’ groups to Francophiles...and from non-profit organizations to line dancing and yoga.

San Miguel de Allende



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One of the most popular relocation/retirement havens is San Miguel de Allende. At *International Living*, we've been writing about this location for over a decade. Way back when we began our coverage, it was an unsung little retreat, a place artists went to work and live on the cheap, and where we sent our savviest readers to buy up colonial mansions for a song. The November 2007 issue of *Condé Nast Traveler* magazine rated San Miguel de Allende fifth on the list of top 10 cities in the Americas, in their Readers Choice awards. Suffice it to say, this colonial city has been discovered.

A veritable gem of colonial architecture, San Miguel is one of Mexico's national historic landmarks. It's also a place where artists, writers, and other creative people can enjoy the many art galleries, excellent musical events, gourmet restaurants, and great bars. With its high-towered church and its curving, cobble streets, tidy shops selling carefully embroidered linens, and hand painted plates, homes that belong in the pages of *Architectural Digest*, and lush courtyard gardens in bloom year-round, this city looks like an illustration straight out of a children's fairytale.

Find out more about Mexico

Moonlit fiestas, strolling mariachis, languid white-sand beaches, colonial towns set in the rugged Sierras, ancient Mayan pyramids rising from the misty Yucatan jungle...Mexico has it all. If this sounds like the life for you, take a look at our *Mexico: The Owner's Manual*. This in-depth book will give you all the information you need to know about moving, buying, investing and living in Mexico...including the price of a beer...how to get a visa...more amazing locations in Mexico with very affordable real estate...and a rolodex of contacts so valuable that it alone is worth the purchase price. For more information, see:

<https://orders.internationalliving.com/120SMTOMUP/U120N1UC/index.htm?pageNumber=2>.