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Visiting Mexico City

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Introduction

Mexico City, or "Ciudad de México," as it is known in Spanish, is a sprawling metropolis teeming with life, culture, and history. As one of the oldest cities in the Americas, its roots trace back to Tenochtitlan, the grand capital of the Aztec Empire. Over the centuries, Mexico City has transformed into a diverse and vibrant place that lures millions of visitors every year with its unique blend of the ancient and modern.

The historical significance of Mexico City cannot be understated. It houses some of the most impressive exhibits of pre-Hispanic civilization and architecture, drawing history buffs and tourists alike to sites such as the Templo Mayor and the National Museum of Anthropology. In these venues, the relics of bygone eras speak volumes about the city's rich cultural tapestry. Mexico City's museums, nearly indescribable in their variety and depth, form an integral part of one's journey through the past and present of this enormous urban space.

Yet, it's not just the historical intrigue that makes Mexico City so appealing. The city's cultural life is vibrant and continually evolving. From world-class art galleries to folk art markets, visitors can immerse themselves in a living culture that celebrates both contemporary artistic expressions and deeply rooted traditions. The music scene too is alive with sound, from mariachi bands playing in the famous Plaza Garibaldi to the bustling nightlife offering genres from salsa to rock.

No guide to Mexico City would be complete without mentioning its culinary wonders. The city is known as much for its street food as for its fine dining. As a melting pot of flavors from all over the country, the city offers everything from tacos al pastor to haute cuisine created by some of the world's most renowned chefs. The vibrant food scene is reflective of the city's role as a cultural capital where traditional meals coexist with innovative culinary experiments.

In addition to its cultural and culinary attractions, Mexico City boasts numerous parks and green spaces that offer respite from the hustle and bustle of urban life. Chapultepec Park is a prime example, serving as both a cultural haven and a natural oasis. Whether you want to explore its museums, stroll its pathways, or enjoy a boat ride on its lakes, this urban green space offers recreational activities for every type of visitor.

For tourists, visiting Mexico City is both an adventure and an opportunity to experience one of the world's most dynamic urban landscapes. With this guide, you will journey through the city's many facets, uncovering hidden gems and understanding what makes Mexico City an unparalleled travel destination. As you

prepare for your trip, you will find this book to be your trustworthy companion and an essential resource in making informed decisions that enhance your visit to this remarkable city.

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CHAPTER ONE: Getting to Mexico City: Ports of Entry

For the vast majority of international visitors, the journey to Mexico City culminates at the airport. While the city is reachable by long-distance bus from other parts of Mexico and even the United States, air travel remains the most common and, for many, the only practical port of entry. Mexico City is served primarily by two major international airports, each with its own characteristics and considerations for arriving travellers. Understanding these gateways is the first step in navigating your arrival into this vast and exhilarating metropolis.

The historical workhorse and main aerial gateway is **Benito Juárez International Airport**, universally known by its code: **MEX**. Located within the city limits, approximately 5 kilometres (3 miles) east of the historic downtown core, its convenience is undeniable. However, MEX is an airport operating at, and often beyond, its capacity. It's busy, occasionally chaotic, and navigating its terminals requires a bit of awareness. It consistently ranks among the busiest airports in Latin America, handling tens of millions of passengers annually. This sheer volume means you should be prepared for queues and bustle, particularly during peak travel times.

MEX is divided into two distinct terminals: Terminal 1 (T1) and Terminal 2 (T2). Knowing which terminal your flight arrives at is crucial, as they are located a significant distance apart and serve different airlines. Terminal 1 is the older and significantly larger of the two. It's a sprawling complex that houses most international airlines arriving from North America (excluding Delta and Aeromexico partners), Europe, Asia, and Central/South America, as well as several domestic carriers like Volaris and VivaAerobus. Its linear design means potentially long walks from your gate to immigration and baggage claim.

Navigating Terminal 1 can feel a bit like exploring a small city itself. It's divided into multiple halls or 'Salas' (A through G, roughly), connected by long corridors often lined with shops, food vendors, and currency exchange booths. Signage is generally available in Spanish and English, but the sheer scale and number of people can sometimes make orientation challenging. Pay close attention to signs directing you towards 'Migración' (Immigration) and 'Recolección de Equipaje' (Baggage Claim) upon arrival. Comfortable shoes are highly recommended, as you may find yourself walking considerable distances after disembarking.

Terminal 2, often referred to as T2, is a more modern facility located across the runways from T1. It primarily serves Aeromexico (Mexico's flag carrier) and its SkyTeam alliance partners, including Delta Air Lines, Air France, KLM, and others. While newer and generally perceived as architecturally more cohesive than T1, it can

also experience significant crowding due to the volume of Aeromexico's operations, serving both domestic and international routes. If you are flying Aeromexico or one of its key partners, your arrival point will almost certainly be T2.

Connecting between Terminal 1 and Terminal 2 requires using the **Aerotrén**, a monorail system that shuttles passengers between the two buildings. It's important to note that access to the Aerotrén is typically restricted to ticketed passengers with connecting flights or those holding airline boarding passes. You often need to show your boarding pass for the connecting flight to board the train. If you arrive at one terminal and need to get to the other for non-flight reasons (e.g., meeting someone, catching ground transport *specific* to the other terminal), you may need to use inter-terminal buses or taxis available outside. The Aerotrén journey itself takes only a few minutes, but factoring in waiting times and walking to/from the stations can add significantly to your transfer time.

Regardless of which terminal you land in at MEX, the arrival process follows a standard international sequence. After deplaning, your first stop will be **Immigration Control (Migración)**. Mexico has been streamlining its entry procedures, particularly for tourists from many countries (including the US, Canada, UK, Schengen area, Japan). Previously, all visitors filled out a paper form called the Forma Migratoria Múltiple (FMM). While physical FMM forms may still be encountered occasionally or required for specific visa types or nationalities, many tourists now receive just an entry stamp in their passport specifying the number of days they are permitted to stay (up to a maximum of 180 days, but the duration granted is at the discretion of the immigration officer).

It's crucial to have your passport ready and be prepared to answer basic questions from the immigration officer, such as the purpose of your visit and the duration of your stay. They may ask for proof of accommodation or a return ticket, although this is not always requested. Pay close attention to the number of days written on your entry stamp; this dictates your legal stay duration. Keep your stamped passport safe throughout your trip. Queues at immigration can vary dramatically depending on the time of day and the number of simultaneous flight arrivals. Patience is often required, particularly at Terminal 1 which handles a wider variety of international carriers.

After clearing immigration, you proceed to **Baggage Claim (Recolección de Equipaje)**. Check the overhead monitors for the carousel number corresponding to your flight. Luggage delivery times can also vary; sometimes bags arrive quickly, other times there can be a lengthy wait, especially if multiple large aircraft have landed around the same time. Once you have collected your luggage, the final step before entering the public arrivals hall is **Customs (Aduana)**.

Mexico's customs process has also evolved. The traditional 'traffic light' system (semaforo fiscal), where passengers randomly pressed a button resulting in either a

green light (pass through) or a red light (baggage inspection), is no longer the standard procedure at major airports like MEX for typical tourists. Instead, all luggage generally passes through X-ray scanners after you collect it from the carousel. Customs officers may still conduct random manual inspections based on scanning results or other factors. You are typically required to declare amounts of currency exceeding \$10,000 USD (or its equivalent) and certain goods, particularly agricultural products or large quantities of merchandise intended for sale. For most tourists carrying standard personal belongings, this process is usually straightforward. Ensure you are not bringing prohibited items (check official sources before travel). Once past the scanners and any potential inspection, you push your cart through the final doors into the public arrivals area.

The arrivals halls of both T1 and T2 at MEX can be quite busy, filled with waiting relatives, hotel representatives, and taxi drivers. It's wise to have a plan for your onward transportation *before* exiting the secure customs area. Official airport taxi booths and ride-share pick-up zones are located within the terminal buildings, offering safer and regulated options than hailing cabs outside. We will delve deeper into transportation from the airport in the next chapter, but the key takeaway upon arrival is to use the authorized services located *inside* the terminal.

Now, let's turn our attention to Mexico City's newer aerial gateway: **Felipe Ángeles International Airport (NLU)**. Inaugurated in 2022, NLU was built on a former military airbase in Santa Lucía, State of Mexico, approximately 45 kilometres (28 miles) north of the city centre. Its primary purpose is to alleviate the chronic congestion at MEX. While still ramping up operations compared to the established hub of MEX, NLU serves a growing number of domestic flights operated by airlines like Aeromexico, Volaris, and VivaAerobus, along with a smaller, but increasing, selection of international routes, primarily from the US and Latin America.

Arriving at NLU offers a different experience compared to MEX. Being a much newer facility, the terminal building is generally perceived as more modern, spacious, and potentially less chaotic than the sprawling terminals of MEX. The immigration and customs procedures are fundamentally the same as those at MEX, involving passport control (with potential digital entry/stamps replacing the FMM for many tourists) and baggage scanning for customs clearance. Given the lower passenger volume currently compared to MEX, queues at immigration and waiting times for luggage might be shorter, though this can vary.

The most significant difference for travellers arriving at NLU is its location. Situated considerably further from the main tourist districts like Centro Histórico, Roma, or Condesa than MEX, the journey into the city takes longer and transportation options are still developing. While dedicated bus services, authorized airport taxis, and ride-sharing platforms do operate from NLU, the travel time into central Mexico City can easily range from 60 to 90 minutes or more, depending heavily on traffic conditions,

which can be notoriously unpredictable. This contrasts with the potential 20-40 minute ride from MEX under favourable traffic.

When booking flights, pay close attention to the airport code – MEX for Benito Juárez or NLU for Felipe Ángeles. If your accommodation is in the southern or central parts of the city, arriving at MEX is generally more convenient due to its proximity. However, if NLU offers a significantly cheaper flight or better timing, be sure to factor in the potentially longer and possibly more expensive transfer into the city when making your decision. The facilities at NLU are modern, but the logistics of reaching your final destination require more planning compared to arriving at the centrally located MEX.

A third airport occasionally mentioned in relation to Mexico City is **Toluca International Airport (TLC)**, located near the city of Toluca, about 65 kilometres (40 miles) west of central Mexico City. For several years, particularly before NLU's development, TLC served as an alternative airport, primarily for low-cost domestic carriers like Volaris and Interjet (before its collapse), and some charter flights. It also handles significant cargo and general aviation traffic. While some budget domestic flights still operate from TLC, it is far less common for international tourists to arrive here compared to MEX or even NLU. The distance and ground transportation challenges make it generally inconvenient unless your ultimate destination is closer to Toluca or you have secured a specific flight routing through this airport.

While air travel predominates, Mexico City is also a major hub for long-distance bus travel. Four main bus terminals (Terminal Norte, TAPO - Terminal Oriente, Terminal Sur, Terminal Poniente) serve different regions of the country. If you are arriving from another city within Mexico, or potentially crossing overland from the United States, you will likely arrive at one of these terminals. These stations are generally functional but can be crowded and require similar awareness regarding onward transportation as the airports. While not a primary international 'port of entry' in the same sense as airports handling immigration, they are significant arrival points worth noting for those travelling overland. We'll touch more on bus travel for getting *around* Mexico in Chapter 2 and beyond.

Whether you touch down amidst the seasoned bustle of MEX Terminal 1, the Aeromexico hub of MEX Terminal 2, or the newer expanse of NLU, your arrival marks the beginning of your Mexico City adventure. The initial moments involve bureaucratic steps – immigration and customs – which are usually navigated without major incident, provided your documents are in order and you adhere to regulations. Being prepared for potential queues, understanding the layout of your arrival terminal, and having a clear plan for the next step—getting from the airport to your accommodation—will ensure a smoother transition from arrival hall to exploring the vibrant streets of this incredible capital. The key is patience, awareness, and using the official channels inside the airport for services like currency exchange and transportation.

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