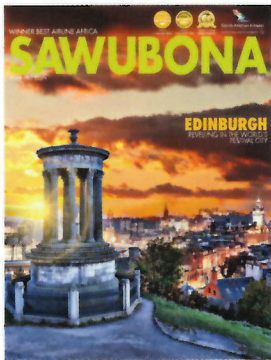


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**ABOVE:** Mexico is a land rich in history and flavour, pg 46.

# MORE THAN JUST TACOS AND TEQUILA...

WORDS: JENNY HANDLEY

**GETTING THERE**  
SAA flies to Washington DC (Dulles) three times a week via Dakar (Senegal) and four times a week via Accra (Ghana) and code-shares with United Airlines and JetBlue beyond DC. Visit: [www.flysaa.com](http://www.flysaa.com)

MEXICO IS A  
GEOGRAPHICALLY  
DIVERSE  
COUNTRY  
WITH WORLD-  
RENOWNED  
CUISINE







# W

hen the Ambassador of Mexico, His Excellency Mauricio Escanero, said “*Ven a comer*”, (meaning “Come and share our food”), I took it as a personal invitation to visit his beautiful country.

He was actually welcoming guests to a dinner at which Jorge Vallejo – chef of world-renowned Quintonil in Mexico

City – was cooking with SA’s own Luke Dale-Roberts as part of a collaboration between South Africa and Mexico. Innovative use of ant larvae and *escamoles* piqued my interest and, after all, Mexican cuisine has been given World Heritage status by Unesco.

A few weeks later, the mother of Mexican cooking, Abigail Mendoza Ruiz, an ethnic Zapotec from Oaxaca (known as the land of seven sauces) where she runs her restaurant Tlamanalli, came to South Africa to teach cooking skills in our townships. For breakfast, we shared grasshoppers flavoured with chilli and garlic, spiced with some of her immense knowledge, united in our mutual love of food.

Mexico has enormous geographical diversity – deserts, oceans, mountains and plains. We decided to ignore the sprawling cities and head straight for the coast, with Tulum in the East Yucatán on the Caribbean side winning the toss-up over popular Puerto Vallarta on the Pacific.

Just an hour’s drive south of the ritzy resort town of Cancun, Tulum boasts spectacular Mayan ruins, their cliff-top setting breathtaking. Where else in the world can you view ruins and

the vivid turquoise water of the Caribbean simultaneously? Chichen Itza on its outskirts – one of the new Seven Wonders of the World – is the most famous Mayan site in the world and a spiritual and cultural centre.

Lazy beach days were interspersed with vigorous activities that included shopping in the village for crafts and beachwear in vivid hues, with my man regularly seeking “moral support” from tequila and margaritas along the way. In excess of 100 million litres of tequila are produced annually. The blue agave plant is the base for this archetypal Mexican drink that’s sold on every street corner.

*Cenote* (caves) are one of Tulum’s big drawcards and the site of many activities. We entered the biggest domed *cenote* in the Yucatán Peninsula for some rappelling, slack-lining and swimming. My husband chose to go cave diving and, lacking a head for heights, watched me rappelling. It involves letting yourself down on a rope from the top of the cave into the icy, seemingly bottomless waters below. It was with fear and trepidation that I started to slowly release my rope before rapidly letting go and landing – to loud applause. We later sought sustenance back in town at Charlie’s, an authentic Mexican restaurant at the bus stop that became our favourite haunt

## IT WAS WITH FEAR AND TREPIDATION THAT I STARTED TO SLOWLY RELEASE MY ROPE BEFORE RAPIDLY LETTING GO AND LANDING – TO LOUD APPLAUSE.

for its well-priced food. Here we could people-watch and make friends using our few words of Spanish over tortillas, tacos and more tequila – referred to as “vitamin T” by the locals!

The highlight of my trip was meeting bright, vivacious and passionate Lily Espinoza, who runs Riviera’s Kitchen Tulum. Our taxi driver followed her directions into a suburb of small streets filled with noisy, playful children and dogs. Her cheerful green kitchen – with a cat slumbering in the sunshine on the windowsill – is where she teaches tourists the basics of native cuisine and about the “people of the corn”, whose fare revolves around corn, beans and chillies. More than 60 varieties of corn are considered to be the staple food for Mexicans and when nixtamalised (dried with an alkali-like lime), the corn changes its state and becomes more nutritious. It’s then ground on a heavy stone to produce cornflour (*masa*).

We learnt to make tortillas – the basis of all local food, with other traditional favourites like guacamole and tomato salsa. A tortilla filled with cheese is called a *quesadilla* and when filled, sealed and baked, it’s called an *empanada*. If fried, it’s a *tostados*; top it with cheese, meat ➤

**PREVIOUS SPREAD:** *Cenote* (caves) in the Yucatán Peninsula.

**LEFT:** Retail therapy of the brightest kind.

**OPPOSITE:** Clockwise, from top left: A local man in traditional dress.

• Day of the Dead street art. • Lily Espinoza. • Batey’s Mojito Bar.











or seafood and it's a *frijoles* and if you add chilli sauce, you have an *enchilada*. Fill and fold and there is your burrito, often containing flavoured beans. I queried the effects of eating so many beans. "Espazote is a green leaf that reduces flatulence and counteracts gastric parasites – and saves friendships and marriages," laughed Lily.

She shared other culinary pearls of wisdom: tomatoes "blink" when cooked, you can soften beans overnight for faster cooking and it's best to use fresh chillies for more flavour.

After feasting and bonding at her kitchen table, Lily drove us to see her new cookery school in a large house in the country. It's surrounded by fruit trees and herbs and it was here that I gained a true understanding of the meaning of the phrase "living off the land". Inspired by nature, she plans to grow



food to cook and teach with. When she dropped us back in Tulum we were armed with tips about where to buy indigenous ingredients, Mexican crockery and many a kilo of *masa*. She also kindly invited us to join her that night to eat at a taco spot favoured by the locals.

It was after dark when we found El Asadero restaurant in a little side street, hidden away from tourists. After beer with spice in a salted glass, I ordered tacos with *nopal* (cactus), savouring each mouthful and moment as our last night in this vibrant, colourful, must-see destination came to a fitting and flavourful end. 🌮



**TOP:** Abigail Mendoza Ruiz and her sister Rufina.  
**ABOVE:** Chilli poppers.  
**LEFT:** Chef Jorge Vallejo and Jenny Handley.

## TASTE MEXICO IN SOUTH AFRICA

### JOHANNESBURG:

- **Salsa Mexican Grill** offers a taste explosion with their healthy, modern take on traditional fare and a great vibe.  
**Bedfordview:** Bedford Centre, cnr Smith and Van der Linde Rds. Tel: 011 615 4562.  
**Parkhurst:** 38, 4<sup>th</sup> Ave, Randburg. Tel: 011 027 2572.  
**Pineslopes:** Pineslopes Boulevard, cnr Witkoppen Rd & The Straight. Tel: 011 465 3199.
- Hats off to **Perron**, aka the Mexican appreciation society, in Illovo. Illovo Junction, Corlett Drive. Tel: 011 880 7296.
- **La Rosa Mexican Grille and Tequileria** in Roodepoort offers great Mexican fare, 180 craft tequilas and authentic margaritas made with fresh limes. Honeydew Village Centre, John Vorster Rd, Weltevreden Park. Tel: 011 675 2544.

### CAPE TOWN

- **Zapata** in Claremont offers a Remembrance Platter, a great assortment of popular dishes, for two (or so they say, but it could feed three). 5 Bedford St, Shop 1 Harfield Village Centre, Harfield Village. Tel: 021 671 2393.
- Imaginative, innovative home-style **El Burro** has three outlets, with the mother ship in Green Point and two equally good, but smaller branches in Tamboerskloof and Newlands.  
**Green Point:** 81 Main Rd. Tel: 021 433 2364.  
**Tamboerskloof:** Cnr New Church St and Kloof Nek Rd. Tel: 021 433 2364.  
**Newlands:** 37A Dean St. Tel: 021 201 1421.
- **Fat Cactus** in Woodstock leads the way with flavour and happy hour that lasts from noon until 6pm. Order their cactus craft beer on tap, something yummy from their fat snactus section on the menu or the combo fiesta platter, and you may never leave.  
**Woodstock:** 5 Park Rd. Tel: 021 447 1713.  
**Gardens:** 160 Albert Rd. Tel: 021 422 5022.  
**Mowbray:** 47 Durban Rd. Tel: 021 685 1920.