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Mexico shows off its crafty side

GUADALAJARA, Mexico — Around 100 years ago Guadalajara, due to its rail link to the United States, became Mexico's commercial centre.



PETER NEVILLE-HADLEY/ MERIDIAN WRITERS' GROUP

Hand-painted figurines await their buyers in Tonalá, the village near Guadalajara where most of Mexico's best crafts are made.

The city's elite built elaborate courtyard mansions in villages on the outskirts where they could retire for some peace and quiet. The city's famous handicrafts makers, squeezed out by modern factories and new development, also headed for the surrounding countryside, where today they produce the majority of Mexico's traditional crafts.

So when the modern visitor has finished walking about the spacious plazas of Guadalajara's historic heart, dominated by the domes and soaring, yellow-tiled spires of its 450-year-old cathedral, it's time to follow the exodus to the outlying villages to find an appealing mix of mansion and market.

At Tlaquepaque, only a few kilometres southeast of the city centre and reachable by public bus, vast courtyard palaces have been turned into elegant, upmarket shopping centres with self-consciously designed items priced to match the ambiance.

The town has long been a stop for tours, and many a visitor takes home enough leather goods, furniture, fabrics and art to furnish a home. Fewer reach Tonalá, the source of many of these items, just a few kilometres further southeast.

There, every Thursday and Sunday, this warren of family run, small-scale workshops wakes up at around 4 a.m. to start on the construction of a vast street market. Its stalls are erected from rough sheets of plastic, metal frames, straps and cables, each stuffed with the best of Mexico's crafts. Wherever else you actually buy these products, whether rough and traditional or modernized and trendy, the chances are they originated here.

Wholesalers arrive from all over the country to buy in bulk, but individual shoppers are also welcome. Even for those determined to keep their wallets to themselves, the market offers hours of gaudy, bustling spectacle.

From fabrics to furniture, and the inevitable jewelry, embroidery and ceramics, much of the work here carries traditional themes of fruit or images of the sun and moon. Plaster saints sit next to more modern and less Mexican items such as children's shoes, furniture for dolls' houses, T-shirts and animal figures made entirely from cast-off pistons, cogs and bits of bicycle chain.

By 11 a. m., with mariachi bands starting up on street corners and the temperature rising, it's time to follow the scent of freshly cut limes to a food stall and sit down elbow-to-elbow with local people for a cold drink and tacos.

The buildings behind the stalls — part house, part workshop, part warehouse, part shop— are where family businesses produce their individual specialities. In one the air is gelatinous with the smell of varnish being hand-brushed onto small ceramic turtles. In another, glassblowers snip, spin, bend and inflate blobs of molten, incandescent glass, working together in a choreographed manner that's part craftsmanship, part stage performance, and open all week long.

So if you happen to miss a market day, Tonalá is still worth the trip.

For information on travel in Mexico, visit the Mexico Tourist Board website [a visitmexico.com](http://www.visitmexico.com). Tonalá's website — tianguistonala.com — is in Spanish but with an English version promised.

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