

La Ruta del Tequila

THE TEQUILA TRAIL

Agave farmers, also known as jimadores, harvest agaves from the Tequila, Jalisco highlands, in Mexico.



Sip and stay in the birthplace of tequila

BY LANE E LEE

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE TEQUILA TRAIL



As with Napa Valley's wine country, Kentucky's Bourbon Trail or France's Cognac region, Mexico also has its own "spirited" region for tequila. La Ruta del Tequila (the Tequila Trail) — a UNESCO World Heritage Site — is a scenic region in Jalisco, Mexico that connects the tequila-producing towns of El Arenal, Amatitán, Magdalena and Tequila. The Tequila Trail provides a behind-the-scenes look at the heritage, heart and hard work involved in tequila-making.



The Jose Cuervo Express takes visitors on a tour of the tequila trail in Jalisco, Mexico.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE TEQUILA TRAIL

TEQUILA TRAINS

One of the easiest ways to get a taste of the route is aboard the Tequila Express. The daytrip train-ride begins in Guadalajara, with the serenade of a mariachi band and plenty of chips, salsa, beer and tequila. Lunch is served, including a tour and tequila tasting at Casa Herradura, in the town of Amatitán.

More mariachi music and snacks accompany the return trip to Guadalajara. Views of the blue weber agave countryside (the only varietal of roughly 200 agave species, in which tequila can be made from) are spectacular. Running on weekends only, the 9 hour tour is \$90 per person. More information is available at: www.tequilaexpress.com.

If you'd rather see the town of Tequila, one of Mexico's designated historical towns, or "Pueblos Magicos," hop on the Jose Cuervo Express. Similar to the Tequila Express, although a bit more upscale, this all-day excursion includes margaritas or tequila shots, and nibbles such as tacos and empanadas throughout the journey, with a visit to Cuervo's distillery — La Rojeña.

Founded in 1795, it is one of the oldest distilleries in Latin America. The Cuervo experience includes time to explore the town of Tequila, a tasting, a show of traditional dancing and music and a factory tour. In addition to the weekend daytrips, the Jose Cuervo Express also runs a Friday night excursion. The tour runs 9 hours, and is \$100-\$130 per person. For more information, visit: www.josecuervoexpress.com.

Legally, only five of the 31 states of Mexico can produce tequila, but a majority is produced in the Valley of Tequila. Hence, if a do-it-yourself tequila trail adventure is more your style, it's best to focus here. Flanked by mountains on both sides and the dormant Tequila Volcano in the center, most of the distilleries are in or near the valley towns of El Arenal, Tequila and Amatitán. The town of Tequila is the most popular stop on the trail. When in Tequila for tequila, here are our recommendations:

TOURING TEQUILA'S DISTILLERIES

El Llano Distillery

El Llano, owned by the Orendain family, is a fifth generation distillery in operation since 1900. It's best to contact Tres Agaves ahead of time for a tour and tasting. If you're lucky, master-distiller Eduardo Orendain will be on hand to offer insights into his family's craft of longtime, artisanal tequila making.

"As a fourth-generation distiller, former mayor of Tequila and president of the Tequila Chamber, there's no one more passionate about the heritage of tequila than Orendain," says Barry Augus, co-owner of Tres Agaves. Orendain specializes in 100% agave tequila via small batches of the estate bottled Arette and Tres Agaves Tequilas, at El Llano. More information is available at: www.tresagaves.com.

La Cofradia Distillery

La Cofradia, making tequilas including Casa Noble, offers a unique "sip and stay" experience. A quaint four-room boutique hotel, each individually themed, lies adjacent to the distillery and agave fields. Take the "Tour of the Senses" night tour which includes dinner, peruse the museum, or just simply relax in the outdoor pool or onsite spa. Without a personal contact, the only way to book a room is by calling or sending a request through their contact form on their website. Visit www.tequilacofradia.com to book a trip.

The beautiful La Cofradia Distillery offers comfortable cottages to accommodate a small number of guests on the grounds.



PHOTO COURTESY OF LA COFRADIA DISTILLERY

Casa Sauza Distillery

As the first to export tequila to the U.S., a visit to Sauza to pay tribute to the U.S. tequila godfather is in order. There are three tour options. The most elaborate is the three-hour La Constancia, which includes assisting a jimador (agave farmer) in the harvest process, a distillery tour with an overview of the five step process of making tequila, and finally, barrel tastings and cocktails. A stop in the Sauza Museum is a must with Sauza family photos and memorabilia on display. Hornitos and Tres Generations are also made here. Tours operate from Monday through Saturday and are only \$8 to \$15. Visit www.casasauza.com for additional details.



The La Cofradia Distillery has a unique museum onsite, celebrating the cultural heritage of tequila in Tequila, Mexico.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LA COFRADIA DISTILLERY



The Hacienda at Casa Herradura.

PHOTO COURTESY OF HERRADURA TEQUILA

MUSEO NACIONAL DEL TEQUILA

Want more maguey (agave) mojo? Head to the National Museum of Tequila, which exhibits a collection of photos, drawings and memorabilia hailing the almighty agave. Plus learn of the folkloric Aztec legend, in which the love between a girl named Mayahuel and a man named Ehecatl create agave. Open Tuesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., you will learn all that is tequila.

TEQUILA VACATIONS

Since La Ruta del Tequila is still in its infancy, getting access to small-production, boutique distilleries can be a challenge. Unlike Napa's wine tasting tours or Kentucky's Bourbon Trail, many boutique distilleries are not open to the public, or are small family operations with irregular hours. For this reason, going with a tour led by an insider is worth it — not only for an authentic, hands-on encounter, but also for streamlining everything from directions, to currency exchange, to translation.

Enter the founders of Spirit of Jalisco, a U.S. tour company specializing in tequila vacations, who have been bringing tequila lovers and bartenders to Jalisco for a "real deal" immersion into the culture of Mexico's beloved spirit for over two decades. And their tour guides are not paid actors reading a script; rather, they are impassioned individuals who have dedicated their life's work to tequila and its preservation.

Led by Clayton Szczech, who is the only non-Mexican to earn the prestigious "Double T" certification for excellence in tequila tourism and education from the Tequila Regulatory Council, the four-day excursion focuses on 100% agave makers.



The pina, or the heart of the agave, first has to cook in an oven prior to the fermentation process.

PHOTO COURTESY OF HERRADURA TEQUILA

THE SPIRIT OF JALISCO

The two basic categories of tequila are mixtos (mixed) and 100% agave. Mixtos, as designated by Mexican law, are made with at least 51% agave. The remaining 49% is derived from another sugar source, traditionally sugar cane, but in order to cut costs many of the big producers are now using high fructose corn syrup (additives can lead to hangovers).

For this reason, tequilas made with 100% agave are what purists seek, both in Mexico and internationally; thus explaining the emphasis of a Spirit of Jalisco trip.

The Spirit of Jalisco's most popular tour is through the Valley of Tequila. It offers visitors insider experiences like a visit to the private Fortaleza distillery and cave, a tasting at La Cofradia with Casa Noble's master taster, and exclusive access to Herradura's aging room. Inside the aging room you will find French cognac barrels filled with Herradura's newest collectible tequila: Coleccion de la Casa, Reserva 2013-Cognac Cask Finish Reposado.

AN AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCE


Since Spirit of Jalisco has developed solid relationships with the maestro tequileros, jimadors and old-timer tavern owners of the area, they're able to open doors — literally — to deliver

a genuine education of the terroir and culture represented by each brand of tequila. As enthusiasts like to say, you're not just drinking liquor, you're drinking history.

"It's all about immersing our guests in a real, authentic Mexican village that is the heart of the rich culture of tequila making. We do not erect walls between our guests and locals — on the contrary, they are welcomed with open arms into the warm, convivial community of Tequila," says Szczech.

Spirit of Jalisco also creates custom tours. They can incorporate other fascinating aspects of the region, such as riding horseback through the tequila-making region of Los Altos, also known as the highlands; exploring the circular stepped pyramids of Los Guachimontones; shopping at local artisan boutiques in Guadalajara; culinary classes with local chefs, and even spa treatments at a nearby luxury hacienda hotel. To find out more, visit: www.spiritofjalisco.com.

A TIP ON GETTING THERE

From many major U.S. cities, American Airlines, US Airways, Delta and AeroMexico offer direct flights to Guadalajara (GDL). If you're renting a car and reserving it online, don't buy car rental insurance ahead of time. It doesn't apply in Mexico and you'll have to repurchase it when you get there. 

SIX SURPRISING FACTS ABOUT TEQUILA



1 Margaritas stemmed from the classic cocktail called the Daisy (gin or brandy, lemon juice and grenadine). During Prohibition, many flocked to Mexico, and it's said that a racetrack in Tijuana made the Daisy with tequila, lime juice, agave nectar and Grand Marnier. The word "margarita" is Spanish for daisy.



2 The blue agave plant is a not a cactus — as many believe — rather, it is a member of the lily and amaryllis family of flowering plants.



3 The most expensive tequila to date is a bottle of Platinum & White Gold Tequila by Tequila Ley .925, which sold for \$225,000 in 2006. They are now attempting to sell a \$3.5 million bottle that comes in a diamond encrusted platinum decanter.



4 It takes at least 8 to 12 years for an agave plant to mature. Some distillers wait even longer.



5 One pina — the heart of an agave plant which contains the juices that are fermented into tequila — will produce roughly one case, or 12 bottles of tequila



6 Contrary to the typical party experience of shooting it with a chaser of salt and lime, quality tequila requires neither. Those elements were introduced as way to mask the tequila flavor. Although you can enjoy it with lime and salt, the highest quality tequila should be sipped neat, like a fine cognac.