

Taming TIJUANA

Transcend the sinful rep of San Diego's sister city by checking out the *mucho cultura* awaiting just across the border



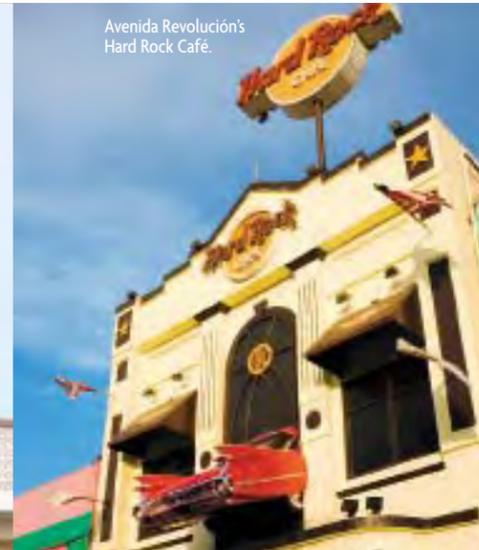
TIJUANA IS SYNONYMOUS with wanton indulgence and all-night partying, and for good reason. But sidestep the street hustlers herding drunken college kids toward seedy clubs and two-for-one tequila poppers and you'll uncover a far more authentic and culturally diverse side to this raucous border city.

Instead, let the sweet smells of steam from taco stands and cinnamon *churros* lure you to an outdoor plaza bathed in languid sunlight, where weathered men with worn guitars and studded jackets steep the afternoon air in Mexican ballads.

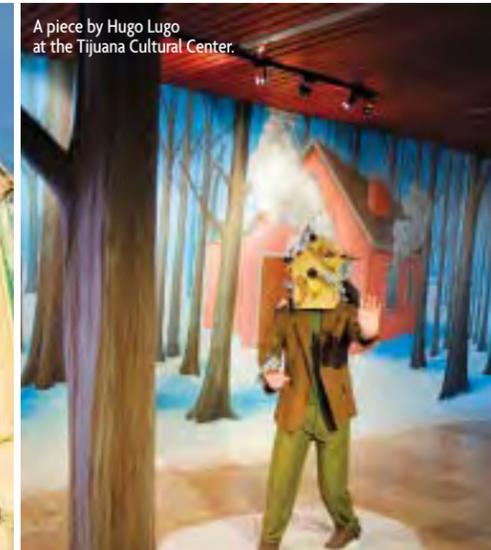
There are some ground rules for engaging this side of Tijuana, however. First, don't drive across the border. Your prospects of losing your way or finding yourself out of your element are high. Instead, take the I-5 freeway south from Los Angeles for approximately 220 km and park at the "last U.S. exit" before the San Ysidro border crossing, where various lots charge between \$3 and \$10 for 24 hours. From there, it's a short walk through the metal turnstiles and into Mexico.

By Melissa Henderson ★
Photos by Marshall Harrington

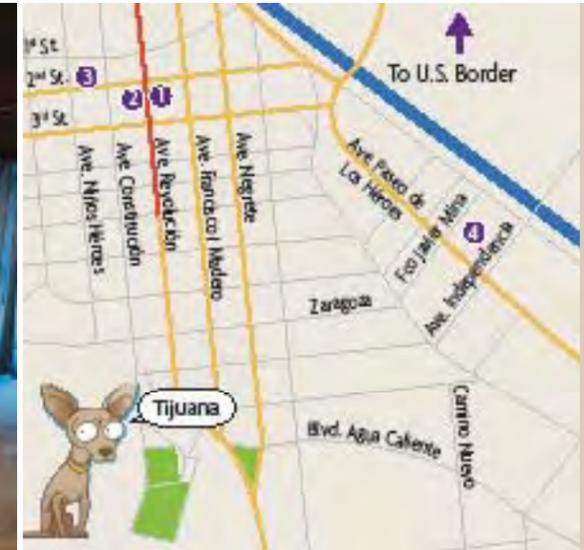
A moment of calm outside La Plaza de Toros Monumental.



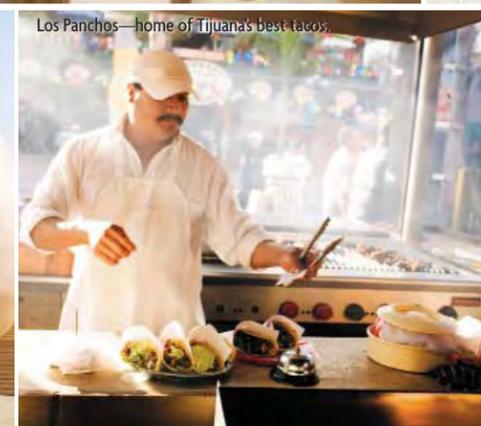
Avenida Revolución's Hard Rock Café.



A piece by Hugo Lugo at the Tijuana Cultural Center.



The Cultural Center's IMAX theatre.



Los Panchos—home of Tijuana's best tacos.



Shopping at the Plaza Santa Cecilia.

Once across, travel by taxi. Average fares are about US\$7, though establishing the price before you get in the cab is vital. Speaking Spanish will help, but don't worry if your language skills are rusty—a friendly smile and the name of your destination will suffice.

The classic tourist experience begins at **Avenida Revolución**, the main drag that stretches from the Tijuana Arch at 2nd Street to 6th Street. The area is best known for its throbbing neon discos (especially Koko Bongo, Hard Rock Café and Tijuana Tilly's), but the revellers don't arrive until after 10 p.m. Use the daylight to hunt for scorpion belt buckles or ornate mirrors with hammered tin and brightly coloured tile at the many curio shops that line the street.

You can also sink your teeth into one of the city's best tacos at (1 on the map above) **Los Panchos** (52-664-215-0104) on Ave. Revolución between 2nd and 3rd, then pop across the street to (2) **Hotel Nelson's Bar y Restaurant** (52-664-685-4302) to sip a refreshing mango margarita or a *michelada*—beer with lime and salt.

Shamelessly embrace your inner tourist and

buy a song from a wandering Mariachi or Norteño band in Plaza Santa Cecilia, then continue on to the (3) **Mercado el Popo** (on 2nd between Ave. Niños Héroes and Ave. Constitución) for regional cheeses, candies and more exotic items like fried grasshoppers or a Santería love spell from Botánica.

But don't limit yourself to shopping. Definitely visit the (4) **Tijuana Cultural Center** (52-664-687-9650) in Zona Río to pore over pre-Columbian artifacts that detail the history of the northern Baja peninsula, watch an educational IMAX movie or catch a live concert featuring internationally recognized musicians—all in the same day.

The Baja region is also home to some outstanding wines, notably from **L.A. Cetto Winery** (52-664-685-3031). Call ahead to schedule a tasting (the Nebiolo, available for about US\$15, is a knockout), or to reserve a coveted spot at one of the monthly musical evenings where stars of the Tijuana opera scene bounce their honeyed voices off the curved walls of the cellar, and dusky amber sconces, oak wine casks and wrought iron chandeliers conspire to create an astonishingly romantic atmosphere.

For a more visceral kick, tear up your PETA membership and follow the trail of red and green balloons to the roar and dust of a summer bullfight, where laughing children toss rosebuds to the swooping matadors every Sunday afternoon from May to September at **La Plaza de Toros Monumental**, the "Bullring by the Sea" in Las Playas de Tijuana (52-656-613-1656).

At the end of the day, downshift with some haute Baja cuisine at **La Diferencia** (52-664-634-3346), designed as a turn-of-the-century villa with an indoor courtyard complete with trickling fountain, singing parakeets and the illusion of a night sky above. Indulge your palate with the aromatic yet subtle duck in tamarind sauce or the delicate squash blossom soup, chased by a surprisingly smooth *Tequila con Vibora* (tequila aged with actual rattlesnakes).

When it's time to cab it back to the U.S., remember to declare all your purchases, have your passports ready, take off the shades and be on your best behaviour. No one, least of all a U.S. Customs officer, likes a joker at the border.