

TRAVEL • WEEKEND GETAWAY

This Magic Town on the Cali Border Is the Perfect Escape to Mexico

Free beer, stunning vistas, and healing resorts await in this Pueblo Magico.

By [Danielle Dorsey](#) Published on 10/27/2021 at 3:07 PM



TECATE

It's not often that a "Pueblo Magico" (or Magical Town) is also a border town. The bucolic, small city of Tecate butts up against California, just 45 miles from [San Diego](#), making it Mexico's closest town to the US to have the special "magical" designation. With narrow tree-lined streets, famous beer, and gorgeous scenery, it's easy to see why Tecate draws tourists across desert roads.

Nestled in the valley below Mount Kuchumaa (also known as Tecate Peak), Tecate was first home to the Kumeyaay who lived in this area long before the border existed. Now, Kumeyaay villages are scattered throughout the Baja region, but you can see their ancient homes at [Museo Comunitario Kumiai](#). Here you'll also find the story of Tecate's old railroad system and a botanical garden that highlights indigenous flora.

In recent years, Tecate has seen a burgeoning craft-coffee and restaurant scene. You can also take advantage of free handouts of the city's eponymous beer. And this year in particular, a decadent, five-day celebration of Dia de los Muertos will more than make up for last year's cancelation. Here's just a snapshot of everything you can do during your visit to Tecate.



TECATE PUEBLO MÁGICO

The best way to get to Tecate? Take a road trip

Whether you drive through Southern California or fly into San Diego or Tijuana, having a car is necessary, as Tecate is about an hour drive from both airports, with no direct public transport available.

Luckily, the drive not only takes you past some epic eroded rock formations, it also manages to elude tourists who flock to crowded [Baja beaches](#). Plus, [Tecate's less-busy border](#) allows drivers to skip the infamously long wait times at the San Ysidro land crossing—just make sure to take note of its limited hours: 6 am to 2 pm on weekdays and 8 am to 4 pm on weekends.

Whether you opt for a [rental](#) or drive your own car, you'll need to purchase Mexican car insurance—[Baja Bound](#) is one easy, online provider. National Guard officers tend to fine drivers (especially those who look like tourists) without the coverage, as well as for rolling stops, so make sure you obey the rules of the road.



RANCHO LA PUERTA

Paint yourself a skull face at the annual Dia de los Muertos celebrations

While Tecate's warm climate is ideal year-round, one of the best times to visit is during Dia de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, celebrations in the fall. The Mexican holiday honors loved ones who have passed on by creating ofrendas, or altars, filled with their favorite photos and foods, including pan de muerto, a type of sweet bread that's often dusted with sugar or sesame seeds and an egg-wash. La Catrina is the holiday's symbolic skeletal creature, often outfitted in feathered hats, tiered dresses, and sugar skull makeup.

After taking a pause last year due to COVID, this year's Day of the Dead festivities will last for five days, from October 29 to November 2, headquartered at Miguel Hidalgo Park. Festivities include private themed dinners, a bread competition, an art contest, live plays, and performances. On Monday, don't miss the Catrina Costumes Runway Contest. The celebration culminates on Tuesday, with a lighting of candles for the dearly departed, and free pan de muerto and hot chocolate.



UNSPASH/JAKOB OWNES

Drink Tecate beer like a local—for free, everyday

Tecate's signature pale lager was created in 1943, but stayed local for many years. The Mexican beer went international in 2017, but drinking Tecate beer in Tecate offers a distinct experience.

“Most of Mexico’s quality beer is exported,” explains Alberto Cortez, a Tecate native and Special Events Manager at Santuario Diegueño hotel. “Tecate is the only place where you can drink Tecate beer that’s made with local water that comes directly from underground springs.”

Another only-in-Tecate advantage? The local brewery offers one free can a day to everyone. Simply visit the brewery to receive your token, then enjoy in the Tecate Beer Garden or opt in to a brewery tour.



EL MEJOR PAN DE TECATE

Get your fill of bakery bread and local coffee

Besides beer, light and sweet homemade breads are what Tecate is known for. El Mejor Pan de Tecate, which literally translates to The Best Bread of Tecate, is the most popular option in town. The panaderia first gained notoriety for their pan dulce (sweet bread) when the city was little more than a break along longer bus routes. Riders would insist on stopping so often that the bakery decided to remain open 24/7 to accommodate late night travelers.

Whether you come to El Mejor Pan for big-hit variety or Cielo de Ti for a more gourmet experience, it's common to pair the breads, pastries, and cakes with coffee. And while regions like Guerrero and Chiapas are upheld as Mexico's top coffee bean producers, Tecate is quickly emerging as a capital for artisanal coffee shops and roasters.

Helmed by local Ignacio Aguayo, who began roasting coffee beans as a hobby while studying architecture, Acento Coffee Roasters features a floor-to-ceiling window where guests and passersby can witness the coffee roasting process—though the wafting smell of freshly ground beans is usually enough to draw them inside.



RESTAURANTE AMORES

Indulge in fine dining and street food eats

Owned by husband and wife Marcelo Hisaki and Reyna Venegas, [Amores Restaurante](#) offers a prix-fixe, multi-course experience. The menu changes daily depending on local produce and pulls from Hisaki's Mexican-Japanese heritage.

Many of Tecate's more casual, long-standing food and drink options are also in high demand, and Cortes is quick to name [La Guerita](#) as the best taco spot in town—especially for carne asada. Cortes also hails [Taqueria Los Amigos](#) as “The best burrito place in Tecate,” and a solid option for tacos if the line at La Guerita proves too long.



RANCHO LA PUERTA

Where to stay in Tecate

While you're welcome to [find an Airbnb in the area](#), Tecate offers well-established lodging options centered around restoration and healing. Opened in 1940, [Rancho La Puerta](#) is a family-owned, [luxurious resort](#) just 15 minutes outside of the city that has long attracted celebs like Oprah Winfrey, Kate Winslet, and Jane Fonda. The healing haven has 4,000 acres of relaxing ranch scenery and an organic farm. In addition to the health and beauty spas, guests can unplug with yoga, guided meditations, workshops, and nature hikes.

If you prefer to be closer to Tecate proper, [Santuario Diegueño](#)—named after Spanish settlers' term for the Kumeyaay people—is a small boutique hotel that sits on a hill overlooking the surrounding valley. The hotel has a gorgeous pool that will transport you to the coast, a museum-worthy collection of regional Mexican art, and two on-site restaurants: [ASAO](#) for fine dining, and the more casual [YIIMA](#), which translates to 'party' in the Kumeyaay language.