

FREE FIELD GUIDE · 2026 EDITION

EAT MEXICO LIKE A LOCAL, WITH CONFIDENCE

How to pick the right stand, what to order, what to skip and how to keep your stomach happy. The street food rules our guides teach every day, in nine destinations across Mexico.

Top 1%
Tripadvisor Travelers' Choice Best of the Best 2026

31,500+
travelers fed since 2017

112
family-run local restaurants we work with

BEFORE YOU EAT

THE FOOD IS THE REASON TO COME. FEAR IS THE REASON PEOPLE MISS IT.

Every week, someone on one of our tours tells us the same thing: "We almost didn't come, we were worried about our stomachs." Three hours later they are asking where to eat for the rest of the trip.

Mexico's street food is not a gamble you take blindly. Locals eat it every single day, and they follow a few simple rules without even thinking about it. This guide puts those rules on paper, so you can walk up to a taco stand on your first night and know exactly what you are looking at.

It is short on purpose. Read chapter 1 and you already have most of what you need.

IF YOU REMEMBER ONE THING

EAT WHERE THE LOCALS LINE UP, AND EAT IT HOT.

A busy stand sells through its food fast, so nothing sits around. Food cooked in front of you, straight off the grill or the comal, is the safest food on the street.

WHAT'S INSIDE

1. THE 30-SECOND STAND TEST

Seven signs that tell you a stand is good before you order.

2. WATER, ICE, FRUIT AND SALSA

What is actually fine, and what to go easy on.

3. YOUR FIRST 48 HOURS

A simple plan to ease in, and what to do if your stomach complains.

4. ORDER LIKE A LOCAL

The ten phrases that cover 90% of street food situations.

5. WHAT TO EAT, WHERE

The dishes worth ordering in each of our nine destinations.

6. ETIQUETTE, MONEY AND RED FLAGS

How it works at the stand, and when to walk away.

CHAPTER 1

THE 30-SECOND STAND TEST

Before you order, stand back for half a minute and look. You need three or four of these signs, not all seven.

1. **There is a line, and it is mostly locals.**
   Office workers, families, taxi drivers. If people who live here choose it, it is good and it is fresh.

2. **It is busy at the right time.**
   Taco stands peak in the evening, breakfast stands in the morning. An empty stand at 9 pm on a Friday is telling you something.

3. **The food is cooked in front of you.**
   Meat on the trompo or the grill, tortillas on the comal. Hot food is the safest food.

4. **The menu is short.**
   Three to six things done every day for years beats thirty things done occasionally.

5. **One person handles the money, another handles the food.**
   Common at well-run stands. Not a deal breaker if it is a one-person show that uses a bag or a glove for cash.

6. **Toppings are covered or kept cool.**
   Onion, cilantro and salsas in covered containers or on ice, refilled often.

7. **The plates are covered in plastic.**
   That little plastic bag over the plate is changed for every customer. It is a hygiene habit, and a good one.



Our guides use exactly this test when they scout new stops. Every place on our tours is a kitchen or stand our team knows personally.

CHAPTER 2

WATER, ICE, FRUIT AND SALSA: THE HONEST ANSWERS

Most of the fear comes from things travelers heard years ago. Here is how it actually works today.

BOTTLED ONLY

TAP WATER

Don't drink it, and neither do locals. Every home and restaurant uses purified water from big 20-liter jugs called garrafones. Brushing your teeth with tap water is a personal call; bottled is the cautious choice.

USUALLY FINE

ICE

Restaurants and established stands buy commercial ice made from purified water. You can usually spot it: uniform tubes with a hole in the middle. Irregular chunks from an unknown source are the ones to skip.

FINE AT BUSY PLACES

AGUAS FRESCAS

Hibiscus (jamaica), horchata and tamarind are made with purified water at any decent place. Order them where the jug empties fast.

FINE, GO SLOW

SALSAS

Fresh salsas at busy stands are refilled all day. The real risk is heat, not hygiene. Taste a drop on your taco before you pour, and never trust the color: green can be hotter than red.

PEELED IS BEST

FRUIT

Fruit cups with lime and chile powder from busy carts are a classic. Fruit you peel yourself is the safest of all.

USE JUDGMENT

RAW TOPPINGS AND SALADS

Onion, cilantro and cabbage at busy taco stands are part of the experience and most people eat them without issues. If your stomach is sensitive, order sin verdura for the first day or two.

SEAFOOD RULE

EAT CEVICHE AT LUNCH, NEAR THE COAST.

Seafood places in Mexico buy fish in the morning and are busiest at midday. That is when locals eat ceviche and cocteles, and so should you.

CHAPTER 3

YOUR FIRST 48 HOURS

Most stomach trouble on vacation is not one bad taco. It is heat, a long flight, a few drinks and a lot of rich food all on day one. Ease in and you skip most of it.

1. **Day 1: cooked and hot.**
   Tacos off the grill, quesadillas, tamales. Keep raw toppings and very spicy salsas for later.

2. **Drink more water than you think.**
   Heat plus alcohol plus chile is the real culprit behind a lot of "food poisoning". Alternate every drink with water.

3. **Small portions, more places.**
   Two tacos here, one there. That is how locals eat street food, and it is the most fun way to do it.

4. **Wash or sanitize your hands before you eat.**
   The most underrated tip on the list. Keep a small bottle of sanitizer in your bag.

5. **Day 2 onward: open the menu.**
   Salsas, raw toppings, ceviche at lunch, fresh fruit. By now your body has caught up with the trip.

IF YOUR STOMACH COMPLAINS ANYWAY

Rest, keep drinking water and sip an oral rehydration drink. Every Mexican pharmacy sells them: ask for suero oral. Eat plain food for a day. Pharmacies are everywhere and pharmacists are helpful, but if you have a fever, severe pain, blood, or it lasts more than a couple of days, see a doctor. Ask your own doctor before the trip what to pack for your situation.



CHAPTER 4

ORDER LIKE A LOCAL

Nobody expects perfect Spanish. Ten phrases, a smile and pointing will get you everything on the menu.

Uno de pastor, por favor. OO-no deh pas-TOR, por fa-VOR	One al pastor taco, please. Swap in any filling: suadero, asada, cochinita.
¿Qué me recomienda? keh meh reh-koh-mee-EN-dah	What do you recommend? The best question in Mexico. People love answering it.
¿Cuál pica menos? kwal PEE-ka MEH-nos	Which one is less spicy? Ask it at every salsa bar.
Sin chile / sin cebolla. seen CHEE-leh / seen seh-BOH-yah	No chile / no onion.
Con todo. kon TOH-doh	With everything (usually onion and cilantro). The local default.
Para aquí / para llevar. PA-ra ah-KEE / PA-ra yeh-VAR	For here / to go.
Soy alérgico (alérgica) a... soy ah-LER-hee-koh ah	I'm allergic to... los mariscos (shellfish), el cacahuate (peanut), la nuez (tree nuts).
¿Cuánto es? KWAN-toh es	How much is it?
La cuenta, por favor. la KWEN-ta, por fa-VOR	The check, please. At a sit-down place they won't bring it until you ask.
¡Provecho! pro-VEH-cho	Enjoy your meal. Said to anyone eating near you. Say it back and you are officially a local.

Tip: take a photo of this page. Allergies are serious; if yours is severe, write it on a card in Spanish and show it before you order.

CHAPTER 5

WHAT TO EAT, WHERE

Mexico is not one cuisine. Here is what is worth ordering at least once in each of our destinations.

THE MEXICAN CARIBBEAN

Playa del Carmen · Tulum · Cancún · Puerto Morelos · Cozumel

- **Cochinita pibil** tacos or tortas in the morning: slow-roasted pork in achiote and sour orange, with pickled red onion.
- **Tacos al pastor** at night, carved off the spinning trompo, with a slice of pineapple.
- **Ceviche and cocteles** at lunch, plus **tikin xic**, Mayan-style fish in achiote.
- **Panuchos and salbutes**, little fried tortillas piled with turkey or chicken, and a **marquesita** for dessert.

MÉRIDA AND THE YUCATÁN

The home of Yucatecan cooking

- **Cochinita pibil** at its source, best on a weekend morning.
- **Poc chuc** (citrus-marinated grilled pork), **sopa de lima** and **papadzules**.
- **Relleno negro**, turkey in a black chile paste, if you want something you won't find anywhere else.
- Any market: try the **xnipec** salsa (habanero, onion, sour orange). Respect the habanero.

MEXICO CITY

Coyoacán · Historic Center

- **Tacos de suadero** and **al pastor** at a busy late-night stand.
- **Tlacoyos** and **quesadillas** from a comal (in the capital, ask "con queso" if you want cheese).
- **Tamales with atole** for breakfast, **esquites** in the afternoon, **churros** with chocolate at night.

LOS CABOS

Cabo San Lucas · San José del Cabo

- **Baja-style fish tacos**, battered and fried, with cabbage and crema.
- **Chocolate clams** (almejas chocolatas), **aguachile** and **smoked marlin**.
- Do it the local way: fish tacos for lunch, carne asada tacos for dinner.

CHAPTER 6

ETIQUETTE, MONEY AND RED FLAGS

HOW IT WORKS AT THE STAND

PAY AT THE END

At most taco stands you eat first and pay after. They will ask ¿cuántos fueron? (how many did you have?) and trust your answer.

CARRY PESOS IN SMALL BILLS

Many stands are cash only and can't break a 500 peso note. Keep 20s, 50s and coins.

TIPPING

At sit-down restaurants, 10 to 15% is normal and usually not included. Check the bill for propina incluida. At street stands a tip isn't expected, but rounding up is always appreciated.

EAT STANDING

Many of the best stands have no chairs. Plate in one hand, taco in the other, salsa within reach.

WALK AWAY IF YOU SEE

- Food sitting out lukewarm, with no heat source.
- An empty stand at peak hours while the one next door has a line.
- Flies on uncovered food or toppings.
- Seafood late at night, far from the coast.
- No prices anywhere and a menu built for visitors only.
- A gut feeling. Trust it. There is another great taco around the corner.



OR SKIP THE GUESSWORK

LET A LOCAL GUIDE DO THE ORDERING.

On our food tours, your guide picks every stop, handles the ordering and the spice level, and tells you the story behind each dish. You walk away knowing exactly where to eat for the rest of your trip.

A THANK-YOU FROM US

10% OFF ANY OF OUR WALKING FOOD TOURS

YOUR CODE

Enter it at checkout on eatingwithcarmen.com. Valid on any of our walking food tours, in all nine destinations.

STREETFOOD10

Playa del Carmen Food Tour
See the tour and dates →

Tulum Food Tour
See the tour and dates →

Cancun Food Tour
See the tour and dates →

Puerto Morelos Food Tour
See the tour and dates →

Cozumel Food Tour
See the tour and dates →

Merida Food Tour
See the tour and dates →

Mexico City Food Tours
See the tour and dates →

Cabo San Lucas Food Tour
See the tour and dates →

San Jose del Cabo Food Tour
See the tour and dates →

Not sure which one?
Take the 60-second quiz →



Eating With Carmen Food Tours is a local walking food tour company founded in 2017 in Playa del Carmen. We have fed more than 31,500 travelers and work with 112 family-run restaurants and stands across Mexico.

Our Playa del Carmen and Mérida tours were named Tripadvisor Travelers' Choice Best of the Best 2026, in the top 1% worldwide. Small groups, local bilingual guides, and all food and drinks included.

Questions about your trip? Write to info@eatingwithcarmen.com. We live here and we answer.

This guide shares general travel tips based on our team's daily experience. It is not medical advice. ¡Buen provecho!