

LAKE CHAPALA

Written by Judy King



Each year more Canadians abandon their former winter snowbird destinations to live happily for a few months or all year long in colourful central Mexico. They often prefer to take up lodging in Lake Chapala and the surrounding areas.

What's causing once fiercely loyal winter Texans, Arizonians and Floridians to abandon their previous warm haunts and move farther south and seek out lodgin in Lake Chapala? Well, the area has a nearly perfect climate, is close to an international airport and excellent medical care, has restaurants, hotels and bed and breakfasts, activities and events to suit every visitor's dream for the perfect winter escape. Mexico's largest natural lake is the focal point of the country's high central plain. Located less than an hour south of Guadalajara (Mexico's second largest city), Lake Chapala is approximately 100 kms long and 20 kms wide, and home to 5,000 to 7,000 full-time foreign residents with nearly three times that many visitors arriving during January, February and March.

Lake Chapala has had ups and downs. Six years ago, the lake reached its lowest level in nearly 50 years. Today the water level is higher than it's been since 1979. Once seriously polluted by agricultural run-off and heavy metals from upriver feedlots, farms and factories, University of

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Guadalajara laboratory tests now show that the water meets United States EPA levels of acceptability.

Lake Chapala is more scenic than recreational. The cool water temperatures, combined with the sticky mud bottom, discourage all but the most intrepid swimmers. Most foreigners prefer to swim in local private and public pools or in the variety of pools in the San Juan Cosalá's mineral hot springs complex just minutes away.

Lake Chapala has never been a sport fishing destination or a boating Mecca, still, several hundred local commercial fishermen are out on the lake every morning. While they sell the catch from their nets on the village streets, most foreigners bypass the local carp and catfish and purchase the fresh Pacific red snapper, tuna, mahi mahi, swordfish and shrimp that are shipped to local fish markets daily.

Climate

Local legend insists a 1970s National Geographic article proclaimed that Lake Chapala has the second-best climate in the world. While we've not found that reference, we have no doubt that the claim is true. Lake Chapala and nearby Guadalajara enjoy eternal spring-like weather. Long term temperature charts prove a mean year-round temperature at Lake Chapala of a comfortable 22 degrees Celsius. Don't be fooled by that year-round average. It takes occasional predawn lows of 4.5 degrees Celsius in late December and occasional late afternoon highs of 34 during the hottest months of April and May to balance out the year.

Each year the Lake Chapala basin receives about 100-110 mm of rain. The rain really does fall mostly at night during the May through October rainy season, unless a tropical storm or hurricane is moving up either of Mexico's coastlines. The area's 1,585-metre altitude keeps the humidity at very comfortable levels, even during the rainy season.

Residents of Lake Chapala pay their doctor between \$15 and \$50 Canadian dollars for office calls, and are delighted to discover that they can usually see their doctor without waiting for an appointment—and that most doctors routinely make house calls.

Safety


Safety is largely a non-issue in the string of small Mexican fishing villages along Lake Chapala's north shore. While petty theft is as annoying in Central Mexico as it is anywhere, there are far fewer car thefts and personal injury incidents in Mexico than in most countries around the world.

Tourists find that they feel comfortable and safe walking the ancient cobblestone streets of Chapala, San Antonio Tlayacapan, Ajijic, San Juan Cosalá and Jocotepec—even at night. Families still rule the streets of Lake Chapala's small towns. There's a mom and pop corner store for every 50 homes, taco stands stay busy on the streets until late every evening and families sit on their stoops visiting with passing neighbours creating the same feeling many retirement-age folks remember from their childhood days.

Getting to Lake Chapala

It is an 1,125 kilometre drive from Laredo, Texas, the nearest border crossing, to Lake Chapala. Since most drivers use over \$150 Canadian dollars for gasoline and another \$130 Canadian dollars for toll road fees for the Mexico portion of the drive, most winter visitors prefer to book flights on one of several major airlines that arrive at the nearby Miguel Hidalgo International airport (GDL).

You'll need a passport for entering and leaving Mexico, and you'll have no problem obtaining a permit to legally remain in the country for 180 days or less. Once you've cleared immigration and customs at the airport, you can take a cab to your bed and breakfast, inn or hotel in Ajijic or Chapala (about 35 minutes) for about \$28 Canadian dollars. It's customary to tip the sky caps and cab drivers about \$1 per suitcase.

Taxicabs in the Guadalajara and Lake Chapala area are absolutely safe. All cab drivers belong to strictly controlled unions which preset the price of all fares. 

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Lodging in Lake Chapala

Like many other winter destinations, seasonal rental prices have increased in the past decade in response to the increased demand. This year visitors at Lake Chapala will find the remaining two or three-bedroom homes renting for \$900 to \$1800 Canadian dollars per month, plus utilities.

Because of differences in rental regulations and traditions, newcomers are well advised to rent their first home through a recommended real estate or rental office. Renters and those winter residents who decide to purchase real estate at Lake Chapala should be sure to check the written inventory and then only sign contracts written in English to be certain that they know what will remain in the house when they take possession of it and know the conditions of the rental or purchase agreements.

Availability of Food Items

People come from Guadalajara, Puerto Vallarta and all over Mexico to the Lake Chapala town of San Antonio Tlayacapan to purchase imported American, Canadian and European food items. The owners of this medium-sized store import two 48-foot trailers of groceries from the United States each month giving Lakeside residents ready access to water biscuits and champagne crackers, imported English jams, canned pumpkin and other delights. While it's possible to live a full life without shredded wheat, Irish steel cut oatmeal and pure maple syrup, it's really nice to have these familiar foods from back home, even when the importation fees mean they cost a bit more.

Some Lakeside residents drive 45 minutes into Guadalajara to shop once a month or so at Wal-Mart, Sam's Club, Costco stores—and a new Wal-Mart is opening this fall at Lake Chapala. While in the city they stop off for a stroll through one of the city's malls or for a great lunch. They

choose from familiar chains like Outback Steak House, Applebee's, McDonalds and Burger King or they try one of the many fine Italian, Japanese, Continental or Mexican restaurants in the city.

Living In a Cash Society

It takes a little adjustment to live in a totally cash society. While visitors may be able to use a major credit card at a few local hotels, be sure to ask if there is a discount for cash payment. Don't bother bringing traveller's cheques as they are difficult to cash, and you'll receive a lower rate of exchange when shopping with them.

Most visitors find that they do best by starting with a few hundred U.S. dollars that they can exchange for pesos at a casa de cambio (exchange house), and then by drawing money (in pesos) from their back-home bank accounts with their ATM cards. Automatic teller machines are in each of the banks in Chapala, Ajijic and Jocotepec. Additional ATMs are located in larger grocery stores and pharmacies, the airport and Guadalajara's big box stores.

Medical Care

The medical school in Guadalajara is one of the best in the world, with many of the graduating doctors taking additional training in their specialty in respected north of the border schools and medical centres.

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While there are four 24-hour clinics at Lakeside, most major medical needs are met in Guadalajara hospitals with their exceptional testing facilities, surgeons and specialists in all fields. One happy surprise for foreigners is that when a doctor has read the results of blood tests, x-rays, ultra sounds or MRI exams the test results are handed to the patient for safe keeping.

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The expertly trained and equipped Red Cross emergency service ambulances are as close as a phone call, and serve the public for a small donation. Always open, the Red Cross clinic in Chapala serves as an emergency room for Lakesiders.

The price of medications varies. Some medicines (especially those that are now available in generic form) are a fraction of the price north of the border. Newer drugs often cost the same or more than back home.

Finding long stay or short stay lodgin in Lake Chapala is not difficult, although it is much easier to do once you are in the area rather than from a long distance. 

THE COST OF LIVING Most retirees living at Lake Chapala find that their monthly living expenses

Telephone (local service)	\$20
Gas for hot water, cooking, clothes drying	\$30-40
High Speed Internet service	\$40-60
Electricity	\$40-100
Water	\$25
Cable or satellite subscription	\$10-150
Maid (per hour)	\$3.50-4.50
Gardener (per hour)	\$3-5
Gasoline for car (per Litre)	\$.75
Lady's haircut and Colour	\$20-45
Manicure or pedicure	\$8-15
Man's haircut	\$4.50
Massage (hour)	\$20-35
Laundry—washed, dried	\$4.50 per load
Movie (First run film in English)	\$8.50
Tickets for Little Theater productions	\$12
Tickets for classical music concerts	\$15-25
Weekly English newspaper	\$1.50
USA Today daily newspaper	\$5.00
Miami Herald daily newspaper	\$2.50
Chatelaine magazine	\$7.50

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Fine meals in best restaurant	\$12.30
cocktail	\$1.30
Sandwich, salad and soft drink	\$5.10
Breakfast, coffee, eggs, bacon, potatoes, bacon	\$6.70
Groceries (per kilo unless other quantity indicated)	
T-Bone Steak	\$3.80
Chicken	\$2.80
Lean Hamburger	\$4.40
Apples	\$3.10
Broccoli	\$1.60
Salad greens (bag)	\$2.50
Oranges	\$0.50
Onions	\$1.20
Potatoes	\$1.20
Bananas	\$0.80
Butter	\$4.50
Cola 2-litre	\$1.80
Eggs	\$1.80
Bacon	\$4.40
Bread (large loaf)	\$2.50

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