

P R I O R

# MEXICO AS MUSE

From a bridge on the road to Acapulco to pre-Hispanic temples and the world's largest cactus reserve, Chic by Accident's Emmanuel Picault finds inspiration in unlikely places.

*BY Carlos Huber*



Although Mexico is quite literally at the center of the globe, sometimes it can feel separate, floating between the US and Latin America, between the Old World and the New. So when someone from the outside is interested in the country and its culture, Mexicans shower them with gratitude. When someone is as passionate about it as Emmanuel Picault, he becomes a native son.

By starting the gallery and design studio Chic by Accident, the Frenchman has shed light on the uniqueness of design and architecture in Mexico — especially that from the ‘50s all the way through to the much-maligned ‘80s and ‘90s. Picault sees the inherent Mexicanness in it and recognizes how cool it is. He understands that there is beauty in the unexpected, even the misunderstood. He embraces the sometimes “cuckoo” quirkiness of Mexico — one of his highest terms of praise.



Having lived extensively in Mexico for the last 20 years, he should know. His quest for the unexpected has led him to places that no tourist would ever venture into. Picault is as animated by a prehispanic temple hidden in the jungle as he is by an Acapulco suspension bridge. And he has an incredible knack for finding just the right pieces of furniture and art to bring back to his Mexico City gallery — a must visit, no matter the size of one’s suitcase.

“Mexico is always about surprises,” Picault says. “It’s an amazing territory if you’re open-minded and curious and enjoy people, places, colors and sometimes difficult moments.” Here, he shares some of his favorites.

## Yucatán

*Aké* | “Located just 40 minutes from Mérida, this archaeological site isn’t difficult to find. What’s interesting for me is that it’s totally unknown and abandoned. Maybe 800 people visit a year; you have to ask a man to open it for you. Here they have the most amazing stairs. They’re always an inspiration to me whenever I have to build something. You could imagine an incredible orchestra playing in this arena, set up on the stairs — it is the beginning of a real dream.”

*Apoala* | “This is a wonderful restaurant in Merida, where an amazing woman makes Oaxacan food in an interesting, modern way. It’s set in one of the most beautiful old places with arches, and the service is perfect. It’s where you go with someone you love well.”



## Estado de Queretaro

*Mission Bucareli and Mirador de Cuatro Palos* | “In a canyon at the bottom of a mountain, you’ll find the abandoned convent from the late 1700s. At the top is Cuatro Palos, which has the most powerful view above the clouds. (You can drive or hike.) It’s two very different sensations that are worth experiencing on the way from the charming town of Bernal to the popular Xilitla in San Luis Potosí. They’re not easy to get to, but there’s a sensation: something very special, very unknown, always very interesting.”

## Estado de Veracruz

*Xalapa Anthropology Museum* | “This is the most important museum for me in all of Mexico. The building was built in the mid-’80s as a collaboration between Mexican and American architects. You don’t have to have a master’s in anthropology or history to feel its power. I love it more than the anthropology museum in Mexico City, which is so rich you need to go back four times! But here it’s a sense of discovering and also enjoying the tour at the same time. Xalapa is not very fashionable, but if you’re on the way to Veracruz or the archeological site of Tajín, this is an absolutely essential moment.”

## Estado de México

*Otomi Ceremonial Center* | “This is totally the most cuckoo place I’ve seen in Mexico. A 45-minute drive from Toluca and 90 minutes from Mexico City, it is the re-creation of a ceremonial center, built in the late 1980s. You don’t have to be a part of the Otomi tribe to take part in the rituals, which are open to the public on the second Sunday of each month. The place is totally inspiring, be it for spiritual reasons or architectural reasons, or just to feel like you’re in the middle of a set design.”

## Estado de Campeche

*El Tigre Pyramid* | “One of the most beautiful places, this pre-Columbian complex is totally unknown — possibly because it is very difficult to get to. For the adventurous, it is a seven-hour drive from Campeche on the border of Guatemala. Said to date back as far as 300 B.C., this pyramid recovered from the jungle looks like a truly wild Indiana Jones experience.”

## Estado de Morelos

*Xochicalco Archaeological Site* | “A very unknown place, yet close to Mexico City. The pyramids are very impressive, and some of the pieces in the small archaeological museum are absolutely delicious and unique. The landscaping surrounding all the pyramids is very powerful and sweet at the same time. And you could go by Uber! Just ask the driver to stay for a few hours.”

## Estado de Puebla

*Zapotitlan Eco Reserve* | “For those who’d rather skip the archaeological tours in favor of an intimate communion with nature in the world’s largest cactus reserve. Here, you stay in a casita because there are no good hotels. Your hosts prepare the fireplace for you, so you can sit all night among the wild cactus, looking at the amazing sky full of stars. A three-hour drive from Mexico City, it is a welcome night of silence and sky. And coyotes.”

## Estado de Guerrero

*Bridge over Mezcala River* | “Whenever I drive from Mexico City to Acapulco, I always admire this incredible feat of engineering. It’s a beautiful bridge with an amazing view of the Mezcala River. You can feel the transition between the mountains to the Pacific coast. It is a point for me to breathe, to see, to enjoy.”



P R I O R



## Estado de Oaxaca

*Iglesia de San Jeronimo Tlacoahuaya* | “Oaxaca is full of recommendations, but if you want to go just 30 minutes from Oaxaca City, there is an amazing church from the 1500s built by the first missionaries. It is Baroque but made by the indigenous community from the Oaxaca Valley, full of colors, representations of animals, vegetation. You are totally alone when visiting this church — the kind of place where the old lady from the church comes to you and starts explaining everything. A few kilometers away is a very good small hacienda that is also home to the design collaborative Oaxifornia, which sells a range of locally made items.”