

Living

living@thenews.com.mx

Take a hike



The Desierto de los Leones, the Nevado de Toluca, and volcanoes Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl offer hikers an opportunity to enjoy nature just a few miles away from Mexico City

BY CHRISTOPHER BENOIT
AND LYDIA CAREY
The News

As much as I love the bright chaos of urban life, it's always nice to get out of the city. Despite the massive sprawl of Mexico City, nature is relatively close. There are dozens of options for trekking beyond and within Mexico City limits. Here are a few options to satisfy your inner nature-lover.

THE VOLCANO COVERED IN SNOW

As we leave the city the sky is overcast and chilly, but pleasant for an early Saturday morning in March. Three friends and I are headed toward Toluca on our way to the Xinantécatl (Nahuatl for "naked man") volcano, otherwise known as the Nevado de Toluca, one of Mexico's highest and most accessible mountain peaks. At the entrance to the 51,000-hectare (126,023-acre) park, a light snow is falling, blanketing everything with a stillness interrupted only by the crunch of snow and ice under our boots. From the parking

lot at the base, a paved road snakes up the mountain almost to the summit, which affords a stunning panorama of central Mexico. The peak is covered with heavy snow and vehicles have been banned from going past the park's entrance, so we make the two-to-four hour hike to the summit on foot. We are hoping for a look at the two freshwater lakes that sit in Xinantécatl's 1.5 kilometer-wide (1 mile) crater, Sun Lake and Moon Lake.

Flurries dust the vast pine forest on either side of the main road. Underbrush is scarce and we can see for miles. The only other human sounds are the occasional huffing and puffing of endurance runners and cyclists training in the mountain's high-altitude environment. Once we pass the tree line, the wind picks up and the snow races unobstructed across the Nevado de Toluca's bald upper region. The views are as breathtaking as the altitude, but after two hours of cold we decide to save the summit for a warmer day. Meanwhile, our endurance runner friend has already lapped the rest of us, making it to the top and back. The snow will be mostly melted by April, when the park hosts runners

at the Skyrace Mexiquense, two races, one 24 (14 miles) and one 26 kilometer (16 miles) races that include trail running and "skyrunning" — running above 6,600 feet.

To get there, drive toward the city of Toluca from Mexico City on highway 134 to Temascaltepec. Eighteen kilometers past Toluca, turn at the sign for the Las Raíces community. From there, it's 21 kilometers (13 miles) to Xinantécatl.

A QUICK DAY HIKE IN DESIERTO DE LOS LEONES

Desierto de los Leones is on the outskirts of Mexico City, making it a great option for an easy day-hike. The park is very popular with city residents, who come on weekends to hike, bike and picnic with their families. It covers 1,867 hectares (4,613 acres) and is located in the Sierra de las Cruces mountain range to the west of the city. It is considered to be the oldest protected biosphere in Mexico.

Insect infestations, air pollution and animal grazing have damaged the park and its wildlife, but the Desierto de los Leones remains a dense pine forest with many lovely streams and



The Desierto de los Leones is on the outskirts of Mexico City, making it a great

option for an easy day-hike. The park is very popular with city residents, who come on weekends to hike, bike and picnic with their families. It covers 1,867 hectares (4,613 acres) and is located in the Sierra de las Cruces mountain range to the west of the city. It is considered to be the oldest protected biosphere in Mexico.

brook. An 18th-century Carmelite monastery holds court in the middle of the park, surrounded by around 20 small restaurants advertising lunches of rabbit and trout from the nearby town of Malinalco. The main trail map at the central parking lot shows only three trails, but if you drive or hike up the 9-kilometer (5 mile) roadway that bisects the park, you'll find unmarked trailheads all along the route. The park's altitude of 2,500 to 3,700 meters (8,202 to 12,139 feet) makes it a good beginning training site for bikers, runners and endurance hikers.

You can get there by taking the Mexico/Toluca highway 15 out of the city. When you reach the Mexico/Toluca tollbooth, take the "retorno" or return to put you on the Toluca/Mexico highway. Immediately after, you'll see signs to your right for the park.

TREKKING ON THE "SLOPES" OF THE SLEEPING LOVERS

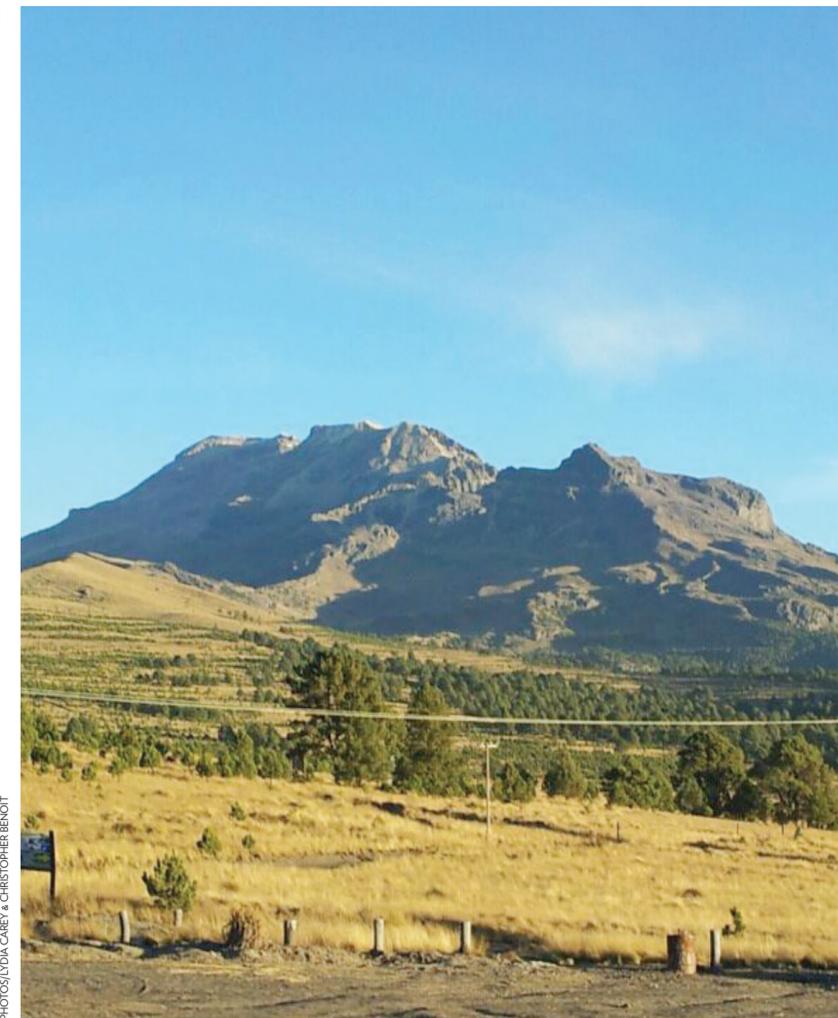
Mexico City sits under two hulking volcanoes that slope down to the outskirts of the city. The volcanoes, whose peaks rise over 5,200 meters

(17,000 feet), are named after Iztaccíhuatl (Izta) and her warrior lover Popocatepetl (Popo), the tragic heroes of the Aztec version of Romeo and Juliet. Popo is an active volcano and currently closed to climbers due to frequent eruptions, but several routes on Izta are open. The most popular day hike on Izta starts on the Paso de Cortés, the pass that separates the two giants at 12,073 feet. Hiking or running up the dirt road through the thin air from the pass to the La Joya refuge is a real challenge.

At La Joya, you can head up a trail through the volcanic sand of the mountain passes and continue to the overnight Refugio Esperanza at 15,944 feet. Only experienced mountain trekkers should continue beyond this point.

The route affords the best vistas in Central Mexico, and the months from November to March are best if you want to avoid bad weather. Always travel with a first-aid kit, extra layers of clothing, and plenty of water. Hire a guide for your first foray onto the mountain.

option for an easy day-hike.



The most popular day hike at Izta starts on the Paso de Cortés, the pass that separates the two giants.



At the Nevado de Toluca, flurries dust the vast pine forest on either side of the main road.

For hard-core endurance junkies, the "Sólo para Salvajes" (Only for Savages) Skyrunning series hosts a half-marathon from Paso de Cortés to a point just above the Refugio Esperanza and back down. The race is held in December and is attended by the best Mexican and European mountain runners. More information on this and other mountain races near Mexico City is available at www.parasalvajes.com.mx.

Paso de Cortés can be accessed by driving east toward Puebla, then south on highway 115 to Amecameca. In Amecameca, follow the signs for Paso de Cortés National Park to a two-lane winding road that ends in the park. Hikers can also take a bus from the TAPO bus terminal in Mexico City to Amecameca, where several "colectivo" taxis make the trip to the pass.

SUMMITTING LA MALINCHE

Another volcano hike lies just east of Izta and Popo. La Malinche, standing over 14,501 feet, dominates the countryside near the border of Tlaxcala

and Puebla. A smaller cousin of the Nevado de Toluca and Izta, it serves as a good training hike. Visitors can stay in the Centro Vacacional La Malintzi, state-run cabins at the base of the mountain. From the parking lot, head up a small trail that cuts straight through the trees toward the upper mountain. After about 6 kilometers (4 miles), the trail breaks free of the tree line and you can charge up the final alpine track to the summit. Izta, Popo, and the largest Mexican volcano, Orizaba, can all be seen from the top. Again, only experienced hikers should tackle La Malinche without a guide, and remember to travel prepared.

You can reach La Malinche by heading east toward Puebla on highway 150D. Before reaching the city of Puebla, turn left on highway 57 which leads to highway 117 to Apizaco. Past the town of Apizaco, follow signs for "Centro Vacacional IMSS La Malintzi." Non-drivers should take a bus from the TAPO to Huamantla or Apizaco, then transfer to a colectivo to the Centro Vacacional.