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Sun Spots

Mexico blends rich
culture with warmth
and relaxation



Viva Vallarta!



Luxury and Adventure on Mexico's Pacific Coast By Rob Dunton

Lapidly alternate between brake and accelerator as I wind through ranchlands and rows of blue agave on an empty dirt road just outside of Puerto Vallarta. Wrapped around my head are goggles and a bandanna to protect my nose and mouth from the dust kicked up by our four-wheel-drive quads. My friend Mark and I race behind our intrepid guide from Wild Vallarta outfitters. We are on a thrilling trek to San Sebastián del Oeste, a 17th century town nestled in the cool upper reaches of the Sierra Madre Occidental, about 40 miles from Puerto Vallarta.

Mark and I grew up around motorcycles, so negotiating the rutted terrain, steep hills and cool streams on bikes is second nature. For us, the journey to San Sebastián del Oeste—a 90-minute air-conditioned bus ride for some—is four hours of bone-rattling thrills. We continually jockey for position, riding hard and fast to keep out of last place, where dust exposure is highest. As we climb higher into the mountains, the smell of pine permeates the shade of the thickening forest.

At about 4,500 feet, we finally reach our destination. Hungry after our ride, we enjoy hearty fajitas at Comedor La Lupita, a mom-and-pop restaurant, then amble into the main square. We explore the winding cobblestone streets, poking our heads into the few restaurants and inns, which serve the rare overnight guest. When we're ready to return to Puerto Vallarta, we do so by paved road, cutting our travel time in half.

PUERTO VALLARTA is ideally situated on Bahía de Banderas, one of the largest natural bays on the Pacific Coast. The former fishing village began to evolve into the bustling resort town it is today in the 1960s, when Richard Burton and Eliza-

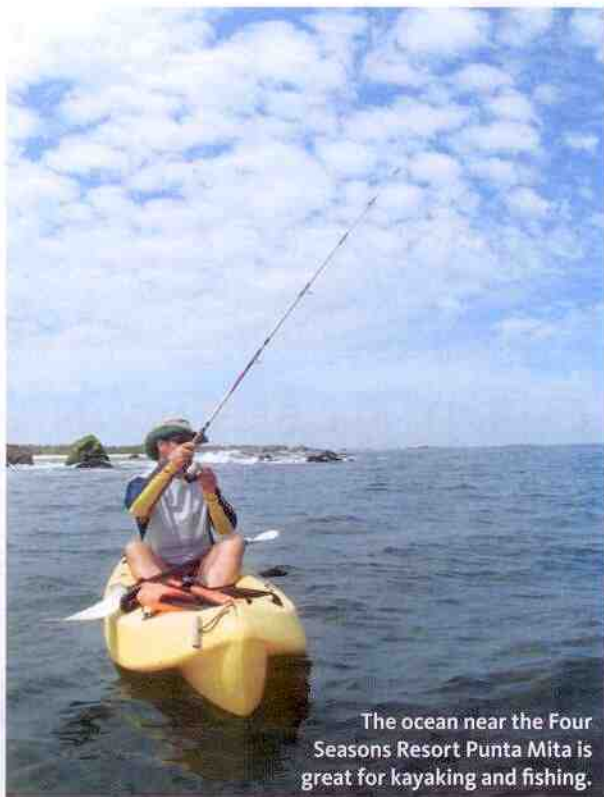
beth Taylor carried on their widely publicized romance here while Burton filmed *Night of the Iguana*.

Mark—my “call-me-any-time-you-need-an-adventure” buddy—and I have come to Puerto Vallarta to push the city's limits. Our itinerary will take us from PV's historical heart to two blossoming getaways to the north: the luxurious enclave of Punta Mita, and the relaxed surf town of Sayulita, both located within 25 miles of the city's airport. Along the way, we will seek adrenaline-inducing adventures by day in the region's rugged mountains, lush jungles, epic surf and fertile sea. At night, we'll take advantage of its many creature comforts by indulging in fine accommodations and cuisine.

FROM WILD VALLARTA'S offices, Mark and I walk bowlegged and mud-caked toward Puerto Vallarta's most recognizable landmark, the crowned spire of the Church of Our Lady of

Guadalupe. We cross the Río Cuale, a small river that runs through Puerto Vallarta's historical area, then climb the stairs along a narrow street to Hacienda San Angel, the stunning boutique hotel where we're staying. The hotel incorporates five historic villas, one of which was a Valentine's Day gift in 1977 from Richard Burton to his wife, Susan Hunt. We wander through serene courtyards, past a pool and gardens, en route to our luxurious quarters, furnished with 19th century antiques and rustic colonial artifacts, to clean up for a night on the town.

As dusk approaches, we walk three blocks to the city's waterfront promenade,



The ocean near the Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita is great for kayaking and fishing.

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the *malecón*, and join a diverse mix of people: Local teens, families with children, jugglers, mimes and sand sculptors blend with travelers from around the globe. The crowds and the music spilling onto the streets from various establishments create a cosmopolitan feel.

Famished, Mark and I head to Los Xítomates, a celebrated restaurant featuring gourmet Mexican cuisine. We are unable to choose from the scrumptious-looking options, so then-chef Luis Jesús Fitch Gómez offers us a tasting menu. Our server inquires if we require low-sodium, gluten-free, Rastafarian, vegan or macrobiotic preparation. I have never been offered all of these options, even in health-conscious L.A. and San Francisco.

DETAILS

LODGING

HACIENDA SAN ANGEL, Miramar 336, Col. Centro, Puerto Vallarta; 877-815-6594; www.haciendasanangel.com. Starting at \$260.

FOUR SEASONS RESORT PUNTA MITA, Bahía de Banderas, Nayarit; 800-819-5053; www.fourseasons.com/puntamita. Starting at \$535.

THE BEACH HOUSE, #10 Calle Las Gaviotas, Sayulita, Nayarit. Book through Papa's Travel Inc., 800-899-4167; www.sayulita.com. Starting at \$90.

DINING

LOS XÍTOMATES, Morelos 601, Centro, Puerto Vallarta; 52-32-2222-9434 (from the U.S.); www.losxitomates.com.

BAHÍA, Four Seasons Punta Mita, Punta Mita, Bahía de Banderas, Nayarit; 800-819-5053; www.fourseasons.com/puntamita.

ARAMARA, Four Seasons Punta Mita, Bahía de Banderas, Nayarit; 800-819-5053; www.fourseasons.com/puntamita.

DON PEDRO'S RESTAURANT & BAR, Calle Marlin #2, Sayulita, Nayarit; 52-32-9291-3090 (from the U.S.); www.donpedros.com/en.

Soon the food is brought out: duck-confit tacos with a soy-habañero sauce; Torreón-style *cabrería* (the name of the filet-like cut of beef) topped with sweet cactus and grilled onions; tuna fillet with tropical fruit and habañero pico de gallo; and pan-seared tuna medallions with chayote-seaweed salad and lemon-basil-chipotle vinaigrette.

The flavors and textures are perfectly matched, and Luis offers us a different wine to complement each dish. The meal is one of the most memorable I've ever experienced.

AFTER A GOOD NIGHT'S

rest, Mark and I rise early for Vallarta Adventures' Outdoor Adventure package—a unique day of ziplining and rappelling down waterfalls in the area's lush tropical forests. The adventure begins with a ride in a fast boat along the coastline. We pass marinas, grand hotels and high-rise condos en route to Boca de Tomatlán, a quiet fishing village at the southern edge of Bahía de Banderas. There we hop aboard a rugged ex-military four-wheel-drive and climb to 2,000 feet, to a base camp in the heart of the Sierra Madre.

After an informative safety talk, our group of 12 mounts a string of mules that carry us higher and deeper into the subtropical forest. In a half-hour, we reach the apex and begin the fun part—our descent. We start by riding La Vista (The View), a 551-foot-long, 113-foot-high zipline that stretches over a long, deep canyon. Next, we rappel down the face of a streaming waterfall, splashing (intentionally) into a cool natural pool at the end. We cross a long, bouncy cable bridge to zip and rappel some more, working our way back to base camp.

COURTESY: VALLARTA ADVENTURES

Participants in Vallarta Adventures' Outdoor Adventure package rappel down the side of an 80-foot waterfall.



THE NEXT MORNING, Mark and I rent a car and drive north to the Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita, the crown jewel of the upscale Punta Mita development, which is surrounded by nine miles of white sandy beaches, azure seas and dramatic rock outcroppings. This tranquil, luxurious getaway is located on the northern tip of Punta de Mita—a peninsula that juts into the Pacific Ocean to form the northern rim of Bahía de Banderas—and is home to fantastic surfing, whale-watching and deep-sea fishing, especially for tuna, mahi-mahi, dorado and sailfish.

As Mark and I arrive, we are graciously welcomed by name. We tour the resort, then unwind next to the stunning infinity pool overlooking the Pacific, lounging in comfortable deck chairs while sipping tropical smoothies.

We spend the rest of the afternoon in a pair of the resort's kayaks, fishing the nearby reefs. As we bob serenely on the surface of the sea, I relax to the sound

of water lapping against the hull, interrupted only by the occasional tug on my line or the call of a hungry gull eyeing my bait.

As sunset approaches, Mark and I head to Bahía, a Zen-ly elegant restaurant perched on the resort's private beach. The menu suggests another night of epic cuisine.

We start the meal with a quesadilla filled with spinach, grilled bell peppers, Oaxaca cheese, tomatoes and roasted corn, then move on to homemade salmon gravlax (a Scandinavian dish of cured raw salmon) marinated in tequila and paired with a hibiscus-infused aquavit. We dip into bowls of chilled gazpacho and a truffle-scented corn soup with chunks of fresh steamed lobster. For the main course, we share two seafood dishes: grilled yellowfin tuna seasoned with a chile-and-garlic-based paste, and whole pink snapper marinated in a spicy annatto-orange sauce. Everything is wonderful.

As we return to our rooms, we see a

happy couple enjoying a candlelit dinner for two on a private grassy knoll overlooking the sea. Note to self: Next trip here, bring wife.

MARK AND I AWAKE EARLY to visit some of the area's well-known surf breaks, such as Punta Burros, La Lancha and El Anclote. We strap our rented surfboards on to the roof of our car and follow the rather fuzzy directions to Punta Burros that the folks at the car lot gave us: "Turn left before the security shack at the Palladium Hotel, then park at the dead end. Follow the trail. Use the rope to climb up the embankment, then continue for 10 minutes and you're there." After a few wrong turns, we find our way.

On the beach is a pair of lean-tos built of driftwood and palm fronds. Beneath one of the lean-tos sits a lone surfer staring at the flat sea. His telekinetic efforts aren't creating any surf, so he moves on. We hold out, and within the hour the tide drops and waves arrive. We pass the next

DETAILS

ACTIVITIES

WILD VALLARTA OUTFITTERS, Manuel M. Diéguez Street, No. 274-A, Col. Emiliano Zapata, Puerto Vallarta; 877-314-WILD; www.wildvallarta.com.

VALLARTA ADVENTURES OUTFITTERS, Local 13-C, Calle Mástil, Marina Vallarta, Puerto Vallarta; 888-303-2653; www.vallarta-adventures.com.

CAPTAIN PABLO FISH CHARTERS AND SURF LESSONS, located on the beach at the Sayulita surf break; 52-32-9291-2070 (from the U.S.).

few hours riding easy, gentle waves in the warm ocean waters.

OUR VARIOUS LAND AND SEA adventures have left us with sore muscles, so we head back to the Four Seasons' Apuane Spa for its signature massage, done with indigenous sage oil and tequila.

The spa is stunning, and the brisk chill of alcohol, the soothing scent of sage and the masseur's strong, rhythmic hands work me into a trance. I feel my body relax and heal.

When we return outdoors, a four-piece band is playing stirring Latin ballads on the lobby terrace. We take in the late-afternoon sun poolside and relax before another exceptional feast, highlighting creative combinations of Latin American and Asian foods and spices, at the resort's Aramara restaurant.

A TRIP TO SAYULITA—an old fishing village that has grown into a laid-back town, with excellent restaurants and a renowned surf break for beginners—is next on our agenda. The emerging town is eclectic and unpretentious—dilapidated cinder-block buildings and *palapas* (structures with roofs made of woven palm fronds) mix with snazzy estates and stylish clubs and restaurants. The streets are cobblestone or dirt and filled with music from airy, wall-less restaurants, bars and clubs. Street vendors sell a range of foods, ranging from fish tacos to crêpes.

We pull into the parking lot behind The Beach House, our oceanfront accommodations. Funky and rustic, like much of the town, The Beach House is situated in front of Sayulita's best surf break and next to local outfitter Captain Pablo, where we can rent additional surfboards to fit the changing surf, or charter a *panga* (the classic open fishing boat of Mexico).

The waves are small, just 2 or 3 feet, so we rent a pair of long boards from Patty, Captain Pablo's wife, and hit the water. The glassy waves are easy to catch and ride—perfect for inexperienced surfers.

The beach, like the town, is family oriented, and the ocean is the local playground. Children frolic in the small waves near the shore. Fathers teach their sons and daughters how to surf. Youngsters ride the waves—some cut fast turns, while others do headstands on long boards for laughs. A man offers horseback rides. Another plays a trumpet while his young son keeps time on a drum. Vendors weave cornrows, apply temporary tattoos and sell silver jewelry from black display cases.

Down the beach, a tent advertises massages for \$45. Captain Pablo's pangas come and go from shore, transporting passengers including fishing enthusiasts, snorkelers and surfers.

AS THE SUN SINKS, we walk to Don Pedro's, a popular beachfront restaurant, and are seated on the top floor of the two-story establishment. The scent of the wood-fired pizzas is tempting, but we decide to start our last meal of the trip with a succulent ahi and king crab tartare prepared with lemon, dill, chives, shallots, avocado, capers and olive oil. Then we share a wonderful mesquite-grilled Sonoran filet mignon, poblano au gratin potatoes, and lobster ravioli with saffron cream sauce.

As we descend the stairs after another perfect meal, the ground floor is rocking: A 10-piece live band is playing sensational salsa tunes, and the tables have been pushed aside to create a massive dance floor. Locals, expats and tourists dance enthusiastically. Mark and I head back to our room long before the music stops.

WE ARISE AT 7 A.M. on our last day. In the lingering dawn, the water is glassy, and the waves roll in as if sent by machine. Our trek from bed to surf break is a short 50 feet across the sand, and only a few surfers are out. Mark and I take turns riding the easy waves as beach vendors set up chairs and umbrellas. Of all the adventures and good times we've had on this trip, I will miss this the most—the quiet thrill of riding waves with a friend, in a place where life is simpler. ▲

Rob Dunton is a freelance writer and photographer living in Santa Barbara.

GETTING THERE



Alaska Airlines serves Puerto Vallarta daily. Book tickets at

alaskaair.com or call 800-ALASKAAIR.

For a complete Alaska Airlines Vacations package, go to the Web or call 800-468-2248.