

TRAVEL

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Off-the-beaten-path locales in Nayarit and Oaxaca have proved a hit for one writer and her brood, scoring points for sun, surf and budget-friendly entertainment.

For quality *familia* time

AMANDA JONES

With news of drug-related violence and H1N1 flu in the headlines, tourism to Mexico has plummeted. But the truth is the violence is largely regional and the swine flu is no longer confined to here. Many places in Mexico are inexpensive, kid-friendly and sunny. Here are some of my family's recent favorites.

Sayulita, Nayarit

Once a fishing village, Sayulita has become a haunt for surfers, bohemians and vacationers who want to avoid the crowds. It's just an hour's drive from Puerto Vallarta on Mexico's west coast. We've visited this authentic Mexican town with our two girls three times, starting at age 3.

Although the town has bad dirt roads, legions of skinny dogs and its share of perennially unfinished construction sites, it has no high-rises, no traffic, no strip malls, no rave bars.

It has a lovely beach and great accommodations, and there's always some *fiesta* or another. The food is diverse, creative, tasty and safe. Sayulita also has an ideal learner's surf break. You can rent giant foam boards on the beach for \$10 and stand waist-deep in water to push kids into the small waves (then gnash your teeth at how easily they pop up after



DAN GAIR / BLIND DOG PHOTO Lonely Planet Images

BEACH OASIS: Casual is the rule at Sayulita, near Puerto Vallarta, where surfers, bohemians and others go for a slower change of pace.

you went over the falls yourself so many times).

Farther down the two-mile-long beach is a break for more serious surfers, many of whom are Mexican dudes and gringo surf bums like my husband (at least for the week).

The town's casual vibe means bare feet are accepted anywhere. Although there are a couple of decent hotels, we always rent a house for the privacy and convenience of being able to whip up mac and cheese on demand. Many a *norteamericano* has come to Sayulita, fallen in love, built a spacious vacation house and then realized extra income would make it even better, so rentals are plentiful.

On our last visit, we rented Casa Magia, a house perched atop the hill behind town. Previously we've rented on the beach, but the downside of Sayulita becoming popular with the hipster crowd is that the cost of beachfront pads has skyrocketed.

Because we always rent a car, Magia, a seven-minute drive from town, worked well for us. It's sleek minimalist, with modern furniture, splendid sunset-over-jungle views and none of the Mexican kitsch that litters so many rentals. It was quiet, remote and, most important, it had wireless and a pool. It's hot year-round, so the pool is a must for kids. They spend hours in it, and it prevents whining about the heat. And they fall into bed exhausted.

Although Sayulita is not a cultural epicenter, it has surprisingly chic shopping for a town of 2,000 full-time residents. You'll find, for instance, pricey black pearl jewelry made by the striking Les Gazelles sisters in their chic shop Pachamama and exquisite beadwork sold by traditionally dressed Huichol Indians in the plaza.

What most visitors don't know about Sayulita is that there are isolated, gorgeous coves a short walk through jungle at the southern end of town. When the main beach gets too crowded on weekends, we run off to Playa de los Muertos (beyond the colorful old cemetery) or even farther to the crashing waves and empty beach of Playa Carreitos.

If you rent a car, spend a day on neighboring San Pancho beach, which is far less popular than Sayulita and has rough waves but is a great place to go for lunch or dinner.

GETTING THERE

Fly into Puerto Vallarta (\$280 from LAX), rent a car or catch a shuttle northwest to Sayulita.

WHERE TO STAY

Rental houses

Casa Magia: Two bedrooms from \$250 a night;

www.magiasayulita.com.

Casa Ava: Two bedrooms from \$125 a night. We stayed here on a previous trip, and it was great; also has a pool and a large outdoor area;

www.sayulitalife.com/ava.

Hotels

Petit Hotel d'Hafa: A small, Morocco-inspired, funky-chic hotel right in the heart of town and a deal to boot.

Doubles from \$50 a night;

www.sayulitalife.com/hafa

Villa Amor: A boutique hotel at the end of the beach, Villa Amor is the swankiest outfit in town, although not very private. Doubles from \$55;

www.villaamor.com.

For more information, www.sayulitalife.com.

WHERE TO EAT

We've always found street food safe to eat in Sayulita. There are carts and canteens everywhere serving fabulous fish tacos for about a buck. There are some terrific outdoor fish restaurants lining the beach; I recommend plain grilled snapper any day. But if you're leery of those places, here are some brick-and-mortar establishments we like:

Rollie's: For breakfast, this place near the plaza serves the best pancakes in town.

Choco-Banana: The morning hipster hangout serves snacks and muffins.

Sayulita Fish Taco Restaurant & Tequila Bar: Fish tacos at a slightly higher price with a great view of the plaza happenings.

Don Pedros: Though it has American prices and a touristy beachfront location, it is an excellent stumble-in-off-the-beach spot and serves outstanding margaritas.

Bicyclette: Our favorite kid-friendly

fine dining spot in Sayulita is on a back street in an enclosed garden. The owners are French, and the food is terrific.

Mar Plata: An unexpectedly swank restaurant in the town of San Pancho. Possibly a good date-night alternative.



Source: ESRI

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