



COVER STORY

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PACIFIC COLOR

**Vibrant Mexican culture and
laid-back luxury in Nayarit**
By David Kaufman

Been There



Mexico Rising

You know Cancún, Puerto Vallarta, and Cabo San Lucas. Now get ready for Nayarit, Mexico's next great destination.

It's just after breakfast time on a steamy summer morning, and already we're drenched in sweat. As we drive past tiny taquerias and colorful *farmacias* on Mexico's Pacific coast, sharing the road with sturdy SUVs and the occasional

Been to Mexico? See more photos and share your own with other readers.

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cowboy on horseback, our air conditioner wages
a futile battle as we inch toward the seaside
hamlet of San Pancho.

The heat is so oppressive that I want to demand we detour ~~straight to~~ the Pacific. But after just a few words, I fall silent, awestruck by the sight at the end of the jungle road. Amid towering palms and a tangle of tropical foliage sits a polo field. Eight or 10 smart-suited jockeys ride atop muscular stallions trotting on the broad green pitch. The bright sun lights up the whitewashed grandstand and chic clubhouse to create a beautiful, dreamlike scene.

“I thought it was a joke the first time I heard about it,” says Robin Reyes, a real estate marketer and polo player in Punta Mita, just south of San Pancho. Sitting regally astride his horse, mallet in hand, Reyes, a native of Alabama, adds, “Who would think you could drive straight out of the jungle onto a polo field?”

During a week’s stay in and around San Pancho and the fast-growing Mexican state of Nayarit, I’ve learned to expect the unexpected. Situated along impossibly blue Pacific waters and framed by the rugged peaks of the Sierra Madre, the coastline of Nayarit is quietly emerging as an alternative to Mexico’s more famous beach retreats, such as nearby Puerto Vallarta. Wealthy Americans (including such celebrities as Will Smith and Jennifer Aniston) have already discovered the area, drawn by the swank Four Seasons Resort and adjacent million-dollar villas on the peninsula of Punta de Mita.



Far more than a bastion of luxury living, Nayarit offers something for everyone. In addition to full-service bayfront resorts like Nuevo Vallarta and the mega-resort Litibú that’s currently under construction, there are spots like San Pancho, an unspoiled village, and Sayulita, a popular surfing destination. Even as it contends with an influx of foreign cash and deep-pocketed foreigners Nayarit manages to maintain a sense of Mexican authenticity. “The surfing and beach culture are what originally got us down here,” says 37-year-old Ian Hodge, who moved from Bend, Ore., to Sayulita eight years ago with his wife, Kerry. “But it was the Mexican people and the local way of life that have made us stay so long.”



Cacti sit on the roof at the Four Seasons Punta Mita, with a thatched-roof building in the background

Seeing Success

Branded as the Riviera Nayarit by the travel industry, the state is in the early stages of a massive overhaul on its way to becoming an eco-conscious alternative to established Mexico destinations like Cancún on the Caribbean and Los Cabos on Mexico’s northern Pacific coast. The development has been meticulously planned, with limits on population growth and the impact on the environment and local communities. Some \$15 billion is being poured into Nayarit mostly on its southern flank, along the Bay of Banderas by private investors and state and federal agencies to build new roads, a dedicated airport, and modern marinas. Tourism spending by Nayarit’s state government has

also tripled over the past half decade.

The goal is to increase tourism and attract second-home buyers, especially the millions of American baby boomers approaching retirement age. It's similar to initiatives launched in the Riviera Maya—the resort zone between Cancún and Tulum on Mexico's Caribbean coast—whose tourism offerings have quickly become world-class.

The efforts in Nayarit are paying off: Tourism surged 20 percent in 2007, as the area attracted travelers from such places as California, Texas, British Columbia, and Ontario. By 2010, some 3,000 additional hotel rooms will be available in Nayarit, including a 120-room St. Regis resort opening in Punta de Mita this fall.

Fortunately, the government is also keen to preserve the area's natural beauty. Nayarit Governor Ney González has taken a hands-on approach to dictating and enforcing environmental controls, including protection of local mangrove swamps, an emphasis on low-density housing, and a mandate that developers plant five new trees for every one they cut down.

Into the Forest

Nowhere is the green thinking more present than back in the village of San Pancho, home of the unlikely polo field. A mere four families populated the town when it was officially established 30 years ago by then-president Luis Echeverría, who built a vacation home there. The city grew over the next two decades—supported by Echeverría's patronage as well as a booming mango industry—and emerged as a tourist destination in the 1990s.

I'm in San Pancho with Quintin "Faurest" Montenegro, owner of Emerald Coast Developments, who is showing me that the town is far more than just a tropical pit stop on the Latin American polo scene. With nearly \$1 billion worth of real estate now under construction in Nayarit, Emerald Coast is one of the state's largest developers. The company is building everything from modestly priced townhouses to multimillion-dollar villas.

As we stroll past San Pancho's quaint downtown, where classic taco stands coexist with a fancy new Euro-Argentinean restaurant, MarPlata, 37-year-old Montenegro explains his

company's eco bona fides and its commitment to the town he has called home for 10 years. Wearing khakis and a white button-down shirt, the fair-haired developer explains how Emerald Coast uses adobe-style compressed earth blocks in place of resource-draining concrete. The development will have solar power systems for home heating and a comprehensive water recycling scheme throughout. "We're far



Waiting outside a *carniceria* (butcher shop) in San Pancho

more advanced than many ‘green’ communities in the U.S.,” Montenegro proudly claims.

Emerald Coast has projects anchored around San Pancho, where the company is based, and north to San Blas. Montenegro’s wife, America, helps run the company’s philanthropic arm, the Emerald Coast Foundation. (The couple has a son, Eder, 6, and infant daughter, Vanessa.) Indeed, the firm has poured more than \$2 million into San Pancho over the past half decade, investing in everything from a new kindergarten and science labs to the restoration of the town’s oceanfront boardwalk, or *malecon*. It has also developed a language lab, opening soon, where locals will be able to learn English and foreigners Spanish, often with each group aiding the other.

For Montenegro, improving the lives of the locals helps ensure they will embrace the village’s newcomers. And so far these efforts are luring just the kind of community-minded arrivals needed to balance prosperity with harmony. “There is a real emphasis on making sure good intentions actually turn into good deeds,” explains Brian Johnson, 52, who moved to San Pancho three years ago from Santa Monica, Calif., with his wife, Melissa, and their two children. “This is more important than ever,” adds Johnson, who has helped open a bilingual Montessori school in town. “San Pancho is still a small tropical town, but there’s an undercurrent of development rising. We must act now to maintain the tranquil nature of the town.”



In Sayulita, with its international expat community, residents love their tortillas

New Money, Classic Charm

Since arriving in Nayarit, I’ve been told that a decade ago, Sayulita, three miles down the coast from San Pancho, greatly resembled the latter town. At that time Sayulita was an undiscovered fishing village that was just becoming known to the global surfer crowd looking for the next perfect wave. Today, it has million-dollar holiday homes, a smattering of celebrity visitors, a vibrant international expat community, and a distinct hippie vibe. Still, Sayulita retains its small-town charm. “This is a town where people were living in thatched-roof houses with pigs running around just a few decades ago,” says Ian Hodge, who, with his wife, founded and now runs Sayulitalife.com, a comprehensive town portal. “Money is changing life here drastically, and for the most part positively.”

Despite the town’s new wealth, the Sayulita scene remains remarkably leisurely and low-key. Young, lithe, perfectly tanned surfer dudes and the occasional dudette cluster under open-air thatched-roof huts, or *palapas*, waxing boards and waxing nostalgic over waves that got away, speaking in a Spanish/English/French patois. Nearby, the sand overflows with a multi-culti mélange of local crafts sellers, fish taco stands, and bands of blond beachgoers. Like Bali in the 1970s and Goa in the ’80s, Sayulita feels decidedly “of-the-moment,” with dollar-a-kilo tortillerias standing next to Starbucks-styled coffee shops, and Christie’s and Sotheby’s real estate signs serving as stark evidence that this halcyon moment could soon come to an end. “Sayulita is a place where you can still surf every day and make money,” says 29-year-old Hana Waxman, who has lived here for two years. “I came here

many times for vacation and ultimately just stayed.” An interior designer, Waxman now has a sizable practice helping to design the homes of other recent arrivals to Sayulita.

Stunning Sights

A short drive south from San Pancho, on the Punta de Mita peninsula, Sotheby’s and Christie’s would feel right at home. The crown jewel of the area is Punta Mita, a 1,500-acre gated community surrounded by nine and a half miles of white-sand beaches.

One of the most exclusive resort areas in all of Latin America, Punta Mita is probably best known for its Four Seasons Resort, which opened nearly a decade ago on a piece of land on the Pacific. The arrival of the Four Seasons coincided with the debut of the Punta Mita development. About \$150 million was spent to build the Four Seasons and a Jack Nicklaus Signature Golf Course and improve the infrastructure. Still very much a work in progress, Punta Mita will add some 750 private residences (with prices up to \$14 million) and will have a total of 500 hotel rooms within four luxury resorts, including that soon-to-debut St. Regis by 2011.



The quiet pool at the Four Seasons

With the St. Regis only a few weeks from completion, the Four Seasons Punta Mita serves as my base for my visit. Staying in one of 145 *casitas* on the property, I feel positively pampered in the resort’s Pacific-front infinity pools and the hammock outside my front door. The resort is a *mélange* of traditional thatched-roof structures and adobe-style colonial buildings cascading down a hillside straight to a series of secluded bays running along the azure Pacific.



Surfboards in Sayulita

Four Seasons may have been the first resort in the area, but it’s not resting on its laurels. It recently introduced a new adults-only pool complex, with a meditation garden and two large hot tubs, in addition to a lazy river ride for kids, a clutch of family-friendly suites, and a waterfront grill called Bahia. Twice a week, chef Juan Gaffuri invites guests to join him as he greets local fishermen at the water’s edge. He explains which catches are in season and selects the fish for that night’s dinner at Bahia, grilled and paired with delicious sauces ranging from peach barbecue to *chimichurri*.

The restaurant is suitably low-key and the cooking spectacular, but my favorite place at the resort turns out to be the spa, where my Mexican therapist, Cristian, kneads me into a blissful stupor after a long couple of days exploring San Pancho and Sayulita. I’ve heard the tequila and sage massage is a must, but I opt for a deep-tissue treatment, which puts the spring back into my sore, tired legs after a day on my feet.

Still Growing

Punta Mita was the first area to put Nayarit on the travelers' map, and while it's still the most exclusive spot in the state, resort zones such as Nuevo Vallarta and Litibú are catching up quickly. Nuevo Vallarta is another planned waterfront community just outside Puerto Vallarta proper. Already fully operational, Nuevo Vallarta includes numerous luxury resorts and suburban-style communities for the upwardly mobile.

Litibú is a 413-acre, \$50 million development with a Greg Norman designed golf course, thousands of hotel rooms, and an eco-park. Its evolution is being spearheaded by Fonatur Mexico's government-backed tourism development agency and Litibú is already being called the next Cancún.

With its spring break crowds and cookie-cutter hotels, Cancún is probably the last thing the folks back in sleepy San Pancho wish for Nayarit. Instead, Panchitos like Brian Johnson say they're committed to ensuring that the seasonal matches on its verdant polo course are the most action the town sees.

"We have created a truly integrated community here," he says, as his two young children play nearby. "San Pancho is different enough that we feel like we're really living in another culture. But we're just three hours away from our families back home."

David Kaufman

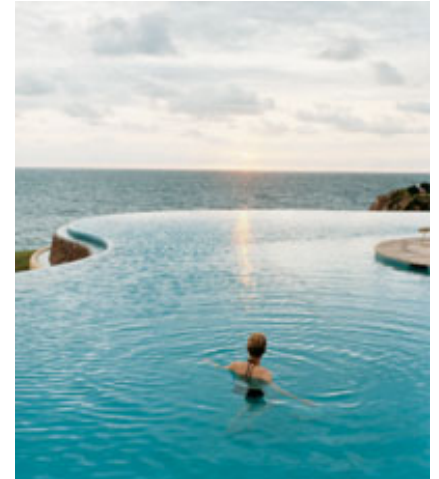
Getting There: [Continental](#) offers daily nonstop service to Puerto Vallarta from its hubs in Houston and New York/Newark.

Nayarit Notables

Where to Sleep

Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita

This 175-room oceanfront retreat has become a favored hideaway for travelers with deep pockets and a taste for luxury. Located on a secluded slice of seashore 26 miles north of Puerto Vallarta, the Four Seasons blends traditional Mexican style with subtle-yet-attentive service. Some suites come with alfresco hammocks and outdoor showers, so guests can constantly enjoy the salty sea air, and an 18-hole golf course and 55-foot yacht are on hand when you're ready for action. 52.329.291.6000; fourseasons.com/puntamita



The water seems to go on forever at the Four Seasons

Where to Eat

Café des Artistes del Mar

This second branch of Puerto Vallarta's famed Café des Artistes opened just over a year ago on the Punta de Mita peninsula. Overseen by chef Thierry Blouet—a member of the French Academie Culinaire and the Maîtres Cuisiniers de France—the restaurant is located inside a luxe 12-suite hotel and offers Blouet's celebrated Franco-Mexican menu. While dinner standouts such as gazpacho with cucumber gelée and roasted sea bass with spinach mousse will make you want to return for more, the restaurant has become truly lauded for its show-stopping desserts, which might keep you from ever leaving. Av. Anclote Lote 5, Coral, Punta de Mita, Nayarit, 52.329.291.5415; cafedesartistes.com/delmar

Sayulita Fish Taco

Fish tacos fresh from the Pacific and straight off the grill. 13 Jose Mariscal, Sayulita, 52.329.291.3272

Don Pedro's

Set in an open-air duplex *palapa*, just steps from the beach and surf, Don Pedro's serves salads, pastas, and grilled meats as well as excellent wood-fired pizzas. With its white tablecloths and candlelit atmosphere, it's a cut above Sayulita's typical taquerias, but still as welcoming to surfers as it is to visiting swells. Calle Marlin 2, Sayulita, 52.329.291.3090; donpedros.com

MarPlata

Named after the waterside Argentine city of the same name, MarPlata is a three-year-old mixed Mexican/European/Argentinean restaurant whose chef hails from Belgium. Opt for either indoor or outdoor seating, select from the extensive wine list, and dig into specialties that range from mackerel carpaccio to hearty, hefty South American steaks. Calle de Palmas 130, Nayarit, 52.311.258.4424 D.K.

Photographs: Cedric Angeles