



FOR RELAXATION, NATURAL BEAUTY,
La Magnífica
AND LAID-BACK BEACH CULTURE,
Costa del
MEXICO'S CENTRAL WEST COAST
Pacífico
IS A PERFECT GETAWAY.

By David Hanson | Photos by Rachel Weill

On my basement floor, I keep an old green rug with a statuesque lion in faded gold stitching. My dad, strongly encouraged by my mom, had wanted to throw it out years ago, but I liked the burly, indestructible thing.

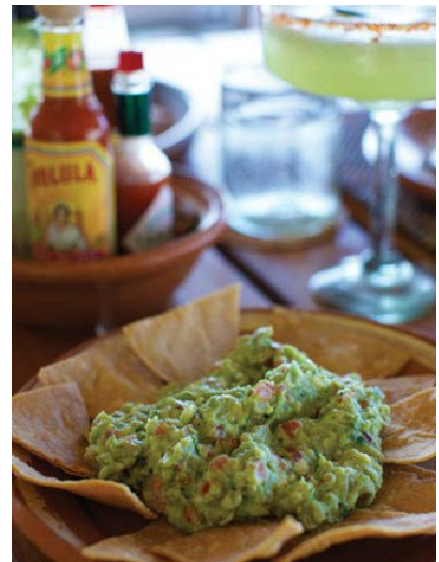
My dad got it in Acapulco on one of my parents' trips to Mexico almost 40 years ago.

Looking for a beach road trip during Seattle's gloomy winter, I noticed the rug, and I got inspired. I pulled out a map of Mexico's central Pacific coast. Acapulco was there to the south, but I liked the coastline a little farther north, closer to Puerto Vallarta. I'd heard of a classic designer resort there, built in the late 1960s with a serious conservation bent. And a friend had mentioned a new hotel of boutique villas clustered in a coastal jungle preservation of 250 acres just south of the bohemian surfer town of Sayulita. So I booked a flight to Puerto Vallarta for a welcome winter escape.



A villa at Costa
Careyes and
(opposite) polo
horses exercising
on the beach





Clockwise from above: beach cabana, fresh margarita, guacamole, and (opposite) showering alfresco, all at Imanta. Opposite page, top: water taxi to Yelapa

In typical modern fashion, Puerto Vallarta is a tale of two cities. There is New Puerto Vallarta and Old Puerto Vallarta. I'd have to pass through the New to reach my first night's stay at Imanta Resort, about an hour's drive north. As I anticipate, the New version disappoints. I navigate traffic and pass the secured gates of a condo-and-marina-and-golf-course maze to finally reach some calm at the Punta de Mita peninsula. This cliff-sided knob bulging off the lush Pacific coast has long been the home of two extremes in beach travel: the Four Seasons on the south side and laid-back Sayulita to the north. I stop somewhere in the middle, both geographically and in terms of style, for a day and night at the new Imanta Resort.

Imanta has no reception lobby. Instead, upon arrival down the winding, paved driveway, I pull up to a gazebo-like *palapa* with a view of the Pacific Ocean. A receptionist in all white waits with a glass of iced hibiscus juice. The staff takes my car and my bags, and I take the beverage on a golf-cart ride to my villa through narrow paths brushed by giant palms and bougainvilleas.

The villa, one of 12 at Imanta, has few walls. Floor-to-ceiling sliding-glass doors open on two sides of the structure; one leads to my patio and its day bed, the other to an infinity pool that reflects palm fronds and blue sky. The autumn climate on this coastline means I'll leave the doors open all night — no bugs to contend with here.

At the resort's dining area, a terraced courtyard overlooking the Pacific, I suddenly want to work on margaritas all day long. This is, after all, the state of Jalisco, home of tequila. Unsolicited, they bring me one freshened with cucumber.

Imanta is Spanish for "magnetic attraction." The owner, whom we will call Diego (he wishes to remain anonymous), must have felt that allure when he bought this 250-acre chunk of rugged land shrouded by rain forest decades ago. For years, Diego and his wife camped in a valley off the

worked here. He described it as a town with one dirt road in and out, much as Yelapa remains today.

Fifteen miles south of Vallarta the road drops steeply into the narrow river-mouth cove that holds the fishing village of Boca de Tomatlán. A few mansions hanging from the cliffs indicate that some outsiders with a penchant for the wild Mexican coast have

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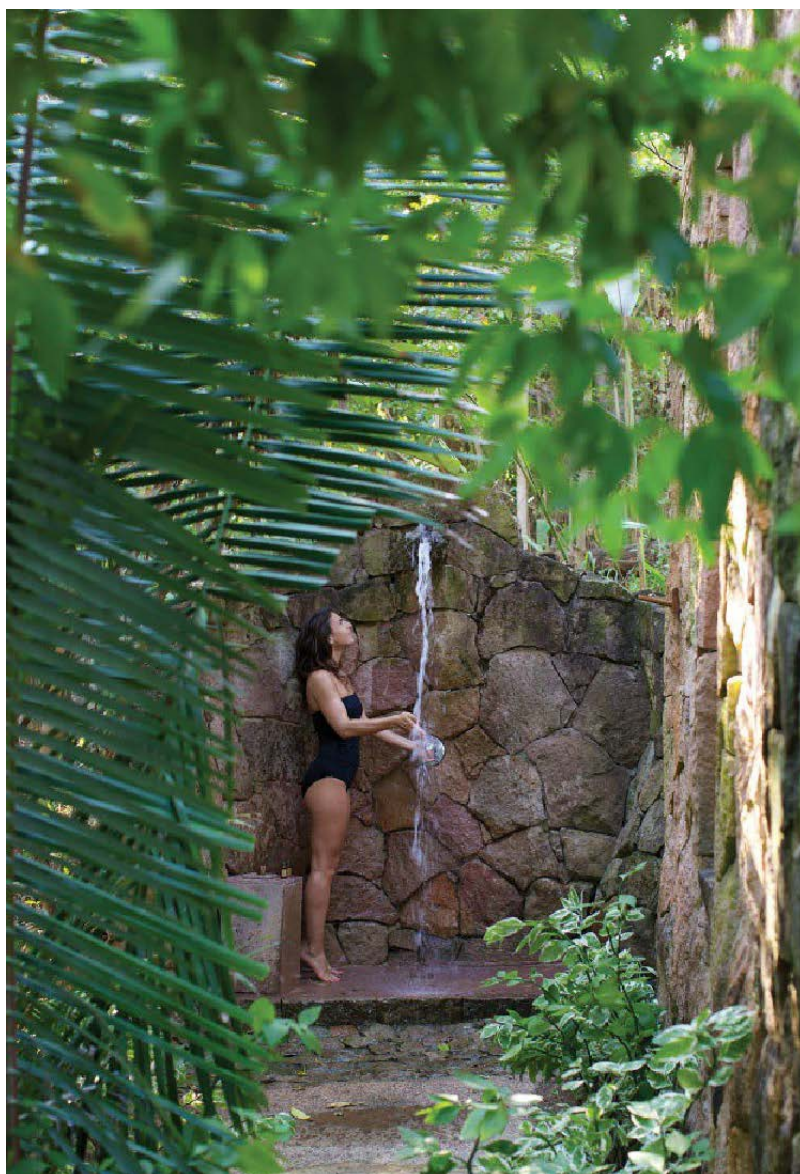
beach, beneath the strong-armed, mystical *higuera blanca* (white fig) trees. They eventually built the resort, and they intend to build a small-scale residential development of low-impact, high-end homes scattered throughout the forest. For now it's just the villas, the restaurant, and a two-mile-long private beach with its Catch of the Day cafe.

I eat dinner there with Diego, his wife, and his daughter, who manages the hotel. Over shrimp ceviche, I tell them that my next stop is the coastline's original conservation resort, Costa Careyes. They insist I stop by their favorite little secret beach town on my drive down. Yelapa, they tell me, sits in a little crescent cove a half-hour boat ride from the nearest roadside town of Boca de Tomatlán. They describe it as a tiny seaside village of steep streets and a few beach palapas to shade visitors while they drink beer and eat tacos from the cantina. And, they say, it is home to witches. I have them draw me a map in the candlelight.

Yelapa

The drive south from Imanta to Boca de Tomatlán leads me through Old Puerto Vallarta, a charming waterfront scene of narrow streets and bustling commerce with apartments and small hotels peering down from the coastal mountains.

Highway 200 then winds up the sea cliffs and past the tiny town of Mismaloya, where John Huston filmed *The Night of the Iguana* in 1963. Puerto Vallarta has changed drastically since Huston





Clockwise from top left: Cafe Bahía in Yelapa, colorful handicrafts, the harbor at Yelapa, and a frosty bottle of Pacifico

I take my banana pie back to the beach, order a cold Pacifico, and watch a few hours of afternoon drift over the Pacific.

discovered this spot.

I sit at a cafe table that leans slightly askew in the loose sand. I order a Pacifico and two fried eggs, beans, rice, and tortillas while I wait

for the *panga* that will take me to Yelapa. A few other tourists wait as well, but it's mainly local kids kicking the soccer ball and fishermen getting ready to leave.

Riding in a *panga* (a sturdy outboard boat with bench seats and a shade canopy) is a study in style and boatmanship, and it is a must for anyone seeking remote Mexican beaches. My *panga* driver puffs on a fat cigar. His thick fingers, wrapped in heavyweight gold rings, rest lightly on the wheel. He could be driving a Caddy in a ticker-tape parade, he's so cool and composed. He deftly

maneuvers through the six-foot Pacific swells and backs us stern-first to the perfect crescent beach of Yelapa. The other passengers and I hand him some pesos, remove our flip-flops, and hop onto the yellow sand.

The options here for my four-hour afternoon stay are limited: sitting on a beach chair with a cold beverage and a platter of fresh guac and chips, following a local guide up the easy trail to a waterfall, or wandering the steep footpaths of the Yelapa village, which tucks into the hill on the south end of the beach.

Curious to see what witches do during the day in a beachy paradise, I head into the tiny village and discover a maze of simple concrete-block homes, an open-air church with kids studying in the vestibule, and little tables of crafts for sale. No witches apparent to the naked eye, but the "Pie Lady" puts me under her spell. She's famous for her banana pies (and cheeses and chocolates carried in a basket

on her head). I take my banana pie back to the beach, order a cold Pacifico, and watch a few hours of afternoon drift over the Pacific before a dinner of tuna in a *pipian diablo* sauce (made with ancho and pasilla chilies) just outside my stone-walled, thatch-roof private casita at Yelapa's beachside Hotel Lagunita.

In the morning I catch the 8:30 water taxi back to Boca de Tomatlán and my car. I've got a two-hour drive to reach my final stop, a two-night stay at Costa Careyes. While the drive from Puerto Vallarta to Boca was a cliff-hanger of twists and dips, Boca to Careyes is, for the most part, a smooth shot through a quiet, rural landscape with few ocean views. Amid this lull of low-canopied dry jungle, Costa Careyes can sneak up on you. There's no way to know that a few hundred yards past the simple gate there's a cliff scattered with architectural marvels overlooking the deep blue Pacific.

Costa Careyes

On my first morning at Careyes, I wake at dawn with the sky changing from deep lavender to pink over the Pacific. I drive down to the resort's turtle sanctuary at the far end of a two-mile-long beach. With the help of the sanctuary's caretaker, I release dozens of sea turtles smaller than the palm of my hand. The soft hatchlings waddle boldly down the steep sand toward four-foot, beach-breaking waves. I wouldn't dip my toe into that surf, but these little guys plunge headlong like children toward a slip-and-slide. Most of them make it.

The experience is an inspiring, unforgettable scene of raw survival, leaving me, of course, feeling lazy, timid, and extremely tall. So I go for a jog down the beach just as a team of polo horses is released to run bareback. I plod along as the glistening beasts thunder 50 yards from me on their routine run, a regimen to keep them in shape for the resort's polo matches.

I spend the rest of the morning lounging horizontally, first on the tiny crescent beach surrounded by rock walls and then floating on my back in the turquoise water of the protected bay. At lunch I meet Giorgio Brignone, the son of Gian Franco Brignone, the Turin-born artist and entrepreneur who created Costa Careyes in 1968.

The elder Brignone discovered this stretch of rare coast from an airplane. He wanted to build an imaginative resort in a land of year-round perfect weather. The coast near the southern border of Jalisco state has a Mediterranean-like climate with a touch of Mexican heat.

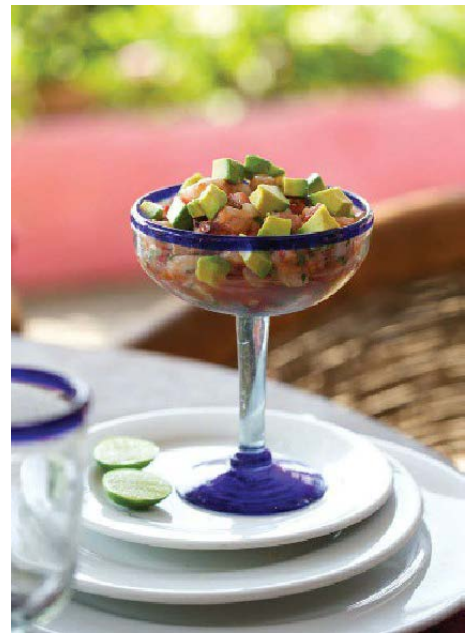
Gian Franco still lives on the property, in a castle-like home he built away from the rental villas and hotel. His son is more the face of Costa Careyes, and he looks the part: tan and lean in designer white jeans, the middle-aged Giorgio could be a model for a European polo shoot. He points over



the water, toward the resort's flagship home, Casa Mi Ojo, which is perched atop a hundred-foot cliff. A swinging rope bridge connects the home to a tiny tower of an island just off the coast.

Mi Ojo epitomizes the Brignone aesthetic that has attracted fashion shoots, celebrities, and dignitaries to this remote enclave of high design and wild nature, a place where white stucco walls curve gracefully and everything seems to flow together.

Gian Franco's vision evolved into more villas that now dot the hillsides above the sweeping curves of the property's private beaches. He was a



In the steep slopes above, audaciously pink and turquoise and yellow villas poke out of the hillsides like bougainvillea flowers.

Clockwise from top left: colorful villa, baby turtle, and ceviche, all at Costa Careyes

strict conservationist, never using a bulldozer but rather building around rocks and trees. The result is a resort that blends Mexico with the Mediterranean and indifferent nature with whimsical architecture.

After lunch, I take a boat ride from Careyitos Beach and its palm-shaded restaurant to the coastline surrounding the Careyes property. There's nothing else out here. I could pick from a handful of empty beaches to be dropped off at for an afternoon. In the steep slopes above, audaciously pink and turquoise and yellow villas poke out of the

hillsides like bougainvillea flowers.

As dinner approaches, the night brings cool air. I wander to Costa Careyes's newest addition, a modern take on a Mexican village aptly called the Cultural Plaza. Studio apartments, art galleries, and a gourmet pizza parlor surround an immaculate concrete plaza with one tree left in the middle. A silent surfer movie plays in grainy black and white on the 40-foot-wide screen at the plaza's back wall. I order a small pizza and a margarita on the rocks. I watch the surfers carve and listen to the cicadas creaking in the dark jungle. ★

David Hanson is a frequent contributor to this magazine.

GETTING THERE

US Airways offers direct flights from Phoenix to Puerto Vallarta and Manzanillo (for immediate access to Costa Careyes). You can rent a car in Puerto Vallarta or arrange for a pick-up from Imanta or Costa Careyes.