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Riviera Nayarit

Mexico's Newest Playground

This Pacific coast resort offers everything from ecotourism to luxe hotels

KICK BACK
The pool at Villa Bella Bed & Breakfast Inn. Top right and below: local color in Sayulita.



FIRST CAME CANCUN, then Los Cabos, then the Riviera Maya. The next big thing in Mexico's planned tourism development is the Riviera Nayarit. How big? Already the Mexican government has poured \$1.5 billion into this public/private venture, which was launched in spring 2007. Originally comprising 112 miles along the coast of the state of Nayarit, from Nuevo Vallarta (just north of Puerto Vallarta) to the colonial town of San Blas, the area was such a success (with the country's highest hotel-occupancy rates for the first half of 2008) that it was recently extended to encompass the entire Nayarit seashore, much of which is undeveloped.

My first pleasant surprise was how easy it was to get there from the East Coast. I hopped a nonstop from Newark to Puerto Vallarta, the region's main gateway. Villa La Estancia, where I began my weeklong tour, was just a 10-minute ride from the airport. Seven hours after takeoff, I was frolicking in the ocean.

Therein lay another surprise: I'd thought this

section of coastline was the exclusive province of surfers. And while the area is justly renowned for its big waves, in many places the Pacific actually lives up to its name. Not only are there good swimming beaches, there's even quality snorkeling and diving, at the Marietas Islands. This wildlife preserve, located in Banderas Bay, hosts a variety of fish, as well as rays and sea turtles, in its clear waters.

Formidable mountains—the Sierra Madre Occidental—frame the shoreline, yielding a dramatic landscape with myriad recreational options, including horseback riding, zip-line canopy tours and ATV excursions. Whale- and bird-watching are big draws. Alas, the whales were not present during

my visit, but I particularly enjoyed a motorboat ride through the mangrove channels of La Tovara National Park, where dozens of wading birds preened and a slow-moving hefty croc made our boat seem suddenly very, very small. If you'd like to get even closer to nature, there are swim-with-dolphins and swim-with-sea-lions outfits, too. The sport fishing is superb, with marlin, sailfish and yellowfin tuna large and plentiful.

SEASIDE INDULGENCE

Despite the area's rugged allure, creature comforts abound. Back at **Villa La Estancia Nuevo Vallarta**, my stylish one-bedroom apartment boasted a full kitchen, washer/dryer, marble bath with oversize Jacuzzi and huge ocean-view balcony with chaise longue and dining set. The property offers good value, especially for families, with deluxe amenities available should the urge to splurge arise. I treated myself to a deep-tissue massage at the supremely serene Tatewari Spa, and the resort's eclectic restaurant, La Casona, is definitely worth a visit.

For those preferring an all-inclusive getaway, **Grand Velas All Suites & Spa Resort**, also in Nuevo Vallarta, is an upscale adults-only enclave that redefines the category. The award-winning spa is among the most beau-

SUNDAY NIGHT FEVER

Editor-at-large Tom Passavant recently spent time in Puerto Vallarta and was astounded by the lively Sunday night gatherings in the town square. Visit www.diversion.com to find out about this local custom.



GRAND VELAS ALL SUITES & SPA RESORT

WHERE TO STAY

cuisine without a thought to transportation and the effects of all that fine Mexican wine.

DOWN-TO-EARTH DELIGHTS

The Riviera Nayarit isn't just about ambitious gourmet fare, of course. The area's fantastic seafood can be sampled at any number of modest establishments. One local specialty is *huachinango zarandeado*, grilled whole red snapper seasoned with achiote. I recommend the version at Tino's La Laguna (tinosvallarta.com) in Nuevo Vallarta, a palapa-covered dining room.

I ended my exploration of the Riviera Nayarit in the fishing village of La Cruz de Huanacastle, at **Villa**

Bella Bed & Breakfast Inn.

(For a detailed account, see my blog post at www.diversion.com.) Seven individually designed accommodations are perched on a hilltop with a jewel of a pool overlooking Banderas Bay. Every inch decorated in native art and crafts, Villa Bella exudes a specifically Mexican brand of charm. La Cruz is home to Hikuri (hikuri.com), an inviting gallery/workshop/café featuring Huichol creations, several family-run restaurants and dozens of roosters. It's a welcome sliver of low-key authenticity along this rapidly developing coast. ☉



◀ **Villa Bella Bed & Breakfast Inn**
villabella-lacruz.com
From \$180

▶ **Villa La Estancia**
Nuevo Vallarta
villalaestancia.com
From \$190

For more information, visit rivieranayarit.com

tiful I've ever seen. I was able to dine at only one of the resort's four restaurants, Frida, which I'm happy to report sets the bar high with its modern takes on Mexican cuisine, such as the sea bass in huitlacoche (corn fungus) crust served over fried plantains with pasilla chile sauce.

About 10 miles north, in Punta de Mita, on El Anclote beach, **Hotel des Artistes** offers ultra-modern two- and three-bedroom suites with every conceivable convenience. Acclaimed chef Thierry Blouet helms the exceptional Café des Artistes. Among the delicacies I sampled were a sublime cream of prawn and pumpkin soup, and swordfish topped with foie gras. The meal was accompanied by *Vino de Piedra*, a meritage from Ensenada, the standout among several terrific Mexican wines I enjoyed on this trip.

The pinnacle of pampering is **The St. Regis Punta Mita Resort**, which debuted in November. It occupies a privileged site with a wide sandy beach and views of the Marietas Islands within the gated Punta Mita development, which includes a Four Seasons and two Jack Nicklaus-designed golf courses. The aesthetic is barefoot elegance, with a subdued palette (I didn't know there were so many shades of white and beige) and butler service for all accommodations.

The Riviera Nayarit shows its bohemian side in nearby Sayulita. A surf-centric town with a large expat community, Sayulita has an appealing assortment of jewelry, crafts and clothing shops. Local Huichol Indians sell their intricately beaded wares in the plaza, and a boutique, *Galeria Tanana* (huicholcenter.org), is dedicated to their handiwork. The beach is attractive even for nonsurfers, but get there early to claim your spot.

Food lovers should consider booking at least one night at **Hotel Garza Canela**, a handsome family-owned lodging in the picturesque colonial town of San Blas. Yes, it's convenient to beaches, historic sites and La Tovar National Park. But most important, guests are steps away from the hotel's phenomenal restaurant, *El Delfin*, which drew raves from *DIVERSION*'s John Mariani (see www.diversion.com). The man knows of what he speaks. Staying on-site allowed me to indulge in chef Betty Vazquez's innovative

▶ **Grand Velas All Suites & Spa Resort**
vallarta.grandvelas.com
From \$704

▶ **Hotel des Artistes**
hoteldesartistesdelmar.com
From \$320

▶ **Hotel Garza Canela**
garzacanela.com
From \$121

▶ **The St. Regis Punta Mita Resort**
stregis.com/puntamita
From \$595

Louise Collazo writes *DIVERSION*'s Travel Deals column.