

La Riviera Alternativa

By Kate Joynes-Burgess in Nayarit for Travel+Leisure (Mexico edition, November 2008)

Dotted among the colonies of new developments Travel+Leisure discovered uncommon natural beauty, great gastronomy, stylish shops and delightful accommodation - from Bohemian luxury to complete blow-out - at Mexico's newest beach destination.

Sitting cross-legged inside Haramara Retreat's open-air yoga pavilion, my eyes drank up the perfectly balanced view between the *selva* and the sea. Within the enormous palapa, I felt like I was suspended on an island in the sky above Sayulita bay. After successive tours of generic developments in the newly launched Riviera Nayarit, I knew that I had chanced upon something undeniably special.

Located just 40 minute's drive from Puerto Vallarta airport, Haramara ("Grandmother Sea" in Huichol), is a real solace. It creates calm through its cleverly designed architecture that effortlessly blurs the line between indoor and outdoor spaces. While instruction in meditation, hatha and ashtanga yoga is available twice-daily (7am and 7pm), there is no compulsion to participate. Lazing in a hammock or taking the tree-lined path down to swim off their private beach after a stimulating spa treatment are indulgent alternatives. Each of Haramara's 15 stylish yet rustic cabañas is furnished with natural woods, hand-woven white bed-linen and muslin drapes, delicately decorated with fresh flowers. Attractive bathrooms, with mosaic pebble floors, are open to the elements at head height so you can shower looking out across the treetops without your privacy being compromised. It helps to be a little Zen to stop freaking out about the lack of physical barriers to keep the beasties at bay. But the finishing is impeccable, making the difference between a hippy hangout and a chic escape from urban life. It is tempting to venture no further than this unique hideout.

Scruffy but Stylish Sayulita

Yet with so much to see in this underexplored corner of the Republic, I wanted to get out there. Less than 1km down the dirt track from Haramara is the entrance to Sayulita, a seaside village turned jet-set town offering an entirely different kind of break. Surf shops stand tall next to seafront restaurants like Don Pedro's, from which I watched light-dappled surfers polish their stunts in front of the setting sun. Its long waves and two sizeable stretches of surf break make it a great place to learn the coolest water sport. During low-season, the town is on the shabby side, yet to put on its glad rags for next year's suitors. Sayulita received bad press from Greenpeace in 2006-2007 when it was named among Mexico's ten dirtiest beaches. The good news is that monthly monitoring has taken Nayarit's surf centre off the environmental group's black list. Its beaches are cleaner than they have been since the population began to boom earlier this decade. Signage in English nods to the arrival of *angloparlantes* chiefly from the United States and Canada. Among the smaller European contingent is Tracie Willis, British founder of

Chocobanana café, famous for its frozen chocolate-dipped bananas and filling breakfasts. Olive-filled focaccia and exquisite cakes are tasty offerings at Panino's Panadería Artesanal Europea. The varied spread put on by Chilean baker Denis Pastori and his wife – and executive chef - Georgina Lomeli is perfect for an impromptu picnic on the beach. The bakery also showcases the glorious expressionist paintings of Chilean artist, Humberto Salanova (www.hsalanova.com), a fellow Sayulita resident, whose cityscapes have a touch of Jackson Pollack.

Pachamama is reigns over Sayulita's growing cluster of boutiques. Owner Nathalie Mignot brings her exclusive Les Gazelles jewellery to discerning, cash-flush visitors from the Riviera's high-end resorts. Tahitian black pearls are their trademark adornments, often strung with leather for a Bohemian effect. Their delicate *Desirada* wrap around necklace will set you back USD\$2530. Fish for more affordable options at Carinne Bérubé's Scarlett boutique. Her own design C-Raine jewellery – charm necklaces with clusters of semi-precious stones and scented Indian amber wood – hang next to pretty patterned sundresses and demure blouses sourced from Los Angeles. Canadian Bérubé, originally from chilly Montreal, has learnt to dress for the Nayarit heat, favouring clothing in silk and cotton for her store. High-quality *artesanía* from across Mexico and Guatemala can be hunted down at La Galería Hamaca and its sister store Galería Colores.

San Pancho: Pueblito Bohemio

Mexico's own San Francisco is 10 minutes drive up the coast from Sayulita. This pueblito has a relaxed, arty atmosphere akin to its giant Californian counterpart. San Pancho, as it is affectionately known, keeps tourists coming back with a full calendar of cultural events. Chief among them is the Colectivo San Pancho's December Art Festival, taking place on the last weekend of the month. It attracts local and international artists showcasing painting, photography, and traditional Huichol crafts from beadwork sculptures to *pinturas de estambre*. San Pancho has more than its fair share of boutiques for a sleepy village where cockerels roam the streets in strutting battalions (I renamed it San Gallo). It is a good base for outdoor pursuits from sea kayaking to horse riding while strong surf attracts big-wave addicts. Romantic types are drawn to San Pancho's legendary sunsets, which give boutique Hotel Cielo Rojo its name. Its comfortable rooms are dressed with traditional textiles and playful kitsch trimmings and its healthy complimentary breakfast, teamed with local organic coffee from Peñita de Occidente, gives a zingy start to the day. Other epicurean treats are served up by Belgian restaurateur Amandine Darmstaedter, from her trio of exclusive eating places: the hilltop Café del Mar, posh Mar Plata and laidback breakfast and lunch joint La Perla del Mar.

Polished Punta de Mita

Upmarket options abound in Mexico's newest Riviera as developers draw visitors and settlers to this 180km stretch of coastline. Punta de Mita is a prime spot where the elegant Hotel des Artistes del Mar

opened its doors in January. Full and fractional ownership options are available alongside boutique hotel services. With its emphasis on art and gastronomy – brought to the table by part-proprietor and celebrated resident French chef Thierry Blouet - the hotel has more character than the pristine but uninspiring new 120-room St Regis and established Four Seasons resorts nearby. It hosts Blouet's first seafood restaurant, Café des Artistes del Mar, a variant on his famous Puerto Vallarta establishment. The new venture is part of Nayarit's booming organic movement. Blouet has launched a "100 Mile Diet Menu" to "showcase locally grown ingredients" while "supporting local farmers" within a 160km radius. Des Artistes apartments are light and luxurious without being too fussy. The sophisticated development, with its exclusive spa treatments and roof-top pool, provides for a purely relaxing break. Yet I wanted another encounter with Nayarit's *naturaleza* before heading home.

Where the Wild Things Are

Three hours' drive north, San Blas is a hub for the Riviera's natural beauty. If the stunning scenery is not incentive enough to make the road-trip, then the ancient port harbours another gem. Within the Hotel Garza Canela's El Delfin restaurant, Chef Betty Vasquez, who trained at Paris' Cordon Bleu School, creates unmistakable culinary masterpieces. Her refreshing *carpaccio de camarón al perejil frito* and rich *pastel de chocolate*, seasoned with *chile de árbol y pimienta* are musts. San Blas's principle attraction is La Tovara mangrove nature reserve. I took the "jungle tour" with recognised bird expert, known only as "ChenCho". He chooses a quieter route starting from the canal at the foot of the Fuerte de San Basilio ruins. Winding through mangroves in his lancha, Chencho pointed out an array of wildlife: cormorants, five-metre crocodiles, bright-red fresh-water crabs and the wide-beaked nocturnal garza canela itself. Afterwards, I cooled off with a quick dip in the fresh water spring, mildly reassured by a fence erected to keep out the crocodiles. Now that was enough nature for me. Back to civilization and Betty's memorable lunch.

When to go

The Riviera Nayarit boasts a mild tropical climate with an average annual temperature of 25°C. To avoid the rains, visit between mid-November and late April, but expect higher prices, particularly in December, when the landscape is most lush. Whale watching is possible between mid-December to late March while low-season (officially May-November), is the time to see nesting marine turtles (www.project-tortuga.org). Eating options are limited in September-October when several restaurants close and shops open more sporadically.

What time is it?

Once you cross the bridge dividing Puerto Vallarta (Jalisco) from Nuevo Vallarta (Nayarit), you enter a different time zone. Nayarit officially observes Pacific Standard Time (one hour behind DF). To make matters more confusing, Central Standard Time tends to be the clock of choice until you reach San Pancho. Check with tour operators which timetable they use before arranging when to meet.

Getting there

Click Mexicana offers regular direct flights from Mexico City. A taxi service from Puerto Vallarta airport costs from 500 (Punta de Mita) to 800 pesos (Sayulita, San Pancho). Renting a four-wheel drive jeep from Avis (www.avis.com) starts at USD\$84 a day.

Sleep

Sayulita

Haramara

16 Tamarindos; (329) 291 3558 / (329) 291 3038; www.haramararetreat.com;
reservations@haramararetreat.com

USD\$430 por noche para dos personas incluyendo 3 alimentos (desayuno, comida y cena). Yoga classes cost USD\$25 per hour.

Punta de Mita

Hotel des Artistes

Av. El Anclote 5; (329) 291 5005; www.hoteldesartistesdelmar.com;
reservations@hoteldesartistesdelmar.com

Apartments start at USD\$425.00 per night.

San Pancho

Cielo Rojo

Calle Asia 6; (311) 258 4155; www.hotelcielorajo.com; hotelcielorajo@yahoo.com
Double rooms from USD\$85 per night.

Eat

Sayulita

Don Pedro's Restaurant & Bar

Calle Marlin #2; (329) 291-3090; info@donpedros.com; www.donpedros.com

Dinner or lunch for two around 550 pesos.

Chocobanana

14 Delfin, Col. Centro, Sayulita 329 291 3051

www.laoriginalchocobanana.com / info@laoriginalchocobanana.com

Breakfast for two around 100 pesos.

Panino's Panadería Artesanal

Delfin # 1, Centro Sayulita, Nay. Tel. 329 291 3429 www.panartsayulita.com/

Cappuccino y pastel 45 pesos.

San Pancho

Bistro Cielo Rojo

The organic hotel restaurant serves non-guests with breakfast (120 pesos per couple), lunch and dinner (around 400 pesos for two). Menu varies daily.

Mar Plata

Argentine cuts come highly recommended alongside Filete de dorado al vino blanco y estragón.

Calle de Palmas 130; (311) 258 4424 a 25; www.marplata.com.mx; marplatanpancho@gmail.com

550 pesos per couple.

Punta de Mita

Café des Artistes

Hotel des Artistes; Five course tasting menu 900 pesos per person.

Tino's Restaurant

The place to try Nayarit's classic pescado zarandeado (188 pesos per kilo).

Avenida El Anclote 64; (329) 291-6473; www.tinosvallarta.com; reserve@tinosvallarta.com

570 pesos for meal for two.

San Blas

El Delfin, Hotel Garza Canela,
Paredes # 106 Sur; (323) 285 0112

Shop

Sayulita

Pachamama

Calle Defines #6B; (329) 291 3468; www.lesgazelles.com; pacha@lesgazelles.biz

Scarlett

Marlín 10; (329) 291 3862; www.scarlettinsayulita.com; carinne@scarlettinsayulita.com

La Hamaca

Revolución 110; (329) 291 3029; mascbr@gmail.com

San Pancho

Tatehuari Joyeros y Galería

Av. Tercer Mundo 90-A; 311 258 4490; www.tatehuari.com; jewelersygaleria@tatehuari.com

Galería de Nayar

Home to Ariel Sainz's furniture and art collection and exhibition space for visiting Mexican and overseas artists.

Av. Tercer Mundo y Cuba, una cuadra de la playa; (311) 2584462; www.sanpancho-sanfrancisco.com/Galeria_del_Nayar.htm

Explore

All recommended hotels can arrange excursions and include on-site spa facilities if you prefer a pampering.

Diva Tours and Transportation

Mexico 25-A, San Francisco; (311) 258 4017; www.sayulitanay.com; divatours@prodigy.net.mx; divatransp@hotmail.com

Rates range from 200 pesos per hour for horse riding to 1500 pesos for a private tour to San Blas.

San Blas Jungle Tour

La Tovara boat trip costs 440 pesos for up to four people. Ask for Chenco on the road leading up to the Fuerte or call Oscar Partida Hernández (Comonfort 134 Pte., (323) 285 0324 if the former guide proves too elusive. Try to tour around 7am before timid species are disturbed by passing boats.