

The Other Riviera

WHY RIVIERA NAYARIT IS THE MOST STUNNING STRETCH OF MEXICO'S PACIFIC COAST
BY AMBER GIBSON

Amere 30 minutes north of Puerto Vallarta, Riviera Nayarit encompasses 23 seaside Mexican fishing villages along a 192-mile stretch of coastline. Lovely beaches, great surfing, lush jungles, the freshest seafood, and excellent luxury lodging make it a more upscale and authentic escape from, say, the all-inclusive and often generic resorts of Puerto Vallarta.

Nayarit is one of Mexico's smallest states, but with an abundance of flora and fauna between its tropical and temperate ecosystems—including jaguars, crocodiles, sea turtles, humpback whales, and hundreds of bird species. The Cora civilization was the first to emerge in the region around 400 A.D., and while there are still Cora villages tucked away in the Sierra Madre mountains, they do not interact with tourists much. The most visible tribe today is the Huichol, known for colorful beaded costume making. Although its citizens represent an endangered culture, many Huichol interact with tourists to sell crafts and artwork. Ask about the cultural and religious meanings behind the vivid patterns and symbols, with common spiritual motifs including the eagle, blue deer, corn, and hallucinogenic peyote cactus.

Nayarit also means not having to be afraid of street food; in fact, a meal on the beach watching the surfers and sunset is a must. Aguachile and pescado zarandeado, or grilled fish, is popular everywhere, and fresh and healthy fare proliferates. Just don't go overboard on the tequila.

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

United offers direct flights between Newark Liberty International Airport and Puerto Vallarta on Saturdays and Sundays. High-end hotels provide ground transport from the airport and taxis are plentiful, but rent a car for more freedom. The drive along the coast on Highway 200 is easy and coastal towns are close to the main highway.

There are ample water sports, including diving, snorkeling, deep-sea fishing, paddleboarding, and surfing (Punta Mita Expeditions is a reputable outfitter for any private excursion). December through May is peak sailing season and there are several world-class marinas in the area, including the new 340-slip Riviera Nayarit Marina at La Cruz.

Sayulita is the best known and most popular of the villages among tourists, with plenty of expats setting up boutiques and sleek art galleries, in contrast with the Huichol craftsmen selling exquisite beaded jewelry and art along the main square. The influx of Americans and Europeans hasn't destroyed Sayulita's charm, though. There are always new stores, restaurants, and bars popping up and hidden gems to discover. Streetside tacos with smoked marlin, beef, pork, or nopales (Opuntia cacti) from Naty's Cocina, fixed up just how you like, are favorite fuels among surfers and yogis, washed down with refreshing tropical aguas frescas. Sayulita Wine Shop has an impressive collection of Mexican varieties (more than 90 labels) alongside distilled Mexican spirits *other* than tequila, such as mezcal, raicilla, and sotol.

Be sure to explore beyond Sayulita, though; there are many equally charming towns like San Pancho, Bucerías, and colonial San Blas further north. Shimmy to live banda music while downing shots of scallops and octopus at local favorite Buzzos in Bucerías, or sip vegan agua de cacao sweetened with piloncillo and cinnamon out of a calabash gourd at Mexicolate in San Pancho.

ATTRACTIONS

GALERIA TANANA

Museum-quality beaded sculptures, jewelry, and yarn paintings greet you at this non-profit Huichol gallery, founded by anthropologist Susana Valdez more than 20 years ago. Its intricate handicrafts are all made by Huichol people

in the mountains of the Sierra Madre Occidental, and proceeds go towards helping native people address economic, educational, and health issues.
Av. Revolución 22, Sayulita, tanana.org

ENTREAMIGOS COMMUNITY CENTER

This artfully designed nonprofit community center supports the children of San Pancho with a bilingual library, recycled playground, sports center, scholarships, and entrepreneurship training. Volunteers are welcome even just for a day and visiting children are always welcome to play. The primary source of income is a robust recycling program, including upcycled toys made from plastic containers that make for quirky souvenirs. A visit here is an excellent way to meet the local community and make new friends. **Av. Tercer Mundo 24, San Pancho, entreamigos.org.mx**

LA CRUZ DE HUANACAXTLE

Weekly seasonal markets have been popular in Mexico since the pre-Hispanic period, and Riviera Nayarit is home to many, showcasing handcrafted products starting in November through early May. La Cruz Market, next to Mercado del Mar, is one of the best, specializing in organic fruit and veggies, cheeses, cured meats, and traditional clothing. Sunday festivities include live music, yoga, and craft workshops for kids. **Marina Riviera Nayarit, lacruzmarket.com**

WHERE TO STAY

IMANTA RESORTS PUNTA DE MITA

A secluded jungle paradise awaits at this exclusive Relais & Chateaux property, located across 250 acres in the Sierra de Vallejo biosphere reserve. All 12 standalone suites are built like prehistoric temples, with soaking tubs carved from pink boulders and outdoor showers with ocean views. Begin the day with a private yoga class on the observatory deck before falling asleep to the sound of crashing waves and bird song during a massage at the open-air jungle



Top: W Punta de Mita
Bottom: Imanta Resorts
Punta de Mita
Next page: Ice cream
at Naef Café

spa. Dinner includes dishes like grilled amberjack with huitlacoche risotto. **Monte Nahuac Lote L, 63734 Higuera Blanca. imantaresorts.com**

W PUNTA DE MITA

Fun and friendly, this Starwood resort incorporates local patterns and designs in colorful and contemporary ways, including a vibrant green and blue mosaic catwalk representing the Huichol life journey. Grab lunch at the poolside Chevycheria ceviche bar after a stand-up paddleboard or surf lesson. Live DJs at Spice Market spice the lively nightlife, as does flavorful Southeast Asian street food like lemongrass chili baby corn and Thai fried chicken wings. **Km 8.5 Carretera Punta de Mita, Desarrollo Costa Banderas, 63734 Punta de Mita. wpuntademit.com**

HOTEL CIELO ROJO

This humble boutique hotel in quiet San Pancho is a great choice for travel-



ers looking for a relaxing, eco-friendly and more authentic Mexican experience. Nourishing organic fare includes ample vegetarian options, and the owners make their own tequila and olive oil. Plus, you're just three blocks from a pristine beach with spectacular sunsets. **Calle Asia 6, 63734 San Francisco. hotelciolorojo.com**

DAY TRIPS AND TOURS

MARIETA ISLANDS

The Hidden Beach in this UNESCO Biosphere Reserve is one of Mexico's most coveted Instagram trophy shots. Only a limited number of tourists are allowed to visit due to environmental



protection, and rumor has it the cratered hole was created by military bomb tests. Great for diving and marine bird-watching. **islasmarietas.conanp.gob.mx**

SAN BLAS

First settled in 1531, this is the oldest village in Riviera Nayarit and was an important Spanish port and naval stronghold, as evidenced by the colonial architecture in the historic center. Wildlife lovers will enjoy birdwatching or a visit to the Kiekari Crocodile preserve. Try oyster sopes, a local delicacy, at El Delfin at the Hotel Garza Canela. **rivieranayarit.com/destinations/san-blas**

DINE AND DRINK

LOS XITOMATES

Chef Luis Jesús Fitch Gómez cooks for guests in his home—much of the produce coming from his organic garden. Lobster and mushroom quesadillas in blue corn tortillas and hearty filets of Torreón style steak blend traditional Mexican ingredients with European fine dining. **Km 14 Carretera La Cruz de Huanacastle-Punta de Mita, Punta de Mita. losxitomates.mx**

NAEF CAFÉ

Blink and you'll miss the entrance to this garden cafe, open for breakfast, lunch, and the best ice cream in Mexico. Flavors available at any given time include piña colada, wasabi, hibiscus, and black sesame. **5 de Febrero #3, Colonia Emiliano Zapata, 63734 Punta de Mita. naef.com.mx**

ALQUIMISTA COCKTAIL ROOM

This bar serves the most sophisticated drinks along the coast. Ask for a shot of the sotol, gin, or vodka (marinating with a rattlesnake), or try a more palatable hibiscus tequila drink with thin, fried chicharrón de pescado. **Puerto Vallarta - Tepic 1480, 63735 Nuevo Vallarta. alquimistabar.com** ■



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