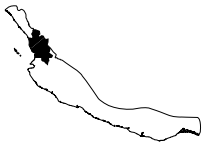
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Nayarit



Once one of the best-kept secrets of the Pacific coast, pristine Nayarit has unsurprisingly emerged as one of Mexico's hottest tourist destinations. After all, it was just a matter of time before beach bums and nature buffs would start spreading the word about the scenic fishing villages, secluded beaches and lush mountains and wetlands teeming with natural wonders.

The state is drawing so much tourism attention these days that the government seized the opportunity to brand a 60km stretch of coastline the 'Riviera Nayarit.' From the gringo-friendly resort of Nuevo Vallarta in the south to the sleepy fishing town of San Blas in the north, once-isolated beach communities, for better or worse, now find themselves sitting on prime real estate.

Despite the ongoing development boom, life on the beach continues to move at a leisurely pace. In Punta de Mita and Sayulita, surfers flock to warm waters with primo breaks, while further north the calming effect of San Francisco, Lo de Marcos and Chacala puts even the most neurotic traveler at ease. In San Blas, tour boats glide through mangroves with hundreds of exotic bird species.

Nayarit is also awash in history and culture. The man-made island of Mexcaltitán is believed by some to be none other than the ancestral homeland of the Aztecs. In the state capital, Tepic, well-preserved historic buildings and several interesting museums dot the streets.

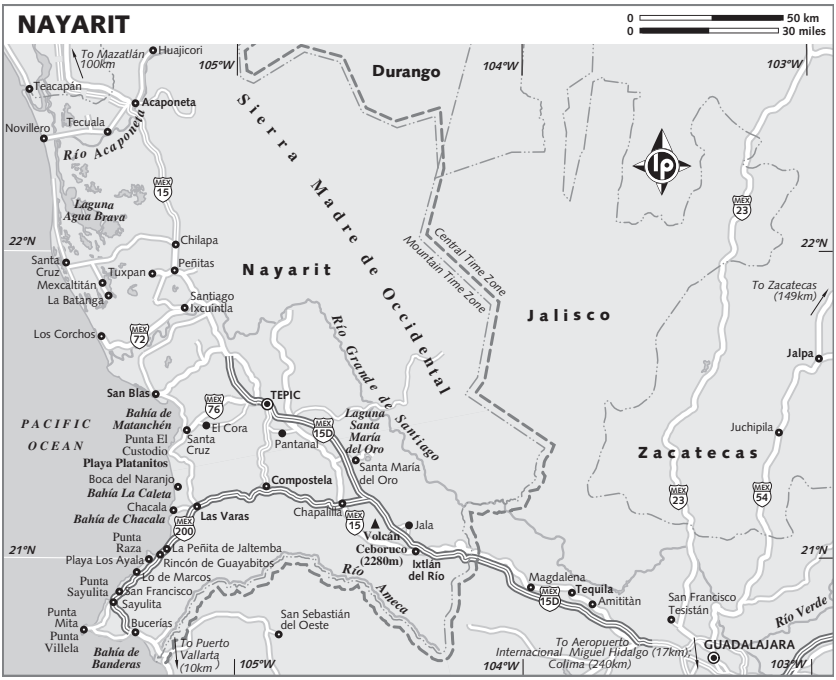
Distances from one town to the next are relatively short in Nayarit, making traveling a breeze. Of course, once you've found that special place, the hardest part is packing your bags.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Boating through mangroves and gazing at exotic bird species in **San Blas** (p122)
- Letting your imagination run wild on the island village of **Mexcaltitán** (p121), the legendary homeland of the Aztecs
- Watching tiny olive ridley turtles scurry into the sea at **Playa San Francisco** (p135)
- Hanging loose at the surfers' paradise of **Sayulita** (p135)
- Unwinding on the picture-perfect beaches in and around **Chacala** (p129)



- SAN BLAS JANUARY DAILY HIGH: 21°C | 70°F
- SAN BLAS JULY DAILY HIGH: 30°C | 86°F



SANTIAGO IXCUINTLA

☎ 323 / pop 17,000

OK, so Santiago Ixcuintla won't be making any must-see lists anytime soon, but it serves just fine as a jumping-off point for the historic island village of Mexcaltitán. You'll find the best hotels within several blocks of the main square.

The **tourist office** (☎ 235-05-95; 🕒 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) and internet services are on the *zócalo* (main plaza), while banks with ATMs and money exchange are nearby.

Indigenous Huichol artists make colorful bead and yarn art at **Centro Huichol** (☎ 235-11-71; cnr Av 20 de Noviembre 452 & Constitución; 🕒 10am-7pm Mon-Sat), a handicrafts center about 10 blocks northwest of the city center. It's on the road to Mexcaltitán and there's a *mariscos* (seafood) restaurant next door if you want to grab a bite before heading out.

Hotel Casino Plaza (☎ 235-08-50; Ocampo 40; s/d/tr M$275/320/380; 🅿 ❄) has modern rooms with cable TV and wireless internet. Street-facing rooms are much brighter than those around the interior parking lot. The hotel's Los Vitrales restaurant offers a surprisingly good breakfast and lunch buffet in an air-conditioned space.

Hotel Plaza Los Reyes (☎ 235-42-57; Av 20 de Noviembre 89; d/tr M$377/425, ste M$542; ❄), one of the newest hotels in town, sports modern rooms with rustic furnishings, cable TV and internet access. High rollers can opt for spacious suites with partial views of the plaza.

Getting There & Away

Santiago Ixcuintla is about 8km west of the Hwy 15 *crucero* (turnoff).

Buses from Tepic leave frequently for Santiago Ixcuintla. You also can take direct buses from Guadalajara or San Blas; however, some lines let passengers off at Las Peñas, a highway town about 10km before the Santiago Ixcuintla *crucero,* so ask if the bus goes *'directo'* to save yourself the hassle of taking a taxi into town.

Three bus lines operate in town, each within several blocks of each other and about three blocks east of the *zócalo* near the intersection of Avs Zaragoza and 20 de Noviembre. Various long-distance buses leave daily from Santiago: