

Ixtapa, Zihuatanejo & the Costa Grande



A glowing halo of bleached-blond sand shimmers brilliantly along the 325 kilometers of Guerrero state's Costa Grande. Beyond the 'Great Coast's' heavenly crescent of beatified beach, small islands rocket from the azure-dream waters like angel's tears, while on terra firma, tawny resorts like Ixtapa and Troncones strut their wares. For beach lovers and chuck-it-all escapists, this could be the entrance to the 'Pearly Gates.'

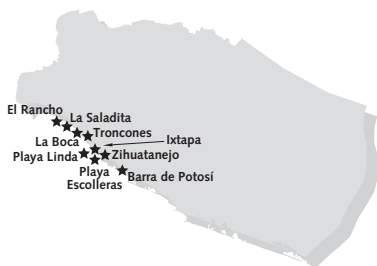
This lightly developed coast extends southeast from the Río Balsas at the Michoacán border all the way down to Acapulco. The verdant hills of the Sierra Madre del Sur protect the tropical forests of the northwest corners of this region, giving way to coconut plantations and a handful of estuaries in the southeast.

Most folks visiting this region will begin their adventures from the Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo area. These twin cities – alike in geography alone – couldn't be more different. Ixtapa is a beach resort that kicks, screams, parties and purges all day and all night without feeling a drop of regret, while her demure sister, just miles away, hides an interesting history, great swimming spots, an intimate downtown area and some top-flight cliff-top hotels and restaurants.

Just a half-hour drive northwest of Zihua, Troncones and Majahua offer buxom and beautiful beaches, good waves for surfing and a laid-back cool that even Miles Davis could dig. Southeast from Zihuatanejo on your way down to Acapulco, travelers will delight at deserted beaches, bird-choked estuaries and fishing villages forgotten by time and the sweep of development.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Leaving your all-inclusive Ixtapa resort for the day to explore the mangrove-fringed lagoon at **Barra de Potosí** (p188)
- Letting loose at the hopping bars and discotheques of **Zihuatanejo** (p179) and **Ixtapa** (p174)
- Dreaming of buying a second home in the sleepy beachside town of **Troncones** (p171), before heading out for a day of surfing, snorkeling or suntanning
- Chartering a **sailboat** (p183) in Zihuatanejo for an afternoon of sailing and snorkeling
- Slipping into a peeling roller at great surf spots like **La Saladita** (p174), **El Rancho** (p171), **La Boca** (p171), **Playa Linda** (p176) or **Playa Escolleras** (p176)



■ AVERAGE JANUARY DAILY HIGH: 29°C | 84°F

■ AVERAGE JULY DAILY HIGH: 32°C | 90°F



History

Humans have been living (and vacationing) on the Costa Grande since 2500 BC. And while the area's archaeological sites have largely been left unprotected, archaeologists have found ceramic shards and architectural remnants at Soledad de Maciel (near Petatlán) and Puerto Marqués (near Acapulco). Unlike those found along the coastal areas to the north, these archaeological markers indicate the region had contact with the Olmecs and later with Teotihuacán. Still, settlements always remained small and widely dispersed.

Tourism, so to speak, goes back a long way. The Purépecha (aka Tarascos), who ruled what is now Michoacán from the early 15th century until the arrival of the Spanish, had an early king named Calzontzin who liked Bahía de Zihuatanejo so much that he decided to build a winter 'retreat' on the point at Playa Las Gatas. If tales are true, the retreat included an artificial reef (still there) constructed to form something of a swimming pool for Calzontzin and his many wives.

When the Spanish arrived in the early 16th century, the region was loosely controlled by

the Aztecs. Following the conquest, Hernán Cortés set his sights on developing a maritime route between Mexico and Asia, and in 1523 he established the shipyard and port of Puerto Santiago (present-day Zacatula) on the Río Balsas. Álvaro Saavedra de Cerón sailed from Zihuatanejo in search of a trade route in 1527, never to return. When a return trade route from Asia was finally established in 1565 between Acapulco and Manila (Philippines), Zihuatanejo's importance fizzled, with just a few English and Dutch pirates using the bay as a hideout before they attacked treasure-filled galleons en route to Acapulco.

After independence, and the subsequent completion of the Acapulco–Manila maritime route, Zihuatanejo remained a sleepy fishing village until the 1970s when Fonatur, a government tourism organization, developed Ixtapa.

Information

Ixtapa and Zihuatanejo are the gateway cities to this region. Though they're right next door to each other, they still feel worlds apart. With its purpose-built infrastructure, Ixtapa clearly