

# Destination Puerto Vallarta & Pacific Mexico

Mexico's Pacific coast is a fairy-tale land: a place where sky and mountain descend to sea and pitch-perfect honey-sand beaches in delicious harmony. It is beautiful and bountiful and blessed. And it's changing at a rapid-fire pace, each day struggling and adapting to a new cultural scene, a new drug lord, a newly developed beach town just waiting to be explored.

There are new environmental threats to be dealt with and new economic meltdowns to be weathered. And always, there is the sun and the sand and a resilient people with smiles as broad and open as the vast arching horizon that shelters the sun each day.

The major headline of the past 500 years is one of inequality and migration. People are moving en masse to resort towns like Mazatlán, Puerto Vallarta, Acapulco, Manzanillo, Ixtapa and Puerto Escondido in search of the almighty peso, in turn straining infrastructure and the environment. And while it hasn't always been good for the sea turtles, marine fauna or monarch butterflies, it has been relatively good for the pocketbook. People are making more: GDP per person rose from US\$8500 in 2000 to US\$12,400 in 2008.

The rise in international tourism has also created a renewed interest in protecting fragile ecosystems in places where a sea turtle is now worth three times more alive than dead, and cultural traditions like weaving, ceramics and cooking are now highly prized skills, ensuring the essence of these centuries-old skills passes on to the next generation. But with the worldwide economic crisis brewing, and the peso losing steam to the US dollar – it went down 21% in 2008, and was continuing to lose its grip in the first months of 2009 – the specters of unemployment, inflation and decreased visitation are looming large on the horizon.

There's also the plague of drugs. Nearly 90% of US-bound cocaine passes through Mexico, and coastal cities – especially Puerto Vallarta and Acapulco – have seen spikes in violence as a result, though this violence is rarely targeted at tourists. But this hasn't kept folks from coming here. Mexico is the seventh most popular tourist destination in the world, and many Pacific coast resort towns are undergoing facelifts, as the government invests in infrastructure and other capital improvements to keep these places on top.

Behind this glitzy facade, the ever-looming issue of inequality continues to simmer. But these complications aren't conspicuous when you walk the streets of Oaxaca or stretch out on the sand at a lost Michoacán beach. The region's overarching happiness and hope (and a rather morbid intimacy with death) seem to cut through all the economic hardships and politics, making room for the important things in life: a perfect sunset, a bucket of chilled beer and the makings of one great party.

## FAST FACTS

Population: 21 million  
(Pacific coast states),  
106.5 million (national)

Life expectancy: men 74  
years, women 79 years

Population growth:  
1.142%

Type of government:  
Federal Republic

Dominant religions:  
Roman Catholic (76.5%),  
Protestant (6.3%)

Literacy rate: 91%  
(US 99%)

GDP per person:  
US\$12,400 (as compared  
to US\$46,000 per person  
in the US)

Foreign tourists entering  
Mexico per year: 21  
million (3.8 million in  
Puerto Vallarta)

Monthly remittances  
from US: US\$2.4 billion  
(October 2008)

Price to prepare a *taco  
al pastor*: M\$2.79  
(November 2008)

# Getting Started

Traveling in this part of Mexico requires little planning. Just grab your passport, get on a plane or bus or in your car, and go! You'll rarely have trouble finding suitable accommodation on any budget, and travel by road or plane within Mexico is easy. If you have limited time and specific goals, work out a detailed itinerary and reserve accommodations in advance. If this is your first trip to Mexico, be ready for more crowds, noise, bustle and poverty than you might be accustomed to. But don't worry – most Mexicans will be only too happy to help you feel at home in their country. While English is widely spoken here, especially in the larger resort areas, it makes sense to invest a little time before your trip in learning even just a few phrases of Spanish – every word you know will make your trip that little bit easier and more enjoyable.

## WHEN TO GO

The Tropic of Cancer cuts across Mexico just north of Mazatlán, so this stretch of coast is officially tropical. The driest months, when it may not rain at all, are from November to April. These months are also the coolest, with temperatures averaging a comfortable 79° to 84°F (26° to 29°C).

The hottest months, May to October, are also the wettest, and the hottest and wettest of all are June, July and August, with temperatures in the high 80s F (low 30s C) along much of the coast. Rainfall increases as you move south from Mazatlán toward Acapulco, with Acapulco receiving twice as much rain as Mazatlán. The Oaxaca coast is drier but closer in average rainfall to Acapulco than Mazatlán. May to October is also extremely humid, and it's generally more humid the further south you move. Hurricanes do pass through here, but normally only one or two make land each year. Hurricane season runs from May 15 to November 30, and peaks between July and September.

See climate charts (p270) for more information.

### DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Your passport or required documentation (p282)
- Sandals or other beach-friendly shoes
- A swimsuit and clothes to cope with Mexico's climatic variations: air-conditioned and non-air-conditioned rooms (and buses)
- Any specific toiletries you require, including contact-lens solutions and contraceptives, as these can be difficult to obtain in Mexico (also consider carrying a copy of prescriptions for any medications you will take with you – this might save you from scrutiny at customs)
- A flashlight for some of those not-so-well-lit streets and stairways – and for power outages
- An inconspicuous container for money and valuables, such as a small, slim wallet or an under-the-clothes pouch or money belt (p271)
- Sun protection: a hat, sunglasses and sunscreen
- A small padlock
- A small Spanish dictionary and/or phrasebook
- A backpack for carrying it all – you can make it reasonably theft-proof with small padlocks; a light daypack, too, is useful

### THE PRICE OF A PESO

When this book went to press, the peso had suffered a serious decline against the US dollar, dropping 21% in 2008 and more than 4% in the first two months of 2009. This could mean inflation in Mexico, recession (experts said the economy would shrink by 1.16% in 2009) or cheaper prices for visitors traveling with foreign currency. In an economy that largely uses US dollars for business transactions, and for hotel rates at midrange to top-end hotels, this could also mean that some of the prices in this book may become inaccurate. As always, things change. And it's advisable to call ahead or check online (especially for those higher-end hotels that base their rates on dollars) for the latest prices.

The peak holiday periods are July and August, mid-December to early January, and a week either side of Easter. At these times, resorts attract big tourist crowds, room prices go up, and rooms and public transport are heavily booked, so reservations are recommended. November to April is reliably dry, warm and blissful, and many North Americans and Europeans choose these months to travel the coast.

Happily for beach bums, the water along Mexico's Pacific coast is perfect for swimming all year long. Diving and snorkeling can be good at any time, but visibility is usually highest (except during plankton blooms) in the dry winter months. Fun surf can be reasonably expected year-round, but waves are biggest from May through to November. Deep-sea fishing, also practiced all year, has its own species-specific seasons (see p50). Bird-watchers often prefer winter visits, when birds migrate down to the coastal lagoons from North America. Whale-watching is best from January to March.

### COSTS & MONEY

On Mexico's Pacific coast, a frugal budget traveler can pay about M\$250 to M\$400 a day by camping or staying in budget accommodations and eating two to three meals a day in the cheapest restaurants. Add in other costs (snacks, purified water, entry to archaeological sites, long-distance buses etc), and you'll be up to M\$350 to M\$500 a day. If you share rooms, costs per person drop considerably.

In the midrange you can live well for M\$500 to M\$1000 per person per day. In most places two people can easily find a clean, modern room with private bathroom and TV for M\$400 to M\$600.

At the top of the scale are hotels and resorts charging anywhere from M\$1000 to M\$3500 and restaurants where you pay M\$140 to M\$350 per person. You can save money by booking high-end hotels over the internet.

These figures do not take into account expenses such as internal airfares or car rentals – not to mention heavy tequila consumption, disco admissions and shopping, which you should certainly budget for.

While traveler's checks, US dollars and euros are accepted in some of the bigger hotels and by money changers, it makes sense to just use your ATM card (most towns with more than 1000 residents have an ATM machine). ATMs will give you the best exchange rate anyway. For information on exchange rates, see the inside front cover of this book.

### TRAVELING RESPONSIBLY

Sustainable travel is all about respect. Respect the environment, respect the culture, respect the economy and respect the rules. There are some easy steps you can take to lower your impact, including offsetting your travel (p284), hiring local guides, diving responsibly (p49) and staying

#### HOW MUCH?

Coco frio (fresh coconut)	M\$10
Internet per hr	M\$10-20
Corona beer	M\$10-20
Street taco	M\$5-10
Local small-car rental per day	M\$350-600

the night in small villages rather than just visiting them for the day. This encourages locals to preserve their culture and traditions, and mitigates the rampant urban migration that is affecting the cultural makeup of this diverse region.

There's nothing better than seeing wildlife in its natural environment, and it's best to avoid buying crafts made from endangered species, and visiting animal shows, like those 'dolphinsariums' you'll see in most major resorts.

This book also has a handy 'GreenDex' (p319) to get you started.

## TRAVEL LITERATURE

Few travel books stick solely to the subject of Pacific Mexico, but several books deal with the country as a whole and make great reading on any trip to Mexico.

Expatriate memoirist Tony Cohan rambles around Mexico to 'see how the puzzle of old and new fit together' in *Mexican Days: Journey into the Heart of Mexico* (2006). In the style of *Mexican Days* (2000), Cohan deftly travels the literary territories of history, contemporary life and old-fashioned journalism.

*The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (2002) is a massive compilation of articles, essays, poetry and photographs providing an encompassing introduction to the history and culture of Mexico.

British writer Isabella Tree takes peyote with the Huichol and meets the matriarch of Juchitán in *Sliced Iguana: Travels in Unknown Mexico* (2001), a warm, perceptive account of Mexico and its indigenous cultures.

*The People's Guide to Mexico* by Carl Franz (13th edition, 2006) has for more than 30 years been an invaluable, amusing resource for anyone on an extended trip. It doesn't attempt hotel, transport or sightseeing specifics, but does provide a great all-round introduction to Mexico.

Carlos Castaneda's *Don Juan* series, which reached serious cult status in the 1970s, tells of a North American's experiences with a peyote guru in northwestern Mexico.

For information on Mexican literature, see p30.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

**Lanic** (<http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/mexico/>) Best broad collection of Mexico links, from the University of Texas.

**LonelyPlanet.com** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) Succinct summaries on travel in Mexico, traveler forums and more.

**Mexican Adventure & Ecotourism Society** ([www.amtave.org](http://www.amtave.org)) Lists some 'green' tourism operators.

**Mexican Wave** ([www.mexicanwave.com](http://www.mexicanwave.com)) 'Europe's gateway to Mexico,' a treasure trove of travel, culture and food-related material.

**Mexico Connect** ([www.mexconnect.com](http://www.mexconnect.com)) Packed with news, message and chat boards, accommodation information, articles and an endless variety of other content and links.

**Mexico Tourism Board** ([www.visitmexico.com](http://www.visitmexico.com)) Worth a peek.

**Mexiconservación** ([www.mexiconservacion.org](http://www.mexiconservacion.org)) Has limited info on flora and fauna, and the ecological challenges facing the nation.

**Mexperience** ([www.mexperience.com](http://www.mexperience.com)) Full of valuable information for travel to and within Mexico.

**Planeta.com** ([www.planeta.com](http://www.planeta.com)) Great articles and listings for anyone interested in Mexico's ecology.

**Responsibletravel.com** ([www.responsibletravel.com](http://www.responsibletravel.com)) Keeps it green.

**Tomzap's Pacific Coast of Mexico** ([www.tomzap.com](http://www.tomzap.com)) For fun, quirky and extensive information about the coasts of Jalisco, Colima and Oaxaca.

# TOP PICKS



## ADVENTURES AROUND EVERY CORNER

There are countless options for outdoor enthusiasts, including the following:

- Surfing the big barrels at Puerto Escondido (p239), Mexico's Pipeline
- Volunteering with sea-turtle ecologists in Playa San Francisco (p135)
- Bird-watching on tropical Laguna de Manialtepec (p244)
- Boating through tropical mangroves to La Tovar (p122)
- Mountain biking in the hills overlooking Bahía de Banderas (p67)
- Sharing the seas with whales or dolphins in Bahía de Banderas (p66)
- Scuba diving in the gorgeous waters off Manzanillo (p158)
- Exploring the superb hilltop ruins and tombs of Monte Albán (p232)
- Cloud-forest hiking in the gorgeous Manantlán Biosphere (p161)

## PARTYING IT UP! FESTIVALS & EVENTS

You'll really catch the Mexican mood at these events.

- The commemoration of Father José María Mercado livens up San Blas (p122) on January 31 with a parade, a march by the Mexican navy, and fireworks
- Carnaval (Carnival; p109), the week leading up to Ash Wednesday, in late February/early March, is celebrated most vividly in Mazatlán
- Semana Santa (Holy Week), Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, is particularly colorful in Puerto Vallarta (p69) and Acapulco (p200)
- The Fiesta de San Pedro Apóstol (p121), on June 29, celebrates the patron saint of fishing and brings a beautiful pageant to Mexcaltitán
- Guelagueta, held in Oaxaca city (p224) on the first two Mondays after July 16, is a brilliant feast of Oaxacan folk dance
- The Sinaloa Arts Festival (p109) brings a series of cultural events to Mazatlán's beautiful Teatro Angela Peralta from late October through mid-November
- The Festival de los Artes, film festival and gourmet festival (p69) dominate the cultural calendar in Puerto Vallarta each year in November
- Día de Muertos (Day of the Dead; p221) is a big event in Oaxaca city, with music and dance at the main cemetery on November 2
- The festival for the Virgen de Guadalupe (p201) is celebrated by all of Mexico on December 11 to 12, but it's particularly vivid in Acapulco

## GUILTIEST INDULGENCES

Everything in moderation? Bullshit! This is your vacation, and you earned it! Here are some great spots to feed your inner Bacchus:

- La Casa Que Canta (p185) costs upwards of M\$4000 a night, and is worth every penny
- Eat the worm at Oaxaca's venerable drinking hole, La Casa del Mezcal (p228)
- Spend a week of Zen at Troncones' Present Moment Retreat (p173)
- Drink a margarita for breakfast!
- Pamper yourself at the luxurious Grand Velas resort (p76) if your pockets go deep, and we're talking real deep
- Los Osuna Distillery (p118) – devil's water never tasted so good
- Pie in the Sky (p91) – a sweet slice of nirvana

# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### BUMMING AROUND THE BAHÍA DE BANDERAS

One Week / Puerto Vallarta & Around

You can easily spend three to five days in **Puerto Vallarta** (p55). Stroll on **Isla Río Cuale** (p61) in the morning, along **Playa de los Muertos** (p61) in the afternoon, and along the **malecón** (boardwalk; p67) at dusk, noting the **public sculptures**.

Spend a day **biking** (p67), **horse riding** (p66) or **diving** (p64). Or shop for **Huichol crafts** (p84) and hit the **art galleries** (p84). After sunset, sample the taste-bud-popping **cuisine** (p76), before heading on to a **dance club** (p81).

After you've filled up on PV, head south to **Mismaloya** (p95) for its fine beach and the stellar snorkeling around **Los Arcos** (p65), a marine park and ecological preserve. Amble into Mismaloya village for **tequila tasting** and **demonstrations** (p96), or for lunch in a **jungle restaurant** (p97).

From nearby **Boca de Tomatlán** (p97) catch a water taxi to **Yelapa** (p98), where you can sleep in an elegant hillside hotel. Next morning rent a horse or hike to beaches or waterfalls.

Alternatively, head north to the understated pleasures of **Bucerías** (p87), or get back to basics in the fishing village of **La Cruz de Huanacaxtle** (p92). You might even make it to **Punta de Mita** (p93) for some **surfing action** (p93).

If you've only got a week, there's no reason to leave the sunny embrace of Puerto Vallarta's beautiful Bahía de Banderas; this trip is a mere 74km.



## THE BEST OF THE PACIFIC COAST **Three Weeks / Mazatlán to Acapulco**

Get your bearings in **Mazatlán** (p101), lingering only long enough to enjoy a romantic evening on Plazuela Machado. Heading south, develop a taste for idleness in the ancient fishing village of **Mexcaltitán** (p121). From **San Blas** (p122) head by boat into gorgeous mangrove wetlands or sharpen your surfing skills on Bahía de Matanchén. Then why not lose a few days on the beautiful cove at **Chacala** (p129) or witness a baby-turtle release in **Playa San Francisco** (p135)?

Empty your wallet of pesos during a spell in **Puerto Vallarta** (p55), enjoying world-class dining, shopping and an all-round good time. Pause for a week of Spanish-language instruction in beautiful **La Manzanilla** (p145) or head to **Barra de Navidad** (p150) to relax with a book or venture by boat into the lagoon. Stop by **Manzanillo** (p154) for some world-class scuba diving or just to enjoy the ambience of the newly gussied-up downtown waterfront.

Continue south into the wilds of Michoacán, stopping first at gorgeous **Playa Maruata** (p165), where black sea turtles come ashore nightly in season. At laid-back **Barra de Nexpa** (p166) or up-and-coming **Troncones** (p171) assume the life of a surfer dude while enjoying world-class waves.

Continue your beach-happy existence in Ixtapa at tiny **Barra de Potosí** (p188), a quiet town with good scuba diving and opportunities for eco-tourism. Allow for a visit to the crafts markets of neighboring **Zihuatanejo** (p179). You should be wonderfully well-rested by now, and ready for the bright lights and resort-town decadence of **Acapulco** (p191).

**This madcap 1409km long-haul journey appeals to never-say-die road warriors with time to spare and living to do. You'll get your fill of fun, sun and sand while getting up close and personal with the coast's most beguiling towns.**



## ROADS LESS TRAVELED

### WANDERING AROUND OAXACA Two or Three Weeks / Oaxaca City & Back

Before seeking out roads less traveled, spend a few days rambling through the cobblestone center of **Oaxaca city** (p214), enjoying the cuisine, museums and galleries, and exemplary handicrafts shopping. Take a day trip to the Zapotec capital of **Monte Albán** (p232), one of Mexico's most impressive ancient sites.

Head south on the spectacular, winding Hwy 175, climbing high into mountainous pine forests then dropping precipitously to **Pochutla** (p245), gateway to the beach towns of **Puerto Ángel** (p246), **Mazunte** (p253) and **Zipolite** (p249). All have wonderful beaches and ample accommodation.

The coastal route of Hwy 200 leads west to **Puerto Escondido** (p235), where the big draws are astounding waves and, naturally, surf action. Nearby, **Lagunas Los Naranjos and Palmazola** (p245) boast abundant birdlife and a local crocodile population. Bird lovers will want to go further, to the **Laguna de Manialtepec** (p244), where roseate spoonbills are common, and to the **Parque Nacional Lagunas de Chacahua** (p234), where mangrove-fringed islands harbor numerous exotics.

Backtrack to **Bahías de Huatulco** (p255), and take your pick of beautiful beaches backed by forest. Surfers will love the right-hand point break at **Barra de la Cruz** (p263). Continue on to the sweaty, low-country **Isthmus of Tehuantepec** (p263), where Zapotec culture is strong and gringos are few. Visit the towns of **Tehuantepec** (p263) and **Juchitán** (p264) and the ancient Zapotec fortress of **Guiengola** (p265). From here, return to Oaxaca city on Hwy 190.

**Oaxaca's got it all: a beautiful and artistic capital, pre-Hispanic towns and a spectacular, varied landscape. This 750km expedition gets you deep into the thick of it and out again.**





## TAILORED TRIPS

### TRAVELING WITH THE TOTS

Kids certainly need more than just sandcastle construction – and destruction – to fill their vacation. Begin in **Puerto Vallarta** (p55), where you can head over to an **aquatic park** (p68), check out the flying **Voladores de Papantla** (p69) on weekends, or head out for a **whale-watching trip** (p66). From PV you can take day trips, or quick overnights, to **San Blas** (p122) for an estuary excursion, or to **Playa San Francisco** (p134), where you'll learn more about sea turtles, and might even witness the hatchlings taking their first steps to the ocean. From there, head south, stopping along the way in the off-beat and family-friendly towns of the **Bahía Tenacatita** (p143), before you hit up **Manzanillo** (p154), a good jumping-off point for day trips to colonial **Colima** (p157) – a great learning experience – and the **El Salto Falls and Manantlán Reserve** (p161). Or head over to an all-inclusive hotel that has a kids' club and enjoy a bit of peace and quiet as a spirited assemblage of counselors keeps your kids busy.



### SURFING SAFARI

With powerful waves curling into the coast's sand-rimmed bays, it's no wonder the Pacific coast has attained legendary status among surfers. Novices, boogie boarders and people that just dig the surfing scene are welcome as well, though some of the waves get too big for beginners.

South of San Blas, **Bahía de Matanchén** (p124) receives amazingly long waves in September and October, while mellow but satisfying surfing can also be had at **Playa San Francisco** (p134) and **Sayulita** (p136), a good spot to get started. On the northern tip of Bahía de Banderas, **Playa El Andote** (p93) offers a potent point break.

Continuing south, **Playa Boca de Pascuales** (p162) is a legendary spot with aggressive barrel swells up to 5m. Deep in Michoacán are more affable – but still challenging – waves at the gorgeous **Playa La Ticha** (p164). A well-established scene in **Barra de Nexpa** (p166) celebrates point-break waves curling in from the left, some allowing rides as long as 150m.

Further south in Ixtapa, the beaches near **Troncones** (p171) feature more than a dozen breaks, and some of the best beginner surf. But the most famous surfing locale on the Pacific coast is **Puerto Escondido** (p239), where you'll find waves to challenge beginners and experts alike. The biggest of these, at Zicatela, offers serious punishment to all but the most experienced surfers. You have been warned!



# The Authors



## GREG BENCHWICK

### Coordinating Author

Greg first came to Pacific Mexico in the 1990s when his Dad brought him and his sister down to Manzanillo for a family Christmas vacation. He has returned regularly since, traveling up and down the coast in search of the perfect sunset and the perfect margarita. Greg specializes in Latin America, new media and sustainable travel, and has written more than a dozen guidebooks over the years. Greg now lives in Colorado with his fiancée and their three-legged Turkish street dog, spending his days studying Mexican history, writing and speaking about travel in Latin America, and heading into the high-country for skiing and backpacking adventures.

Greg wrote the introductory chapters, as well as Directory and Transportation. He updated the following chapters: Jalisco, Colima & Michoacán Coasts; Ixtapa, Zihuatanejo & the Costa Grande; Acapulco & the Costa Chica; and Oaxaca.



## JOHN HECHT

John's love affair with Mexico began more than a decade ago when he headed south of the border to study Spanish in Guadalajara. Three years later, and still speaking with a thick gringo accent, he said adios to the mariachi heartland to try his luck in the big city, Mexico City that is. As a native of Los Angeles, the smog and traffic in the sprawling Mexican capital made him feel right at home. Currently, he is a Mexico-based travel writer. Mom constantly tries to convince him to return to the good ol' USA, but she doesn't seem to understand that you just can't get a good taco there.

John updated the Puerto Vallarta, Mazatlán and Nayarit chapters.

## CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

**Jürgen Buchenau** A professor of history and director of Latin American Studies at UNC Charlotte, Jürgen is a native of Germany who has lived and traveled extensively in Mexico. He received his PhD from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1993. He is the author of several books, including *In the Shadow of the Giant: The Making of Mexico's Central America Policy, 1876–1930* (Tuscaloosa, 1996); *Tools of Progress: A German Merchant Family in Mexico City, 1865–Present* (Albuquerque, 2004); *Mexico OtherWise: Modern Mexico in the Eyes of Foreign Observers* (Albuquerque, 2005); and *Plutarco Elías Calles and the Mexican Revolution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007). Jürgen fact-checked the History chapter.

**David Goldberg, MD** David completed his training in internal medicine and infectious diseases at Colombia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New York City, where he has also served as voluntary faculty. He is an infectious diseases specialist in Scarsdale, New York, and the editor-in-chief of the website MDTravelHealth.com. David wrote the Health chapter.

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