

## Chapter 1

# Discovering the Best of Mexico's Beach Resorts

---

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Scoping out Mexico's stellar beaches
  - ▶ Discovering the top places to stay
  - ▶ Exploring Mexico's most unforgettable places and experiences
  - ▶ Uncovering the best restaurants and nightlife
- 

**M**exico should be the beach vacation of your dreams. All those glossy images of long stretches of pure, powdery, white-sand beaches and dramatic coastlines do exist — and they're found along the entire shoreline of Mexico.

Between the two of us, we've logged thousands of miles crisscrossing the peninsula, and these are our personal favorites — the best places to go, the best restaurants, the best hotels, and must-see, one-of-a-kind experiences.

This chapter gives you a sneak preview of the absolute best that Mexico's beach resorts have to offer — the cream of the crop. Each of these places and experiences is discussed in detail later in this book; for now, you can skim them all at a glance and whet your appetite.

## *The Best Beach Vacations*

Mexico has a multitude of stunning beaches — in a variety of forms — any of which will make for a great vacation. The following are our favorite beach getaways:

- ✔ **Puerto Vallarta:** Puerto Vallarta is Mexico's only beach resort where authentic colonial ambience mixes with true resort amenities. Spectacularly wide Banderas Bay offers 42km (26 miles) of beaches. Some, like Playa Los Muertos — the popular public beach in town — abound with *palapa* (thatched roof) restaurants, beach volleyball,

Mexico





and parasailing. The beaches of Punta Mita, the exclusive development north of Vallarta, are of the white-sand variety, with crystalline waters and coral reefs just offshore. Others around the bay nestle in coves, accessible only by boat. See Chapters 16 to 19.

- ✔ **Puerto Escondido:** This is our pick for the best overall beach value in Mexico. Although it's principally known for its world-class surfing beach, Playa Zicatela, the surrounding beaches all have their own appeal; colorful fishing *pangas* (small boats) dot the central town beach, parked under the shade of palms leaning so far over they almost touch the ground. Puerto Escondido offers unique accommodations at excellent prices, with exceptional budget dining and nightlife. See Chapter 29.
- ✔ **Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo:** These side-by-side resorts offer beachgoers the best of both worlds: serene simplicity and resort comforts. For those in search of a back-to-basics beach, the best and most beautiful is Playa La Ropa, close to Zihuatanejo. The wide beach at Playa Las Gatas, with its restaurants and snorkeling sites, is also a great place to play. The luxury hotels in Ixtapa, on the next bay over from Zihuatanejo, front Playa Palmar, a fine, wide swath of beach. See Chapters 20 to 23.
- ✔ **Cancún:** Despite the well-documented damage from 2005's Hurricane Wilma, Cancún is rapidly recovering, and is known as Mexico's most popular beach playground. Essentially one long ribbon of white sand bordering aquamarine water, Cancún has one of Mexico's most beautifully situated beaches. If you want tropical drinks brought to you while you lounge in the sand, this is the vacation for you. In addition to being a bustling, modern mega-resort, it's also a great place for exploring Caribbean reefs, tranquil lagoons, and the surrounding jungle. The most tranquil waters and beaches on Cancún Island are those at the northern tip, facing the Bahía de Mujeres. See Chapters 10 to 13.
- ✔ **Playa del Carmen:** This is one of our absolute favorite Mexican beach vacations. Stylish and hip, Playa del Carmen offers a beautiful beach and an eclectic assortment of small hotels, inns, and *cabañas* (cabins). The social scene is focused on the beach by day and the pedestrian-only Quinta Avenida (Fifth Avenue) by night, with its fun assortment of restaurants, clubs, sidewalk cafes, and shops. You're also close to the coast's major attractions, including nature parks, ruins, and, *cenotes* (sinkholes or natural wells). Cozumel Island is just a quick ferry trip away. Enjoy it while it's a manageable size. See Chapter 15.
- ✔ **Los Cabos:** Dramatic rock formations and crashing waves mix with wide stretches of soft sand and a rolling break. Start at Pueblo la Playa, just north of San José del Cabo, and work your way down the Cabo Corridor to the famed Playa de Amor at Land's End. Some beaches are more appropriate for contemplation than for swimming, which isn't all bad. See Chapters 30 to 33.

## The Best Luxury Resorts

If money is no object, Mexico's beach resorts have no shortage of places to park yourself in style. As an extra-added bonus, most of Mexico's resorts have recently added brand-new spas that raise the art of relaxation and pampering to a new level. What could be better than a massage on the beach? (Maybe a massage on the beach *with* a margarita, too?)

The following are a few of our favorite luxury resorts:

- ✔ **Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita** (north of Puerto Vallarta): This luxury resort has soared in popularity since opening in 1999. It offers an unrivaled location (on a remote, pristine stretch of beach) and the stellar service characteristic of the Four Seasons chain. Also on-site are an expansive spa and a private Jack Nicklaus Signature golf course. See Chapter 16.
- ✔ **Las Ventanas al Paraíso** (Los Cabos): Stunning in its relaxed elegance, Las Ventanas comes complete with a deluxe European spa, excellent gourmet restaurant, and elegantly appointed rooms and suites. From fireplaces and telescopes to private pools and rooftop terraces, each suite is a private slice of heaven. See Chapter 30.
- ✔ **One&Only Palmilla** (Los Cabos): Currently the most popular Mexican resort with the Hollywood crowd, the recently renovated Palmilla has earned its spot as the most deluxe hotel in this seaside playground known for sumptuous accommodations and great golf. The exceptional spa, fitness center, and yoga garden, as well as a restaurant by renowned chef Charlie Trotter are added bonuses. See Chapter 30.
- ✔ **Villa del Sol** (Zihuatanejo): Few hotels meet the demanding standards of luxury and attention to detail required to be a member of the French Relais & Châteaux, but this small beachfront inn does. It's also a member of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World. See Chapter 20.
- ✔ **Le Méridien Cancún Resort & Spa** (Cancún): Although there are grander hotels in Cancún, we prefer this resort, as it's the most intimate of the luxury hotels, with an understated sense of highly personalized service. Especially notable is its 1,394-sq.-m (15,000-sq.-ft.) Spa del Mar. See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Fiesta Americana Grand Aqua** (Cancún): This resort was undergoing repairs from Hurricane Wilma damage at press time, but is expected to return to its previous splendor by fall 2006. Its exquisite design and detailed amenities set a new standard for Cancún chic when it opened in early 2005. It offers luxury that indulges the senses without overwhelming them. Clean design and a color scheme that mirrors the aquamarine and white beach landscape are inherently relaxing. Add a superb spa, dazzling selection of restaurants, and a chill-music scene in the evenings around the pool, and the mood is set for a more modern take on luxury. See Chapter 10.

- ✔ **Maroma** (Riviera Maya): You cannot ask for a better setting for a resort than this beautiful stretch of Caribbean coast with palm trees and manicured gardens. You begin to relax before you even take the first sip of your welcome cocktail. Service is very attentive, and the rooms are large and luxurious. See Chapter 15.

## The Best Good-Value Accommodations

Being on a budget in Mexico doesn't mean you'll have to sacrifice style — or the perfect beach vacation. There are plenty of well-priced options, and here are our favorites:

- ✔ **Paraíso Escondido** (Puerto Escondido): This eclectic inn is a great bargain, especially for the originality of the décor, and the excellent service. It's a short walk to both the beach and the action along Puerto's main street. See Chapter 29.
- ✔ **Misión de los Arcos** (Huatulco): Just 1 block from the central plaza, this hotel has a similar style to the elegant Quinta Real, at a fraction of the cost. An all-white facade and intriguing decorative touches give it an inviting feel, plus there's also a cute cafe, stocked gym, and Wi-Fi everywhere. A shuttle service takes you to Huatulco's beaches. See Chapter 28.
- ✔ **Hotel Los Flamingos** (Acapulco): Take a break and step back in time, to the Hollywood heyday of Old Acapulco, when you stay here. Set on a dramatic cliff, away from the bustle of Acapulco's beach zone, this hotel was once the private retreat of movie greats including John Wayne, Cary Grant, and Johnny "Tarzan" Weissmuller. Its funky charm still captivates. See Chapter 24.
- ✔ **Cabo Inn** (Cabo San Lucas): This former bordello is the best budget inn in the area. Rooms are small but extra-clean and invitingly decorated, amenities are generous, and the owner-managers are friendly and helpful. Ideally located, close to town and near the marina, the inn caters to sportfishers. See Chapter 30.
- ✔ **Rey del Caribe Hotel**: Not only will you find exceptional value here, but you'll also support a true ecological hotel, which uses environmentally sensitive practices like collecting rainwater and composting. Sunny rooms are surrounded by lush jungle landscaping — and all in the heart of downtown Cancún! See Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Treetops** (Playa del Carmen): An economical, quiet hotel steps from both the beach and Avenida 5, Treetops could easily get by on its location alone. But the owners have gone out of their way to create distinctive lodging with plenty of amenities. The hotel has its very own *cenote* and piece of shady jungle, making it a lovely place to relax after a trying day of strolling the beach and wandering the village streets. See Chapter 15.

## The Most Unique Places to Get Away from It All

Mexico offers a multitude of unique places to escape the world and relax in seaside splendor. While some of the specific hotels below offer more activity than others, all are what we consider to be the most unique places in Mexico to transport you to a truly “away” state of mind:

- ✔ **Verana** (Yelapa, south of Puerto Vallarta): The stylish Verana adds a dash of sophistication to funky Yelapa — a remote village accessible only by boat, about 45 minutes from Puerto Vallarta. Each of the six handcrafted casas has a unique architectural style that complements the expanse of vistas to the surrounding jungle and ocean. It's a perfect blend of style, romance, and nature. See Chapter 16.
- ✔ **Quinta María Cortez** (Puerto Vallarta): This is one of Mexico's most original places to stay; it's an eclectic B&B uniquely decorated with antiques, curios, and original art. It sits on a beautiful cove on Conchas Chinas beach. See Chapter 16.
- ✔ **La Casa Que Canta** (Zihuatanejo): This architecturally dramatic hotel incorporates wonderful Mexican adobe and folk art in grandly scaled rooms. It's a delightful place to unwind, read on the terrace overlooking the bay, and order room service. See Chapter 20.
- ✔ **Casa Natalia** (San José del Cabo): This renovated historic home, now a charming inn, is an oasis of palms, waterfalls, and flowers against the desert landscape. Each room and suite is an artful combination of modern architecture and traditional Mexican touches. The restaurant is the hottest in town. See Chapter 30.
- ✔ **Hotel Jungla Caribe** (Playa del Carmen): In a town filled with exceptional inns, this one's a standout. The eclectic décor combines neoclassical details with a decidedly tropical touch. The rooms and suites surround a stylish courtyard, restaurant, and pool. You couldn't be better located — a block from the beach, with an entrance on happening Avenida 5. See Chapter 15.

## The Best Active Vacations

With the ocean as tempting as it is off of Mexico's miles of coastline, you're certain to find multiple ways to enjoy it above and below the surface. There's also plenty to do on land as well. Here are our favorite things to do:

- ✔ **Golf in Los Cabos and Puerto Vallarta:** Puerto Vallarta, with its seven championship courses, is *the* new destination for golfers to keep their eyes on. See Chapter 19. The Corridor between San José del Cabo and Cabo San Lucas is one of the world's premier golf destinations, with five championship courses open and a total of 207 holes slated for the area. See Chapter 33.

- ✔ **Cenote Diving on the Yucatán Mainland:** Dive into the clear depths of the Yucatán's *cenotes* for an interesting twist on underwater exploration. The Maya considered the *cenotes* sacred — and their vivid colors indeed seem otherworldly. Most are located between Playa del Carmen and Tulum, and dive shops in these areas regularly run trips for experienced divers. For recommended dive shops, see Chapter 15.
- ✔ **Scuba Diving in Cozumel and along the Yucatán's Caribbean Coast:** The coral reefs off the island, Mexico's premier diving destination, are among the top five dive spots in the world, though damage from 2005's Hurricane Wilma has affected some areas. The Yucatán's coastal reef, part of the second-largest reef system in the world, affords excellent diving all along the coast. Especially beautiful is the Chinchorro Reef, lying 32km (20 miles) offshore from Majahual or Xcalak. Diving from Isla Mujeres is also quite spectacular. See Chapters 14 and 15.
- ✔ **Surfing Zicatela Beach in Puerto Escondido:** This world-class break is a lure for surfers from around the globe. It challenges the best in the sport each September and October, when the waves peak and the annual surf competitions take place. See Chapter 29. Other noted surf breaks in Mexico include Sayulita and Las Islitas Beach near **San Blas** (both north of Puerto Vallarta), and Playa Costa Azul, on the outskirts of **San José del Cabo**. See Chapter 33.
- ✔ **Sportfishing in Cabo San Lucas:** Billfishing for magnificent marlin and sailfish is a popular sport throughout southern Baja, and it's what originally put Cabo San Lucas on the map. See Chapter 33. Fishing is also excellent in Puerto Vallarta, and Zihuatanejo. See Chapters 19 and 23.
- ✔ **Sea Kayaking in the Sea of Cortez:** From Cabo San Lucas to La Paz, and continuing north, the Sea of Cortez is a sea kayaker's dream. It has dozens of tiny coves and impressive inlets to pull into and explore, under the watchful gaze of sea lions and dolphins. Professional outfitters provide gear, guides, and instruction for novices. See Chapter 33.
- ✔ **Exploring the Bays of Huatulco:** Whether you travel by party boat or in a small skiff to a pristine cove, the nine Bays of Huatulco offer beach lovers a treasure-trove of sand and sea pleasures. See Chapter 28.
- ✔ **Whale-Watching in Puerto Vallarta's Banderas Bay:** From December to May each year, the magnificent humpback whales make their annual migration to these waters to breed and bear calves. Watching these mammoth yet highly social sea mammals entertain an audience is a truly life-enhancing experience. See Chapter 19. Whale-watching is also a popular pastime in mid-Baja's Magdalena Bay, with trips available from Cabo San Lucas. See Chapter 33.



## The Best Dining Experiences

Best doesn't necessarily mean most luxurious. Although some of the restaurants listed here are fancy affairs, others are simple places to get fine, authentic Mexican cuisine:

- ✔ **Arrayán, for Tacos Like You've Never Before Tasted** (Puerto Vallarta): The colorful atmosphere may be casual, funky, and fun, but the food is seriously and authentically Mexican. Prime beef filet tacos are just one specialty — others include Mexican duck confit, shrimp *pozole* (broth with hominy and shrimp), and homemade ice creams from indigenous fruits. See Chapter 18.
- ✔ **El Mirador, for Margaritas** (Acapulco, in the Hotel Plaza Las Glorias): You can enjoy a great margarita at many places in Mexico, but this is the only one that serves them with a view of the spectacular La Quebrada cliff divers. See Chapter 24.
- ✔ **Labná:** A showcase of authentic Yucatecan cuisine and music, in downtown Cancún, this is the place to sample regional specialties such as pork *pibil* (pit-baked pork) and *poc chuc* (slices of pork with onion, marinated in a tangy orange sauce). See Chapter 12.
- ✔ **Pozole in Acapulco:** If it's Thursday, there will always be *pozole* in Acapulco. Sample this locally popular meal comprised of hominy and meat in a broth garnished with savory seasonings. Our favorite place to indulge is at the cliffside restaurant at the Los Flamigos Hotel. See Chapter 24.
- ✔ **El Cafecito, for Mango Eclairs and Coffee** (Puerto Escondido): Worthy of the trip to Puerto Escondido itself are El Cafecito's mango éclairs, accompanied by a steaming mug of coffee and served beachside on Playa Zicatela. Also noteworthy are the ample "surfer's special" breakfasts at numerous other cafes along the beachfront. See Chapter 29.
- ✔ **Cabaña del Pescador (Lobster House; Cozumel):** If you want an ideally seasoned, succulent lobster dinner, Cabaña del Pescador (Lobster House) is the place. If you want anything else, you're out of luck — lobster dinner, expertly prepared, is all it serves. When you've achieved perfection, why bother with anything else? See Chapter 14.
- ✔ **Media Luna** (Playa del Carmen): The inviting atmosphere of this sidewalk cafe on Avenida 5 is enough to lure you in. The expertly executed and innovative menu, together with great prices, makes it one of the top choices on the Caribbean coast. See Chapter 15.

## *The Best Shopping*

Beyond the ubiquitous T-shirts and glass pyramids, you'll find captivating treasures to take home from your trip to Mexico's beach resorts. Here are our favorite shopping experiences:

- ✔ **Huichol Art in Puerto Vallarta:** One of the last indigenous cultures to remain faithful to their customs, language, and traditions, the Huichol Indians come down from the Sierra Madre to sell their unusual art to Puerto Vallarta galleries. Inspired by visions received during spiritual ceremonies, the Huichol create their art with colorful yarn or beads pressed into wax. See Chapter 19.
- ✔ **Oaxacan Textiles in Huatulco:** The valley of Oaxaca produces the best weavings and naturally dyed textiles in Mexico; it's also famous for its pottery (especially the black pottery), and colorful, imaginative woodcarvings. Both can be found in shops in Huatulco, on Oaxaca's coast. See Chapter 28.
- ✔ **Taxco Silver:** Mexico's silver capital, Taxco, has hundreds of stores featuring fine jewelry and decorative objects. See Chapter 27.
- ✔ **Resort Wear in Cancún:** Resort clothing — especially if you can find a sale — can be a bargain here. And the selection may be wider than what's available at home. Almost every mall on the island contains trendy boutiques that specialize in locally designed and imported clothing. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Duty Free in Cancún or Los Cabos:** If you're looking for European perfume, fine watches, or other imported goods, you'll find the prices in the duty-free shops in both Cancún (at the major malls on the island and in downtown Cancún) and in Los Cabos hard to beat. See Chapters 13 and 33.
- ✔ **Precious Gemstones in Isla Mujeres:** Isla Mujeres, also a duty-free zone, offers an impressive selection of both precious stones and superb craftsmen who can make jewelry designs to order. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Quinta Avenida, Playa del Carmen:** This pedestrian-only street offers leisurely shopping at its best. No cars, no hassle, simply stroll down the street and let your eye pick out objects of interest. Expect a good bit of merchandise popular with counterculture types, such as batik clothing and fabric, Guatemalan textiles, and inventive jewelry and artwork. But you'll also find quality Mexican handicrafts, premium tequilas, and Cuban cigars. See Chapter 15.

## The Best Nightlife

Rivaling the midday sun on the beach, most of Mexico's coastal resorts have a simmering hot nightlife. Here are the liveliest places for nocturnal diversion among Mexico's Beach Resorts:

- ✔ **Puerto Vallarta:** Of all the beach destinations, Puerto Vallarta enjoys the most sophisticated and varied nightlife. An excellent selection of small clubs features live jazz, blues, salsa, and good old rock 'n' roll. You'll also find mariachi, pre-Columbian, and traditional Mexican ballads. Heating up the scene are a new group of contemporary clubs and lounges — including the international set at Nikki Beach — with DJs spinning house, trance, and chill. See Chapter 19.
- ✔ **Acapulco Discos:** Nightlife can't possibly get more lavish, extravagant, or flashy than it is in Acapulco, Mexico's hands-down diva. This city's main cultural attractions are the clubs that jam until sunrise, several of which have walls of windows overlooking the bay. See Chapter 27.
- ✔ **Cancún's Clubs in Malls:** Cancún's wide-ranging hot spots include most of the name-brand nightlife destinations, concentrated in entertainment malls and festival shopping centers, as well as hotel-lobby bars with live music, and sophisticated discos. Popular nightlife tours allow you to bypass lines and sample various clubs in a single night. The clubs here can accommodate up to 3,000, and there are plenty of options for staying out until the sun comes up. See Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Cabo San Lucas Beach Bars:** In the nightlife capital of Baja California, after-dark fun centers on the casual bars and restaurants that line the main drag, as well as those on the town's public Medano Beach. The place retains a rowdy, outlaw feel, despite the influx of tony hotels nearby. A new lounge scene is, thankfully, updating this lively town's nightlife. See Chapter 33.
- ✔ **Quinta Avenida, Playa del Carmen:** Stroll along the lively, pedestrian-only Fifth Avenue to find the bar that's right for you. With live music venues, tequila bars, sports bars, and cafes, you're sure to find something to fit your mood. See Chapter 15.