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Punta de Mita is Mexico's Malibu

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Punta de Mita is Mexico's Malibu
Punta de Mita is a luxurious resort on the Pacific Coast of Mexico near Puerto Vallarta that's also home to great surf spots. The area features a Four Seasons and other less expensive options. Visitors can get instruction from famed "Pipeline Master" Gerry Lopez.

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Surf legend Gerry Lopez stood next to me on stand-up paddleboard, watching a bump in the ocean grow as it inched toward us. "Paddle, paddle, you got it," the "Pipeline master" said in a gentle, encouraging tone. I dug my paddle deep into the ocean's clear blue surface, trying to maintain my balance, and the wave picked the board up under my feet. Soon I was gliding down the line clutching my paddle with Lopez, one of the best tube riders and most respected surfers in the world, behind me. A party wave. Until I nearly nailed the guy sitting on the inside, and I bailed out of the wave to avoid a massive collision. It would be my last wave during a magical surf trip to Mexico that introduced me to an upscale and unexpected side of our neighboring country – a coastal haven that gave me a newfound perspective on a region that has suffered blows to tourism and its image over the past few years.



I first heard of Punta de Mita from a Billabong all-girls surf and stand-up paddleboard (everybody uses the term "SUP," so I will too from now on) trip a few months ago. The stories of a mellow, right-hand longboard wave comparable to Malibu's that went on for what seems like forever, had me searching for more about this secluded spot about 40 minutes north of Puerto Vallarta.

Needing a break from reality, and a relief from the chilly waters in Orange County that were causing near-hypothermia if you didn't put on a full wetsuit, I wanted somewhere warm with a flight close enough to take just a few days away from work. I talked my travel partner Jen into joining the adventure, and we booked our trip to Punta de Mita.

If you came here a little more than a decade ago, you'd find a quaint fishing village with few homes. The 1,500-acre peninsula was bought by Mexico's largest development company, Dine (pronounced Dee-nay), which had a vision to turn the coastal enclave into Mexico's premier upscale destination. Punta Mita translates to "Gateway to Paradise."

By 2000, the Four Seasons resort was up and running as the development's anchor, and the gated, secured community called "Punta Mita" was born, with "Punta de Mita" encompassing the rest of the area not within the gates. The luxury hotel chain that draws visitors from around the world started with 120 rooms, and business flourished. A beachfront St. Regis was built, and luxury homes behind the gates sprang up, with wealthy people buying them as second homes and developers snatching them up for investment or rental purposes.

The area became the new hot spot for Southern California clientele. Many were wealthy surfers who enjoyed the convenience of a three-hour trip to warm waves. It was life in paradise with the possibility of turning a profit – until the economy crashed in 2008, followed by the swine flu epidemic in 2009 that drew U.S. State department travel alerts.

Surfers love to get dirty on trips, traveling to Third World countries with little in their bags or wallets.



Maybe it goes back to the old '70s surf movies, where remote waves seem far away from showers and soap. When I thought of a south-of-the-border surf vacation, I always envisioned sleeping in a ramshackle house, eating \$1 tacos and dealing with pounding south swells too big for me to handle. But after an exhausting surf session, there's nothing like feeling pampered.

The face of the surfer has changed. Surfers are no longer bums with no jobs scouring remote parts of the world. They are doctors, lawyers and CEOs of big companies, especially in Orange County. They have disposable income and wives (or husbands) whom they want to feel comfortable while they sneak off to score surf. Places like Punta de Mita also draw visitors who enjoy the surf-town lifestyle, even if they never get more than ankle-deep in the waves.

Jen and I rented a two-bedroom condo we booked online www.puntamitasurf.com for \$150 a night. When we entered our new digs our jaws dropped. The two-bedroom condo was beautiful and spacious, with spotless tile floors. The main bedroom had glass doors overlooking a huge patio, grassy area and the ocean. It was the kind of place that would run \$400 a night at surf spots in California and Hawaii.

The next morning, we hit the surf early. We rented boards on the beach in front of the El Anclote break – a long, mellow right-hander that had me buzzing with excitement. With a big south swell slamming the rest of Mexico, we were blessed with perfect 2-3 footers at the protected surf break.

There are many options for various styles of surfers in the nearby area, with eight breaks varying from perfect left-handers to faster shortboard waves within a few minutes via boat. I'm a longboarder, so this smooth spot was perfect for the long, calm rides I like. Think San Onofre, without the crowds.

Day after day, I just couldn't remove myself from the ocean, surfing twice a day for two hours, sometimes three, in 75-degree water. It was still officially spring, but here it was bikini weather. And you bet we spoiled ourselves afterward, with a \$40, hourlong massage on day three of surfing, as every muscle in our bodies was knotted with exhaustion.

It was a different vibe here than I've ever experienced, much like stories I'd heard of Waikiki in the days before high-rise hotels and package tours. There's room for everybody, so there was none of the "my wave" angst that can spoil even the most popular surf spots. Here, fellow surfers cheer you on, encouraging you to join in a party wave. SUP'ers mingle with surfers. Experts encourage people taking lessons, and friends jump on each other's boards to try to ride tandem.

We heard Lopez was going to be in town teaching a SUP clinic.



Lopez is a Hawaiian legend, the surfer known for mastering the hollow tubes of the Banzai Pipeline on Oahu. At 62, he still looks like he could charge the biggest North Shore breaks.

But this day we found ourselves in a lineup on the Mexican side of the Pacific, his Zen demeanor apparent as his eyes searched the horizon for waves. "It's beautiful here," he said, flashing a big, warm smile. SUP'er Greg Lopez helped create the Gerry Lopez Rainbow Sandals Battle of the Paddle, one of the largest SUP races in the world, held at Orange County's Doheny State Beach each fall. This has become a new hot spot for stand-up paddling, which has exploded in the past few years. In Orange County, surfers and SUP'ers are irked at each other's existence on crowded breaks. In Punta Mita, they are family, sharing waves. This isn't by accident. When Lopez started holding his clinics in October, there was a sense of resistance among the locals. They invited the local surfers to a fish feast and handed out autographed photos of Lopez, and he talked to them about the "Aloha spirit" that he wanted to bring to Mexico as he had in Hawaii in the '70s.

checklist

GETTING THERE: Flights are available out of John Wayne and Long Beach airports. Both require layovers. LAX has nonstop flights. Prices as low as \$400. From the Puerto Vallarta airport, you can take a taxi to Punta de Mita for \$35-\$50, or take the bus from the airport straight to Punta de Mita – where the line ends – for about \$2. Transport is about 40 minutes.

WHEN TO GO: High season is November through April, but for a surfer wanting waves to himself, the cheaper low season is now through October.

WHERE TO STAY:

Luxury villas: For a large group or family, renting a large villa, home or hi-end condo might be the best way to go. Costs range from \$600 to \$1500 a night depending on the season, with a personal chef added for \$50 a night. More info:

www.puntamitaluxuryresorts.com

Four Seasons: At the Four Seasons, rooms range from a standard room for \$460 a night, to the five-bedroom "Presidential Coral" home for \$16,000 a night, and everything in between. Here, you are paying for service and access to the coastline from their property.

Modest & comfortable: El Anclote condos sit on the bluff above of the surf break El Anclote. More info: www.puntamitasurf.com

Feeling Zen: A new getaway development called Haixa, opening July 15, is a quiet retreat for those looking to connect with their spiritual side. There are yoga courses and a meditation sauna like those the natives here used. It has a quiet common area, Palapa roofs, wooden walkways through lazy rivers and gardens growing herbs used for spa treatments. A boat leads patrons to a private beach. There is a Greg Norman golf course, and full concierge services.. More info: www.puntamitasurf.com 818 879 7955

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