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## Mexico's hidden wonder by the sea

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Noah Richler

OAXACA PROVINCE, MEXICO—[Puerto Escondido](#), “the hidden port,” is built on a gentle cove in the embrace of a stubby promontory on the west coast of Mexico. At the foot of the hills of the Sierra Madre, coffee used to be exported out of this, the only safe harbour between Huatulco, a 100 kilometres to the south, and Acapulco, 300 kilometres north. The *Playa Zicatela*, the sandy beach that runs south of the town, is long and pristine and favoured by the surfers who congregate here and compete in the autumn when “the wall,” a wave as high as 40 feet, is likely to crash upon the shore.

Beyond the *punta*, the rocky point at the *Playa Zicatela*'s southern end, the beach runs straight and unprotected and the Pacific pounds the sand unrelentingly — too exposed for anything but the region's astonishing birdlife and the sea turtles that come here to lay their eggs.

Still today, Puerto Escondido is true to its name and gloriously hidden to most. In the harbour, the fishers' dories and the small launches of a handful of tour operators bob upon the water in view of the few bayside restaurants and a painted blond mermaid, evidently not Mexican, providing shade to a fisher's family hawking their catch.

In the morning the women of the market come down the hill to the beach and wait for the fishers to rush their dories with their night's haul up to the sand. Young men hold up poles like goalposts for the fishers to aim at as one and then another drives his boat up onto the beach. The boats are hardly settled before the women have rushed to their gunnels, baskets at the ready, to reach in for the biggest and best fish: *huachinango* — snapper — and tuna, mostly.

A busy boulevard

A block above the beach is the Avenida Perez Gasga, a boulevard of shops, cafés, restaurants, hotels and nightclubs that is closed to traffic during the evenings. In its centre is the Hotel Casablanca, a two-storey hotel favoured by the Québécois — or, as they are known here, the *tabernacos*.

There is an excellent pizzeria, Bendito's, run by a couple of Italians who are among the many expatriates who have settled in Puerto Escondido, and behind the Avenida is a cul-de-sac where the indigenous hill tribes sell colourful pottery, parchment notebooks and toy *Zapatista* dolls.

Places to stay

Accommodation is plentiful in Puerto Escondido, and available at all levels — a modest inn by the harbour captain's offices for hardened travellers, brightly painted inns on the narrow streets that lead up from the Avenida to the centre of the bustling town, where an unfinished government hotel broods over it.

At the top of the town is a glorious market of flowers, fruits, fish and crafts where butchers cut paper thin sheets of fresh beef to be dried as



The light in Puerto Escondido is magical, in part because the harbour town is so secluded from the rest of Mexico.

Noah Richler/Photo for the Toronto Star

jerky, and vendors offer ice cream but also yellow mangoes sliced in the shape of budding plants and mounted on ice-cream sticks. Have a spicy fish or Mexican eggs for breakfast.

Markets are a barometer of the character and authenticity of a place and this one is bustling and blissful.

#### Hotel Santa Fe

At night, walk the boulevard that runs along the playa Zigatela. Nestled at the top is the exquisite [Hotel Santa Fe](#), started 35 years ago by Robin and Barbara Cleaver, a couple from Santa Fe, N.M. At night, the ocean breeze blows through the covered restaurant built on top of the single-storey front of the hotel's organic complex of colonial-style buildings that have been added to over the course of the facility's 33-year existence. The Santa Fe is an aesthete's idyll — an intimate, almost M.C. Escher-like compound of terracotta-roofed buildings gathered around a swimming pool shaded by potted plants and trees. The rooms are singular and charming and beautifully tiled and beneath the restaurant, abutting the Zigatela beach at street level, is an airy café that feels simple and utterly salubrious in the mornings.

The Santa Fe produces its own coffee, a dark organic roast made from a mature hilltop plantation the Cleavers own in the hills of the Sierra Madre, above the town. But if exploring is what you want to do, then at the far southern end of the Zigatela boulevard, a 10-minute amble from the hotel, is the Cafécito. It offers free Internet access and a busier, more heterogeneous idea of the community's beach life.

There are North American tourists, many of them Canadian, who appear to have stumbled upon the place unwittingly, others who have the more comfortable air of regulars — and the surfers, of course, who lodge in palapa-style huts on the beach, their roofs made from palm fronds.

#### Beautiful cycle to the days

There is a beautiful cycle to the days here, starting at dawn, when lines of dozy birds ruffle their wings along the beach and contemplate the water. The surfers appear to be imitating them as they stand studying the rhythm of the waves. A few lithe bodies perform their morning yogic salutations while early morning fishers stand in the gathering surf and cast nets. The first eager visitors pass, the locals walk their dogs and the fit run barefoot.

A few photographers are in attendance when the surfers begin to accumulate, waiting for the big wave and their moment.

Before dusk, the day begins to wane. Most of the surfers go home, the Mexicans walk with their families, others leave on horseback, while the last of the surfers wait and wait — hoping for that final, perfect wave.

The stragglers will catch the rose light of the setting sun as the pelicans hover, floating in the air before taking aim again and dive bombing for a fish.

The day's game of light gives way to the night's way with sound — the roar of great thunderous, crashing waves pierced by the isolated calls of humans and animals rising from the palms. You can hear it best from the deck of the Guadua, an excellent French-influenced restaurant (with fine vegetarian dishes and crushed ice margaritas) built in a large palapa midway up the beach.

#### Guarding wildlife

There seems to be a profound understanding that the beach and the water and its flora and the fauna are resources to be guarded. At the spot where, 20 years ago, there was a turtle slaughterhouse, there is now a turtle museum. Local vigilantes preserve the species' chances by driving their trucks or ATVs over the turtle tracks that appear from time to time in the sand, blatantly giving away the location of their precious eggs. The Santa Fe and other restaurants and hotels indicate when there is to be a *liberación* — the mass hatching of as many as 100,000 turtles in one night making their multitudinous scramble to the sea under cover of darkness to avoid the gluttonous pelicans and their enormous scooping beaks.

#### Wildlife watching

Do make sure, while you are here, to visit the [Laguna Manialtepec](#), about 20 kilometres north of Puerto Escondido. This enormous lagoon is rich with birds because it is bounded by high mangrove trees with impenetrable knots of chalky roots planted in the water.

After a bird-spotting boat excursion of exceptional reward, a beer can be had on the dune that separates the lagoon from the sea, and it will become clear to you that because the surroundings of Puerto Escondido are so spectacular, the flora and fauna so much a presence, that

even we humans will be humbled and take our place amid all the wonders that are to be found here.

*Noah Richler is a Toronto-based freelance writer.*