

What? Where? Huatulco! (Wa-too-ko)

Mexican resort boats pristine bays, beaches

BY JODY ROBBINS, FOR THE CALGARY HERALD MARCH 5, 2011

Imagine a relatively undiscovered tropical paradise with azure skies and seas. You can kick back with a lip-puckering margarita and snack on fresh seafood while watching the family frolic on inviting beaches. You can dream on, or live it, after a direct flight to Huatulco, Mexico, from Calgary.

In the state of Oaxaca, Huatulco is a southern coastal resort that actually refers to nine pristine bays, several protected coves and more than 30 sublime beaches along 26 kilometres of spectacular coastline.

Steep cliffs separate the sea from dense hardwood forests, verdant jungles and aromatic coffee plantations.

Described as one of the last frontiers on the Pacific, Huatulco's sparse population has left the turquoise ocean unpolluted and ideal for snorkelling and surfing. Blazing with 330 days of sunshine a year, the skies are cloudless and the water is surprisingly warm all year long.

It's also the most recently developed 40,500-hectare resort area by FONATUR, Mexico's National Trust Fund for Tourism Development (creators of resort towns such as Cancun, Ixtapa and Los Cabos). This time, however, the government seems to be heeding some of the mistakes of these predecessors.

Originally set up for 10,000 hotel rooms, an early environmental study revealed the area can only sustain around 4,000.

This is great news for tourists as all the infrastructure is in place: an international airport, good roads, a marina and tourist excursions are available -- without the hoards.

Though development began in the early 1980s, it is purposefully slow going with an expected completion around 2020. With an emphasis on making it an eco-friendly destination, 70 per cent of the land is set aside as an ecological reserve. The goal is to create a model for future resort development and, with environmental groups keeping a close eye on the situation, they may well achieve this.

With only four resorts located around Tangolunda Bay, the area has room to breathe. You won't miss the mass of tourists or that clustered corridor feel. I'm not about to suggest our family had an authentic Mexican experience while staying at an all-inclusive, but it did feel different.

For one, it was noticeably quieter, even during high season. And many of the tourists are Mexican, which makes for a pleasant change.

We stayed at recently remodelled Las Brisas, occupying the site of the old Club Med.

Spread out across 20 hectares of exotic vegetation, it resembles a small village. This was fine for us (our daughter loved hailing the shuttle carts and riding without seatbelts), but those who have difficulty walking might get frustrated being so dependent upon the shuttle.

All rooms have ocean views and ours overlooked a cactus garden sloping down to the Pacific, complete with several striking quetzals and other exotic birds.

Though the temperatures were 30 C by day, you never felt it. The lack of humidity and ocean breezes keep us perfectly comfortable.

With four beaches (including a coral reef for snorkelling) and several sport options from tennis to sailing, there's no shortage of activities to keep families busy.

The Kids Club was cheery and bright with a surprisingly quiet pool and spacious cabanas. So nice was it, we caught several couples (who'd left their children at home) encroached there.

Each day, the Kids Club would hike through the botanical gardens and learn about native flora and fauna. Most impressive to the five-year-old set was learning how to feed an iguana.

For a slower-paced experience, La Crucecita (The Small Cross) is reminiscent of what resort towns must have been like three decades ago. Life revolves around the Plaza Principal, dominated by the church standing patriarchally at the head of the square.

There are a few shops selling souvenirs, but they are the exception, not the rule.

One block off the main square, butchers hack into freshly plucked yellow chickens and hang their cuts (unrefrigerated) proudly on display.

Be forewarned, development has begun on a 5th Avenue similar to Playa del Carmen's for overly inflated touristy trinkets and the like. While in town, visit La Crema for its extensive cocktail list and clay-oven pizzas, or try The Tipsy Blowfish in Tangolunda Bay area.

There, you can chill at picnic tables while your freshly caught fish gets grilled with sides and beer for \$12 US.

And if that's too quiet for you, head to La Papaya, the area's most popular disco, where an aquarium with bikini-clad ladies (and the occasional mermaid) groove to Top 40 tunes.

Huatulco seems to have everything going for it, except crowds. So get there before the black-socks-and-sandals crowd figures this out. We plan on beating them there again. Soon.

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If You Go

-Signature Vacations has this area all sewn, up but it's rumoured WestJet may begin flights next year:
www.signaturevacations.com

-Las Brisas: www.brisashotelonline.com/huatulco

-La Crema: www.lacremahuatulco.com

-The Tippy Blowfish: www.thetippyblowfish.com

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