

My favourite place in Mexico

A seasoned world traveller spills the beans on his secret gem

BY PAUL GESSELL, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN FEBRUARY 19, 2011



You can see the sunrise from Posada Arigalan, which overlooks the beach at lovely San Agustinillo.

Photograph by: Paul Gessell, The Ottawa Citizen

My first visit to the breezy Mexican seaside restaurant El Paraiso del Pescador was to watch Olympic hockey. Nine months later, I returned to the restaurant in the small fishing village of San Agustinillo for a delicious filete pescado à la Veracruzana (fish in a spicy tomato sauce). But first, the hockey.

The restaurant was officially closed during my first visit -to diners, anyway -because of some squabble between Mexican bureaucrats and the Hungarian-Canadian owner whom everybody in this tiny Pacific Coast village knows simply as Sandor. (Two names seem so unnecessary in a small town where everybody knows everybody and tourists become part of the family in just a few days.)

The fuss at the restaurant occurred during the Vancouver Winter Olympics, so Sandor, as a courtesy to his many Canadian customers, moved aside all the tables and set up chairs around a giant television screen. Diehard hockey fans with no access to television, let alone Canadian television, suddenly had a tropical environment to watch Canada take gold. You could bring your own beer and snacks, seeing as how the kitchen was locked up.

Sandor is a legend in this town. A Hungarian immigrant who had been living in Timmins, he hauled a small trailer onto a vacant lot on San Agustinillo's main street about 30 years ago and never left. The trailer is still there, but Sandor lives elsewhere in town with his Mexican wife and children.

He owns a hotel, restaurant and sport-fishing business. He's also the kind of guy who will oblige accident-prone tourists with an emergency drive to a hospital at nearby Pochutla.

Sandor is typical of both the local and foreign residents of San Agustinillo (also often spelled San Augustinillo.) People like Sandor, Carmela (the wandering cookie lady), Christina (the Italian barmaid), Fernando (the beachfront masseur) and Rose (the Mexican-American hotel-keeper) combine to make this one of the friendliest vacation spots you can hope to find.

So, how safe is anywhere in Mexico in light of all the horrific stories of drug lords beheading one another? Well, if you deal in drugs, watch out. And you may not want to drive your Mercedes in the most northerly areas of Mexico for fear of robbers. But if you are a typical gringo looking for sun, sand and nothing stronger than tequila, chances are you will be as safe as at home in the snow.

Although very small, friendly San Agustinillo has a bit of a cosmopolitan feel, owing to the large number of foreigners who have taken up residence and opened businesses. Italians dominate, and thank goodness for that. Let's face it: Mexico, like Canada, does not have one of the world's great cuisines, but who can turn down a rich, creamy spaghetti carbonara or pepperoni pizza?

The village is squeezed between the Pacific Ocean and steep hills, some simply spiked with tall cactus and others as densely forested as a jungle.

The coastal cities of Puerto Escondido and Huatulco are each about an hour's drive away and each of those cities has an airport. A taxi ride from either airport to San Agustinillo can cost as little as 300 pesos (about \$25).

There are no big hotels in San Agustínillo. Most are very basic bungalows on the hillsides just behind the beach and go for 300 or 400 pesos (about \$25 to \$35) a night. Many businesses along the waterfront also have turned the second floors of their shops and restaurants into hotel rooms with spectacular ocean views and cooling breezes.

Don't expect most of this class of accommodation to offer reliable hot water, air-conditioning or standards comparable to package tour hotels.

Think of San Agustinillo as more like a camping trip, with four walls instead of a tent and the opportunity to stuff yourself daily from giant goblets of spicy shrimp cocktail for \$6.

There are some fancier places for those who must have air-conditioning and other amenities. There are two higher-end hotels on a steep hill midway between San Agustinillo and the neighbouring village, Mazunte, a kilometre to the west. Pan de Miel offers luxury for more than \$100 a night. The less pricey Posada Arigalan, right beside, has a variety of rooms, with most going for \$65 a night. At Arigalan,

where the aforementioned Rose presides, you can also splurge on an apartment-sized penthouse for \$200 a night or rent a very modest cabin for \$30. Both hotels offer stunning simultaneous views of the beaches at San Agustín and Mazunte, but are a bit of a hike to restaurants.

Mazunte is what first drew me to this coast. I was vacationing in Puerto Escondido and kept hearing stories from other travellers about the beach at Mazunte. It was, people exclaimed, the ultimate beach.

Now, as someone who has spent a lifetime in search of the perfect beach, I simply had to see the place. I took a taxi to Mazunte, installed myself at Posada Arigalan and inspected the Mazunte waterfront. It came out wanting.

The beach itself was great. But the town was something of a dustcovered dump. The first restaurant I hit was unfriendly and the tourists on the beach were, at breakfast, still coming back to reality after a drug-fuelled night on the playa. Being old enough to have lived through the 1960s -and still able to remember that time -I decided Mazunte was not for me. In fairness, Mazunte has since become more pleasant with some paved roads and better eateries.

At Sidhartha restaurant, those with a yen for home can even get poutine.

On my second day in the area, I explored San Agustín. The beach was inferior, somewhat smaller and steeper than Mazunte's, but the village itself was charming. Everyone was friendly. Everyone seemed anchored to reality at breakfast. Restaurant waiters welcomed you instead of scowling because you disturbed their siesta.

The atmosphere is so inviting that many tourists and residents of such nearby beach communities as Mazunte, Zipolite (Mexico's famed nude beach) and Puerto Ángel come to the San Agustín waterfront to sit at such delightful restaurants as Palapa de Evelia, where beachside umbrellas and chairs are free to all diners, the fish is always fresh and the guacamole is served in generous porridge bowls.

After but a few days, I fell in love with San Agustín. It has skyrocketed to one of the top spots on my all-time favourites list.

So, what do you do all day at San Agustín?

Eating and drinking are primary activities. La Termita, an upscale beachfront pizza parlour and hotel, offers hearty pizza and first-class rooms approaching \$100. Nearby is El Sueño de Frida, a tiny bar on main street that is decorated with Frida Kahlo prints and is a gathering spot for resident ex-pats. Christina, the owner, serves fresh baking in the morning, beer in the afternoon and, always, Wi-Fi and great conversation.

At El Sueño de Frida, you can learn all about the new Canadian-run school that teaches local kids how to make simple animation videos. Or you can discover who was naughty last night at the Irish-Canadian pub, La Casa Mágica, up the hill. The pub's owner drops in to El Sueño to use the Wi-Fi.

Many villagers used to earn their pesos by catching sea turtles. Turtle meat was considered tasty. But the turtle harvest was banned in 1990 and now this coastline has become something of a haven for eco-tourists.

Throughout the area, one spots posters showing a very sexy Mexican woman, exclaiming in Spanish: "My man does not need turtle eggs." Apparently some men believe turtle eggs increase their sexual stamina. One suspects that many men could also ditch their Viagra if that woman in the poster was their wife.

At Mazunte, just a 15-minute walk from San Agustinillo, one finds the Centro Mexicano de la Tortuga, a large turtle hatchery and aquarium open to the public. There are dozens of different kinds of live turtles on view. Some ordinarily live in rivers; others in the sea. Some are tiny, others as big as your kitchen stove. Kids love the place.

A few more kilometres to the west is La Ventanilla, where you can take rides in 10-person canoes into a swamp and see endangered river crocodiles and other wildlife.

This area is also a birdwatcher's paradise. At Posada Arigalan, one can sit on a deck on a forested hillside and, within minutes, see orioles, cardinals, hummingbirds, woodpeckers and, somewhat ominously, large numbers of turkey vultures flying over Mazunte beach, surely in search of young backpackers enfeebled by sunburn, tequila and illegal substances.

For the more adventurous, there is deepsea fishing, surfing, snorkelling and hiking.

Yoga is also big here. From my room at Posada Arigalan, I could eat breakfast on my private hillside deck listening to something like Gregorian chants coming from Agama Yoga, a hilltop yoga centre that welcomes tourists for one-time sessions or lengthy courses, including one on tantric sex.

My days tend to be frittered away sitting on the beach, stuffing myself with shrimp cocktail, waiting for Carmela, the grandmotherly cookie lady, to come wandering by selling desserts, and then booking a massage from Fernando, a sturdy Mexico City lad with a collection of aromatic oils, scented candles and New Age music back at his home in the hills.

And, if by chance you get bored one day, look up Sandor. He'll probably let you watch some Canadian hockey on his television.

Paul Gessell is a Chelsea-based writer who likes to spend part of each winter in Mexico.

IF YOU GO

Getting there: Sunwing flies charters to Huatulco from various Canadian cities. From Toronto, the fare, including taxes, can be less than \$600. Air Canada flies from Toronto and Montreal to Mexico City, where you can catch local airlines, such as Aeromar or Interjet, to Puerto Escondido or Huatulco. Count on total airfare, including the Mexico City connection, to exceed \$1,000. A taxi from Puerto

Escondido to San Augustinillo should cost about 300 or 400 pesos (\$35 dollars or less). Fares are higher from the more upscale Huatulco airport. Mexican airfares and routes are in turmoil right now because of the recent death of Mexicana airline. Should it rise again, and service Canada once more, there could be downward pressure on other airline fares from Canada to Mexico.

Where to stay: Information on Posada Arigalan can be found at www.arigalan.com.

Other spots: The website for Sandor's fishing, ? ? restaurant and hotel business is www.paraíso-del-pescador.com.

Agama Yoga information is at ? ? www.agamayogamexico.com.

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