



TRAVEL

# LUXURY & NATURE

→ Mexico's Riviera Nayarit is planning for its moment in the sun

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**I**f your idea of a lavish sun holiday does not include a bunch of screaming drunks on a giant inflatable wiener zipping back and forth across your ocean view all day, consider Nayarit, the Mexican coastal state directly north of Puerto Vallarta.

Puerto Vallarta, or PV, is the favourite destination of most gay and lesbian visitors to Mexico (and gay and lesbian Mexicans, for that matter). The clubs, the beach scene, the promenade and the number of hotels catering to

a gay clientele make PV the obvious choice. But Nayarit, dubbed Riviera Nayarit in 2007, wants to build on the success of PV while avoiding the pitfalls that plague many tourist destinations in Mexico — an endless wall of towering hotels, overcrowded beaches and scant attention to the environment. Riviera Nayarit is positioning itself as Mexico's newest luxury destination, offering miles of unspoiled beaches and crystal clear turquoise water with high-end resorts and eco-lodges nestled

amongst gorgeous scenery.

And they want the gays.

"We want to give gay and lesbian travellers a choice," says Richard Zarkin, public relations manager of Riviera Nayarit's Convention and Visitors Bureau. "When my friends come to Puerto Vallarta, I know they want more than the mid-level hotels now serving the gay and lesbian market," he says. "Nayarit offers service, safety, incredible food and amazing wilderness areas. Where else can you walk for miles along barely popu-

lated beaches and then sit down to a five-star meal?"

Zarkin recently spirited a small group of gay journalists from the US, Canada and Mexico — including myself — to showcase the virtues of Nayarit. "This must be the first gay press trip of its kind in Mexico," says Zarkin. "No other Mexican tourist board has reached out to the gay community like this." Despite his Russian last name, Zarkin, who's gay, was born and raised in Mexico City. He's visibly proud of his part in nudg-

ing his agency and the hotels he represents to become more gay-positive. Everywhere we go, hotel managers and marketing folk know they have to pay more than lip service. “We want to learn from you,” is a refreshing refrain.

**O**ffering unparalleled luxury, the Four Seasons Punta Mita is located at the northern end of Banderas Bay, a 45-minute drive from PV’s international airport. Built in 1999, the hotel and tourist residence complex points to the future of Riviera Nayarit. There’s already a St Regis in Punta Mita; a Hyatt and other fancy properties are in the works further north along the coast. None of them will crowd each other.

The main pool and bar at the Four Seasons, built above a sweeping arc of beach, is a magnet for guests. But if the kids start bugging you, you can retreat to the adult-only pool with its private cabanas, or the spa, or the adult-only beach. Gorgeous as it is clever, the layout presents every level of privacy and socializing. It’s kind of hard to figure out which form of indulgence you want at any given moment. With that in mind, the resort surprises sun-befuddled guests with impromptu treats like ice cream or foot massages. You just have to give in (I drew the line at the Evian water misting, hard nut that I am). By far, the most luxurious rooms are the spacious ocean-front suites with private plunge pools.

With its three dinner restaurants, Four Seasons Punta Mita is leading the charge to make Nayarit a culinary hot spot. The open air Bahía by the beach can’t be beat — ocean breezes, a great view of the sunset and fresh, simply prepared seafood like grilled octopus or seared red snapper (you can pick your own from the catch of the day brought in earlier in the morning). A great selection

of Mexican wines, standouts from Baja and near Guadalajara, makes for a perfect evening.

Imagine yourself getting married on a rocky promontory jutting out into the Pacific, as waves crash and the sun sets. The Four Seasons wants to make that dream a reality, with their onsite wedding planners. “We want to market ourselves specifically to the gay and lesbian wedding market,” says Claudia Silva, marketing director at the Four Seasons Punta Mita. (You can only have commitment ceremonies in Nayarit, though, like all states in Mexico, it must recognize same-sex marriages done in Mexico City.) Everyone from the kiddies to your future mother-in-law would be blissed out in this place.

Did I mention the glorious yacht you can book for whale watching?

The resort offers easy access to Puerto Vallarta, with day and evening shuttles to town for shopping and dining. Why not mix and match your holiday with a weekend blow-out in PV and a low-key retreat to Punta Mita during the week? The Four Seasons also offers day trips to nearby Sayulita, an old hippie hang-out with a great beach popular with surfers. It’s a funky town with plenty of shops and galleries, including the lovely Huichol Centre with traditional and contemporary crafts from the region’s indigenous people.

One of the most breathtaking spots on our trip was Haramara, a yoga retreat built high up on a vertiginous, forested valley overlooking the ocean, just south of Sayulita. Owner Sajeela de la Borbolla used to have another retreat near Tulum on the east coast until a hurricane wiped her out. Luckily, the Sierra Madres caught her in their spell. Each of the 15 private cabanas at Haramara were lovingly designed by de la Borbolla. There’s no electricity in the open-air cabanas;

nights are by candlelight. “There is fantasy in the design,” says de la Borbolla. Guests walk up and down narrow footpaths to two private sandy coves below or two yoga pavilions at the top. The retreat offers many types of classes, activities and excursions. Haramara has also played host to numerous gay guests, even a naked yoga group (don’t worry, they booked the whole place out).

Despite its holistic health focus, the food in the restaurant and tree-house terrace is anything but Spartan. It can be healthy and delicious, like beet puree with sticks of carrots, cucumbers and jicama, or it can be decadent, like crème brûlée with passion fruit pips. (If daily yoga sounds too intimidating, you can just eat here if you book ahead.)

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→ THE TOUR Four Seasons at sunset (far left), mangroves near San Blas (below), Haramara retreat (bottom).



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The winding, mostly two-lane highway north from PV through Nayarit was badly damaged by a freak rain storm in September (even one of the main bridges out of PV was knocked down). The road was still passable in our van, so jeeps and more rugged vehicles will have no problem. It's still a very pretty drive with less and less development the further north you go; nothing but forests and farms. Spectacular ocean views start to tease 90 minutes north of Sayulita (but there are countless coves and tiny beach spots along the route for the intrepid explorer — Frommer's guide is very helpful). Our destination was the natural bounty surrounding the small colonial town of San Blas and the cooking of Betty Vazquez, arguably the region's best home-grown chef.

A centre of shipping in the 18th-century, San Blas is now a sleepy little fishing town surrounded by mangrove swamps. We spent over

an hour near dusk in a small outboard boat, or panga, exploring the mangroves, first a large channel that empties into the ocean near the fabled Isla del Rey, an island sacred to the Huichol Indians. Then we headed into much narrower channels that snake through the bush. This is a major bird-watching region. The variety we spotted was bewildering: countless types of herons, egrets, kingfishers and pelicans. And we got less than 15 feet from a hulking crocodile.

We returned from our adventure into the caring hands of Chef Vazquez and her superior restaurant, El Delfin, part of the Garza Canela hotel owned and operated by her family. (Though charming and friendly I wouldn't call Garza Canela a luxury hotel. The rooms are large and clean, however, and the air conditioning works.) The Vazquez family is from the nearby state capital of Tepic. San Blas was the family's holiday spot; Betty has fond memories of coming here as a child. So

when the family bought the hotel it made sense that she'd take over the kitchen. But it wasn't a given.

"I wanted to be a pilot," says Vazquez, 50. "But I ended up as an air traffic controller in Guadalajara. I hated it; I couldn't stand the stress." She had to find a new career. Her family encouraged her to follow her passion for food. Vazquez went off to Paris to study at the Cordon Bleu Academy in Paris. With that classic French grounding, Vazquez was able to return to her homeland and build on the region's heterogeneous cuisine. "Even our very traditional dishes are a mix of local and Spanish, and the Spanish themselves were a mix. And over the years all sorts of Asian and European influences took root. It was fusion before fusion existed.

"That said, you still have to preserve and honour the more traditional cuisine."

Her cooking was superb. Everything from the bread and marmalades to the ices was homemade. Vazquez grows much of her herbs and citrus fruits on the property. A shot of tequila never tasted as delicious as it did here, accompanied by

a shot of sangrita (freshly squeezed tomato juice with a hint of orange zest and spices). The Mexicans in our party were horrified to hear how we drink (cheap) tequila up north.

Though celebrated as a world-class chef Vazquez has resisted the call to work in larger cities. "I'm more concerned with quality of life. I'm very happy here." She is a good place to stop this tour of Nayarit. As a passionate spokesperson for the region, she is actively engaged in shaping a better future for her town. "Because we are surrounded by water, San Blas has been left alone." But she knows change is coming. Development is encroaching from Mazatlan in the north and Puerto Vallarta in the south. She's encouraged by Mexicans of all stripes who are invested in those changes. "We want to keep what's good about San Blas but change is good if change is done right."

Hopefully Nayarit will get it right. But why wait to find out? The perfect blend of luxury and nature is there now, waiting for you.

RIVIERA NAYARIT [rivieranayarit.com](http://rivieranayarit.com).



→ FRIENDLY Tahéima (left), Betty Vazquez and El Delfin (below), Haramara (bottom).



## NAYARIT DELUXE

### PUNTA MITA

**Four Seasons** Incomparable luxury, service and setting, just an hour from Puerto Vallarta. [fourseasons.com/puntamita](http://fourseasons.com/puntamita).

**St Regis** Secluded, exclusive, gorgeous. [starwoodhotels.com/stregis/puntamita](http://starwoodhotels.com/stregis/puntamita).

### Hotel Des Artistes Del Mar

Large, well-appointed residential suites. The restaurant, Café des Artistes del Mar, is owned by acclaimed chef Thierry Blouet (following the success of Café des Artistes in Puerto Vallarta). [hoteldesartistesdelmar.com](http://hoteldesartistesdelmar.com).

### NUEVO VALLARTA

**Tahéima Wellness Resort** An all-inclusive hotel with a strong health focus. In its first year, so offering good deals. Close to Puerto Vallarta but not on the beach. [taheimahotel.com](http://taheimahotel.com).

### SAYULITA

**Haramara** A luxurious yet simple yoga retreat in a spectacular setting. Ultra-romantic. [haramararetreat.com](http://haramararetreat.com).

### SAN FRANCISCO (SAN PANCHO)

**Cielo Rojo** A tiny perfect boutique hotel in a tiny town, a few blocks from the beach. [hotelcielorojo.com](http://hotelcielorojo.com).

**Polo Club** An elegant outdoor restaurant and, yes, polo. [polovallarta.com](http://polovallarta.com).

### SAN BLAS

**Garza Canela Hotel** Basic, friendly, family-run hotel with a fantastic restaurant, El Delfin. Amazing nature excursions nearby. [garzacanela.com](http://garzacanela.com).