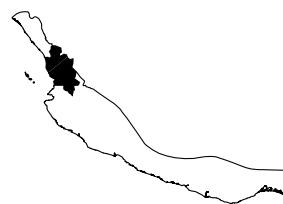


# Nayarit



Life is good for travelers along coastal Nayarit. Mexico's sunny central coast state is the perfect place to lose yourself on a long, lonely beach or ease into life in a friendly fishing village. The region's lush mountains rising from the sea and gorgeous wetlands brimming with exotic bird life, along with its uncrowded and seemingly endless stretches of honey-colored beach, means that many visitors stay considerably longer than they had initially planned.

If it's action and adventure you're after, you'll find it in San Blas, where small boats leave daily for the inner reaches of an extensive jungle estuary. Or perhaps you seek to test yourself on the long swells curling into Bahía de Matanchén. Snorkelers find underwater satisfaction at Isla Islote, the humpback island rising from the sea near Rincón de Guayabitos. Hikers and birdwatchers get what they came for in the exceptionally scenic coastal town of Chacala.

It's also a region awash in history and culture. In Mexcaltitán, believed by many to be the mythical Aztlán, you can learn about the peregrinations of Aztec people prior to the founding of Tenochtitlán (modern Mexico City), and imagine what life was like in ancient Mexico. The capital of Nayarit, inland Tepic, is an unpretentious city with a number of museums and a pleasant center where the Huichol – one of a few indigenous peoples in Nayarit – live.

Public transportation is straightforward, getting you to most destinations without much hassle. In several small beach resorts, featuring wholesome family-run restaurants and hotels, you can enjoy a beach vacation free of the ostentatious hullabaloo of the major resort centers. All in all, Nayarit is pretty neat.

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Boating along mangrove jungles and spotting sunning birds and crocodiles from **San Blas** (p132)
- Sampling the *tamales camarón* (shrimp tamales) in the ancient shrimp-fishing village of **Mexcaltitán** (p130)
- Watching turtle hatchlings enter the sea for the first time in **Playa San Francisco** (p143)
- Beach-bumming and sharpening your surfing skills in **Sayulita** (p144)
- Languishing on one of the region's loveliest beaches in **Chacala** (p137)



■ SAN BLAS JANUARY DAILY HIGH: 21°C | 70°F

■ SAN BLAS JULY DAILY HIGH: 30°C | 86°F

## SANTIAGO IXCUINTLA

☎ 323 / pop 18,000

Despite its charming plaza and impressive gazebo held aloft by eight busy iron muses, Santiago Ixcuintla, sitting inland about 230km southeast of Mazatlán, is mainly of interest as the jumping-off point for the historic island village of Mexcaltitán de Uribe (usually referred to as Mexcaltitán).

The **tourist office** (☎ 235-05-95; 🕒 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) and Internet services are on the *zócalo* (main plaza), while banks with ATMs and money exchange are nearby.

**Centro Huichol** (☎ 235-11-71; Calle 20 de Noviembre 452 & Constitución; 🕒 10am-7pm Mon-Sat) is a handicrafts center where indigenous Huichol make their distinctive arts and crafts; you'll find it 10 blocks northeast of the city center on the road to Mexcaltitán. Opening hours are erratic, so if the door is shuttered, give it a vigorous knocking and someone usually will open it. There's a *mariscos* (seafood) restaurant next door, making for a pleasant lunch stop on the way to Mexcaltitán.

A couple of hotels are near the market. The only one providing a measure of

decency is **Hotel Casino Plaza** (☎ 235-08-50; Ocampo 40; s/d/tr US\$26/30/34; 🕒 📺), which has dark, modern rooms with TV. The hotel's surprisingly good Los Vitrales restaurant (with mains costing US\$3 to US\$8) serves local specialties in a modern, air-conditioned space. There's a market with cheap food stalls two blocks north of the *zócalo*.

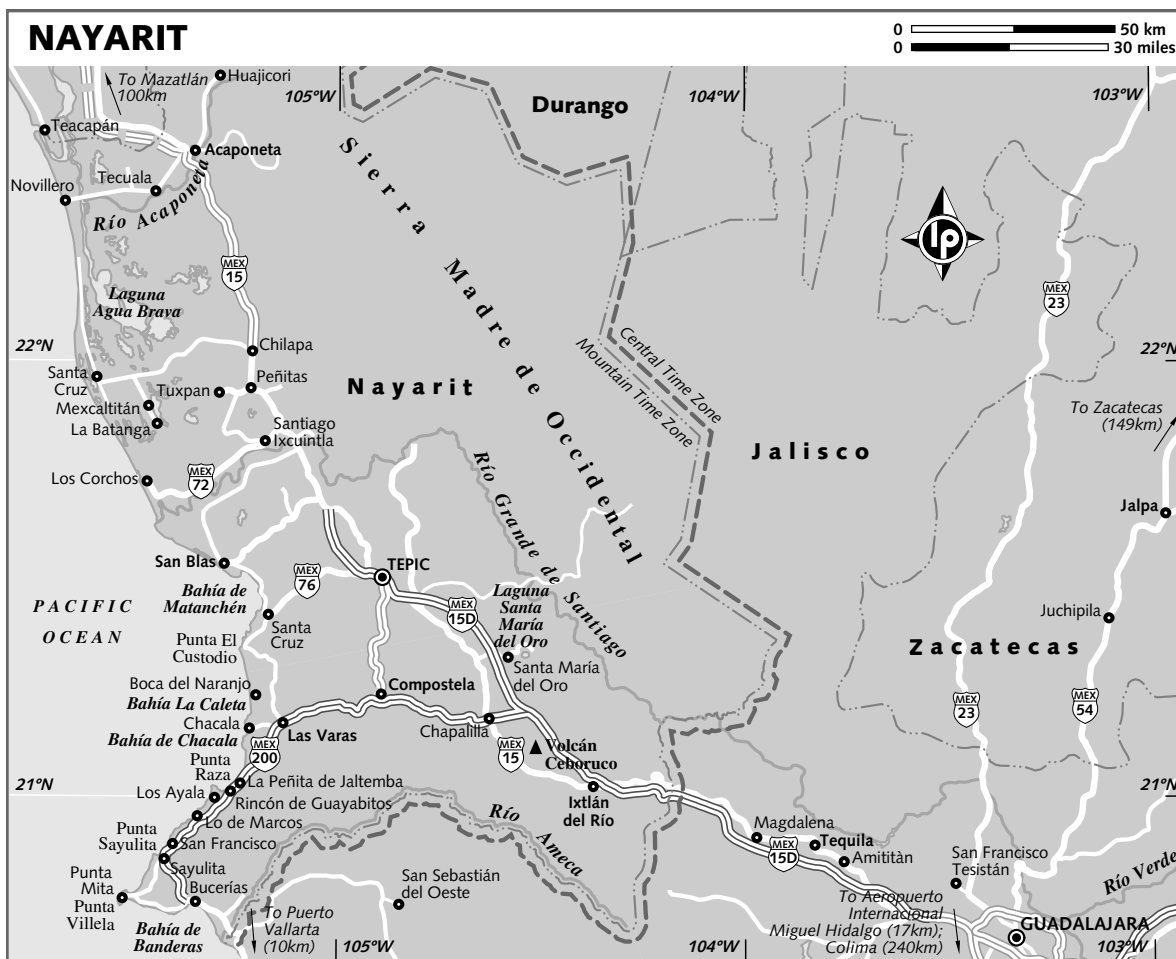
## Getting There & Away

Santiago Ixcuintla is about 8km west of the Hwy 15 *crucero* (turnoff).

Buses from Tepic (US\$3, 1½hr, Elite) leave frequently for Santiago Ixcuintla. You can take a Tepic, Guadalajara or San Blas bus and be let off at Las Peñas, a highway town about 10km before the Santiago Ixcuintla *crucero*; from here there are frequent buses (US\$1.50), *taxis colectivos* (shared taxis; US\$1.75) or taxis (US\$9). Avoid going all the way to the *crucero* and waiting there for a bus to take you in; at night it's not a safe place to hang around.

Three bus lines operate in town, each within a block of each other and about two

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### AZTEC LAUNCH PAD?

A visit to ancient Mexcaltitán is undeniably evocative of the distant past. But was it really once Aztlán, the mythical ancestral homeland of the Aztecs?

The local version of the town's origins contends that the Aztecs left here around 1091 to begin the generations-long migration that eventually led them to Tenochtitlán (modern Mexico City) around 1325. Proponents point to the striking similarities between the cruciform design of Mexcaltitán's streets to the urban layout of early Tenochtitlán. Also cited is a pre-Hispanic bas-relief in stone found in the area – now on display in the Museo Regional de Nayarit (p135) in Tepic – depicting a heron clutching a snake, an allusion to the sign the Aztecs hoped to find in the promised land. And then there are the chronicles of reports by Aztecs to Spanish missionaries, including one in which it was related that the ancestors 'lived in that beautiful happy place they called Aztlán, where they were surrounded by all kinds of ducks, herons, marine crows and water hens.' Indeed, the name Aztlán means 'place of egrets' – and there are certainly plenty of those milling about.

But not everyone's so sure. Competing theories place Aztlán in the Four Corners area of the United States, in Wisconsin and even Alaska. No serious archaeological study has ever been undertaken in Mexcaltitán according to Jesus Jauregui, an expert based in western Mexico at the Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Historia. 'Aztlán is a mythical place, not a historical one.'

Local opinion goes both ways. One fisherman who had considered the facts as displayed at the town's museum wasn't buying it. 'Why would anyone leave?' he asked.

blocks west of the *zócalo* near the intersection of Avs Zaragoza and 20 de Noviembre. Various long-distance buses leave daily from Santiago:

**Mazatlán** (US\$15, 4hr, 5 Rapido del Sur & 1 Pacífico)

**Guadalajara** (US\$18, 5hr, 5 Norte de Sonora)

**Puerto Vallarta** (US\$14, 4½hr, 3 Norte de Sonora)

**San Blas** (US\$3.50, 1½hr, 3 Norte de Sonora)

**Tepic** (US\$3, 1½hr, 32 Norte de Sonora)

*Combis* (minibuses) from Santiago Ixcuintla to La Batanga (the departure point for boats to Mexcaltitán) depart from the Terminal de Taxis Foráneos, on Juárez at Hidalgo, three blocks north of the market, at 7am, 10am, noon and 3pm. The trip costs US\$1.80. Transportes del Pacífico also runs a 2nd-class bus to La Batanga daily at 4pm (US\$1.50, one hour, 37km).

## MEXCALTITÁN

☎ 319 / pop 2000

Carrying on much as it always has, this small, safe and friendly shrimp-fishing hamlet has an intriguing history that stirs the imagination. Visitors arrive at the ancient island village via a 15-minute *lancha* (fast, open, outboard boat) ride through mangrove channels full of fish, shrimp and the birds that eat them. A tremendous quantity of *camarones* (shrimp) is gathered on the island each day to be tallied and distributed; you'll

see it everywhere spread out on the sidewalk, gathered in buckets or sold in tamales from a wheelbarrow.

Tourism has scarcely touched Mexcaltitán, though it does have pleasant waterside restaurants and a small museum. Sometimes referred to as the 'Venice of Mexico,' it is surrounded completely by the Laguna Grande de Mexcaltitán, and the dirt streets are sometimes covered with water after heavy rains. All travel is then done in canoes. These days, however, dikes far upstream in Durango state control water flow and flooding is rare.

Many believe the island to be the site of the mythical Aztlán (meaning 'place of egrets'), the original homeland of the Aztec people. Some academics, however, are skeptical of this story, and there has never been a serious archaeological study of the town. Being here is considerably more fun if you believe the story.

At dusk the streets fill with children and by 8pm it's as if they own the place. In the plaza a sound system blares from the periphery as teenagers dance to Mexican hip-hop and Eminem. Elsewhere, women play *lotería*, a game remotely resembling bingo.

### Orientation & Information

Mexcaltitán is delightfully free of cars, filled instead with bicycles and handcarts. The main street rings the center of the island,

which is a small oval, about 350m from east to west, 400m from north to south. The central *zócalo* has a church on its east side, and the museum on its north side. The hotel is a block behind the museum.

All the telephones on the island go through one operator; look for the '*larga distancia*' (long distance) sign one block west of the *zócalo*. From outside the island, phone the **switchboard** (☎ 232-02-11) and ask for the extension you want.

### Sights & Activities

The **Museo Aztlán del Origen** (admission US\$0.50; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-7pm), on the northern side of the plaza, is small but enchanting. Among the exhibits are many interesting ancient objects and a reproduction of a fascinating long scroll, the *Códice Rururini*, telling the story of the peregrinations of the Aztec people, with notes in Spanish. Rendered in a vaguely cartoonish style, the scroll reminds one of an outtake from *The Simpsons*.

You can arrange for **boat trips** (about US\$5 per hour) on the lagoon for bird-watching, fishing and sightseeing – every family has one or more boats.

### Festivals & Events

**Semana Santa** (Holy Week) is celebrated in a big way here. On Good Friday everyone takes to the streets and the normally placid town comes to life. After a life-size crucifix is carried through the streets, sound systems are fired up and the central plaza becomes party central until dawn. For the **Fiesta de San Pedro Apóstol**, celebrating the patron saint of fishing and held on June 29, statues of Sts Peter and Paul are taken out into the lagoon in decorated *lanchas* for the blessing of the waters. Festivities start around June 20, leading up to the big day.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Ruta Azteca** (☎ 232-02-11, ext 128; Venecia 5; s/d/tr US\$15/20/30) The best, worst and only hotel in town. Rooms are simple and marginally clean; insist on one in the back with a view of the lagoon.

The *tamales camarón* (US\$0.50) sold from a wheelbarrow on the streets in the morning are a local culinary highlight. On the east shore, accessible by a rickety wooden walkway, **Restaurant Alberca** (mains US\$4-6; ☎ 7am-6pm) has a great lagoon view

and a menu completely devoted to shrimp. Don't leave town without trying local specialty *albóndigas de camarón*, battered and fried shrimp balls served in a savory broth.

### Getting There & Away

From Santiago Ixcuintla (p128), take a *combi* or bus to La Batanga, a small wharf from which small boats depart for Mexcaltitán. The arrival and departure times of the *lanchas colectivas* are coordinated with the bus schedule. The boat journey takes 15 minutes and costs US\$0.80 per person. If you miss the *lanchar colectiva*, you can hire a private one for US\$5 between 8am and 7pm.

### SAN BLAS

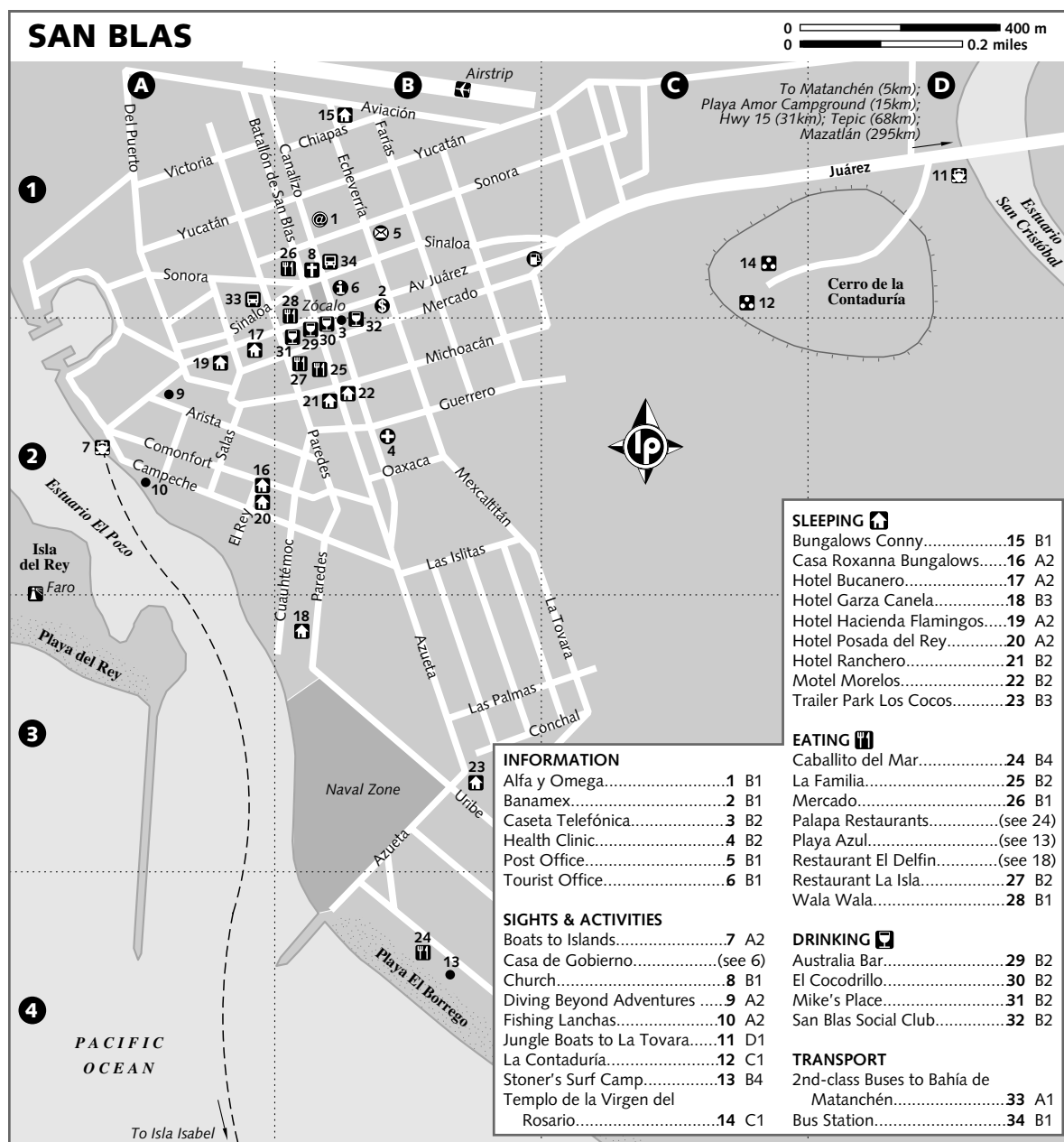
☎ 323 / pop 9000

The tranquil fishing village of San Blas, 70km northwest of Tepic, was an important Spanish port from the late 16th to the 19th centuries. The Spanish built a fortress here to protect their *naos* (trading galleons) from marauding British and French pirates. Later, Romantic poet Longfellow saw fit to honor the town and its bells in a long poem, completed just days before he keeled over. Visitors come to enjoy isolated beaches, fine surfing, abundant birdlife and tropical jungle reached by riverboats. A smattering of lively bars and restaurants and an amiable beach scene add to the mix, making for an enjoyable stay.

The bad news: at dusk there's a pernicious proliferation of *jejenes* (sand flies), tiny gnatlike insects with huge appetites for human flesh. Carry insect repellent and check the screens in your hotel room. (If you find these warnings exaggerated, count yourself lucky.)

### Orientation

San Blas sits on a tongue of land situated between Estuario El Pozo and Estuario San Cristóbal, with Playa El Borrego on the Pacific Ocean on the southern side. A 36km paved road connects San Blas with Hwy 15, the Tepic–Mazatlán road. This road goes through town as Juárez, the town's main east–west street. At the small *zócalo* it crosses Batallón de San Blas (Batallón for short), the main north–south street, which heads south to the beach.



NAYARIT

**Information**

**Banamex** (Juárez s/n) Has an ATM.

**Alfa y Omega** (Canalizo 194; per hr US\$1; ☎ 9am-11pm Mon-Sat, noon-11pm Sun) Speedy Internet access.

**Health Clinic** (☎ 285-0232; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Sat).

**Post office** (cnr Sonora & Echeverría)

**Caseta Telefónica** (☎ 285-12-05; Canalizo 5; ☎ 9am-9pm)

**Tourist office** (☎ 285-00-05, 285-03-81; Casa de Gobierno; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) On the east side of the zócalo, this basic tourist office has a few maps and brochures about the area and the state of Nayarit.

**Sights & Activities**

Although the beaches dominate here, everyone loves the boat tours through the estuaries where birds and wildlife abound.

From December to May, **Diving Beyond Adventures** (☎ 285-12-81, in the US 415-331-7925; www.divingbeyond.com; Juárez 187b) organizes and leads affordable adventure experiences, including diving, kayaking, hiking, bird-watching, whale-watching, jungle boat tours, and visiting historical sites. It uses local guides and practices sound low-impact environmental tours. Its signature – and most expensive – trip is a three-day diving, fishing and camping extravaganza to Isla Isabel. It costs US\$715 per boat for up to four guests, and an additional US\$30 per tank for diving (arrive with proof of diving certification if you plan to scuba dive). It also rents kayaks (US\$20 for four hours).

### BOAT TRIPS

A boat trip through the jungle to the fresh-water spring of **La Tovar**a is a real San Blas highlight. Small boats (maximum 13 passengers) depart from the embarcadero. Boats go up Estuario San Cristóbal to the spring, passing thick jungle vegetation and mangroves rife with exotic birds. The limpid waters of Tovar

are gorgeous to behold, but resist taking a dip and instead gaze at the scene from the adjacent restaurant: a swimmer was attacked by a crocodile here in early 2006. For a few dollars more, you can extend the trip from La Tovar

to the **Cocodrilar**io (crocodile nursery), where reptiles are reared in captivity for later release in the wild. For a group of up to four people, it costs US\$32 to go to La Tovar

(3½ hours) and US\$40 to the Cocodrilar

io (four hours); it costs US\$8 to US\$10 for each extra person. Shorter boat trips to La Tovar

can be made from near Matanchén village, further up the river; they take an hour less and are a few dollars cheaper. The mangrove ecosystem surrounding San Blas is a sanctuary for 300 species of birds – you don't have to be a birder to get a thrill from an encounter with the flamingo-like roseate spoonbill. A five-hour bird-watching trip up the Estuario San Cristóbal to the **Santuario de Aves** (Bird Sanctuary) can be arranged at La Tovar

embarcadero by the bridge; the cost is US\$60 for up to four people. Other boat trips depart from a landing on Estuario El Pozo. They include a trip to **Piedra Blanca** (two hours, US\$40) to visit a statue of the Virgin; to the **Isla del Rey** peninsula, just across from San Blas (US\$1); and to **Playa del Rey**, a 20km beach on the other side of Isla del Rey. From here you can also hire boatmen to take you on bird-watching excursions for about US\$15 per hour. Boatmen also offer fishing and sight-seeing trips from small boats docked on Campeche on the edge of the estuary. The going rate is US\$25 per hour for groups of up to eight people. You can make an interesting trip further afield to **Isla Isabel**, also called Isla María Isabelita, three hours northwest of San Blas by boat; trips cost US\$260 for up to five people. Permission from the port captain is required to visit the island, and a couple of days is needed to take it in. Designated a

### BEACHES

The beach closest to town is **Playa El Borrego**, at the end of Azueta. Broad waves roll in with bravado. Stoner's (below) rents out surfboards, boogie boards and bikes. Swimming can be treacherous in some conditions – beware of rip currents and heed locals' warnings.

The best beaches are southeast of town around Bahía de Matanchén, starting with **Playa Las Islitas**, 7km from San Blas. To get there, take the road toward Hwy 15, and turn off to the right after about 4km. This paved road goes east past the village of Matanchén, where a dirt road goes south to Playa Las Islitas. The road continues on to follow 8km of wonderfully isolated beach. Further on, **Playa Los Cocos** and **Playa Miramar**, also popular for surfing, have *palapas* (thatched-roof shelters) under which you can lounge and drink fresh coconut milk.

### SURFING

With many beach and point breaks, San Blas is the place where many beginner and intermediate surfers choose to hone their skills. The season starts in May, but the waves are fairly mellow until September and October when the south swell brings amazingly long waves curling into **Bahía de Matanchén**. Surf spots include El Borrego, Second Jetty, La Puntilla, Stoner's, Las Islitas and El Mosco.

At Playa El Borrego, **Stoner's Surf Camp** (☎ 285-0444; www.stonersurfcamp.com; surfboard/boogie-board rental per hr US\$3/2, per day US\$10/8, lessons per hr US\$15) is the nexus of the scene. National long-board champion 'Pompis' Cano gives lessons and holds court under the *palapa*. There are also four rustic cabins (US\$10 to US\$15), space to camp (US\$3) and tent rentals (US\$2).

### CERRO DE LA CONTADURÍA

Just west of the bridge over Estuario San Cristóbal, the road passes the Cerro de la

Contaduría. Climb up the hill and see the ruins of the 18th-century Spanish **La Contaduría Fort** and **Templo de la Virgen del Rosario** (admission US\$0.70); there's a fine view from the top.

### Festivals & Events

Every year on January 31 the anniversary of the death of **Father José María Mercado** is commemorated with a parade, a march by the Mexican navy and fireworks in the *zócalo*. Mercado lived in San Blas in the early 19th century and helped Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla (p30) with the independence movement by sending him a set of old Spanish cannons from the village.

On February 3 festivities for **San Blas**, the town's patron saint, are an extension of those begun on January 31, with traditional dance and musical performances.

### Sleeping

San Blas has plenty of economical guest-houses and one noteworthy fine hotel. In local parlance, a 'bungalow' sleeps more than two and includes a kitchen.

### BUDGET

**Hotel Rancho** (☎ 285-08-92; Batallón 102; r with/without bathroom US\$15/10) Basic and friendly, this popular place has eight rooms and a communal kitchen for guests.

**Motel Morelos** (Batallón 108; r US\$15-20) Morelos is stark but homey, with rooms around a central courtyard. An old pelican has made the place home for over a decade, ever since the proprietors nursed him back to health following an injury. He's cute but decidedly not cuddly.

**Hotel Bucanero** (☎ 285-01-01; Juárez 75; s/d/tr US\$15/25/35; P 🚿) This hotel has seen better days, but it still sparkles with old, salty character. The dark, rough-around-the-edges rooms are set around a big leafy courtyard. There's a lively weekend disco next door.

Tent campers should be prepared for the swarms of insects, especially at sunset. There are a couple of options:

**Trailer Park Los Cocos** (☎ 285-00-55; Azueta s/n; tent/RV sites US\$8/13) Pleasant and grassy with just enough trees.

**Playa Amor Campground** (Playa Los Cocos; tent/RV sites US\$8/14) A 15-minute drive east of town. It's attractive and on the beachfront, with sunset views and few mosquitoes.

### MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Hotel Hacienda Flamingos** (☎ 285-09-30; [www.sanblas.com.mx](http://www.sanblas.com.mx); Juárez 105; s/d US\$68/85, ste US\$76-105; 🚿 🚿) This superbly restored colonial gem provides the classiest accommodations in town. All of the spacious rooms around the quaint courtyard have been tastefully modernized with coffeemakers and TVs. The swimming pool is surrounded by a pleasant, green garden.

**Casa Roxanna Bungalows** (☎ 285-05-73; El Rey 1; [www.casaroxanna.com](http://www.casaroxanna.com); bungalows US\$50-60; 🚿 🚿) This elegant, gay-friendly haven offers five capacious bungalows and a long pool on spacious manicured grounds. English is spoken and discounts are offered for longer stays.

**Bungalows Conny** (☎ 285-09-86; [www.bungalowsconny.com](http://www.bungalowsconny.com); Chiapas 26; r US\$35, bungalow US\$45-50; 🚿 🚿) In a quiet part of a quiet town, this new place with only four units rests easy with modern rooms and bungalows. The largest is fresh and feels like a small apartment, with a separate bedroom and large kitchen.

**Hotel Garza Canela** (☎ 285-01-12; [www.garzacanela.com](http://www.garzacanela.com); Paredes 106 Sur; s/d US\$94/120, ste US\$134-164; P 🚿 🚿) Modern, professional and comfortable, the Garza Canela is a reliable top-end choice. Standard rooms are spacious and decorated in colonial style, while the suites are enormous and contemporary, with frosted glass and marble floors. It's also home to Restaurant El Delfín, the best restaurant and gift shop in town.

**Hotel Posada del Rey** (☎ 285-01-23; [www.sanblas-mexico.com/posadadelrey](http://www.sanblas-mexico.com/posadadelrey); Campeche 10; d/tr/ste US\$35/40/45; 🚿 🚿) This family-run business with a low-key but friendly atmosphere has clean, modern rooms surrounding a cozy courtyard with a swimming pool. It has a small bar and restaurant in the high season.

### Eating

San Blas is a casual town with casual restaurants, all serving fresh seafood. On the beach, *palapa* restaurants are notable for delicious fish cooked in the *campechano* style, with tomatoes, onion, octopus, shrimp and oyster. The cheapest eats can be found at the local *mercado* (market) on Sonora and Batallón.

**Restaurant El Delfín** (☎ 285-01-12; Paredes 106 Sur; mains US\$9-18; 🚿) At Hotel Garza Canela, this restaurant is the best choice for fine dining, serving an impressive array of rich,

gourmet dishes such as anise-accented fish or cumin-peppered shrimp. Desserts are magnificent and the international wines reasonably priced.

**Restaurant La Isla** (☎ 285-04-07; cnr Paredes & Mercado; mains US\$5-8; 🕒 2-9pm Tue-Sun; ♿) La Isla grills near-perfect seafood, but it's also worth coming in just to check out the overdone seashell decor – it's so tacky it's cool.

**La Familia** (☎ 285-02-58; Batallón 16; mains US\$4-8) Decorated in a bottom-of-the-sea spirit, this family restaurant asks moderate prices for delicious seafood and Mexican dishes.

**Wala Wala** (☎ 285-08-63; Juárez 94; mains \$6-15; 🕒 closed Sun) This cheerfully decorated restaurant serves inexpensive, tasty, home-style meals. It's mostly basic Mexican and pasta with a few specialties such as lobster and *pollo con naranja* (chicken with orange).

If you're looking to eat where the waves crash, head to Playa El Borrego, where *palapas* line the beach. **Caballito del Mar** (☎ 285-04-07; Playa El Borrego; mains US\$8-15) cooks up remarkably sophisticated seafood dishes and *pescado zarandeado* (filleted fish marinated with spices and herbs and grilled). At Stoner's Surf Camp, **Playa Azul** (☎ 285-04-44; Playa El Borrego; mains US\$3.50-5.50) is a traveler hangout with good music, lots of hammocks and well-prepared fare (including vegetarian).

## Drinking & Entertainment

The nightlife in San Blas is unexciting but pleasant enough, with a good selection of low-key watering holes to choose from. Most open up at dusk and close late, which means midnight in this town.

**San Blas Social Club** (cnr Juárez & Canalizo) Jazz records line the wall; pick one out and the gentleman bartender will slap it on. There's live music Friday and Saturday, movies on Wednesday, and good strong coffee every morning.

**Mike's Place** (Juárez 36) This lively bar primes the dance floor with a good mix of blues and rock music. There's live music Friday to Sunday.

**El Cocodrilo** (Juárez 6) This old favorite still attracts gringos in the evening, using well-priced cocktails as bait.

**Australia Bar** (Juárez 34) The long bar of this upstairs pool room is dotted with cool youths and grungy foreigners throwing drinks back.

## Getting There & Around

The little **bus station** (cnr Sinaloa & Canalizo) is served by Norte de Sonora and Estrella Blanca 2nd-class buses. For many destinations to the south and east, it may be quicker to go to Tepic first. For Mazatlán, transfer in Tepic. There are daily departures to various destinations:

**Guadalajara** (US\$18, 5hr, 1 1st-class, 7am)

**Puerto Vallarta** (US\$11, 3½hr, 4 1st-class)

**Santiago Ixcuintla** (US\$3.50, 1hr, frequent 2nd-class)

**Tepic** (US\$4.25, 1hr, 2nd-class hourly 6am-8pm)

Second-class buses also depart from the corner of Sinaloa and Paredes several times a day, serving all the villages and beaches on Bahía de Matanchén.

Taxis line up along the southern edge of the *zócalo* and will take you around town and to nearby beaches – a good option with two or more people. A trip to Playa El Borrego will set you back US\$4. Rent bicycles from **Wala Wala** (☎ 285-08-63; Juárez 94; per hr/day US\$1.50/5) or **Stoner's Surf Camp** (☎ 285-0444; per day US\$6).

## TEPIC

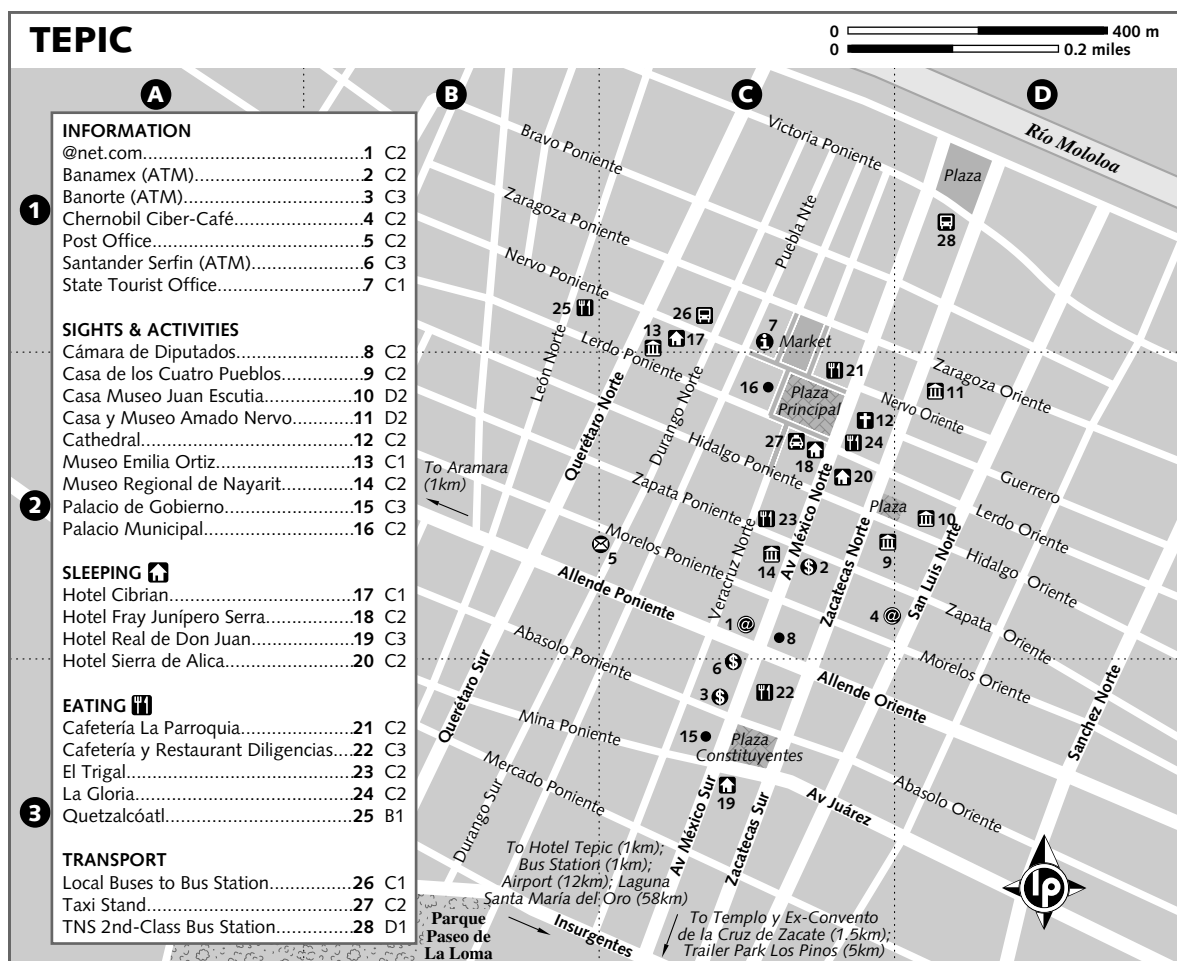
☎ 311 / pop 266,000 / elevation 920m

Founded by the nephew of Hernán Cortés in 1524, Tepic is an old city even by Mexican standards. Today the capital of Nayarit is a forward-thinking, predominantly middle-class place, retaining few vestiges of its distant past. Many travelers pass through the outskirts of town without looking back, but those that take a day to nose around may come to appreciate the provincial hustle and bustle playing out on its narrow streets. Indigenous Huichol are often seen here, wearing their colorful traditional clothing, and Huichol artwork is sold on the street and in several shops. Adding interest are an imposing neo-Gothic cathedral and several interesting museums.

## Orientation

Plaza Principal, with the large cathedral at the eastern end, is the heart of the city. Av México, the city's main street, runs south from the cathedral to Plaza Constituyentes, past banks, restaurants, the state museum and other places of interest. The bus station is on the southeastern side of the city, about 2km from Plaza Principal, with plenty of buses serving the center. Peripheral roads





allow traffic to pass through Tepic without entering the city center.

**Information**

The **state tourist office** (☎ 216-56-61, 212-80-36; www.turismonayarit.gob.mx; cnr Puebla Nte & Nervo Pte; ☎ 8am-8pm) is a great resource with free maps and extensive information about Tepic and the state of Nayarit.

Banks (with ATMs) and *casas de cambio* line Av México Nte between the two plazas; you'll find the post office at the corner of Durango Sur and Morelos.

Access the Internet at **Chernobil Ciber-Café** (☎ 217-69-22; San Luis Potosí Nte 46; per hr US\$1) or **@net.com** (Av México Sur s/n, Plaza Milenio; per hr US\$1).

**Sights**

The large **cathedral** on Plaza Principal was dedicated in 1750; the neo-Gothic towers were completed in 1885. On the other side of the plaza from the cathedral is the **Palacio Municipal** (city hall), where you'll often find Huichol selling handicrafts at very good prices under the arches. On Av México Nte, south of the plaza, look inside the Nayarit

state government buildings –Palacio de Gobierno and the Cámara de Diputados – to see some impressive and colorful **murals**.

The 18th-century **Templo y Ex-Convento de la Cruz de Zacate** (cnr Calz del Ejército & Av México; ☎ 9am-4:30pm Mon-Fri) is about 2km south of the cathedral. It was here in 1767 that Father Junípero Serra organized his expedition that established the chain of Spanish missions in the Californias; you can visit the room where he stayed, but there's not much else to see.

**MUSEUMS**

Housed in a palatial 18th-century residence with a lovely courtyard, **Museo Regional de Nayarit** (☎ 212-19-00; Av México 91 Nte; admission US\$3; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat) concerns itself primarily with pre-Hispanic objects, including ancient pottery and tomb artifacts, as well as art and exhibits that shed light on Huichol art and cosmology. Considerably less interesting are the examples of colonial painting on display.

A couple of interesting museums are housed in impressive restored colonial

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residences. The **Casa y Museo Amado Nervo** (☎ 212-29-16; Zacatecas 284 Nte; admission free; ☎ 9am-2pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) celebrates the life of poet Amado Nervo, born in this house in 1870. The collection is slight, but the house itself is lovely to behold. The **Casa Museo Juan Escutia** (☎ 212-33-90; Hidalgo 71 Ote; admission free; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri) was the home of Juan Escutia, one of Mexico's illustrious Niños Héroes (child heroes), who died in 1847 at age 17 defending Mexico City's Castillo de Chapultepec from US forces during the Mexican-American War. It's simply furnished and evocative of early 19th-century Mexico.

The **Museo de los Cuatro Pueblos** (☎ 212-17-05; Hidalgo 60 Ote; admission free; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Thu, 9am-1pm Fri & Sat) displays contemporary popular arts of the Nayarit's Huichol, Cora, Nahuatl and Tepehuano peoples, including clothing, yarn art, weaving, musical instruments, ceramics and beadwork.

**Aramara** (☎ 216-42-46; Allende 329 Pte; admission free; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-3pm Sun) is a small museum of visual arts about 1.5km west of the town centre. The **Museo Emilia Ortiz** (☎ 212-26-52; Lerdo 192 Pte; admission free; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) honors the Mexican-school painter Emilia Ortiz (1917-96) and her work.

## Sleeping

In its historic center Tepic rewards travelers with a good selection of comfortable, independent hotels that won't break the bank.

**Hotel Sierra de Alicia** (☎ 212-03-22; Av México 180 Nte; s/d US\$44/57; ☎ ☎) An old hotel that's kept its standards intact, this midrange favorite has 60 bright, spacious rooms with satellite TV and phones. It's so close to Plaza Principal you can hear the cathedral bells ring.

**Hotel Real de Don Juan** (☎ /fax 216-18-88; Av México 105 Sur; r/ste US\$73/105) Though it looks old and has some character, this hotel is thoroughly modern. The 48 rooms are done up in appealing pastel colors, with luxurious king-size beds and marble-accented bathrooms. A good restaurant and classy bar dominate the 1st floor.

**Hotel Cibrian** (☎ 212-86-98; Nervo 163 Pte; s/d US\$20/25; ☎) This central hotel provides an excellent value with its clean, bright rooms with TV, telephone and enclosed parking. Rooms overlooking the busy street can get noisy. There's also a good, economical restaurant.

**Hotel Fray Junípero Serra** (☎ 212-25-25; [www.frayjunipero.com.mx](http://www.frayjunipero.com.mx) in Spanish; Lerdo 23 Pte; s/d US\$61/67, ste US\$80-154; ☎ ☎ ☎) Rooms in this modern hotel are tastefully appointed and come with deluxe amenities, including wireless Internet and satellite TV; some have a view over the plaza.

**Hotel Tepic** (☎ 213-17-77; fax 210-05-45; Dr Martínez 438 Ote; s US\$15-18, d US\$23-28; ☎) Weary travelers get some much-needed shut-eye at this good, modern hotel next to the bus station.

**Trailer Park Los Pinos** (☎ 210-27-28; Blvd Tepic-Xalisco 150; RV/tent sites US\$15/4) About 5km south of town, this spacious park offers 24 trailer spaces with full hookups and wireless Internet. The leafy, grassy grounds make tent camping a pleasure.

## Eating & Drinking

In contrast to most Mexican cities, Tepic has a good selection of vegetarian restaurants but, in keeping with the region, their local specialties are all shrimp-based.

**El Trigal** (☎ 216-40-04; Veracruz 112 Nte; mains under US\$3; ☎ 8:30am-9pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-7pm Sat & Sun) This inexpensive vegetarian restaurant has tables in an attractive courtyard. Offerings include whole-wheat quesadillas, veggie burgers and an excellent *menú del día* (lunch special).

**La Gloria** (☎ 217-04-22; cnr Lerdo Ote & Av México Nte; mains US\$5-16; ☎ 7:30am-11pm) With live music and tables on a balcony overlooking Plaza Principal, La Gloria is an especially enjoyable place for an evening meal. The menu, firmly rooted in shrimp and fish, is a little more adventurous than the average.

**Quetzalcóatl** (☎ 212-99-66; León 224 Nte; mains under US\$4; ☎ closed Sun) A friendly, inexpensive vegetarian restaurant with a pretty courtyard, relaxing music and tasteful decor.

**Cafetería y Restaurant Diligencias** (☎ 212-15-35; Av México 29 Sur; mains US\$2-4; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Popular with locals for its *comida corrida* (set-price lunch and dinner menu), Diligencias serves up quality coffee, snacks and full meals all day long in a vintage dining hall.

**Cafetería La Parroquia** (Nervo 18 Ote; snacks US\$1-3.50) On the northern side of the plaza, upstairs under the arches, this place is very pleasant for breakfasts, drinks and inexpensive light meals. They also do good coffee.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Tepic's **airport** (TPQ; ☎ 214-18-50) is in Pantanal, 12km (or a 20-minute drive) from Tepic, going toward Guadalajara. **Aero California** (☎ 214-23-20; Airport) and **Aeroméxico** (☎ 213-90-47; Airport) offer direct flights to Mexico City and Tijuana, with connections to other centers.

### BUS

The bus station is on the southeastern outskirts of town; local buses marked 'Central' and 'Centro' make frequent trips between the bus station and the city center; local buses depart from the corner of Nervo Pte and Durango Nte. The bus station has a cafeteria, left-luggage office, shops, post office, tourist information, card phones, a Telecom office and an ATM.

The main bus companies are Elite, Estrella Blanca (EB), Ómnibus de México (OB; all 1st-class), and Transportes del Pacífico (TP; 1st- and 2nd-class). There are daily departures to various destinations:

**Guadalajara** Elite (US\$20, 3½hr, frequent 1st-class);

Futura (US\$17, 3½hr, frequent 2nd-class)

**Mazatlán** Elite (US\$20, 4½, hourly 1st-class; US\$15, 4½, hourly 2nd-class)

**Mexico City** OB (US\$57, 10hr, hourly 1st-class); Elite & EB (US\$50, 11hr, hourly 2nd-class) To Terminal Norte.

**Puerto Vallarta** TP (US\$15, 3½hr, 1st-class 9pm; US\$12, 3½hr, hourly 2nd-class 1am-10pm)

TNS (Transportes Norte de Sonora) operates a small terminal north of the cathedral near the Río Mololoa with 2nd-class service to San Blas (US\$4.25, one hour, hourly from 5am to 7pm) and Santiago Ixcuintla (US\$3, 1½ hours, half-hourly from 6am to 7pm).

## Getting Around

Local buses operate from around 6am to 9pm (US\$0.30). *Combis* operate along Av México from 6am to midnight (US\$0.30). There are also plenty of taxis, and a taxi stand on the south side of Plaza Principal.

## AROUND TEPIC

### Laguna Santa María del Oro

Surrounded by steep, forested mountains, idyllic Laguna Santa María del Oro (elevation 730m) fills a volcanic crater 2km around and thought to be over 100m deep. The clear, clean water takes on colors ranging from turquoise to slate. It's a great pleasure to walk

around the lake and into the surrounding mountains, spotting numerous birds (some 250 species) and butterflies along the way. You can also climb to an abandoned gold mine, cycle, swim, row on the lake, kayak, or fish for black bass and perch. A few small restaurants serve fresh lake fish.

**Koala Bungalows & RV Park** (☎ 311-264-36-98; koala@nayarit.com; Santa María del Oro; per person tent/r/bungalow US\$5/30/43, cabin US\$57-71) is an attractive, peaceful park with a restaurant, campsites and well-maintained bungalows in several sizes. It's owned and operated by a friendly Englishman, who's an excellent source of information about the lake.

To get there, take the Santa María del Oro turnoff about 40km from Tepic along the Guadalajara road; from the turnoff it's about 10km to Santa María del Oro, then another 8km from the village to the lake. Buses to the lake depart from in front of the bus station in Tepic three times daily (US\$3, one hour).

## Volcán Ceboruco

This extinct volcano, with a number of old craters, interesting plants and volcanic forms, has several short, interesting walks at the top. There is plenty of vegetation growing on the slopes, and the 15km cobbled road up the volcano passes lava fields and fumaroles (steam vents). The road begins at the village of Jala, 7km off Hwy 15D, between Tepic and Guadalajara; the *crucero* is 76km from Tepic, 12km before you reach Ixtlán del Río. There's no public transportation, so you'll need your own wheels.

## Ixtlán del Río

The small town of Ixtlán del Río, about 1½ hours (88km) south of Tepic along Hwy 15D, is unremarkable in itself, but fans of controversial author Carlos Castaneda will remember that this is where Don Juan took Carlos in the book *Journey to Ixtlán*. Outside Ixtlán, the **Los Toriles** archaeological site has an impressive round stone temple, the **Templo a Quetzalcóatl** (☎ 9am-5pm). Any bus between Tepic and Guadalajara will drop you at Ixtlán.

## CHACALA

☎ 327 / pop 400

The tiny coastal fishing village of Chacala, 96km north of Puerto Vallarta and 10km west of Hwy 200 and Las Varas, sits pretty

along an amazingly beautiful little cove on Bahía Chacala backed by verdant slopes and edged by rugged black rocks at either end. The horizon is perfectly framed by the embrace of the cove, and the sound of the waves is gently mesmerizing. With more and more visitors coming each year, the town is changing, albeit slowly, but for now it remains a great place to unwind and send your regards to the horizon.

Chacala has just one main, sandy thoroughfare and a few cobbled side streets. Camping is possible at several of the beachside *palapa* restaurants, but there are also some unique accommodations to choose from.

### Activities

Hereabouts, the sea provides most of the action. The waters of **Bahía Chacala** are calm and clear most days, allowing for relaxing water sports and exemplary snorkeling (bring your own gear, as you won't find it for rent in town). Local *panga* (motorized skiff) captains, easily encountered on the beach, are available to ferry you to favorite spots like **Bahía La Caleta**, 15 minutes north by boat. Here surfers rejoice to find a fine left-breaking point break.

You can also hike through the jungle to **Playa La Caleta**, about 1½ hours to the north; it's a challenging but rewarding slog with a happy ending on a deserted beach known for its big waves. Along the way you're likely to see a great variety of bird life, including exotics such as the West Mexican chachalaca or the Pacific slope flycatcher. You can arrange to have a *panga* pick you up on the beach for transport back to Chacala.

At Casa Pacífica (right), you can inquire about local guides and pick up copies of hand-drawn hiking maps and a brochure called *Birds of Chacala*.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Restaurant Laguna Encantada** (☎ 272-03-08; camping free) If you're a camper, consider asking for a beach space outside this place, toward the north end. It's free, as long as you support the restaurant by eating there a few times.

**Restaurant El Delfín** (☎ 272-10-67; camping sites US\$5) Campers also have it good here on a large grassy area under neat rows of palm trees. The casual open-air restaurant serves

basic fare. You'll find it toward the south end of the beach.

On or near the beach, decent spots to lay your head include **Posada Familia** (☎ 219-40-15; r US\$40-50; 🚻), **Restaurant Tres Hermanos** (☎ 272-10-67; r US\$30) and **Posada Sarahi** (☎ 219-40-12; r US\$30-45).

Folks interested in getting to know some locals should check out **Techos de México** (☎ 275-02-82; [www.playachacala.com/techos.htm](http://www.playachacala.com/techos.htm); r US\$18-40), a series of seven homes with room for up to four people. Rooms are updated but basic and are separate from the host home. Some come with a kitchen.

**Casa Pacífica B&B** (☎ 219-40-67; [www.casapacificachacala.com](http://www.casapacificachacala.com); d US\$60-70 incl breakfast) At this relaxing midrange option, three large, beautiful suites come with queen-size beds and a kitchen. Owner Susana Escobido is exceptionally knowledgeable about the area and manages eight other vacation rentals in Chacala (US\$35 to US\$100 per night).

**Mar de Jade** (☎ 219-40-60; [www.mardejade.com](http://www.mardejade.com); Playa Chacala s/n; s/d US\$138/220, s ste US\$165-188, d ste US\$244-275; 🚻) Considerably more than just a hotel, this lovely workshop center, spa, Spanish school and organic farm offers a relaxing atmosphere in the company of some very interesting people. Three healthy meals are included and mealtime is something of a thought exchange. Yoga and meditation are typical morning activities.

**Majahua** (☎ 219-40-54; [www.majahua.com](http://www.majahua.com); Playa Chacala s/n; r US\$129-194, ste US\$355, all incl breakfast) Super chic and tucked away in the unspoiled jungle overlooking the edge of the cove, this earthy ecolodge offers five beautifully designed rooms, a fantastic outdoor restaurant and spa services. It's a five-minute walk from the parking area, just up the road from Mar de Jade.

You can grab a meal or snack at any of the dozen-plus *palapa* restaurants on the beach. For super-fresh seafood, head to the dock early in the morning and buy your own fish; some restaurants will cook it up for free (or for a small fee), as long as you buy side dishes and drinks there too.

**La Brisa** (☎ 291-40-15; mains US\$5-12; 🕒 8am-10pm) The best of the beach restaurants, La Brisa does good morning coffee and seafood prepared the local way. If you've a hankering for something decadent, go for the *camarones* Costa Azul, shrimp stuffed with ham, tuna and cheese.

**Mauna Kea Café** (☎ 219-40-67; breakfast US\$5-6; ☎ 8-10am Mon-Sat) A tiny, unconventional and casual rooftop café at Casa Pacífica, Mauna Kea serves up full, hearty breakfasts, good coffee and Hawaiian-style waffles.

### Getting There & Away

To reach Chacala, get off the bus at Las Varas (any 2nd-class bus will stop here, as will most – but not all – 1st-class buses) and take a *taxi colectivo* (shared taxi) to Chacala (US\$2, 15 minutes). A private taxi sets you back US\$10 to US\$15.

### AROUND CHACALA

Hidden in the mountains up a rough dirt road is **Jamurca** (admission US\$1.50; ☎ 9am-5pm Thu-Tue). At these rustic hot springs, it is said, the Huichol *marakames* (shamans) once took ritual baths to purify their bodies and souls. You can do the same in three concrete pools. Bring a picnic lunch to enjoy in the garden as iguanas look on. You'll need your own wheels to get there; on Hwy 200 look for the swimmer pictograph 2km north of Las Varas at a town called Las Cuatas, then head south about 4km on the rutted road.

### RINCÓN DE GUAYABITOS

☎ 327 / pop 3000

On the coast about 60km north of Puerto Vallarta, Rincón de Guayabitos ('Guayabitos' for short) is a tailor-made beach-resort town catering to Mexican vacationers and winter visitors from Canada and other cold places. It's nothing fancy and shows its weathered age, but its appeal lies in its slow, uncomplicated pace and relative lack of gringos. As you lie on the beach wiggling your toes in the sand, vendors pass by selling fish roasted on a stick and cool, fresh coconuts. Guayabitos gets overrun during Semana Santa, Christmas, and the July and August school holidays. Weekends are busy, but the beautiful beach is practically empty the rest of the week.

### Orientation & Information

Rincón de Guayabitos is on the coast just west of Hwy 200. At the north entrance to town, a high-water tower emulates an elongated mushroom. Turn into town here and soon you'll be on Guayabitos' main street, Av del Sol Nuevo. It's lined with shops,

restaurants and hotels. More restaurants and hotels sit along the beach, one block over – they're reached by side streets, as there's no road along the waterfront.

The nearest bank is in La Peñita de Jaltemba, 3km north of Guayabitos, but there's an ATM at **Villas Buena Vida** (☎ 274-02-31; Retorno Laureles s/n).

**EquiNoxio Internet** (Av del Sol Nuevo s/n; per hr US\$3.50) The only place to log on, with plug-ins for laptops.

**Delegación de Turismo** (☎ /fax 274-06-93; Av del Sol Nuevo s/n; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2pm Sun) Near the water tower; provides information on the local area and the state of Nayarit.

**Post office** (☎ 8am-2pm Mon-Fri) Behind the *zócalo*, near the tourist office.

### Sights & Activities

From the beach you can take a *panga* or a glass-bottom boat (up to five people US\$35/US\$25) out to the gorgeous snorkeling nirvana **Isla Islote** (a few kilometers offshore), where you can rent snorkeling gear and eat in a simple restaurant.

North of Guayabitos, **Boca del Naranjo** beckons, with wild waves crashing onto the beach and mangroves ideal for kayaking and bird-watching. To get there, drive 6km north from the turnoff to Chacala on Hwy 200 and take the signed left to the village of La Lima de Abajo and continue a short distance further to the beach.

For something different, climb the 224 steps to **Cerro de la Santa Cruz** (Hill of the Holy Cross), known locally as La Cruz. From here you'll enjoy fantastic views of Bahía de Jaltemba and of the handsome green scarp of the Sierra Madres to the west. Pilgrims make the climb en masse at Easter, but the rest of the year you're likely to have the lookout to yourself. You'll find the path at the southern terminus of Av del Sol Nuevo.

Boat operators offer whale-watching trips from November to March. If you want to test out a different beach, try Playa Los Ayala (p141), about 2km south of Guayabitos.

### Sleeping

Most of Guayabitos' accommodations are midrange bungalows with kitchens, pitched at families. Single travelers will have a harder time finding cheap rooms. The following prices are for the winter high season, though the high-priced months can vary



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from one establishment to another. Staying a while? Negotiate discounts.

**Posada Jaltemba** (☎ 274-01-65; cnr Av del Sol Nuevo & Retorno Laureles; d/q US\$30/60, bungalows US\$40-85; 📞 🚗 🚰) A good deal. The attractive, vine-covered stucco-and-brick buildings shine with charming rustic touches and tropical plants. Rooms fit right into this mold.

**Hotel Posada la Misión** (☎ 274-03-57; posadala.mision@prodigy.net.mx; Retorno Tabachines 6; d/tr US\$72/78, bungalows US\$80-128; 📞 🚗 🚰) This hotel has a colonial theme going, with beautiful tiles lining open halls in front, great sea views out back and a pretty, amoeba-shaped pool in the middle. Rooms are nice and quaint, and bungalows have balconies.

**Villas Buena Vida** (☎ 274-02-31; www.villas.buenavida.com; Retorno Laureles s/n; r US\$64, ste US\$91-119; 📞 🚗 🚰) With its beachfront swimming pool and balconies overlooking the ocean, this luxurious hotel is a great place to splash out. Villas sleep one to four people; suites sleep five to six people. The hotel also presents its guests with sportfishing, snorkeling, biking and horseback-riding opportunities.

**Hotel Guayabitos** (☎ 274-09-20; Av del Sol Nuevo 17; d/q US\$32/45, bungalows US\$50-70; 📞 🚗 🚰) This new hotel has a large pool, secure parking and comfortable rooms with kitchenettes. Its air-conditioned restaurant offers hearty local dishes like *camarones del diablo*, an exuberantly spiced shrimp dish (US\$9). Mains cost US\$4 to US\$11, and the restaurant is open from 8am to 10pm.

**Posada Real** (☎ 274-07-07; cnr Av del Sol Nuevo & Huanacaxtle; d/q US\$45/65, bungalows d/q US\$50/70; 📞 🚗 🚰) Possessing the town's most audacious paint job, this cheerful hotel has decent rooms and a good restaurant. The bungalows come with kitchens. The hot tub is big enough for you and all your friends.

Other options:

**Paraíso del Pescador Trailer Park & Bungalows** (☎ 274-00-14; paradisodelpescador@hotmail.com; Retorno Ceibas; tent & RV sites US\$21, r US\$55, ste US\$110, 4-/8-person bungalows US\$65/165) Stark and basic, but right on the beach.

**Bungalows y Hotel Pancho Villa** (☎ 324-02-46; Av del Sol Nuevo s/n; s/d US\$20/25, bungalows US\$52-75; 🚰) Has small, musty rooms and bungalows in motel-like digs, but they don't cost an arm or a leg. At least there's a pool.

## Eating

On the main drag you'll find many economical spots to grab a bite; local tastes tend to gravitate toward *pollo asado* (grilled chicken) and fried fish, along with plenty of shrimp dishes.

**El Campanario** (☎ 274-03-57; Retorno Tabachines 6; mains US\$5-9; 🕒 7am-10pm) This place serves up good fish, burgers, enchiladas and omelets, among other menu items. Nibble on them in airy, casual and intimate surroundings, beautifully tiled and set with hanging ceramic parrots. It's at the Hotel Posada la Misión.

**Beto's** (☎ 274-05-75; Av del Sol Nuevo s/n; mains US\$3-10; 🕒 7am-9pm) Beto's is popular with large families for its simple, no-nonsense Mexican menu. Seafood, *pozole* (a hearty soup of hominy, meat or seafood, vegetables and chilies) and other treats keep everyone happy.

**Arthur's 'Los Super' Tacos** (Av del Sol Nuevo s/n; tacos US\$.80; 🕒 5-11pm) This is the best place in town for a really cheap meal; It makes its own tortillas and salsas.

**Roberto's** (Retorno Jacarandas; mains US\$6-12; 🕒 8am-6pm Wed-Mon) Serving up seafood and meats in a casual, covered patio, this place caters to the breakfast and lunchtime sand-covered crowd. Look for it on the beach; Roberto's also does breakfast.

**George & Gary's** (☎ 274-04-00; Av del Sol Nuevo s/n; mains under US\$5; 🕒 7am-9:30pm) G&G's grills up burgers, tosses chef salads and percolates fancy coffees – that's about the extent of its lunch menu. It's also popular with gringos for the breakfast waffles (US\$3.50). There's a book exchange here, too.

**La Piña Loca** (☎ 274-11-81; Retorno Tabachines 7; mains US\$4-16; 🕒 7am-10pm) This place sits cute and homey, colorful and small. It's totally open and airy, serving breakfast, lunch and dinner from a Mexican menu.

**Rincón Mexicano** (☎ 274-06-63; cnr Cedros & Retorno Laureles; mains US\$6-11; 🕒 closed Wed) Attached to the beachfront Hotel Estancia San Carlos, this restaurant has a lunch and dinner menu with barbecue ribs, interesting beef dishes and imaginative meals such as shrimp in mango and red-wine sauce.

## Getting There & Away

Rincón de Guayabitos doesn't have a bus terminal. Second-class buses coming from Puerto Vallarta (US\$5.50, 1½ hours, 72km)

or Tepic (US\$6, two hours, 83km) may drop you on the highway at Rincón de Guayabitos, but sometimes they don't stop here. A couple of kilometers toward Tepic, La Peñita is a sure stop. *Colectivo* vans operate frequently between La Peñita and Guayabitos (US\$0.50, 10 minutes) during daylight hours, or you can take a taxi (US\$3).

## AROUND RINCÓN DE GUAYABITOS

There are many pleasant little beach towns south of Rincón de Guayabitos that make good day trips from either Guayabitos or Puerto Vallarta; they all have places to stay and eat. The sleepy **Playa Los Ayala** (Km 96) beckons, about 2km south of Guayabitos, while the two pleasant beach towns of **Lo de Marcos** (Km 108) and **San Francisco** (Km 118), 13km and 9km south, respectively, make good day trips from either Rincón de Guayabitos or Puerto Vallarta. Be careful about swimming at these beaches: waves and currents are changeable, so ask locals if it's safe to enter the water during your time there.

First- and 2nd-class buses traveling along Hwy 200 will drop you at the *crucero* for Lo de Marcos or San Francisco, about 1km from the edge of each town.

### Playa Los Ayala

Considerably earthier and more sedate than its neighbor Guayabitos, Playa Los Ayala is shared by sun worshipers and fishermen who spend much of the day sitting in a kind of manly sewing circle, mending their nets. Boats are for hire on the beach for snorkeling trips to Isla Islote and Boca del Naranjo. A 15-minute jungle hike over the headlands at the southern end of the beach will drop you down into a secluded cove and beach called **Playa del Beso** (Beach of the Kiss). You'll likely have it all to yourself.

**Villas Minerva** (☎ 274-11-10; Coral 42; r US\$50-80, ste US\$110; 📞 📺 📶) Overlooking the beach, this well-run, recently completed hotel offers homey rooms sleeping up to six, and suites with kitchens and balconies. It has an appealing beachside pool and patio.

### Playa Lo de Marcos

Playa Lo de Marcos, 13km south of Guayabitos and 49km north of the Puerto Vallarta airport, is a small village with a beautiful beach beloved by Mexican travelers and snowbirds from *el norte*. There are a couple of decent

**DETOURS: PLAYA PUNTA RAZA**

If you're lucky enough to be traveling in a high-clearance vehicle, or stalwart enough to consider making an arduous 5km hike from Hwy 200, the wild sands of Punta Raza offer glorious solitude, superlative bird- and wildlife-watching, and an exceptional place to set up a tent for a few relaxing days. The long, sloping beach is pummeled by crashing waves – making things dicey for swimmers – and ringed by near-virgin jungle. An elusive, edge-of-the-world charm means you'll want to stay at least as long as your sunscreen holds out.

If you prefer walls and a ceiling, you can spend the night at the seasonal **Hotel Rincón del Cielo** (☎ 274-70-70 in Monteón; d US\$50), with six simple, personable rooms, including two at water's edge. You're well off the grid here and thus rooms are lit by lanterns or candles. A small restaurant with a short menu serves delicious fresh juices and seafood; from your table you can watch blue-footed boobies and magnificent frigate birds perform their singular acrobatics and crash headfirst into the sea.

To get there, look for El Monteón sign on Hwy 200, 5km south of Guayabitos. Turn to the west, pass through the village, then turn right at Calle Punta Raza. The rutted dirt road passes over a scenic ridge and through lush old-growth forest.

restaurants, and simple bungalows are available if you decide to spend the night. One simple choice is **Padre Nuestro** (☎ 275-00-24; bungalows US\$20-30; 🚽). A more upscale option is **Villas and Bungalows Tlaquepaque** (☎ 3-659-14-36 in Guadalajara; 44 Av Echeverría; d/q/bungalow \$70/75/80; RV hookup US\$20; 📶 🚽), with pleasant, spacious rooms decorated with religious iconography and an RV park well located by the beach.

Just 2km to 3km south from Lo de Marcos are two more beaches (**Playa Los Venados** and **Playa Miñitas**) with some restaurants. You'll also find a few trailer parks along the side road there.

**Playa San Francisco**

☎ 311 / pop 1800

You just might leave your heart in San Francisco (known locally as San Pancho). The big appeal here is the beach, of course – a wide, long expanse covered in thick sand and edged with crashing waves that attract surfers from miles around. Plenty of restaurants tend the more sedate tourists who'd rather lounge while sipping a margarita.

From September 26 to October 4 the town dresses up and takes part in the nine-day festival called San Pancho Days. There's a **casa de cambio** (exchange bureau; cnr Av Tercero Mundo & Av America Latino) with no set hours, and, at last count, two Internet cafés.

**SLEEPING & EATING**

**Calandria Realty** (☎ 258-42-85; [www.calandriarealty.com](http://www.calandriarealty.com); Av Tercero Mundo 50) manages several bungalow and villa rentals in San Pancho.

**Hotel Cielo Rojo** (☎ 258-41-55; [hotelcielorojo@yahoo.com](mailto:hotelcielorojo@yahoo.com); Asia 6; r US\$58, ste US\$68-73) Providing an exceptional value, this modern hotel offers substance and style with four colorful rooms and two well-appointed suites. The rooms are artfully furnished with hand-made furniture and vibrant native touches. There's a small sitting pool, a hot tub, and a communal kitchen for steaming up that shrimp you bought on the beach.

**Costa Azul Adventure Resort** (☎ 258-41-20; [www.costaazul.com](http://www.costaazul.com); ste/villa US\$140/160, all-inclusive d US\$220-271; 📶 🚽 🚿) Perfect for a splurge, this eco-chic resort with a private beach is well suited to travelers too antsy to spend their vacations on the beach (although beach bums are also well taken care of). Surfing lessons and excursions take full advantage of the multiple point, reef and beach breaks nearby; there's also kayaking, mountain biking, horseback riding and snorkeling trips. Phew! Retire to your big, bright room or to Wahoo's Bar and Grill, the *palapa* restaurant. Activities are included in the all-inclusive rate. To get there, from the main village road, Av Tercero Mundo, take the signed right turn two blocks shy of the beach. From here it's a bumpy 2km ride.

**Lydia Bungalows** (☎ 258-43-37; [bungalowslydia@hotmail.com](mailto:bungalowslydia@hotmail.com); apt/bungalow US\$80/110) For delicious privacy, head 2km south of Costa Azul to this idyllic, exceedingly private retreat set on a secluded sandy beach and nestled beneath a grove of towering coconut palms. On offer are four small apartments with kitchenettes and a spacious one-bedroom



bungalow. The suite sleeps up to six people. Discounts are available for longer stays.

**Palapas Las Iguanas** (☎ 258-40-15; [genolamphear@hotmail.com](mailto:genolamphear@hotmail.com); Tercero Mundo s/n; palapa/apt US\$60/90) With two flavors of accommodation, here you can choose between perpetually breezy, romantic open-air *palapa* units with kitchenettes and mosquito nets over the bed, and more traditional, fan-cooled kitchenette units. You'll find it on the main street, half a block from the beach and adjacent to Los Arcos Restaurant.

**Casa Obelisco Bed & Breakfast** (☎ 258-43-16; [www.casaobelisco.com](http://www.casaobelisco.com); d US\$180-200; ♿ ♻️) Located 1km south of Costa Azul, this romantic, Mediterranean-style B&B offers four luxurious, richly decorated suites with ocean-view balconies overlooking a manicured jungle garden and pool. A generous breakfast, prepared by your American hosts, is included in the price. Children under six years are not allowed, and reservations are essential.

**Restaurant Celia** (☎ 258-40-16; Av Tercero Mundo; r US\$26) On the interestingly named Av Tercero

Mundo, San Pancho's main street, this simple place offers a measure of decency and the cheapest accommodations in town in the form of fan-cooled rooms you probably won't write home about.

**Gallo's Pizza** (☎ 258-41-35; Av Tercero Mundo; mains US\$5-14; ☎ 5-10pm Thu-Sun) An expat-favored hangout on the edge of town, Gallo's serves up good pizza and buckets of beer, with frequent live music.

**Restaurante Las Palmas** (☎ 258-40-35; mains US\$6-12; ☎ 8am-9pm) A pleasant spot at sunset, this classic beachfront eatery celebrates shrimp in a big way. If you never care to eat another shrimp, try the spicy octopus (US\$12).

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

San Francisco is off Hwy 200, 22km south of Guayabitos and 8km north of Sayulita, at Km 118. Any 2nd-class bus heading north or south on Hwy 200 will drop you at the crossroads, 2km from the beach. From there, take a *combi* (US\$2) or private taxi (US\$4).

### TURTLE AID

Driven by primeval impulse and in the dark of night, thousands of olive ridley sea turtles arrive on the pristine beaches of Pacific Mexico for a few months each year to lay their leathery, ping-pong-ball-sized eggs in the sand. Six to 10 weeks later, turtle hatchlings emerge from the shell to scamper into the water, dodging numerous predators. Despite their numbers, the survival rate is less than one in 1000.

Playa San Francisco, which remained undeveloped well into the 1970s, once provided prime nesting grounds for marine turtles. The town's oldest inhabitants can still recall the nights when hundreds of the hulking turtles arrived en masse to lay their eggs. By 1992, however, their numbers suddenly started to plummet on a global scale. The pressures of coastal development, shrimp fishing and poaching had reduced the once thriving local population of nesting turtles from thousands to a scant 72. This was also the year that the **Grupo Ecológico de la Costa Verde** (☎ 258-41-35; [www.project-tortuga.org](http://www.project-tortuga.org); America Latina 102, Playa San Francisco) built their first marine nursery to provide large-scale protection of sea turtles and contribute to a worldwide effort to stave off the threat of their extinction. Today the group incubates and releases more than 25,000 hatchlings each year to the sea, and conducts outreach education in local schools in hopes of hatching young environmentalists.

During the summer and fall months, visitors are invited to tour the nursery, and in October and November they are invited to attend release events as turtle hatchlings scurry into the Pacific Ocean for the first time. On Wednesday nights at 7pm (in winter) or 8pm (in summer), Grupo Eco puts on a multimedia presentation about local efforts to protect marine turtles at the Costa Azul Adventure Resort (opposite), or sometimes at Gallo's Pizza (above) in the village.

The group depends on volunteers to, among other things, collect nests from six different beaches in the dark of night and relocate them to the nursery. The effort starts gathering momentum in June at the onset of the nesting season and ends in mid-November. To be accepted, volunteers must stay with the program for at least two months and pay their own expenses (about US\$300 per month). No special skills or education are necessary – only the willingness to work in adverse weather at 3am! For more information, visit the website.

## SAYULITA

☎ 329 / pop 1600

Sayulita is still low-key, but it has definitely been discovered and can feel crowded at times. The beautiful sandy beach, lined by homes and places to stay, is popular with surfers, especially novices. There are two surf shops, two campgrounds and many tasteful B&Bs. Meal options range from cheap fish tacos on the street to full gourmet Mediterranean dinners on white linen. In addition to playing in the waves, boat trips, horseback riding, trekking and kayaking are all possible. See the operators on the main street.

Sayulita (Nayarit) is one hour behind Puerto Vallarta (Jalisco). Sayulita has no banks or ATMs. Many businesses are closed from May through November.

### Information

Sayulita has no tourist office, but the good folks at Sayulita Properties (right) can point you in the right direction – provided they're not too busy. The nearest full-service bank and ATM is in Bucerías.

**Librería Sayulita** (☎ 291-33-82; Navarrete 9; 🕒 9am-8pm Sun-Fri) A bookstore and de facto community center; pick up a tourist map (US\$1.50) of the town.

**Sayulita Caja de Cambio** (☎ 291-30-05; Delfín 44; 🕒 8am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2pm Sun) Near the *zócalo*; offers so-so rates.

**Bre@kfast.net** (per hr US\$4; 🕒 7am to 8pm) Stop by here to get online; it's at the end of Delfín, on the beach. Customers ordering food get 15 minutes of free Internet time.

**SayulitaNet Lounge** (☎ 291-34-44; Marlin 12; per hr US\$4; 🕒 noon-midnight) Try this place to log on over a tipple. They have a wireless network, but it's also a chic bar serving well-made concoctions and imported beers.

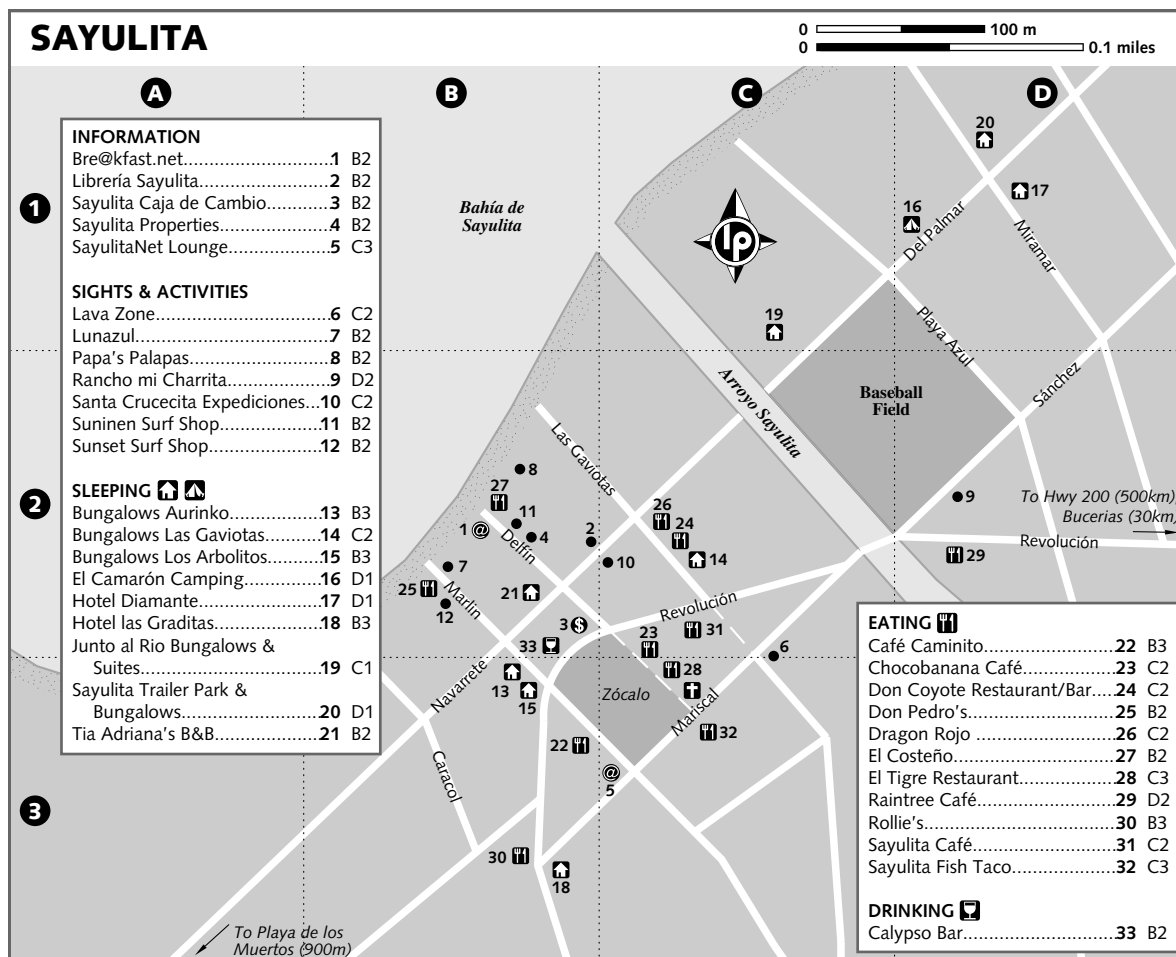
**Lava Zone** (José Mariscal; wash/dry 6kg US\$6; 🕒 8am-6pm Mon-Sat) The place to spin and tumble your washables.

**Sayulita Properties** (☎ 291-30-76; Delfín 9; www.sayulitaproperties.com; 🕒 8am-8pm) Has tourist and rental information as well as Internet service (per hour US\$3.25).

### Sights & Activities

Swimming in Sayulita is fairly calm in general, but if you have any doubts ask for local advice. You can arrange bicycle rental, boat trips, horseback riding, trekking or kayaking from operators on Delfín, the main street, including **Santa Cruzecita Expediciones**

NAYARIT



(☎ 291-01-91; Navarrete 14; bike rental per day US\$17, snorkeling gear rental US\$3; ☎ 9am-sunset), which also rents and repairs surfboards.

A popular nearby destination is **Playa de los Muertos**, where picnics and boogie-boarding top the action. It's a 15-minute walk south along the coast road, past the Villa Amor terraces. The road goes through a small cemetery; the first beach you come to is Los Muertos. Follow this dirt road to other, more isolated beaches.

You can also hire a boat to take your group out to the uninhabited **Islas Marietas** for picnicking, snorkeling and swimming.

**Rancho mi Charrita** (☎ 291-31-12; 14 Sánchez; ☎ 11am-sunset) offers horseback rides to Los Muertos and Carrisitos beaches (1½ hours; US\$20), a zip-line canopy tour through the treetops (US\$40), and boat trips to the Islas Marietas (three to four hours; US\$150 for up to six people).

## SURFING

Surfing is a way of life in Sayulita. With decent waves pouring into Bahía de Sayulita from both the left and the right, you can practice your well-honed moves with an audience, or even take up the sport for the first time. Try these full-service surf shops – all open from 8am until sundown:

**Sunset Surf Shop** (☎ 291-32-96; Marlin 10; sunset55@hotmail.com; surfboard rental per day US\$20-25, lessons per hr US\$30) Also offers fishing and surfing trips to the Islas Marietas (four hours, up to six persons US\$150).

**Lunazul** (☎ 291-20-09; Marlin 4; surfboard/body board rental per day US\$20/12, lessons per 1½hr US\$40)

**Suninen Surf Shop** (☎ 291-31-86; Delfin 4A; rentals per day/week US\$20/150, lessons per 1½hr US\$40)

**Papa's Palapas** (☎ 229-32-78; rentals per hr/day US\$5/22, lessons per 2hr US\$30; ☎ 8am-sundown) Next to El Costeño restaurant on the beach.

## Sleeping

If you arrive during holiday periods, when everything's booked up, try the realtor **Sayulita Properties** (☎ 291-30-76; Delfin 9; [www.sayulita-properties.com](http://www.sayulita-properties.com); ☎ 8am-8pm), which can attempt to find you something. The following prices reflect the winter high season.

**Bungalows Aurinko** (☎ 291-31-50; [www.sayulita-vacations.com](http://www.sayulita-vacations.com); cnr Marlin & Revolución; 1-2-bedroom bungalows US\$68/106, ste US\$88) Smooth river-stone floors, open-air kitchens, exposed raw beams and well-appointed decor make this a memorable place to stay. Huichol art

adorns the walls while Oaxacan linen covers the beds. Free bike use and discounts on surfboard rentals are part of the deal.

**Bungalows Los Arbolitos** (☎ 291-31-46; sayulita bungalows@earthlink.net; Marlin 20; ste US\$99) Harbors nine intimate and luxurious suites, two with kitchens. Craftsman touches, creative design and lush gardens add up to paradise. Add tax to prices.

**El Camarón Camping** (Del Palmar s/n; sites per person/huts US\$4/25) This grassy, kick-back spot, on the beach north of town, is the heart of the scene for young surfers and hippies, and its beach is the only place in town to enjoy both a left and a right break. Basic structures with *palapa* roofs and damp mattresses are available for those without a tent; the beachfront one is about as bodacious a party nook as one could ask for. Beware: many come for a day and end up staying for months.

**Tia Adriana's B&B** (☎ 291-30-29, 888-221-9247 in the US; [www.tiaadrianas.com](http://www.tiaadrianas.com); cnr Delfin & Navarrete; ste US\$65-120, incl breakfast) This B&B offers some vibrant suites with kitchenettes; top ones are open to breezes (no walls!) and have views. Other suites also have special touches. The large, hearty breakfasts are camaraderie-inducing.

**Sayulita Trailer Park & Bungalows** (☎ 390-27-50; sayupark@prodigy.net.mx; Miramar s/n; tent/trailer sites with hookup US\$12/16, r/bungalow US\$30/70, ste US\$50-70) This place maintains an attractive, palm-shaded property beside the beach, with a restaurant and snack bar. Discounts are offered to those who choose to stick around for a while.

**Bungalows Las Gaviotas** (☎ 291-32-18; Las Gaviotas 12; r/bungalow for 6 US\$25/50; (P)) Friendly, basic and family-run, Las Gaviotas shows its years, but it's only a few steps from the beach. At dusk you can expect a thunderous gaggle of boys to use the courtyard as a soccer field.

**Hotel Diamante** (☎ 291-31-91; Miramar 40; s/d/q US\$35/50/70; (P)) Diamante has downright small, basic and blah rooms – but there's a pool and outdoor covered kitchen area, which attracts thrifty backpackers.

**Junto al Rio Bungalows & Suites** (☎ 291-35-54; bungalow/suite US\$40/60) By the edge of the arroyo on the beach, this place has hammocks, three simple bungalows and two suites with a kitchen. The owner can be hard to locate.

**Hotel las Graditas** (☎ 291-35-19; lasgraditas@hotmail.com; Mariscal 12; s US\$30-40, d US\$60-70, house for 6-8 US\$120; (P) (P)) With dark and musty rooms, this place is good only as a last resort. The small pool affords good views over the town.

The large house perched at the top of the epic flight of stairs is also for rent (but don't expect a porter to haul up your luggage).

## Eating

The cheapest eats in town are Sayulita's wonderful taco stands: look for them in the *zócalo*. The most pleasant places, however, are the *palapas* on the beach, where a seafood dish, a cold beer and the salty sea breeze will cost you about US\$8.

**Sayulita Café** (☎ 291-35-11; 37 Revolución; mains US\$8-12; ☎ 5-11pm) With an atmospheric dining room and candle-lit sidewalk tables, this place serves hearty Mexican fare and splendid fresh seafood dishes. For a treat, try the *molcajete azteca* (US\$12), a pre-Hispanic dish combining beef, chicken, chorizo, onions, *panela* (a mild fresh white cheese), grilled nopales (cactus) and... well, that's enough.

**Sayulita Fish Taco** (José Mariscal s/n; tacos from \$0.50; ☎ 11am-9pm Mon-Sat) This place has perhaps the tastiest fish tacos in Mexico; American owner Albert spent years perfecting his recipe. There are only four outdoor tables and some stools.

**Raintree Café** (☎ 291-35-23; Revolución 21; mains US\$6-20; ☎ 8am-11pm Mon-Sat) This brand-new bar and restaurant aims for swanky and hits the mark. The dinner menu proclaims itself to be '*fusión mexicana*,' with selections like Roquefort fettuccine with shrimp (US\$7) and tequila shrimp fajitas (US\$20). They also stage changing exhibitions of local art and employ a very talented bartender.

**Café Caminito** (☎ 291-3564; Marlin 12; mains US\$4-7; ☎ 4:30-10pm Thu-Tue) Caminito has tables on the street facing the *zócalo*. Enjoy the flaky Argentine empanadas stuffed with fish (US\$2), pizzas, pasta and big crunchy salads. For dessert, try the pear cooked in burgundy with English cream (US\$4).

**El Tigre Restaurant** (mains US\$6-18; ☎ 5-10pm Mon-Sat) On a small terrace upstairs overlooking the *zócalo*. Some locals think the town's best seafood is grilled here. Surf videos play while you wrestle with your lobster (US\$18).

**Chocobanana Café** (☎ 291-30-51; cnr Revolución & Delfin; breakfast US\$4-5; ☎ 6am-3pm) This small shack on the *zócalo* is a very popular patio for breakfast or the town's best burger. Vegetarians will find options here, and milkshake fanatics just might find heaven.

**Rollie's** (Revolución 58; breakfast US\$4-6; ☎ 8am-noon) This is *the* place for breakfast. Rollie

and friends lovingly serve Western breakfasts with an occasional Mexican twist. Choose music from Rollie's collection, or sing along with him.

**Don Pedro's** (☎ 291-30-90; Marlin 2; meals US\$11-22; ☎ restaurant 6-11pm, bar & grill noon-11pm) Overlooking the beach, this is two eateries in one: a fine restaurant upstairs offering elegant dining choices, and a bar and grill downstairs serving upscale pizza and salads. There's a generous veggie stir-fry on offer for US\$8.

Other recommendations:

**Dragon Rojo** (☎ 291-32-01; cnr Las Gaviotas & Navarrete; mains US\$5-8; ☎ 11am-10pm) Reasonably good Chinese fare under a shady *palapa*.

**El Costeño** (☎ 291-00-39; Delfin; mains US\$8-12; ☎ 8am-8pm) Right on the beach; the tables on the sand get packed with gringos enjoying seafood.

**Don Coyote Restaurant/Bar** (cnr Las Gaviotas & Navarrete; mains US\$8-12; ☎ 11am-10pm Tue-Sat) Serves good old Western favorites, including spaghetti, veggie dishes and grilled chicken on a *palapa* patio.

## Drinking & Entertainment

Sayulita's not a place to paint the town red, but there are a few places where you can kick out the jams...or play chess. The local **chess club** (☎ Tue 6-8pm) meets at Librería Sayulita (p144); visitors are welcome (particularly those who bring their own chess set).

**Calypso Bar** (☎ 291-30-05; Revolución; mains US\$8-20) Across from the *zócalo* and popular for its 5pm to 7pm happy hour. Surf videos liven up the TVs, and on Friday nights there's a DJ.

**Don Pedro's** (Marlin 2; ☎ restaurant 6-11pm, bar & grill noon-11pm) Don Pedro's has reggae and rock on Friday nights, DJs on Saturday nights and Cuban on Monday nights.

**Don Coyote Restaurant/Bar** (cnr Las Gaviotas & Navarrete; ☎ 11am-10pm Tue-Sat) This place offers music and dancing on its open patio several nights per week, and sports on satellite TV on weekends.

## Getting There & Away

Sayulita is about 35km northwest of Puerto Vallarta, just west of Hwy 200. First-class buses leave daily from the long-distance terminal in Puerto Vallarta (US\$4, one hour, 10 1st-class; US\$2, 20 2nd-class). The bus stop is on Revolución by the bridge crossing the arroyo.

Buses headed for Puerto Vallarta leave every 30 minutes between 5:30am and 6:45pm (US\$2 to US\$4, one hour).

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