

# MEXICO



THE WEATHER IS PERFECT FOR LAZING ON THE PLETHORA OF AMAZING BEACHES.



## ACAPULCO

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It's at night that you can see the true extent of Acapulco's sprawl. The hills that gently curve around the C-shaped bay shine brighter than the Milky Way itself.

Perhaps it's the beautiful vistas that made Acapulco so favored by John Wayne, Rita Hayworth and the rest of the jetset. Or, maybe, it's just that the weather is so perfect for lazing on the plethora of amazing beaches.

The long golden stretch of Hornos, framed by towering resort buildings and beach stalls where you can sip ice-cold juice from a fresh coconut. Playa Condesa for watersports and beach musicians. Playa Puerto Marqués, where hawkers peddle silver and sombreros.

Palm-fringed Playa Caletilla is another favorite. The palapa-shaded café on Pie de la Cuesta is a great place to watch the sun turn the water into a burnished sheet. And quiet, rustic Barra Vieja is the place to go for a horseride and turtle viewing.

If the kids ever get bored with the beach, head for CiCi water park where you can ride the rapids or swim with dolphins. The spectacularly dangerous La Quebrada cliff divers are a must-see. If you head to the bottom tier, you'll see them hitting the water as well.



Brave the traffic to go to the Mercado Municipal markets for stalls crammed to the rooftops with an amazing selection of goods. Fresh flowers, fake flowers, chillies and spices, blue ceramic swans, sides of beef, silver jewelry. You'll find it all!

Spend an afternoon exploring Old Acapulco – the sidewalk cafes that edge the shaded zócalo are very inviting. Make sure you take a look at the lovely mural along Diego Riviera. The nautical museum at the star-shaped Fuerte de San Diego and the ceremonial masks at the Casa de Máscaras are must-sees.

Escape from the crowds in the lovely botanical gardens; go birdwatching in the lily-covered Laguna de Tres Palos; or catch a marlin in the deep waters outside the bay. Palao with its palms and traditional fishing boats is lovely. So are the views from the Chapel of Peace. And there aren't many places where you can snap a shot of pelicans waddling on the beach with a huge cruise ship as their backdrop.

Play golf to the accompaniment of pounding waves; hike Isla La Roqueta; take a moonlight stroll in Pie de la Cuesta; and marvel over ancient rock carvings at Palma Sola. Though it's a bit off the beaten track, the views are superb.

The cuisine is a delicious mixture of European meets Mexican. Enjoy a meal at one of the many lantern-filled restaurants on the beach itself. Or go more upmarket. Either way, you're bound to find some great food. And if you like to party, head for the Palladium after dinner.

It won't take long for you to understand why Acapulco was the first place to be dubbed 'the Mexican Riviera'. And, although the Hollywood stars have long gone, the glamor is still there to be found . . . and enjoyed.

## CABO SAN LUCAS

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The arid beauty of the Baja Peninsula is a photographer's dream. A marvellous fusion of striking desert landscapes, stunning sunrises and sunsets, mystical rock formations rising out of the azure Sea of Cortez and long, curving beaches that fringe the extensive coastline.



Chances are you'll spend a lot of time in the ocean, as even the cooler months hover around 73°F (23°C). In summer, you'll understand why the hawkers sell so many sombreros off the beach – a cloudless 95°F (35°C) is the norm.

Luckily there is no shortage of beaches from which you can swim and snorkel. The rocky outcrops that cup the white sands of Bahia Santa Maria; the palm-fringed Chileno Bay; lovely Solmar and beautifully remote Lover's Beach.

Medano offers great watersports; the broad expanse of Cerritos lends itself to surfing; Palmilla is where the celebrities hang out. And, while you're lying there sunning yourself, it's not unusual to see a Manta Ray leaping out the water – even just off the main resort beach.

Cabo is also a diver's paradise. Manta Ray Freeway in Cabo Bay is renowned. And the sea lions love to play ... when they're not sunning themselves on the rocks around Land's End, that is. Non-divers can simply go on a whale watching cruise.

Deep-sea fishermen will also invariably come back with grins on their faces. And, no surprise, seafood restaurants are everywhere. Try it

stacked into tacos, tortillas or pizzas at one of the little hole-in-the-wall stalls. The restaurants and bars at the Marina are good. Or go to the original Trailer Park restaurant for one of the best lobster meals you've ever had. Hmm-mmm.

Spend some happy hours browsing the flea market in town. Take a drive to the fishing village of Todos Santos for some local arts and crafts. All the exotic fruit orchards you pass should make you hungry, so stop off for lunch at the Hotel California.

Explore the deserted beaches of the East Cape. Sip a Corona at Tabasco's quaint beach shacks. Or play a round of golf on the course where cacti take the place of trees.

Go north to La Paz, where you can see the area's love of wildlife at the Community Whale Museum. While you're there, gaze up at the 39 foot (12m) high altar at the Santuario de la Virgen de Guadalupe. End the day off with a traditional Antojito meal while watching the sun set from the malecón.

A vacation at Cabo San Lucas has been described as 'Heaven on Earth'. Locals just call it paradise and invite you to come and join them. ►





ALMOST HALF THE VISITORS TO MEXICO FIND THEIR WAY TO THE DELIGHTS OF CANCÚN.



## CANCÚN

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**Palm trees, absolutely incredible clear aquamarine water in an ocean so warm and welcoming you'll still be swimming at sunset, and 14 miles (22.5km) of beautiful beach.**

A pulsating nightlife, more restaurants and bars than you can poke a stick at, and a city center that still retains a traditional Mexican feel. Ancient Mayan ruins, theme parks and a shopping mall so filled with things to do that some people come back several times to see everything!

That's Cancún. Perched on the point of the Yucatan Peninsula and one of the best spots you'll ever find to vacation.

If you're here for the beaches, go to Playa Delfines for boogie boarding and body surfing. The water sports at Tortugas make it excellent for families. And Playa Chacmool is a favorite of the young crowd recovering after and all-nighter at Coco Bongo or the like.

The calm, white sands of Playa Norte on the minute Isla Mujeres invite you to laze. You'll find plenty of parrot fish with the help of a mask and snorkel. And sailing is an absolute pleasure.

Explore the windward side of the island in a golf cart. Browse for Guatemalan textiles and Balinese sarongs in the town's tiny shops. Sample Ceviche at one of the beach bars. It's a great day out.

You could easily fill your day at the huge Plaza La Isla. No, not just shopping or eating at one of the restaurants, but with the many activities available there. Boat around the mall on water ... you'll even see a crocodile-filled lagoon. Go to the interactive aquarium and touch the sharks and sea cucumbers. You can even swim with the dolphins.

If you still haven't had your fill of shopping, go to the flea market, Flamingo Plaza, or Luxury Avenue; where you'll find duty free Montblanc, Cartier and Swarovski, as well as the latest designer fashions.



The best place for curio shopping is the little shop at the Casa Del Arte Popular Mexicano. Of course, first browse through the incredible collection of folk art – masks, toys, dolls, pottery and intricate tapestries from the country's best village artisans.

For those who prefer the great outdoors, dive the wreck of Punta Cancún, El Tunel, and the reef off Riviera Maya. Keep your eye out for the underwater cross in Cancún's bay ... there are always plenty of fish sheltering behind it.

You'll find flamingos and nesting sea turtles at the Celestún beaches, a fascinating half-mile cave system at the Grutas de Loltún and graceful egrets fishing for food in the mangroves on the other side of the Hotel Zone.

For a fresh water experience, trek or zip line through the jungle to one of the cenotes, unique natural underground sink wells. With almost no peaks or hills on the peninsula, the rainwaters collect in huge subterranean lakes or emerge as vast rivers. Great for swimming and snorkeling with a difference.

For archaeological boffins, the small El Rey ruins are right in town and are a peaceful haven for hundreds of friendly iguanas. The pyramids at Chicén Itzá, Uxmal and Tulum ruins are further away, but are a spectacular example of Mayan architecture.

Almost half the visitors to Mexico find their way to the delights of Cancún. And a huge percentage of them go back for more ... over and over again.

## COZUMEL

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**When Jacques Cousteau dived the waters around Cozumel, he raved about the experience. And he had every reason to do so. The water temperature is 80 degrees, the visibility is 80 foot and the sea life is prolific.**

In other words, this is a diver's paradise. Or, if you prefer to float around on the top of the water, a snorkeler's dream with a kaleidoscope of coral and fish only a couple of meters below the surface. And, once you've had a nibble of what's on offer, you won't be the first that decides to sign up for a course at one of the handy dive schools.

That way you may just get to see the huge groupers and bass at Arrecife Paraiso; the Hawksbill turtles, colorful toad fish and eagle rays at Yucab Reef and Santa Rosa Wall; or the incredible coral gardens populated by swarms of tropical fish at the shallow Yucab and Palancar reefs. You'll find barracuda, nurse sharks, dolphin, yellow snapper ... the list is endless ... at any of the 100 dive sites within 3 miles (5km). ▶



FOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL BOFFINS, THE SMALL EL REY RUINS ARE RIGHT IN TOWN AND ARE A PEACEFUL HAVEN FOR HUNDREDS OF FRIENDLY IGUANAS. THE PYRAMIDS AT CHICÉN ITZÁ, UXMAL AND TULUM RUINS ARE FURTHER AWAY, BUT ARE A SPECTACULAR EXAMPLE OF MAYAN ARCHITECTURE.



For adamant non-divers, take a wildlife-viewing tour aboard a catamaran through the Punta Sur Ecological Reserve's lagoon. You'll see graceful flamingos, egrets and, perhaps, even some crocs. Go swim with the dolphins, spot turtles in the lagoon or laze on a hammock on the beautiful beach at Chankanaab National Marine Park; or hop into a submarine and experience the deeper coral and sea life through the portholes.

When you come up for air, laze on the plentiful soft calcium white beaches. Just don't try to build a sand castle! Broad and beautiful Playa Palancar, Azul and Santa Pilar; bars and watersports at Paradise; the crashing waves of El Mirador; and azure waters of Chen Rio.

The great snorkeling at Playa San Francisco; and pristine Playa Bonita or Punta Morena on the wild west coast. Though it's not all wild – you often find lovely little coves in the sheltering arms of tumbled rocks. And there's nothing like a cold Cervezas and fried fish at beachside Coconuts or Mezcalito's.

Salsa in the plaza with the locals on Saturday nights; scoff Huevos Motuleños at the café above the museum; sip margaritas while watching the sun set over the ocean. It's sheer bliss.

Even though Cozumel is tiny – only 24 miles long and 7 across – less than half of the land mass is developed. The west coast is pristine enough for you to imagine you were alone on a deserted island. The lighthouse on the southern tip is picture perfect and Chichén Itzá, the best restored Yucatán Maya site, is impressive, especially the Pyramid of Kukulcán at the western entrance. Stay for the sound-and-light show.

San Gervasio is a treasure house for those who keep their eyes open. Apart from the numerous iguanas, the bushes hide underground waterways, iridescent butterflies, hidden wells, colorful flowers and small temples dedicated to the Mayan goddess Ixchel, who rules over fertility and the moon. Look out for the one marked with manitas – small handprints.

One other thing about Cozumel, the inhabitants never pressure you to buy trinkets. Once the cruise ships have left, go to Avenida Rafael Melgar

in San Miguel and have a gentle browse. You'll find some lovely exotic jewelry amongst the souvenirs.

You may or may not take some home with you. Even if you don't, this is the sort of vacation that will remind you why you have a job. And spur you on to work at coming back ... just once more.

## IXTAPA

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**This is the perfect vacation spot for those who like to be able to laze on the beach at any time of year. There's rarely a day that drops below 86°F (30°C) in Ixtapa. Good thing there are so many excellent beaches!**

The long, lovely stretch of white sand on Playa del Palmar in front of the big hotels is usually teeming with umbrellas, watersports, beach peddlers and people having the time of their life. Playa Escolleras, near the lagoon, is a surfer's favorite.

Isla Ixtapa, just offshore, has three great beaches. The swim beaches are calm enough for young children. Playa Coral has the best snorkeling, especially in the morning (before the water is too stirred up by swimmers) and you may even get to see starfish and seahorses.

There's also a lovely hike up to the summit where you find a great view of the island and mainland. The beachcombing is good around the point. Go for the day and have lunch at one of the beachside seafood restaurants.

Rent a moped and scoot over to palm-lined Playa Linda, with its stunning view of the mountains. Swim with the dolphins at Delphini. Take the kids to the waterslides at Magic World.

Play golf at Palma Real, while doing your best not to be distracted by the view and the alligators lazing off the greens. Catch the fish of your dreams out in the 'deeps'. And explore the history of the Guerrero coast at the small, but excellent, archaeology museum.

Catch a ferry to Playa Las Gatas, in picturesque Zihautenejo Bay, for a day of watersports and sand-soccer. Refresh at one of the thatched restaurants under the palms while listening to beach musicians. Or hike to the El Faro lighthouse for a view you'll always remember.

Back on the mainland, Playa la Ropa has what it takes for a full day of activity. Or, if you prefer, take a morning stroll by Zihautenejo's pier past pelicans and friendly local fishermen. Wander through the colorful marketplace during the hottest part of the day. The little church is charming and there are tons of other shops and cafes in this very Mexican town. Cap off the day by staying for dinner at the restaurant in the cliffs!

Like so many other places in Mexico, sunsets over the rock-strewn Ixtapa bay are superb. Especially when you have a margarita in your hand (or a bucket of ice-cold beers) and are lounging on a hammock beneath palm trees. Because that's just the kind of thing you'll find yourself doing here.



THE LONG, LOVELY STRETCH OF WHITE SAND ON PLAYA DEL PALMAR IN FRONT OF THE BIG HOTELS IS USUALLY TEEMING WITH UMBRELLAS, WATERSPORTS, BEACH PEDDLERS AND PEOPLE HAVING THE TIME OF THEIR LIFE.



## MANZANILLO

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This quiet and charming seaside town is packed with things to do. Of course, like any of the beachside towns in Mexico, you can spend your days lazing in the sun and surf. However, there are so many other temptations ... especially for those who like to explore off the beaten track.

So, hire a car and get going! There are heaps of tropical fruit plantations everywhere. Drive into the Sierra Madre mountains to learn about the coffee growers. You'll love the winding trails through jungle villages populated by as many donkeys, goats and pigs as people. There are some beautiful waterfalls along the way as well.

Cuyatlán is best known for its turtle sanctuary, where the Miguel Álvarez Center collects the eggs from local beaches, hatches them safely and releases the hatchlings into the ocean. If you're there in spring, stay to watch the sun set through towering green waves. An awesome sight.

Colima and Comala are excellent places to view the volcanoes – snow-capped Nevado de Colima, and very active and grumbling Volcan del Fuego. Have lunch in Colima's town square, after exploring the beautiful historic buildings that have survived the multiple earthquakes.

Go to Comala to get one of the clay griddles the town is named after. Or, if you prefer, the furniture, paintings and wrought iron work the town craftsmen specialize in. Stop at one of the restaurants on the central plaza to watch a mariachi band while dining on Botanas – an assortment of fried tacos, enchiladas, ceviche tostadas, cheeses and salads.

If you're feeling adventurous try one of the local punches made from pomegranate, tamarind, dried plum or some other exotic fruit; or tuba, made from palm sap. ►

Barra De Navidad brings you back to the beach again. A lovely little town with cobblestone streets and a long, curving beach, the buildings cluster on a small spit of land thrusting out into the ocean. There's a primo surfing wave at the tip of the spit as well.

If you're hungry, sample the spicy stew served in a steaming lava rock bowl while you're there. It deserves the name 'speciality'. If you're after something classy and romantic, have lobster at the clifftop L'Recif instead.

The two best beaches are said to be Playa La Audiencia, where the gorgeous sheltered cove makes the water tranquil enough for waterskiing, and Playa Miramar, which has the best surfing and bodysurfing waves in town.

There's another 150 miles (240km) of magnificent unspoilt coast stretching to the north, peppered with secluded bays, excellent bird-watching lagoons, rustic seaside villages and the kind of scenery made famous by Bo Derek in the movie Ten.

If you don't want to move too far from Manzanillo, the central market is a good place to experience the flavor of Mexico. By all accounts, the locals are delightful. There is some excellent diving, the deep-sea fishing is said to be a world beater and there is no shortage of other watersports.

The long boardwalk is most dramatic at dusk, when flocks of starlings almost blot out the sunset.

You'll know you're in an ancient volcanic region when you walk along Manzanillo's beaches. Soft and fine underfoot, the sand is darker than most ... an echo of long-ago eruptions. And a reminder of just how awesomely beautiful nature can actually be.

## MAZATLÁN

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**Almost on the Tropic of Cancer, Mazatlán is hot in summer and warm in winter, never really slipping below 66°F (19°C). Warm sunny days are followed by more lovely sunny days. No wonder this is one of Mexico's prime resort areas.**

Mazatlán's long ribbon of sandy beaches cover over 10 miles (16km). Those that aren't swimming and sunning are surfing off Punta Camarón or Playa Bruja. Or horseriding through the coconut plantations before cantering along an open stretch of sand next to the crashing waves.

Catch a water taxi past the pelicans on Cacos Island and sea lion-filled rocks to Isla de la Piedra. Bodysurf, walk through flower-filled fields and lush coconut plantations before dancing with the locals at one of the beachside restaurants.

Then there's the scuba diving and some of the best sports fishing you could ask for. Over ten thousand sailfish and marlin are hooked every year. Mind you, that kind of excitement is only to be expected considering this is Mexico's main fishing port as well.

Go to one of the atmospheric seafood restaurants in Old Mazatlán to sample incredibly fresh tuna ... or a delicious shrimp cocktail served in a green coconut ... or lobster ... or Pescado Zarandeado, the local speciality.

Walk off your dinner by strolling through the brightly lit and beautifully restored buildings in this historic part of town. Or, if you're strolling the tree-lined streets during the day, go to Centro Mercado for the full Mexican market experience of bargain-priced crafts, food stalls,



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bags of fresh spices and locally-grown fruit and vegetables. And finish with a look inside the large 19th century cathedral.

The Zona Dorada has plenty of touristy stores for jewelry and other craft, as well as fashion. One shop with the most incredible assortment of goods is Sea Shell City. Worth a look, even if you don't buy. And the mall at Hotel Playa Mazatlán has some more expensive, but excellent, craft shops with masks from Guerrero, tinware from Oaxaca and Talavera pottery.

Zona Dorada also has a number of pulsating discos, while old Mazatlán is the place for good bars. And, of course, there's Isla de la Piedra, especially on Sundays, which is said to be a time of 'live music, hard drinking and hot dancing'.

Some might like the thrill of the Clavadistas who dive from a platform high above the ocean or at the Plaze de Toros bullring. More sedate activities are the Mexican art at Museo de Arte, artifacts at Museo Arquelógico and antiques at the restored Machado Museo Casa.

Kids will really enjoy the shows at the aquarium. And the entire family will enjoy the sight of the second-highest lighthouse in the world, perched on a rocky outcrop at the southern end of the peninsula. The views of the city and coast are certainly superb.

Whether you're after miles and miles of beach all to yourself, sunning yourself on the edge of the Sea of Cortez or forays into the Sierra Madres, you'll find plenty to do in and around this exuberant city.

## PUERTO VALLARTA

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Like so much of Mexico's Central Pacific Coast, the fishing off Puerto Vallarta is world class. Many a happy fisherman has come back with tales of huge schools of 50 pound tuna, sailfish and mahimahi ... and the catches to prove it.

El Moro thrusts up out of the water a mere 25 miles (40km) away from Puerto Vallarta and it's at places like this where the teeming life tends to gather. You'll find giant manta rays, dolphins, wahoo, humpback whales and orca off Islas Marietas, a protected marine reserve. And the reefs, rock arches, caves and tunnels of Los Arcos National Marine Park are another excellent dive spot.

For those who like to see, rather than catch, there is an abundance of whales, rays, turtles, gigantic billfish and other inspiring sea life. Whether you choose to dive into the depths to experience the wonders, or bob on the surface, it's rare that someone goes home disappointed. ►





BUNGEE JUMP OFF A SEA CLIFF, WATCH FISHERMEN SELL THEIR DAILY CATCH ON PLAYA PRINCIPAL, OR SIMPLY SIT BACK WITH A COLD MECHELADA IN YOUR HAND AND A CONTENTED SMILE ON YOUR FACE.



Actually, many have fun simply snorkeling off the beaches in the calm and clear waters alongside rocky points, especially Playa las Gatas and Majahuita. If, on the other hand, you're just after fun in the sun, the best places are Playa los Muertos, with its seafront cafes and watersports; the lovely little coves of Playa Conchas Chinas; and Yelapa, which is a boat ride away and fringed by thatch-roofed bars and lush jungle.

Away from the beach, Puerto Vallarta is also outstandingly picturesque. Color-washed Mexican villas grace cobblestoned streets. Viejo Vallarta, the lively waterfront, is enhanced by artistic sculptures and lovely old palms. The beautiful filigreed crown atop La Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, rises calmly above it all.

Hunt for excellent and affordable treasures like Taxco silver, leather sandals and woollen wall hangings in Mercado de Artesanías; fashion in Calle Basilio Badillo and Calle Morelos; seashell trinkets, sarapes and painted plates from beachside vendors.

Delight in the amazing hand-blown merchandise at Mundo de Cristal. Get lovely little gifts from Artesanías Flores; choose your favorite gourd mask at the folk-art shops at Casa Marina; and make sure you don't leave without buying locally-grown coffee from the Mercado Municipal.

Many of the restaurants have top-notch international chefs. The malecón is lined by a multitude of bars, restaurants and nightspots. And even the lighthouse serves cocktails.

For the more sedate, meander up from Plaza Principal, past the outdoor amphitheater with the much-photographed arches and, up to the steeple of Templo de Guadalupe with its panoramic view. And the Mudeo del Cuale may be tiny, but has a collection of stunning potters, grinding stones, figurines and other objects from days gone by.

Those with kids will no doubt enjoy a day on the slides and the dolphin show at Splash Parque Acuático. There are excellent golf courses, including the acclaimed Four Seasons Punta Mita. Hikers and horseriders will love the jungle-covered hills and birdwatchers, the migrating birds in the coastal lagoons.

Bungee jump off a sea cliff, watch fishermen sell their daily catch on Playa Principal, or simply sit back with a cold mechelada in your hand and a contented smile on your face.

Whatever you choose to do, it will likely be memorable. And come back to mind to cheer you up some cold day in the future.



## ROSARITO BEACH

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The year-round sunshine of Rosarito Beach is just across the border from California. Cooling ocean breezes take the harshness out of the bright summer sunshine and the winters are lovely and mild.

Most people spend their time lazing on the wide golden beaches that mark the start of over 4000 miles (6437km) of magnificent coastline or exploring the secluded coves that line the coast. Others like to indulge in adrenaline pumping watersports, deep-sea fishing or surfing the big breaks at Baja Malibu, Calafia, K38½, Salsipuedes and San Miguel.

However, there is plenty else to do in this laid-back beachfront town. And one of the most popular is shopping for inexpensive artefacts. Look for Mercado, just up the street from Festival Plaza Hotel, for excellent traditional Mexican art pieces like wrought iron goods, blown glass and wooden carvings.

Tijuana has huge shopping malls where you can find European fashion, cosmetics and perfume at reasonable prices. And, remember, Mexicans love to bargain! There's also a worthwhile Cultural Center here and, for those who like to get the heart pumping, horse and dog racing, Jai Alai games and bullfights.

This is also wine country and there are some good tours on offer. Sample the ambrosia in the valleys of Calafia, Guadalupe and San Antonio de las Minas. Head north to the Valley of the Palmas; or south to the Valleys of St Tomas and San Vicente Ferre. With such a wide choice of cellars and cultivars you're bound to find a lot to like.



The more energetic will play golf; ride ATVs or horses along the wilder beaches; or cycle the award-winning 50 mile (80km) path that winds along the Pacific Coast from Rosarito Beach and inland through lovely rural scenes to Ensenada.

Whale watching is popular, especially the gray whale that comes to calve in the shallow Baja lagoons. And a visit isn't complete without fresh-caught lobster from the little fishing village of Puerto Nuevo.

There are good restaurants everywhere. Try Ceviche, oysters or fried fish and salad. And, of course a Corona or margarita while the sun is setting over the bay.

The nightlife pumps, with the two biggest drawcards being Club Maya and the huge – and hugely popular – Papas & Beer beach club. ■