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La Cruz de Huanacaxtle

Sun, sand, and culture in a Mexican fishing village

Baseball-capped fishermen spread out their sierra fishing nets on the college soccer pitch. In the hot siesta sun, they run their fingers along the lines checking for snags and breaks. The thin cords appear as a semi-translucent tangle over the dry grass.

With rich stocks of sardines, red snapper, shrimp, and sierra—a mackerel-like fish, the fishing industry has quietly fed the village of La Cruz de Huanacaxtle since the 1930s. Called simply “La Cruz” by locals and pronunciation-hesitant visitors (it’s roughly pronounced wha-nah-CAX-slee), the small Pacific town is tucked in a corner of Banderas Bay. The bay’s name—Bahía Banderas in Spanish—fully translates to Bay of Flags and it is the world’s second largest, trumped only by the Bay of Bengal.

“It is a favorite area with all Mexicans,” says Eric, a taxi driver. “People come here from all over.”

To the south, the castle-like resorts of Nuevo Vallarta and the dark Sierra Madre Occidental mountains emerge above the saltwater haze. La Cruz is only 20 minutes from Puerto Vallarta International Airport (PVR). At Bucerias, the closest town to La Cruz, the four-lane Mexico 200 meets the two-lane Punta de Mita Highway. Besides the 2 kilometres of paved road, the two communities are also connected by a stretch of soft-sand beaches.

Nayarit (its state border with Jalisco is just north of the airport) has re-branded itself in recent years as “Riviera Nayarit” to attract increasing numbers of tourists to the 309 kilometres of coast and beaches. “It is on the license plate,” says Eric, pointing out the state’s new moniker.

Over the Christmas holidays, families in beach gear arrive by the busload to enjoy a day of sun and sand. But at present, La Cruz remains fairly untouched by the wave of large vacation resorts that have swept along the bay, north from Puerto Vallarta and east from Punta de Mita.

AROUND LA CRUZ

BUCERIAS

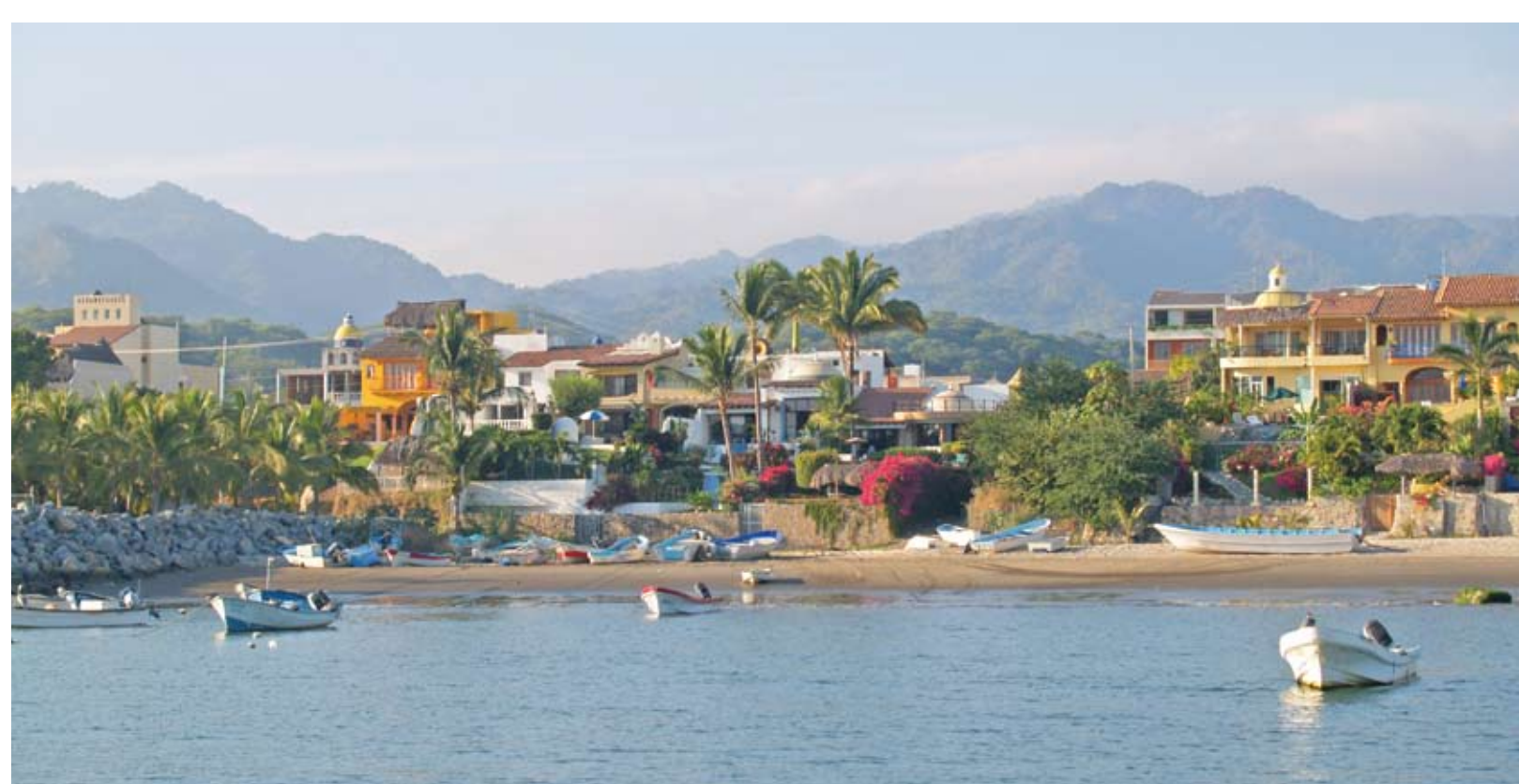
Sundays in Bucerias offer a traditional tianguis, an outdoor market for fresh vegetables. Watch the local fisherman in the late afternoons cast giant nets into the rolling surf while families both local and visiting play in the sand. With its true community feeling, Bucerias offers an authentic feeling of Mexican culture.

SAYULITA

Sayulita has a vibrant surfing culture, fantastic restaurants, nightly music, and calm ocean waters perfect for swimming with the family. The cobblestone streets are lined with boutique shops specializing in one-of-a-kind Mexican crafts, designer linen clothing and hip surf stores.

SAN BLAS

San Blas is a quintessential Pacific beach town that hasn’t yet succumbed to tourism. It is still a laid-back beach town of some 12,000 souls. There are no chain or five-star hotels. This is a great place for travelers who don’t mind trading major frills for some authentic Mexican hospitality.



The town's busiest district is the commercial strip along the Punta de Mita highway. Filled with gas-station conveniences like refrigerated clamato juice and tequila mixers, the by-pass keeps traffic away from the beaches and the town's shady streets.

Quiet Langosta Street leads from the highway down to a small waterfront plaza. A plain huanacastle-wood cross in the traffic circle is a literal representation of the fishing town's name. Huanacastle trees, also known as parota and guanacaste, can grow 40 metres high and 3.5 metres in diameter at the base. The huanacastle is so prized Costa Rica has made it their national tree.

More common in La Cruz, however, are the almond and fig trees that provide a soft shade over the cobbled streets. Local families sit in garden chairs, the women minding children while perhaps running a convenience store or a small two-table restaurant. Roosters roam an odd vacant lot and dogs sunbathe in streets named for the sea—Marlin, Tiburon, Sierra, and Coral. In this slow-speed town, the most delightful attraction—the La Cruz beachfront—is practically sanctioned off for families and quiet enjoyment.




LEFT PAGE L-R: La Manzanilla Beach plays host to Mexican families and tourists alike; the streets are named for the ocean bounty of the bay; THIS PAGE TOP RIGHT: La Cruz in a flux of new and old; The new Marina will bring big changes to the traditional town.

"We have the sun, and the sand, and the culture," says Michael Murphy, a realtor who splits his time between Vancouver Island and Bucerias. "You have to get below the Tropic of Cancer to get the weather."

The Tropic runs just north of Mazatlan, about 7 hours up the coast, and in Banderas Bay there is no shortage of tropical beaches.

La Cruz's finest stretch of sand is at La Manzanilla, a sheltered beach that caps the western edge of town. Clustered together in a snug block, a few palm-thatched palapa restaurants provide shade, as the waiters—often Spanish-English bilingual—serve whole pineapple and young coconut cocktails. The menus are limited almost exclusively to fresh local mariscos, be it skewers of grilled shrimp, smoked red snapper, or marlin tacos. The jukeboxes are plugged with various Latin rhythms: ranchera, norteño, vallenato, trova, bolero, banda, cumbia, and bachata.

On the beach, vendors walk the hot sand in flip-flops to sell cotton candy, blankets, jewelry, and fake tattoos. Commercial-fishing-turned-tour boats bob outside the swimming area, the decks stacked with



La Cruz enjoys clean and safe beaches with La Manzanillo the most popular with local families and tourists.

fluorescent orange life jackets and fishing poles.

The water temperature in Banderas Bay remains swim-able year-round (by Canadian standards), ranging from about 18°C to 30°C. Fishing, too, offers a catch in most months, while the stiff Pacific breezes please sailors and windsurfers.

Behind the beach the town's deluxe homes seemingly cling to the hillside overlooking the sands and marina. The hills around La Cruz allow for more residents to enjoy ocean views from the breakfast table and at nighttime, the lighted properties look like jungle tree houses.

From packed La Manzanilla in the west, a rockier stretch of beach divided with breakwaters serves as a pedestrian thoroughway to the marina near the town plaza. At the second breakwater, Canadian flags top the palapa parasols and beachside tables of Don Bidou Restaurant.

"The owners are from Quebec," the smartly dressed, white-collared waiter says, flashing a wide smile. But despite the Canadian influence the menu lists all

varieties of fresh La Cruz seafood, and it is served on thick clay pottery that originates from Guadalajara. The drinks are unsurprising and pleasing beach classics: cold cervezas and icy margaritas.

Within a 10-minute walk from La Manzanilla, a barcode of yacht masts breaks up the buildings and coconut

"These little towns, they are adapting and changing."

palms along the waterfront. Marina Riviera Nayarit, which opened in 2008, is the one of the largest and deepest on the Pacific coast. And with its own restaurant, bar, and concierge, the marina has become a comfortable gateway to Riviera Nayarit and Puerto Vallarta.

The influx of world-traveling sailors has also brought an international vibe to the town. Town restaurants range in fare from Italian to Asian fusion, often with local La Cruz seafood as the key ingredient.

"Before the marina was here, all the fishermen used to clean the fish on the

beach, and sell the fish on the beach," says Rafael Alcántara Luarte, the harbor master at Marina Riviera Nayarit.

Part of marina plans included building a fish market and dock. "We built some storage rooms with walk-in fridges and areas where they can clean the fish," he says.

Add in the weekly farmers' market and "you can cook an entire meal with products we sell here."

While the connection to the local fishing heritage is not lost with the influx of tourism, it also doesn't stay the same.

"The fishermen don't necessarily totally rely on going out and catching fish now, they take tours out to catch fish," says Murphy, noting the shift in the local economy. The fishermen's wharf and market mean the local launches dock near multi-million dollar yachts. It is a resounding contrast.