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# Great Escape

## Spontaneous trip to Mexico vanquishes winter doldrums

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Posted: 03/13/2010 4:13 PM | Comments: 0 (including replies)g



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*Miles of undeveloped beachfront runs along Oaxaca state's shoreline.*

I'VE heard despair is a positive emotion because it spurs one to action.

As winter clenched its icy grip, I despaired. No amount of friendship alleviated my malaise. I needed to escape. I daydreamed about hammocks, warm tropical evenings and meeting new friends. While surfing the web, I found a last-minute deal on a direct flight to Huatulco, Mexico.

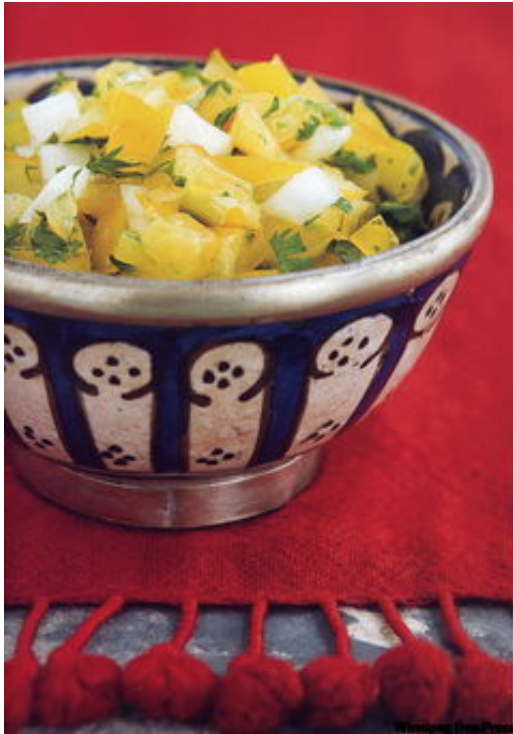
I acted. I booked the flight, packed my bags and drove to the airport on a cold, dark morning, listening to radio reports warning of an impending winter storm. I didn't have time to plan.

Within six hours, I disembarked into sunshine on a hot, sunny afternoon. I walked out of the airport and caught a public bus north to the newly minted city of Puerto Escondido.



[Enlarge Image](#)

*Life mimics a Corona beer commercial on Roca Blanca beach. (CANWEST NEWS SERVICE)*



[Enlarge Image](#)

(CNS)

When the 16th-century Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortez was asked to describe Mexico, he's said to have crumpled up a piece of paper and set it on the table. I was reminded of that on the serpentine Highway 200 to Puerto Escondido, which runs through the steep Oaxaca coastal hills.

I took the first reasonably priced hotel I found on a long stretch of beach called Zicatela and walked along the strip, enveloped in the sensuous tropical evening. Restaurants offering an array of cuisine line the beach, each with its own music. Salsa, reggae, hip-hop and jazz collided in the evening air, creating a cacophony of musical genres.

I chose a simple outdoor eatery, sat at a table on the beach, kicked off my flip-flops and enjoyed the sound of the surf crashing onto shore. I ordered a whole fried fish and a beer and made small talk with my friendly waiter.

My spirits began to lift. Puerto Escondido is known as Mexico's surfing capital and Zicatela is the reason. I don't surf, but I knew several small, protected coves ideal for swimming lie within a 20-minute walk of the town. My favourite beach was Carizillo, where I whiled away a couple of afternoons, hanging in a hammock in a palapa (a thatched-roof, open-sided structure), drinking coconut water, eating fresh shrimp cocktails and taking frequent dips in calm, turquoise water.

Another of my favourite beaches was Roca Blanca, a short bus trip north of Puerto Escondido. Miles and miles of undeveloped beach extends to the north and to the south. Once again, I found a hammock in a palapa, and bodysurfed in the moderate waves with a handful of Mexican tourists.

One morning, I forfeited a couple of hours of beach time and explored the market in the centre of Puerto Escondido, enjoying the sights and smells of the abundant produce that comes from the nearby hills. Evenings were never dull.

I stumbled across a friendly little bar on Zicatela called the Rockaway, where I mingled with the expats and other

travellers. Friday night we danced salsa around the swimming pool to a live band that regularly plays there.

Puerto Escondido is home to an emerging international music scene. Sunday night the promise of more live music took me downtown to the Adoquin, Puerto Escondido's main tourist strip.

A pedestrian-only zone in the evenings, it features shops selling Mexican crafts, and more pizza places than taco stands. Then I went across the street to the tiny, funky Congo bar where I met some of the Rockaway regulars and grooved to edgy roots music played by a young Argentine musician passing through town.

The next morning I travelled south about an hour by public bus to San Agustinillo, a village comprising a couple of streets running along the ocean sprinkled with numerous small hotels and restaurants. I discovered that most of the Oaxaca coastline is exposed, offering excellent surfing conditions; but it can be dangerous for swimming.

With only a couple of vacation days left, I set out by cab to go the short distance to Zipolite, Mexico's best-known nude beach and another surfer's paradise. A string of modest low-rise hotels catering mainly

to backpackers straggles along the beach.

I stayed at Lo Cosmico, a collection of rustic bamboo huts and simple, clean rooms built on a rocky hillside overlooking a small cove. I prefer a private bath and hot water, but I made an exception here because of the hotel's charm. Hammocks hang in every room and in the common area.

The morning of the seventh day, I took a public bus heading into Huatulco. The wide, manicured boulevards were eerily empty. Tourists stay in resort hotels in the several coves of Huatulco, which are separated by rocky hills.

I couldn't see all the beaches in the short time that remained, so I took a boat tour that cruised along the coastline, revealing numerous small beaches, mostly undeveloped. We stopped at two of them, swimming and snorkelling in the warm, clear water.

I arrived at the airport in the nick of time. Sand pebbled between my toes and sea salt stiffened my unruly hair.

My despair had covered and slunk away, tail between its legs, vanquished by the pleasure of my spontaneous escape.

— Canwest News Service

## **IF YOU GO**

Public transportation runs frequently and costs a fraction of cabs, also ubiquitous. Be prepared to barter with taxi drivers.

### **Where to stay**

Puerto Escondido: Mayflower Hotel and Hostel, between the Adoquin and the town's principal beach.

San Augustinillo: Hotel Punta Placer, on the beach.

Zipolite: Lo Cosmico, at the far northern corner of the beach.

### **Where to eat**

Puerto Escondido: El Cafecito, on Zicatela.

San Augustinillo: El Secreto, on the main street.

Zipolite: El Alchemista, on the beach, just below Lo Cosmico.

### **Where to have fun**

Puerto Escondido: Bar Rockaway, on the Zicatela beach strip; and Congo on the Adoquin.

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