

Editor's Choice From This Month's Issue

Table of Contents



*Although it's famous for big waves, Puerto Escondido has tranquil coves for swimming, too. ©Joel Carillet/iStock*

LIFESTYLE

By Bonnie W. Hayman [December 2021](#)

# Puerto Escondido—Mexico's Surf-Hippie Paradise

Let's face it, all Mexican beach cities are pretty darn beautiful. Puerto Escondido (PE), though, stands out. You may like it, you may hate it, but one

thing is certain: this freewheelin', hippiedippy, surfer town is markedly different from the other spots on the Pacific Ocean coast.

### **So, What's *Different* in PE?**

**No major resorts.** First and probably foremost, PE has no major resorts marring the views of the hills surrounding the bays. Sure, you'll find beautiful hotels, some that call themselves resorts because they have spas and onsite masseuses, and other lovely places to stay tucked behind the streets of Playa Zicatela. Most of these cost less than \$125 a night, some only \$50.

Without these resorts taking up the views, you feel like you've stepped back in time. In PE, it's more important to see and feel nature than wear a bracelet showing which resort you can afford.

**Tourists and residents of all ages.** When people travel or move abroad, they often look for people from their own country or age group to bond with. Many of the Mexican beach retirement cities have age-specific tourists, depending on how they have marketed their advantages. Some also have an abundance of U.S. citizens, like Los Cabos on the Baja California peninsula.

Zihuatenejo, a beautiful retirement city on Mexico's Pacific coast, hosts a majority of Canadian retirees with a smattering of retired U.S. citizens. They're mostly snowbirds, there from November until just before Easter.

This is where Puerto Escondido shows its diversity. With a year-round tourist trade (the waves are always good or great), PE is home to people from all over the world. I met people from France, Italy, Argentina, Uruguay, Germany...all varying ages. You will also meet people who live alternative lifestyles and have differing views of the world.

**Distinct areas.** PE has different locales within its boundaries that are distinct enough to appeal to specific groups. Like the various beaches with their range

of activities (surfing, snorkeling, fishing, people-watching, etc.), the city itself also packs in a wide range of zones with their own specific atmosphere.

**Zicatela.** Even if you are not an expert surfer searching for that one epic wave, Zicatela has plenty of appeal for those who like to shop, eat, and party. Upscale stores provide the latest in beachwear and shoes. Sign up for tours of baby turtle releases, bioluminescence, whale watching, deepsea fishing, horseback riding, and any number of other activities.

Nightclubs, especially on the Zicatela “strip”, will satisfy your craving to meet people, dance, sing, and get your party on. Doesn't matter if you like techno or salsa, you'll find it in Zicatela.

**La Punta.** La Punta, a community of surfers, backpackers, hippies, boho chic wannabes, hipsters, and alternative lifestyle gurus populate this extremely interesting neighborhood. Visitors from all over the world (mostly young, but not exclusively) patronize the international restaurants where you'll encounter many ways to drink mezcal. My favorite was a gin and tonic with a shot of mezcal, mango purée, and rosemary. Spectacular!

**El Adoquín.** As the first paved road in PE, the cobblestones (*adoquines*) give this colorful shopping area its name and a quirky Mexican touch. Check out this long stretch of street for souvenirs, ceramic shops, beachwear, international restaurants, and more.

It's best to go at night, as traffic is stopped then and it becomes a leisurely pedestrian walkway. Artists bring their works to display, often on tables outside on the street. Street musicians and live music venues entertain you while you eat or stroll around.

At the beginning of the Adoquín, look for a Tourism Kiosk and you may be lucky enough to find Gina, a genuine expert. She's a great person to seek out

for your off-the-beaten-path questions.

**City Center.** Away from the tourist areas, in the city center of PE, you should visit the Benito Juarez market. This workaday Mexican market houses hundreds of stalls selling almost anything you need, from fresh fish to kitchen and hardware items. Visiting a large Mexican market like this one is an adventure in itself. The colors, smells, sounds, products, and services can keep you entertained all day.

Visit this market on Wednesdays and Saturdays when people bring their fresh produce, meat, chicken, fish, and desserts. Whether you want a *licuado* (smoothie), fresh flowers, eggs from someone's backyard, seeds, nuts, herbs, medicinal plants, crafts, dresses, jewelry, sandals, hats, or horse supplies, you'll find it here.

At night, if you like listening to music and/or dancing, you can go to some clubs where the locals hang out and you'll be hard pressed to see a foreign tourist. Dubai, a big warehouse-type disco offers Latin music on the weekends.



## So, What's *Similar* in PE?

Well, the fabulous beaches and gorgeous sunsets are the obvious answer. Puerto Escondido is famous for its beaches. **Playa Zicatela** gives the city its legendary status as a surf destination, featuring “the Mexican Pipeline” for advanced surfers. There, the consistent waves can hit 20 feet and more in late spring and summer.

Despite its 167 steps down to the beach (which you have to climb to return), **Playa Carrizalillo** ticks all the boxes. It's physically gorgeous, with verdant greenery climbing to enclose the small bay. Turquoise water laps on golden sands, in waves small enough for everyone to swim, yet big enough to learn to surf.

Palapa restaurants dish out fabulous seafood and other treats. Just be aware of the steep rental fee of \$15 for two lounge chairs, a table in between, and an umbrella. As a single traveler I was not allowed to rent a single lounge chair because they were all paired up. (This was the one negative of the beach.)

By contrast, you can visit **Playa La Punta**, an intermediate surfing beach, and bring a blanket, food, and refreshments. Relax on the beach and enjoy the laidback life of La Punta's surfer/ bohemian community.

**Playa Manzanillo** and **Puerto Angelito** beaches lie side by side. Playa Manzanillo appeals to local families as the waters are calm for swimming; Puerto Angelito harbors the fishers' *panga* boats. Restaurants on both beaches serve delicious seafood platters.

**Playa Coral** offers a tiny, enclosed bay with a virgin beach. Good for swimming on one side and surfing on the other, this is a great place to take a picnic and go with a significant other.

**Playa Bacocho**, next to Playa Coral, a 15-mile stretch of undisturbed sands, offers two resort-type hotels right on the beach.

Due to its strong undertows, this beach is not recommended for swimming, but it is beautiful and a great place to run or walk in the hours of dawn or sunset. Beware of Club de Playa Cocos. They charge \$50 for a day pass (that's just the entry charge!). I passed by just to buy a bottle of water and they said I had to pay the \$50 to have the water.

It's a totally different vibe at **Resort Villa Sol**, a little bit farther down the beach. Not only did they give me a bottle of water, but also a free sample of their delicious shrimp purée soup. The day charge there was only \$15, which could be applied to my food bill; there was no specific entry charge like the other place.

### **Mexican and International Food**

Puerto Escondido has great food, pretty much like every other town in Mexico. Of course, because you are in the state of Oaxaca, you should try the famous *molé* sauce. Some expats don't like this chocolate/peanut/chili sauce right away, but try it in chicken enchiladas a few times and you'll come to love it.

“ *Puerto is cheaper than other Mexican beach cities.* ”

Seafood here is excellent, whether it is a whole fried fish or fish tacos, seafood soup, octopus in garlic, or shrimp. The brave ask for fried grasshoppers with a shot of mezcal, a popular snack here.

If that's a step too far, but you still want to try a local snack, *tlayudas* are a dish unique to Oaxaca, available all over Puerto Escondido.

While restaurants and street vendors have their own special touches for this tasty snack, it is basically a large tortilla, slathered in bean sauce, cabbage

salad, tomatoes, avocado, and delicious Oaxacan string cheese with a choice of meat on top.

Some places to eat around Puerto Escondido:

**Sunrise Restaurant/Bar.** Best octopus tacos I ever had. On the Zicatela beach right on the strip. Salsa classes and dancing on Thursday nights.

**El Coste Ceviche & Grill.** Zicatela. Go for their excellent grilled red snapper (*huachinango*).

**Lychee Thai Food. La Punta.** Nice ambience, good food. Says vegan/vegetarian, but uses fish sauce on just about everything.

**El Cafecito.** Zicatela. Best breakfast in Puerto Escondido. Their *tasajo con nopales* (steak with cactus) just might make you stay forever.

### **Living in Puerto Escondido**

As in most Mexican cities, you can live in Puerto Escondido for much less than you would in the U.S. or Canada. And if a beach location is what you are searching for, Puerto Escondido is still somewhat cheaper than other Mexican beach cities for a two-bedroom apartment near the shore.

Even though it's more affordable than other Mexican locations, expats who have lived here for 10 years or more lament rising prices, which they believe will increase prohibitively when the planned superhighway from Oaxaca city transforms the current six-hour treacherous drive into a two-and-a-half-hour breeze.

On the other hand, this development may also present a golden opportunity to purchase property here. House prices are sure to increase when the new road makes the journey a lot more convenient for weekenders.

As far as savings compared to the U.S. or Canada, you can live in this beautiful Pacific beach city for about one-fifth of what you would pay in California. And your lifestyle could be more lavish as you use that extra money to pay for cleaning help, a driver, a cook, etc.

Puerto Escondido is not for everyone. The surf/hippie vibe isn't everyone's dream ambience. However, if you want to live in a Mexican paradise with tolerant attitudes, lots of live music, people of all ages from all over the world, and spend less money than you would in a more traditionally upscale location, then it could be for you.

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