



The beachfront at the gated resort community of Punta Mita near Puerto Vallarta.

# Awash in luxury

## Mexico's beautiful Punta Mita is surprisingly affordable

If you're keen to avoid the kind of giant resorts, vendor-ridden beaches and noisy bars favored by the "spring break" crowd, you can still find upscale tranquility in Mexico without having to break the bank.

Situated 27 miles north of Puerto Vallarta's Gustavo Diaz Ordaz International Airport, the Punta Mita peninsula has become a favorite hideaway for celebrities and tycoons looking for peace and privacy.

On the same latitude as Hawaii — but only half the flight time from New York (about five hours direct) — the area offers the same near-perfect climate. There are 340 days of sunshine per year and average temperatures of 80 degrees, plus crystal blue waters, lush flora and fauna and outstanding amenities.

But if owning one of the area's multimillion-dollar haciendas or staying at the superluxurious Four Seasons Resort, where rooms average \$1,500 per night, is out of your budget, try renting one of the surprisingly affordable villas or condos in this peaceful gated community.

If you're looking for plenty of space, you'll find it here. A standard floor plan for both condos and villas consists of three en-suite double bedrooms with separate kitchen, dining, living and outdoor areas covering at least 3,500 square feet — perfect for low-key families

or groups of friends looking for a stylish hideaway.

The exquisite "Mexi-terranean" interiors, elegant hybrids of traditional Mexican and chic southern European, leave no detail overlooked. Choose a villa and enjoy a private plunge pool and whirlpool; the en-suite bathrooms have outdoor showers.

You'll likely find yourself taking as many photos of your impressive accommodations as of the fabulous surrounding landscape.

In fact, dragging yourself away from your vacation home is likely to be the biggest hurdle you'll face.

In-villa spa treatments, such as the signature Mita Relaxing Massage (\$118), can be arranged through the concierge. You can even submit a grocery list before you arrive to ensure your well-appointed kitchen is stocked for leisurely meals overlooking the ocean.

But getting off your lounge is worth it. Just steps away is 9½ miles of white-sand beaches; a residents' beach club, offering a pool, food and spa services, provides a focal point for each villa or condo community.

Don't be surprised if you have the beach to yourself. The main entry gate allows access only to staff and residents, many of whom use their properties only a few months of the year.

Even during the January to April high season, clever planning has ensured that the area never feels busy.

The Jack Nicklaus Signature Golf Course has tee times available throughout the day (a second Nicklaus course and St. Regis hotel, with a fitness suite available to villa guests, are scheduled to open in early summer).

Those looking for more adventure can try sailing, diving or snorkeling alongside the areas' many humpback whales, dolphins, rays and sea turtles. Or try your hand at surfing in the pleasant 73- to 85-degree waters.

One of the area's best surf breaks is on a pristine beach at the foot of the impressive Casa Papelillos hacienda. Here, you could find yourself catching a wave with the likes of Jay-Z, Beyoncé, Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin, who have all stayed at the sumptuous, fully staffed, nine-bedroom estate that rents for \$13,000 per night.

And if you want to take a break from cooking, there are plenty of options, though you'd be wise to hire a car as taxis can be expensive.

The area's small local village, overlooking Banderas Bay on the south side of the 1,500-acre Punta Mita peninsula, offers several good beachfront restaurants and shops. The Four Seasons Resort's exclusive boutiques and restaurants are also available to nonguests.

At least one evening in Puerto Vallarta is a must. It's about an hour's drive through heavy traffic on the winding coastal road. But Puerto Vallarta's quaint cobble streets and bustling, mile-long boardwalk, known as the Malecon, are worth the effort. They offer an invigorating mix of sculpture, shops, galleries and restaurants.

Just off the Malecon find traditional Mexican fare at El Arrayán (at 344 Allende). Try family recipes like Auntie Chiquis' tomatillo-pasilla chicken next to the restaurant's own arrayán tree, which produces the sweet, fleshy fruit used in the house margaritas.

For more celebrity spotting, try the exquisite Café Des Artistes. The unassuming white exterior gives way to a cavernous assortment of beautifully designed dining areas. From the all-white minimalist dining room to the stunning, jungle-like, multilevel outdoor garden, the restaurant has attracted such stars as Nicolas Cage and Robin Williams.

The French- and Polynesian-inspired menu rotates seasonally, and chef Thierry Blouet's unbeatable chocolate desserts will send you to heaven, should there be any doubt you're already there.

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