

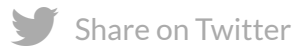


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WORLD TRAVEL

# Treasures of the Riviera Nayarit

By Anne Z. Cooke ⌚ 20 min read





*Sandy beaches and mile-long surfing waves fringe the coast of the Riviera Nayarit, a popular vacation destination for families and surfers. Photo by ©Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld.*

SAN BLAS, Mexico – When you're self-isolating at home, whiling away the hours scanning the internet for recipes, did you ever stumble across Mexico's most-watched television show, "Master Chef"? How about the celebrity chef herself, Betty Vasquez, one of the show's three judges? The name is ringing my bell, either. But when I searched online for "famous chefs Mexico," planning ahead for an upcoming trip to Puerto Vallarta, I was amazed to find Betty – and her restaurant, El Delfin – in San Blas, a couple of hours north on the Riviera Nayarit.



*San Blas's first parish church, built in the 1800s, now too expensive to repair, remains on the plaza in San Blas. Photo courtesy of Riviera Nayarit Tourism.*

Later on, when my partner Steve suggested that we spend an overnight exploring San Blas, I agreed as long as it included dinner at Betty's. "It's only two, maybe three hours north of Puerto Vallarta on Highway 200," said Sonia, the concierge who checked us into the Miraval Hotel, in Nuevo Vallarta. "Take your time and look around. It's scenic all the way up the coast, with sandy beaches if you want. We take our bathing suits and eat lunch at one of the villages. My favorite? In Sayulita, maybe at Pancho."





*Mexico's many arts and crafts include woven fabrics, for sale here in Bucerias, on Banderas Bay, north of Vallarta. Photo by Steve Haggerty ©ColorWorld.*

Thanks to my parents, inveterate travelers, Mexico was familiar country. But we'd never explore the state of Nayarit or its spectacular western border, the Pacific coast. Leaving the PV cruise ship and the airport behind, we crossed the border north into Nayarit, leaving the tourist world – crowded with souvenir shops, shopping centers and tourist hotels – behind. Within minutes, the landscape changed to open country, interrupted here and there by fields, jungle thickets, giant trees, crossroads, small houses and an occasional village. According to Steve, who'd done his homework, San Blas, population just 8707, was once an important port. At the mouth of a river, it was a source of fresh water, a necessity when, in the 1500s, Spain's "treasure ships," sailing northeast from the Philippines laden with silks and spices, made landfall. Repurposed as an official naval base in the mid-1700s, it was from here that the Spanish empire, threatened by Russia's settlements in Northern California and Alaska, sent a company of soldiers and colonists north to build the missions, led by Father Junipero Serra.





*The bones of San Blas' oldest church, Our Lady of the Rosary, built on San Basilio hill in 1769 and a romantic destination for weddings, need a roof, door and windows to come back to life. Memorialized by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, in his poem "the bells of San Blas," it's San Blas' most popular tourist attraction. Photo by © Haggerty/ColorWorld.*

Our first brief stop, in Buceritas, was just long enough to explore the arts and crafts market on Cardenas Avenue, a block from the beach, and to grab a ten-minute dip in the ocean. Passing a dozen Canadian retirees, lounging on the sand, they stopped us long enough to offer a cold beer. "I come every winter for three months," they said. "Join us, it's marvelous."





*Mexico's arts and crafts include hats, fabrics, and leather belts. Bucerias, Banderas Bay, north of Puerto Vallarta. by ©Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld.*

We couldn't miss the next stop, at Sayulita, one of Mexico's historic "magic towns." Popular and famous for miles of surfing beach and endless waves, Sayulita's narrow cobblestone streets shaded by trees and lined by art galleries, craft shops, cafes, ice cream vendors, bars, cottages, and sheds, all crammed onto every buildable inch. Following mobs of shoppers, mostly Mexican and Americans, we found a beachside café, ordered ice tea and waded in the waves.





*Travelers shopping on the Riviera Nayarit's cobblestone streets – in Bucerias, San Pancho and Sayulita (see should remember to wear good shoes. Photo by ©Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld.*

Then it was on to San Pancho – officially, San Francisco – where iguanas live in the trees shade the central plaza and where I bought a primitive painting from a sidewalk artist.

“My father paints all of these,” said Marco, flipping through half-dozen scenes, all different. “He uses recycled paper, too,” he explained, showing me the ragged edges. Colored flags strung between the buildings led the way to the ocean and Las Palmas Restaurant where we sat under an umbrella on the beach. In the front, watched the surfers and ordered lunch. Overwhelmed by a platter piled with six kinds of seafood and a cold pint, an hour ticked away in no time. By the time we finally reached San Blas the sunset was hanging over the ocean, reflected in shivery streaks.

As we circled the plaza, crowded with mothers pushing baby strollers, old men playing checkers, and skinny kids chasing each other around the fountain, I caught a whiff of barbecued pork. A wave of nostalgia made my heart thump and I felt like a ten-year-old, traveling with my parents. San Blas is unlikely to ever be on someone’s bucket list. Simplicity, its greatest charm, is also its greatest charm. If you’ve seen Director Alfonso Cuarón’s film “Roma,” the story of ordinary families coping with the challenges of a changing world, you’ll understand why San Blas is a place worth visiting.



life in Mexico in the 1970s, you know what I mean. As we pulled into the gas station, the attendant, a rangy fellow in cowboy boots ambled over to the pump. "If you want to taste real Nayarit cooking," he said, glancing at our tourist map, spread out on the dashboard, "try the Hotel Garza Canela, that way," he said, pointing toward the ocean. "They have a restaurant there and a pool." Was it Betty Vasquez's restaurant? He wasn't sure.



*Local painter Marco and his dad paint local scenes on paper they make at home and sell them for about \$10 at street markets in San Francisco). Photo by ©Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld.*





*The Hotel Garza Canela, inside a private, walled hacienda, is surrounded by five acres of shade trees and lush gardens. Located in San Blas. Photo by ©Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld.*

Heading for the hotel, a large, old-fashioned building behind a wall, we found the door, booked for the night, and asked about the restaurant, the El Delfin. "It's right there, through the door to the patio," said Rosa, the desk clerk, pointing the way. "It's still early, so you'll be the only one here." Stepping outside, I realized that we were behind a wall in a multi-acre, traditional, colonial-style hacienda, with a spacious patio and garden, leafy trees scattered about and two or three other buildings. A swimming pool was visible in the distance, beyond the door to the restaurant.

"Come in, come in, we're open," said a woman standing at the open door, her brown hair twisted in a bun. "My father spent hours out here, weeding and watering," she said, smiling. "He loved this place. Come in, I'm Betty." she said, holding the door. I was so thrilled that I couldn't think of what to say. She shook hands and looked pleased. "You've come all this way, just to eat?" she asked, showing me to a table. "I'm so glad you're here." By this time, I was bursting with curiosity. "What do you think of the food?" I asked Steve, after we'd looked all around, ordered from the menu, and she'd disappeared into the kitchen. "Her bio says she studied at the Cordon Bleu, in Paris." Twenty minutes later the dinner arrived, and we wielded our forks. "This is delicious," said Steve, savoring a bite of baked pork.

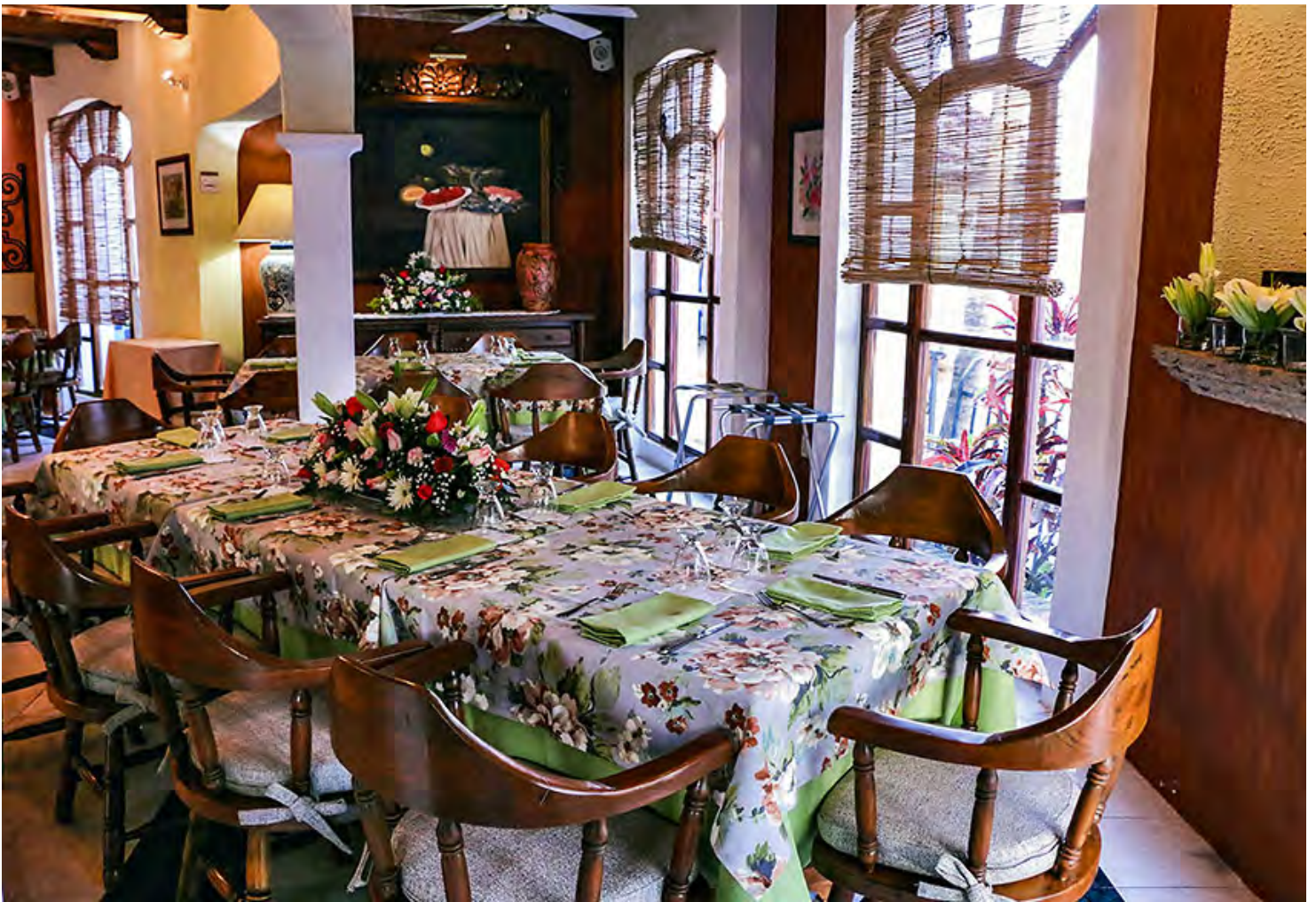




a fruit and chipotle s  
"Here, try it," he said  
over a couple of bites:  
you order curried shi  
asked. "Am I tasting  
milk?" We were scar  
dessert menu when  
returned with coffee,  
my surprise she sat  
talk.

*Betty Vasquez, at home in her own kitchen, sets aside three days to prepare a holiday family treat, "bacalao al pil pil," a traditional Basque dish. Photo by ©Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld.*





*El Delfin Restaurant. Photo by ©Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld.*

"Tell me, will you be here long?" said Betty. "I've loved traveling in Europe and overseas, and year I spent in France. But this is our family home. My roots are here in San Blas. Do you have a tour? You must see the fort on the hill." I grabbed my pen and began to scribble. Visit the fort Basilico Hill. Check ocean view and look for big white rock in ocean. Huichol people call it Tate Haramara, the sea goddess. Walk through old church next to fort, La Nuestra Senora del Rosa at Las Islitas beach, on Matanchen Bay. Bring bug spray. Highlight is guided boat tour on Sant estuary in La Tovar National Park, with birds and crocodiles. "You know," said Betty, pausing "Why don't I show you around? I'm going out of town tomorrow afternoon, but I'm free in the We're filming the next season of MasterChef Mexico and I have to be there. We have three ju I'm one of them."

After touring with Betty, who pointed out her favorite shop, the vegetable market and the ice shop she loved as a teenager, she left and we headed to the beach for the afternoon. The next day on her advice, we joined a boat tour through the La Tovar Park bird sanctuary, guided by nat Francisco Garcia. I was prepared to be as bored that morning as I'd been thrilled the night before.



is, until it became another one of the best adventures we didn't plan. Gliding quietly upstream estuary, spotting rare birds at every turn; winding among the mangroves until the estuary me river; watching the clear water curl around the muddy water and the sun-loving flowers crowd banks; La Tovara Park was as enchanting as El Delfin dinner was unforgettable. ^



*Sightings of black-crowned night herons, seen here in La Tovara Park, are rare. Usually found near water immobile on bushes or rocks and perfectly camouflaged, they're difficult to spot. Photo by ©Steve Haggerty/Ci*

## Just the Facts:

Touring the [Riviera Nayarit](#)

[Hotel Garza Canela](#): rooms for 1-6 US \$90-\$275.

Entrees at El Delfin restaurant: US \$10-\$25



From Puerto Vallarta by car: 79 miles, 2-3 hrs, Hwy 200 North, then State 16.

From Guadalajara: 162 miles, 3-4 hours.



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