

TRAVEL



SPECIAL MEXICO ISSUE

See what awaits

YOU CAN FIND A DIFFERENT MEXICO WAITING TO BE DISCOVERED BEYOND THE OBVIOUS HAUNTS. EXPLORE A SURREAL SCULPTURE GARDEN IN THE JUNGLE. **L3.** ● JOIN A *CALENDA* THROUGH THE STREETS OF OAXACA. **L4.** ● SNORKEL WITH SEA LIONS THROUGH BAJA'S TURQUOISE WATERS. **L6.** ● HAVE ONLY A LONG WEEKEND? A HISTORIC PACIFIC BEACH TOWN IS A THREE-HOUR HOP AWAY. **L7.**

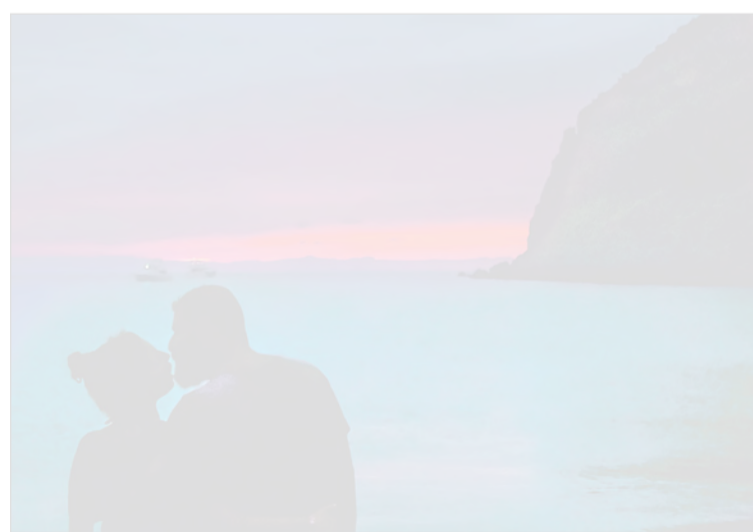


Photographs by CHRISTOPHER REYNOLDS Los Angeles Times

Santo is one of Mexico's youngest national parks, and Isla Espiritu Santo is its marquee attraction.



piece of coral to guests aboard a panga, a boat that carries visitors.



DARKNESS brings its own charms to Isla Espiritu Santo, which has no roads, bridges or permanent human residents.

ered and channeled by the island's ridges and arroyos, roaring toward lower ground. Toward us.

Trouble in the night

I was still in the tent when the estuary burst its banks. Water rushed past my feet, cutting a route through our camp to the beach.

The crew stripped to their bathing suits and headlamps, hollering and dashing back and forth to move equipment, food, tables, the refrigerator.

The runoff quickened and deepened. Within moments, our shade tarp had collapsed, and most of the crew's tents were swamped. Lucero's tent, crumpled and

nudged by the current, looked as if it might join our anchored pangas offshore.

The crew had turned off our electrical hub — half a dozen car batteries, solar collectors, radios, phone chargers. But in precious little time, the water advanced within a foot of the tent that held it all.

They told me later they had been setting up camp in the same spot for 30 years and never been flooded like this.

While the other guests sheltered in their tent at the untroubled north end of our beach camp, the crew grimly splashed and scrambled at the south end, where the water was rising.

I stood on the rain-pelted sand, directing my headlamp beam to help the crew see what they were doing.

I eventually busied myself dragging kayaks to higher ground and digging a trench in hopes of channeling the runoff — a futile effort but something to do.

And then, no more than 30 minutes after the water burst upon us, the runoff settled on a single route to the sea. It had bisected our camp, and the wind and rain raged on. There would be hours of reconstruction and cleanup ahead, but the water had stopped tearing away sections of beach.

The crew could take a breath, reclaim gear from the shallows (including Lucero's tent and my backpack) and set up on higher ground. I walked to my tent and crashed. Ramírez, tent-less, worked another few hours, then accepted my invitation to sleep on my floor.

If you make a winter trip to Isla Espiritu Santo and the same thing happens to you, I will eat my snorkel.

Historically, the area gets barely 8 inches of rain per year, most of it in August and September, a bit in the first days of October. That night in mid-October was an anomaly in a place that's usually dry.

But it was also a reminder: As long as nature is in charge, there's plenty of risk on this island.

A rainbow and a transformed trail

Our camp was a sight in the morning. Downed tarp. Tilted rack of stand-up paddleboards. Broken mirror over the main sink. Nine inches of water in each panga. But the team was fast re-assembling things.

By 8 a.m., breakfast was on a table. Sleeping bags were hanging out to dry and the radio was crackling with plans for reinforcements. The first blue skies of the weekend appeared, along with a modest rainbow.

So we went kayaking. And bird-watching in Bahía San Gabriel.

But before we fired up the pangas and left Isla Espiritu Santo for good, we rehiked the trail to the boulders, this time skirting the runoff's new path. The rocks were redder, the rain-scrubbed cactus greener. The wasps had flown or drowned.

And the tall, blank, red-rock wall that was so prominent? Now it was a backdrop to a roaring waterfall.

The island was new again, and except for the bug bites, I felt that way too.

ESCAPE TO SAN BLAS, MEXICO

Go beyond the beach for local history up close

By ANNE Z. COOKE >>> Passengers arriving at the airport in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, practically vibrated with anticipation as they headed for the exit. I felt a sense of excitement too, but instead of Puerto Vallarta I was heading for a long weekend in San Blas, about 95 miles north on the Pacific Coast. I was hoping to find the authentic Mexico I remembered from a trip with my parents when I was in grade school. I had booked a boat tour for my husband, Steve, and me in La Tovara National Park, known for its mangroves, marshes and rare birds. And I had reserved a room at the Hotel Garza Canela, owned by chef Betty Vázquez, a TV personality on "MasterChef Mexico." The tab: \$620 for hotels (four nights), \$830 for meals and \$160 for a car rental.

THE BED

Once I learned that Vázquez and her family owned the Garza Canela ("boat-billed heron" in Spanish), I had to try it. From the street the hotel resembled a house. But when I stepped onto the patio, I realized I was in a traditional walled hacienda, with 35 rooms and eight cottages. The 5-acre garden was bursting with fruit trees and flowers. "My father loved these trees," said Vázquez, who stopped to introduce herself. "He planted every one." After a day exploring San Blas, our reward was a swim in the pool and a tall, cool drink on the third-floor balcony of our 1980s-retro room.

THE MEAL

The dishes at El Delfín, Vázquez's restaurant in the hotel, were so varied it was hard to choose. The Cordon Bleu Paris-trained chef blends Mexican, Spanish and French ingredients and styles with elements of indigenous cooking. To start, we ordered a gently flavored cream soup made with corn, shrimp and poblano chiles and served with cotija cheese and bacon. My entree, the baked fish filet, caught that day, was lightly bathed in a sauce of orange and white wine. Steve chose the flank steak with a red wine sauce, served with chorizo and beans. We lingered over the strawberry-mango ice cream and a bottle of wine.

THE FIND

San Blas is historic to its roots. The small town, established in 1531 on the Santiago River, was a freshwater stop for Spain's "treasure" ships sailing from the Philippines. As a naval base in the 17th century, it was charged with supporting Spain's expeditions as well as Father Junípero Serra, founder of the missions, who sailed from San Blas. The fort atop San Basilio Hill, known as the Contaduría, is the town's pride and joy. We prowled through the chamber



STEVE HAGGERTY

CHEF Betty Vázquez owns Hotel Garza Canela, so prep for "MasterChef"-quality food.

Hotel Garza Canela, 106 Paredes, San Blas, Mexico; garzacanela.com. Doubles from \$90.

El Delfin Bar & Restaurant, Hotel Garza Canela. Entrees from \$10.

La Tovara National Park, bit.ly/latovaranp

where silks and spices were stored and admired the 180-degree view of the town and ocean far below. The stone ribs of the church still stand, a popular wedding venue.

THE LESSON LEARNED

I thought I knew Mexico, but the Riviera Nayarit (rivieranayarit.com) proved me wrong. In Sayulita, I wandered on tree-shaded streets lined with art galleries and craft shops. In San Francisco, a.k.a. "San Pancho," I sampled six kinds of tacos at a beachside restaurant, then toured the backstreets, dreaming about vacation rentals. The biggest surprise was Matanchén Bay, near San Blas, the world record-holder for the "longest surfable wave" at 5,700 feet. Riding a board on a breaking roller for more than a mile? Now that's a trip.



STEVE HAGGERTY

THE RUINS of the church on San Basilio Hill beckon tourists and wedding planners alike to the fort known as the Contaduría.



COSMO CONDINA Alamy Stock Photo

TEMPLO PARROQUIAL is among the churches of San Blas, a departure point for missions founder Father Junípero Serra.