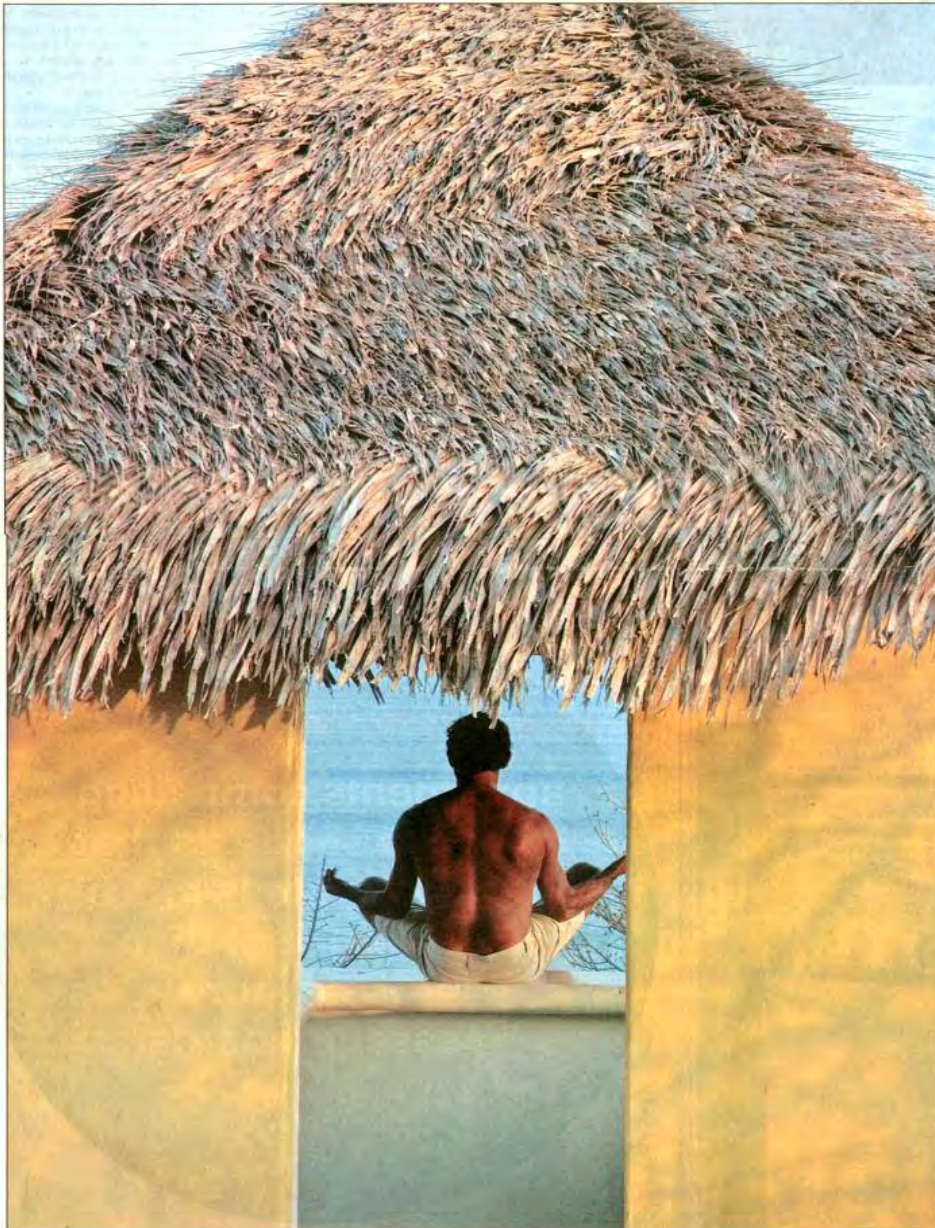


■ Q: What island is Europe's westernmost country? (The answer is on PAGE J9.)

MEXICO

Upscale and undiscovered

Stylish Punta Mita occupies the end of a foot-shaped peninsula with nine miles of pristine shoreline and its sole — and soul — massaged by the Pacific.



THE GOOD LIFE: Relaxation and restoration are integral aspects of the vacation experience at Punta Mita on Mexico's Pacific coast. PUNTA MITA DISCOVERY CENTER PHOTOS

By MOLLY GLENTZER
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

PUNTA MITA, MEXICO — It's hard to say exactly when Punta Mita charmed me in spite of myself.

Maybe when I took that first sunrise walk on an empty, pristine white beach. I picked up a free souvenir: a speckled blue spiny lobster shell. I climbed to the top of a huge rock and did a few sun salutations. There were rose petals blowing around, the remains of a romantic dinner the Four Seasons Resort had staged for some of its guests the night before.

Or maybe I was hooked that afternoon on another quiet beach, one with harder-packed, also pristine sand that was easier to walk on, when I spied a great blue heron perched on a rock in the surf.

Or maybe it was the moment Fernando handed me a beer in a tall plastic cup.

I sat with friends on the prow of a sailboat for hire. We felt like models in a Nautica ad — hair blowing, soaking up the spray and the sun and letting our psyches rock with the boat as it crested big waves. And Fernando, a tan, thin, good-looking teenager with bleached blond hair, was chatting

Please see **PUNTA MITA**, Page J6



BASKING IN THE SUN: The Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita offers a choice of three pool complexes.

More on Mexico

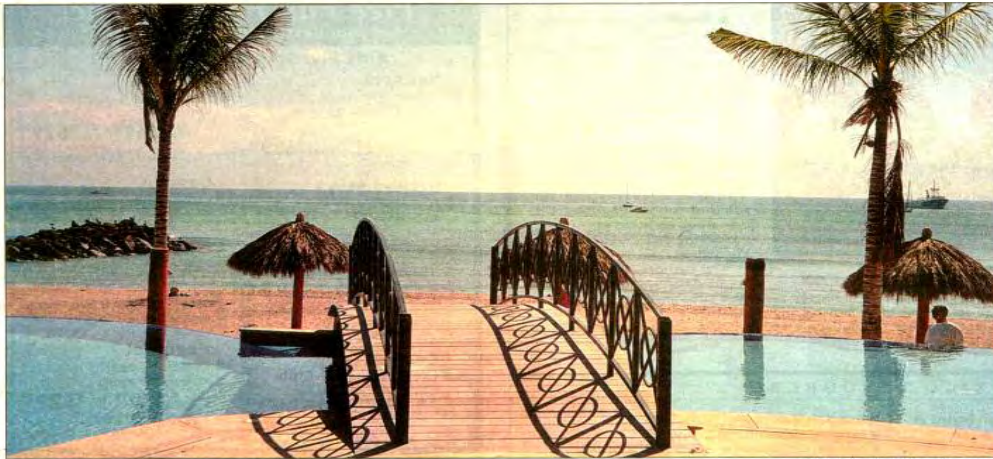
MEXICO CITY: Explore the nation's capital from a resident's perspective. **PAGE J2**



PUERTO VALLARTA: The needs of sea turtles and tourists aren't always compatible. **PAGE J3**

YUCATÁN PENINSULA: Enjoy Cancún but save time and appreciation for traditional wonders, too. **PAGE J4**

PUNTA MITA: The lure of its wild water makes place special



MOLLY GLENTZER: CHRONICLE

BRIDGE TO A MEXICAN PARADISE: Pool, beach and ocean seem to blend together from a vantage point at the Hacienda de Mita condominiums in Punta Mita. Development of new villas and condos continues at the 1,500-acre resort.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE J1

me up in broken English. I was thinking that he probably picks up a lot of business out here for later, after the boat docks.

You may like to play golf, or you may love lounging beside a pool in a tropical environment. But, ultimately, it's the lure of its wild water that makes Punta Mita special.

About 45 minutes north of Puerto Vallarta in the state of Nayarit, it occupies the end of a foot-shaped peninsula cradling Banderas Bay, with its sole (and soul) massaged by the Pacific. The nine miles of shoreline here are naturally "scalloped" into coves and inlets, giving the beaches an intimate scale.

Scrubbed and designed for U.S. vacationers, the 1,500-acre development is a project of Dine, the real estate subsidiary of the Mexican conglomerate DESC. (It's not to be confused with the more accessible nearby town of Punta de Mita.)

Punta Mita is relatively undiscovered for a good reason: Imposing gates monitor access to each of the dozen or so resort communities within the main entry.

The hum of construction is constant. New villas and condos — which account for most of the lodging choices — are coming on line fast. While this building boom may not please everyone, the developers do not plan to line the beaches with hotels.

The still-growing Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita is the only viable hotel choice for now. Open about six years, it's a jewel in the chain, with four gourmet restaurants, three beautiful pool complexes, a small spa and a Jack Nicklaus-designed golf course.

It's almost a shame you have to retire to an indoor room at night, given the stylish poolside cabanas that surround the adults-only pool area. They're outfitted with plasma-screen TVs, state-of-the-art sound systems, wireless Internet service and plush furniture. Champagne and caviar are served at



EDWIN LOUIE: CHRONICLE

the bars outside early each evening.

You know a place has arrived when the fashion world moves in. Punta Mita will get an added shot of glamour in June when Michelle Smith, the designer behind the upscale Milly line, unveils her Punta Mita Collection of chic dresses, swimwear, beach bags and sportswear at the Four Seasons.

A St. Regis resort with another Nicklaus-designed course is due to open in December — although when I visited in February, getting a beat on the layout required some imagination. The site consisted of strategically piled mounds of dirt, with a couple of concrete-block-construction offices.

I stayed at Las Palmas de Punta Mita, in one of 28 just-completed luxury villas along the Four Seasons' golf course. I

enjoyed the indoor-outdoor bath, the sunny entry atrium and the gourmet kitchen but gravitated to the terrace and its plunge pool. It overlooked the fourth fairway, with a view of the Pacific and the golf course's famous "Tail of the Whale" green, which is perched dramatically on a small, rocky island. (During high tide, players access it by amphibious vehicle.)

Punta Mita Residential Concierge services can stock the fridge or send in a personal chef or a masseuse. Cheerful maids seemed to hover — each day, they sculpted the plush towels into animal shapes and laid them out with fresh bougainvillea blossoms.

If you'd rather venture out to eat, several Residents Beach Clubs on the peninsula offer excellent waterfront meals, including delectable shrimp quesadillas, huge hamburgers and drinks.

You wouldn't know you were in Mexico if the friendly people didn't speak English with charming accents.

The exception is the small village where, according to our guides, Dine gave land to squatters who were living on the government-owned peninsula when development began. Aside from a few scruffy beachfront bars and restaurants, there's not much else for visitors there.

But natural wonders aren't hard to find, and outdoor activities are plentiful.

Walks along the beach turned up plentiful birds, the tracks of sand crabs and prints left by some kind of large cat — perhaps an ocelot. We also watched as a washed-up spotted

PLANNING A TRIP

■ **Getting there:** Continental Airlines operates several nonstop flights daily to Puerto Vallarta. Punta Mita is about a 45-minute drive or cab ride from Puerto Vallarta.

■ **When to go:** Summers can be very hot. November-April is ideal.

■ **Four Seasons Punta Mita:** Rooms cost \$545 to about \$15,000 nightly, with villas about \$3,000 per night December-April, less at other times. Call 011-52-329-291-6000; access www.fourseasons.com.

■ **Villa and condo rentals:** Villa rentals average \$1,200-\$12,000 per day December-April. Luxury condos average \$750-\$1,850 per day in high season. Reserve through Mita Residential by calling 877-561-2893 (toll-free from the United States) or e-mailing info@puntamita-properties.net.

boxfish became dinner for a black vulture. One night, a small fox darted across the road.

On the sailboat ride toward the nearby Marietas Islands, a sanctuary for marine life and birds that draws scuba divers and snorkelers, time-warp music blared over the boat's speakers: The Beach Boys' *Good Vibrations*, Simon and Garfunkel's *Sounds of Silence*. We were looking for humpback whales, which visit in the winter.

It might have been the music's weird influence, but I became giddy when we spotted humpbacks breaching in the distance — even though from our vantage point, without binoculars, I could see only water-spouts and poorly outlined tails.

Surfers have several good spots to catch the waves around Punta Mita. Sea kayaking, swimming with the dolphins, jeep safaris and canopy tours along zip lines in the Sierra Madre also beckon. There are plenty of things to keep vacationers busy for a week.

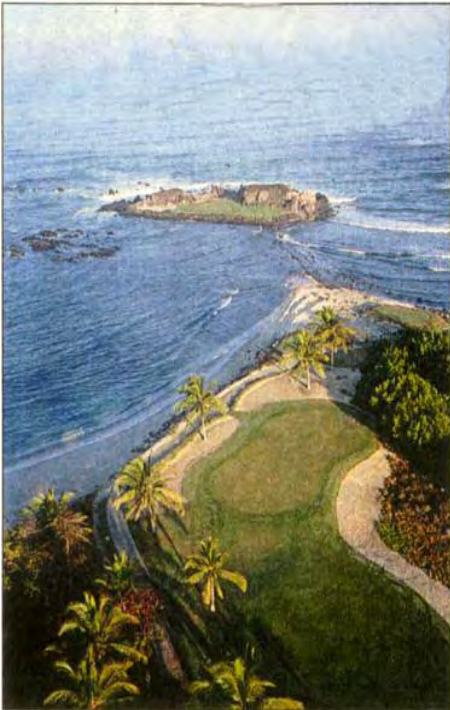
Or not. If relaxation is your goal, you can lose track of time here, blissfully, in a weekend.

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Café des Artistes can be a gastronomic adventure

TOP 10



PUNTA MITA DISCOVERY CENTER

TAIL OF THE WHALE: Punta Mita's Jack Nicklaus-designed golf course includes an optional Par 3 hole with a natural island green shaped like a whale's tail. Players tee off from the shoreline and reach the green, shown in background, via an amphibious vehicle when tides are high.

The world's top golf resorts, from the readers of Condé Nast Traveler magazine:

- **Four Seasons Resort**, Punta Mita, Mexico
- **American Club**, Kohler, Wis.
- **Westin Turnberry Resort**, Ayrshire, Scotland
- **Four Seasons Resort Hualalai**, Big Island, Hawaii
- **The Homestead**, Hot Springs, Va.
- **Four Seasons Resort**, Nevis
- **The Greenbrier**, White Sulphur Springs, W.Va.
- **Inn at Bay Harbor**, Bay Harbor, Mich.
- **Gleneagles**, Auchterarder, Scotland
- **Four Seasons Resort at Troon North**, Scottsdale, Ariz.

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

by **MOLLY GLENTZER**
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

PUERTO VALLARTA, MEXICO — Even from the back seat of a van full of sunburned travel writers, Puerto Vallarta entices at night.

There's a carnivallike atmosphere along the famous Malecon promenade near the center of town. Turn inland a few blocks, and the quieter, narrow streets yield boutiques, art galleries and eateries that beg to be explored.

I felt like I was finally in "real" Mexico when we passed the ornate Our Lady of Guadalupe Cathedral. The doors were wide open, and dim golden light spilled onto the sidewalk along with voices from the small congregation inside, participating in a Mass.

Then came the best surprise of all — well worth an hour's ride from Punta Mita, indeed worth a trip from Houston: a religious experience of the culinary kind at Thierry Blouet's stylish Café des Artistes compound, carved out of a century-old home on the hill above the Malecon.

Comprising several "concepts" that have evolved over 16 years, Café des Artistes is a gastronomic adventure zone. The friendly, French-born Blouet — one of Mexico's top cooks — delights in exotic ingredients.

In the main restaurant, Café des Artistes Gourmet Bistro, you're likely to find roasted sea bass consorting with spinach mousse and an eggplant marmalade; giant grilled scallops cavorting with a melt-in-your-mouth huitlacoche and potato Parmentier. Or Kobe beef with a pasilla chile sauce sharing a plate with a potato and bacon terrine, fried goat cheese and black beans. The cocoa and spice-spiked roasted piglet with a "hibiscus confit turnip" is another winner.

I could go on, but I'm getting hungry. Entree prices range from about 160 Mexican pesos (\$14.50 U.S.) for a "Grand Vegetable Symphony" to 495 pesos (\$45) for a 14-ounce rib-eye steak. A three-course, prix-fixe menu costs about \$34, plus about \$40 for house wine.

We were served (and served, and served) a tasting menu that would take pages to explain, each with its own wine — and I lost track of it all after the mirrored tray of a dozen or so deserts arrived and Blouet cheerfully brought out his best liqueur.

Although Blouet's meticulously-styled dishes clearly mark him as the "artiste" of the house, contemporary sculpture plays out the theme



FANCY RESTAURANT: Thierry Blouet Cocina de Autor is for high-end dining.

in several inviting environments. (You'll have to visit more than once to enjoy them all.) We ate under the stars in the lush, multilevel tropical garden. Another room is all candle-

GOURMET CUISINE

■ **Café des Artistes:** Chef-proprietor Thierry Blouet often hosts guest chefs from around the world. He also offers cooking classes. Access www.cafedesartistes.com; call 011-52-322-222-3228.

■ **Special event:** Blouet is a founder of Puerto Vallarta's annual Festival Gourmet International. Each November, chefs from around the world cook at prominent restaurants throughout the resort town. The 2007 festival is Nov. 8-18. Access www.festivalgourmet.com; call 011-52-322-290-2247.

— M.G.

light, crystals and white walls. The Constantini Wine Bar, where 350 bottles are available by the glass, has a cool modern vibe.

Then there's Thierry Blouet Cocina de Autor, a stunning upstairs room that feels like the inside of a terrarium. Here, the chef and his army of sous-chefs whip up three-, four- and five-course tasting menus nightly that range in price from about \$53 to \$68 U.S. To finish off the evening, you can choose your own music in an intimate new Cigar and Cognac lounge.

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