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Adventure Guide to Mexico

By BONNIE TSUI

BEYOND the sunbathers, cervezas and spring break debauchery so conspicuously on display in [Cancún](#) and [Cozumel](#), [Mexico](#) offers a lesser-known adventure experience — the kind that is found deep in the jungle or near small [fishing](#) villages and offshore reefs.

The same country that possesses one of the world's most polluted capital cities also ranks as one of the richest in species diversity. Twenty-two biosphere reserves and nearly 50 national parks offer [hiking](#) and wildlife-watching opportunities; mountain chains and interior canyons are chockfull of [biking](#) trails; fertile warm-water upwellings attract pods of whales and glittering fish.

Adventurous tourists — particularly those focused on a specific outdoor sport or activity — have much to discover along the coast and on the country's ruggedly varied interior terrain.

Almost by definition, some of these unexplored gems are in remote areas, so travelers will need to be vigilant about safety. That's where knowledgeable outfitters are key — they can take you to little-touristed places where you'll feel comfortable exploring the backcountry forests and secluded [beaches](#) that you might not visit alone. Regions like Chiapas and Oaxaca, while still extricating their reputations from recent political unrest, have become more stable. Before you book, consult the United States State Department (www.travel.state.gov) for travel advisories.


SURFING: SAYULITA [BACK TO MAP](#)

Surfers have been crossing the border to ride waves along Mexico's Pacific coast for decades, and this small coastal fishing village 30 minutes north of [Puerto Vallarta](#) has lately achieved the perfect mix of lively beachfront bars, surf camps and terra-cotta architectural charm — all, most importantly, with easy access to numerous breaks ideal for beginners and for intermediates looking to sharpen their technique. Advanced riders might head south to the body-wrecking barrels at Puerto Escondido, but the rest of us mere mortals will be content to spend a week or two skimming the waves there.

An easy right break on Sayulita's bay, just off a curving white-sand stretch of town beach, is where longboarders spend most of their time; if those waves get too big, beginners can always move down the beach and find smaller ones. A faster left break caters to speedy shortboarders. In 2006, the Access Trips adventure travel company started a small-group surf itinerary to Sayulita and its surrounding breaks, joining the pioneering Las Olas Surf Safaris (www.surflasolas.com), which runs surf camps for women, and several others. The special flavor of the village, says Alain Chuard, co-owner of Access Trips, comes from its friendly and eclectic population (local fishermen, hippies, expatriates) and the town's careful control over development (there are no big hotels or big chain stores here, whereas Wal-Mart has landed in Puerto Vallarta).

Most everything in Sayulita is within walking distance, from the beach to the grocery stores and cafes in the village center to the surrounding jungle. The village might not be a secret anymore, but it's far from being overrun by tourists. Beaches are rarely crowded, a one-bedroom villa at Villa Amor, the luxury hotel in town, starts at \$90 a night, and foreign travelers tend to be in their 20s and 30s.

Access Trips' seven-day surf safaris are led by a local surfer, Javier Chavez, and a core team of instructors. The student-to-teacher ratio is capped at an intimate 4 to 1, and all trip leaders are locals. Days are spent surfing the bay and visiting other secluded surf spots north and south of Sayulita that are accessible only by boat. In the winter, humpback whales cruising by the bay are a bonus. Surfers stay in newly built bungalows with ocean views just up the hill from town, and morning yoga sessions in a private studio help ease the muscle pain left by consecutive pop-ups on the surfboard. Lunch might be grilled shrimp on the beach, and there are plenty of other outdoor activities, including guided jungle treks, mountain biking and trips to hot springs.

Access Trips,  (650) 492-4778); www.accesstrips.com; seven-day surf adventures from \$1,885, including lodging, instruction, all breakfasts, a lunch and two dinners, yoga and transportation, including airport transfers; November through May.

ROCK CLIMBING: EL POTRERO CHICO [BACK TO MAP](#)

About an hour northwest of Monterrey, a craggy limestone outcrop named El Potrero Chico has been quietly attracting rock climbers from around the world. What makes the area unusual is the sheer variety of the 600-plus bolted routes — in which permanent artificial anchors are embedded in the rock — all within easy access of a campground and lodge at the base of the rock.

The icing on the cake? You won't have to share. The crowd typically tops out at 50 or 60 people, mostly a mix of Americans and Canadians and some Europeans; on many days, you'll probably encounter just a handful of other climbers.

Since the climbing scene in Mexico has yet to take off, most of the climbs have been developed by Americans in the last decade, and routes are usually christened with quirky Spanish or English names (Estrellita, Treasure of Sierra Madre, Yankee Clipper). The bolting of routes directly into the rock makes the rugged terrain more accessible to a wider spectrum of climbers; an average Joe can easily try a beginner climb next to an awesome Jane working on a longer, more complicated route. Limestone uplift makes for a combination of crags, spires and ridges. The terrain and loose rock conditions are the kind of thing you'd find in the backcountry (think the Wind River range in [Wyoming](#)), but here, it's all fixed-bolt sport climbing instead of traditional climbing, in which climbers place their own gear to protect against falls.

Long, moderate sport routes make El Potrero Chico a friendly place for climbers to work on their skills. Posada El Potrero Chico is a family-run campsite and lodge owned by a local resident named Luís Lozano. It serves the sporting crowd with Wi-Fi, new casitas and a small gear shop.

El Potrero Chico is just west of the small town of Hidalgo, where the living is simple, with street markets and hearty food typical of northern Mexico — nopalitos, carne asada, gorditas. To encourage climbing and environmental efforts in the community, the climbing school runs cleanup days in which local children help with the maintenance of routes by collecting trash.

“It’s a quiet and safe town with all of the services,” said Mr. Lozano, who grew up in Hidalgo. “People return year after year, and some of the climbers have already moved here.”

Posada El Potrero Chico, (52-1) 81-8362-6672; www.elpotrerochico.com.mx; weeklong guided climbing trips from \$1,511 a person, including guide, equipment, airport shuttle and lodging in a casita with private bath; November through March.

DEEP-SEA FISHING: CABO SAN LUCAS  [BACK TO MAP](#)

In 1940, [John Steinbeck](#) embarked on an expedition to the Sea of Cortez to catalog marine life along Cabo’s rocky, undeveloped coastline, and found it “ferocious with life.” Though the town of Cabo San Lucas is now known as a luxury [golf](#) destination, it first earned its reputation through its prized access to waters teeming with fish. With the Pacific Ocean on one side and the Sea of Cortez on the other, Cabo offers exceptional sport fishing at the confluence of both in the harbor’s deep-water canyons.

The area hasn’t been nicknamed the “marlin capital of the world” for nothing. An estimated 50,000 billfish — fast-swimming trophy fish that include marlin, swordfish and sailfish — are caught every year, and angling competitions stir up the resort strip in the fall months. Sustainable tourism calls for catch-and-release practices for billfish — their populations have steeply declined over the past 50 years — though fishing operators will let you keep commonly caught game fish like yellowfin tuna, roosterfish, Spanish mackerel and dorado. On most fishing trips, the crew will clean, fillet and freeze your selected catch to take home for eating.

While the rocky intertidal zone that Steinbeck discovered in Cabo back then has been almost completely overrun by beaches and resort development, a day spent on the water captures some of that wonder. The quintessential Cabo angler experience includes chartering a small panga, or open fishing launch, early in the morning (unless you happen to be a movie star, in which case fully serviced 110-foot boats are more common). Swordfish are most plentiful January through June, as are sailfish, and the best conditions for blue and black marlin are July through November, when big storms put populations on the move. Striped marlin is caught year round.

“The fishing experience in Cabo can be unforgettable, and the marlin are the biggest challenge — they’re what people come here to catch,” said Juan Beltran, a reservations agent and dockmaster for Pisces Fleet Sportfishing. The company’s fleet ranks No. 2 in the world in the number of released striped marlin, according to the Billfish Foundation, a nonprofit organization that supports the conservation of global billfish populations. Recently, Mr. Beltran said, the tight-knit fishing community has begun lobbying the Mexican government to change its new regulations that allow midsize commercial shark fishing boats to come as close as 10 miles to shore.

Shark boats use longlines, which have about 1,000 hooks, and that method results in large incidental catches of other species, and the fishing community is advocating a return to a 50-mile distance to protect juvenile sharks and game fish populations, which are found closer to shore. “We care about our nature sources here in Cabo,” said Mr. Beltran. “They’re the source of our livelihood.”

Pisces Sportfishing,  (619) 819-7983 ; www.piscessportfishing.com; a 28-foot boat charter is \$560 a day,

including crew, tackle, bait, lunch and fishing licenses for four.

MOUNTAIN BIKING: COPPER CANYON [BACK TO MAP](#)



Almost all visitors to the Barranca del Cobre, or Copper Canyon — one of the deepest and largest canyon systems in the world — show up via train or tour bus, stopping only to take a snapshot or two of the gloriously bizarre rock formations and caves. Actually composed of a series of huge canyons, Copper is traditionally home to the native Tarahumara Indians, a reclusive people who still live in remote canyon villages much as they have for centuries.

An eight-hour drive from [El Paso](#), Tex., the town of Creel in the state of Chihuahua is the gateway to Mexico's thriving mountain and road biking scene; every July, it plays host to a major national cycling festival and race series. From this base, at an elevation of 7,600 feet, you'll find that Copper's ins and outs are well suited to two-wheeled exploration; on a mountain bike, you can actually smell the flowers (and feel the dirt). Just about every kind of trail and terrain can be accessed: world-class technical single-track, forest roads, [Moab](#)-quality slick rock, rocky desert landscape, challenging long climbs and descents on old mining tracks, and winding back roads.

Several companies based in Moab, [Utah](#), including Nichols Expeditions (www.nicholsexpeditions.com) and Western Spirit (www.westernspirit.com), offer weeklong mountain bike excursions to Copper Canyon, with guides and support vehicles. Regular riders looking for a longer itinerary will want to contact KE Adventure Travel, which leads a two-week de facto Tour de Tarahumara.

"There really are epic rides for all tastes," said David Appleton, a guide who works with KE's trips in Mexico. "The difficult part is sorting out all of the trails and rides, since nothing is marked and there are just so many. We have been guiding and riding there for 14 years and have only touched the tip of the iceberg."

KE's itinerary is a series of rides in terrain from the highland pine forest at canyon rims to the arid conditions at the base. Most days average about 25 miles, and elevation tops out at 8,200 feet (with one dizzying 4,000-foot descent into Batopilas Canyon along a switchback trail), but easier routes are plentiful. Nights are spent in hotels in town and log cabin lodges along the trail. There's also no shortage of wildlife (parrots, whitetail deer, jaguars) or scenery (cataract waterfalls, deserted mining claims). But bikers say that the highest moments of a trip here might well be the quietest ones — a meeting with a Tarahumara farmer, for instance, or a fire-illuminated night spent in a cabin, far from electricity.

KE Adventure Travel,  - (800) 497-9675  ; www.keadventure.com; 13-day Copper Canyon bike trip from \$2,390, including lodging and meals; late October to early November and March to early April.

SNORKELING WITH WHALE SHARKS: ISLA HOLBOX [BACK TO MAP](#)

Forty miles northwest of the party port of [Cancún](#) is little-known Isla Holbox (pronounced OLE-bosh), a narrow spit of white sand some 25 miles long and no more than two miles wide at its widest point, situated in the Gulf of Mexico. From June through September, the island's offshore waters are the site of a large congregation of whale sharks, who come here to feed on seasonal plankton blooms.

The whale shark is the world's biggest fish — it can grow to more than 50 feet in length — and its dark

grayish-blue body is dotted with white spots, giving it the local nickname of “domino.” Because the whale shark is a vulnerable species, and because coastal mangrove areas are also located here, the Yum Balam Biosphere Reserve was created in 1994 to protect Isla Holbox and its surrounding waters. An active tourism industry has sprung up, providing travelers with the singular experience of snorkeling with whale sharks.

The population of Holbox — which was named for its proximity to a spring (Holbox is Mayan for “black hole”) — is less than 2,000. There are no cars; most people get around by [bike](#), [golf](#) cart or motor scooter. The local economy is still based heavily on [fishing](#), and there is an abundance of seafood restaurants in the main town serving up fresh daily catches of lobster, grouper, red snapper, conch and octopus. Adding to the picture-postcard prettiness are hundreds of flamingos that flock to the island.

From the Mexican mainland, most visitors get to Holbox by taking a ferry across the lagoon from Chiquilá, which takes less than 30 minutes. Day trips are the norm, with local guides taking tourists to see the whale sharks in season; Dove6 Water Tours (www.whalesharkexperience.com), run by a [University of Georgia](#) business graduate and his partner, also offers packages that include swimming with whale sharks and scuba [diving](#) elsewhere in the Maya Riviera.

The Canadian company Gap Adventures organizes an eight-day itinerary to Holbox from Cancún, coordinating accommodation, whale shark tours and other activities for travelers with local Holboxeño suppliers. Out in the waters, whale shark tourism is governed by environmental regulations: snorkelers must remain seven feet from sharks, and boats must stay 100 feet away. Guides are mandatory, scuba diving and fishing are prohibited, and all sunblock must be biodegradable.

“Swimming with the whale sharks was the main reason we went to Holbox, apart from the fact it’s a beautiful little island with gorgeous white sandy [beaches](#) and few tourists,” said Jessica Stone, 26, a reflexologist who lives in [London](#) and who visited [Mexico](#) last year. “They are just so huge you can’t believe you’re in the water with them.”

Gap Adventures,  (800) 708-7761 ; www.gapadventures.com; eight-day Holbox trip from \$875.

BIRD WATCHING: CHIAPAS [BACK TO MAP](#)

With the Zapatista rebel chief penning mystery novels, and tourism locations in Chiapas featured prominently in last year’s Miss Universe pageant, the reputation for sociopolitical friction that this southern Mexican state has had in the past just might begin to lose some of its edge. But long before Subcomandante Marcos led an indigenous army out of the jungle on New Year’s Day 1994, demanding land and other rights for the state’s many Indian groups, Chiapas was best known for its incredible biodiversity. In the Lacandón rain forest, the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve — designated in 1979 as the first biosphere reserve in Mexico — protects more than 1,200 square miles, home to a whopping number of bird species (close to 350, which comprises nearly a third of the country’s total), at least 3,400 plant species and more than 100 species of mammals.

The reserve is probably the only place where you’ll encounter so many rare birds in the wild, including the quetzal — whose feathers were prized by ancient civilizations — and the scarlet macaw, harpy eagle, king vulture and Muscovy duck, all of which are threatened with extinction.

The rain forest is also home to endangered jaguars, ocelots and tapirs. Last year, Mountain Travel Sobek began a new wildlife-focused trip that involves active exploration of Montes Azules and other nature areas. Visitors take guided boating trips along the reserve's rivers and [hike](#) jungle paths lined with 200-foot ceiba trees, all in search of exotic birds, mammals and Maya archaeological sites. Other activities include swimming in waterfalls and "crocodile wrestling" (if you feel like channeling your inner crocodile hunter, you can help scientists catch, measure and tag crocodiles for a local conservation program). The trip also incorporates stays with local indigenous communities and interaction with local researchers who work on ongoing biosphere conservation efforts.

"We're getting to know areas that have not been explored by outsiders," said Mark Willuhn, trip leader for Mountain Travel Sobek in the region. He is also the director of the nonprofit group Mesoamerican Ecotourism Alliance. "One of the key things about this place is that there are so many indigenous communities, all with their own distinct cultures and traditions," he said. "People travel all over the world for these kinds of cultural experiences when, two hours from [Houston](#), it's right here."

Guests stay at small boutique eco-lodges like the five-room Lacandonia Adventure Lodge, which is in the center of the biosphere reserve. A series of thatched-roof cabañas overlooking Río Lacantún are constructed of tropical materials including bamboo and palm.

Mountain Travel Sobek,  (888) 687-6235 ; www.mtsobek.com; eight-day exploratory Chiapas wildlife trip from \$2,900 a person.

HIKING: THE SIERRA NORTE [BACK TO MAP](#)

The Sierra Norte is one of the most biologically diverse mountain systems in Mexico, blanketing an area of about 6,500 square miles in the northern part of Oaxaca state. Its diverse topography includes steep mountain slopes covered in pine and oak, cactus-clad 5,000-foot valleys and lush tropical coastline, with an elevation range from sea level to 10,000 feet. Much of the biological richness of the Sierra Norte is found in its mountainous cloud forests, long isolated because of their steep slopes and high altitudes.

The Sierra Norte is part of a bioregion designated by Conservation International as one of the richest and most endangered in the world, with unique species of orchids and wildlife including southern flying squirrels, Pacific orange tip butterflies, Oaxaca hummingbirds and white-throated jays.


Because of its remoteness, the Sierra Norte is seldom explored beyond the fringes of the city of Oaxaca, and much of it is inhabited by various indigenous communities. But the hiking in the Sierra Norte is stunning, and the [Puerto Vallarta](#)-based travel company Journey Mexico leads a nine-day tour that takes trekkers through a tapestry of ecosystems. The outfitter has also partnered with local residents to visit indigenous villages.

The trip starts with an exploration of the colorful and historic city of Oaxaca, including visits to the pre-Columbian ruins of Monte Alban and Mitla. From there, it continues to the mountains, where a few days are spent hiking and living in the Sierra Norte with Zapotec communities that remain largely traditional and untouched by modern life.

Residents have set up a system of trails and cabins. The tour company hopes that by creating opportunities

for local people to become guides or lodge owners, they will have alternatives to working in logging, which has already cut through some areas. The hiking level throughout is moderate, with some full- and half-day hikes; most are through valley and forest landscapes.

A big draw is the rare chance to meet with local people and learn about the sacred traditions of the rural region. The itinerary also includes two nights spent at a beach-side lodge in the fishing village of Puerto Escondido on the Pacific; from here, guests can [kayak](#) and hike into mangrove-lined estuaries and perhaps view endangered sea turtles laying eggs. They can also scuba dive, snorkel, kayak and surf. The best is saved for last, when a hike from the slopes of the Sierra Madre del Sur leads through deep tropical lowland jungle to a crashing waterfall and swimming hole.

Journey Mexico,  (800) 513-1587 ; www.journeymexico.com; nine-day Oaxaca Mountains to the Pacific trek from \$2,490, including lodging, most meals and transportation including flights between Oaxaca and Puerto Escondido.

BONNIE TSUI is editor of "A Leaky Tent Is a Piece of Paradise" (Sierra Club), a collection of essays on the outdoors.

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