

T NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC Traveler

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Mexico's Magical Coast

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three very different Pacific resorts

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As daylight fades in the quintessential Mexican town of San Blas (above), locals gather on the streets around the town square for a night of socializing. Friendly and forthright, this small fishing port claims a distinguished heritage. In the late 18th century it served as a major base of Spanish operations in the New World. Renowned padre Junípero Serra sailed from here in 1768 to found the chain of California missions. Today San Blas still claims old churches and a devout population (right).





SAN BLAS... IT'S SIMPLY MEXICO

From upside down, it looks as though the sky has filled with ocean and the ocean with sky. "Feels good, huh? It's great for your body to hang upside down while gravity pulls you back into alignment," Kathi assures me.

Ten minutes before, I had happened upon this paradisiacal, banana-tree-fringed point at the end of an equally paradisiacal, virtually deserted beach. Here, Kathi, a part-time Californian, had appeared and welcomed me to her "resort"—sky blue, palapa-topped bungalows nestled among the banana fronds. Oh, and a yoga swing dangling in the courtyard at the very edge of the Pacific.

"Try it," Kathi had offered enthusiastically, pointing to the contraption. "You'll like it." I do like it, hanging there, watching the big, peachy clouds scurry along the horizon, occasionally snagged by the fins of dolphins.

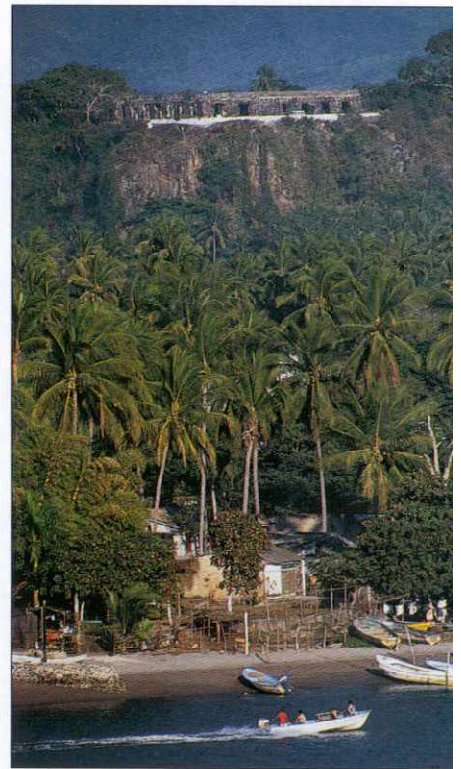
When I right myself, Kathi gives me a handout on her place: Otro Mundo—Other World. "The air is filled with positive, uplifting energy . . ." the brochure rhapsodizes. "Please leave all prejudices, negative thoughts, worries and cares at home or in Vallarta. Come and enjoy life at its best."

All things considered, it seems fair to call San Blas an *otro mundo*. Once a place of empire, the town served as an important port during Spain's colonial heyday. But history long ago bypassed San Blas, and today it floats in a dreamy time warp, its 18th-century customhouse no more than a distinguished ruin, its old hilltop fortress ravaged by weather and the creeping forces of the jungle. Now the town revels in its distinctive provincial vitality, and you feel when you come to it that you have entered some scene from a García Márquez novel.

We came to San Blas by road, about the only option available. Route 200 north from Puerto Vallarta took us through ecstatically lush jungle and past roadside huts where machete-wielding vendors waited to sell *cocos fríos*—cold coconuts—to passersby.

About two hours outside Puerto Vallarta, we turned left toward the coast and began a long, gliding descent to the ocean and San Blas.

A simple, unaffected place of some 8,000 souls, the town revolves around its *centro*, where small shops face a worn plaza. People amble along here,



The ruins of La Contaduría, an 18th-century Spanish fortress on San Basilio Hill, hover above the town.

shopping or visiting with one another, their rich, familiar chatter filling the streets. Dogs lie in the cool shade of doorways, and men on unwieldy old bicycles teeter and weave in and out of ruts in the road.

Our hotel, Las Brisas, sat just at the edge of town, its brick-paved poolside patio fronted by small, motel-style rooms. The closed, air-conditioned rooms lacked the open-air charm of other Mexican resorts, but there was good reason for that. If you believe the tales, San Blas harbors enough mosquitoes in the rainy summer months

to airlift you back to Vallarta. And almost any time of year the *jejenes*, or no-see-ums, will pick your carcass clean before you can say "¡Hola!"

But along with such tales of terror are also legends about the beauty of San Blas's beaches. Anxious to check out the latter, I headed for El Borrego beach, just a few blocks away. The legends were true. Streaks of afternoon sunlight played across the sand and spangled the long, lazy breakers that rolled to shore. Shrimp boats, backlit by the sun, lumbered across the horizon like strange shadow puppets, while pelicans rode the sea breezes in pterodactylian formation. The endless pristine beach was deserted, its line of palapa restaurants, famous for their *pescado ahumado*, fish smoked over mangrove fires, were closed for the day. I walked south, away from town, meeting only a man and his burro along the way. Both were staring intently out to sea.

Dawn and dusk are the witching hours for *jejenes*, so we waited out their evening assault in Las Brisas's dining room over a world-class meal that started with cream of *poblanos* (mild peppers) soup, proceeded through perfectly trimmed turkey, and ended with memorable homemade ice cream. The chef, Betty, one of the daughters of the family who owns the hotel, came out to meet us. Trained in Paris, she had returned to San Blas with a mission. "I wanted to use classical cooking techniques on local ingredients. You see, a Mexican kitchen is full of color, and I want to blend those colors and textures into my cooking." She seems to be succeeding admirably.

After dinner we walked to the plaza, where the nightly revelry was already in full sway. Hand-holding lovers whispered together on benches, and barefoot children gleefully chased after pigeons. The doors to the church fronting the square were wide open, and the padre's singsong evening Mass leaked out onto the street. The few gringos in town collected together at a local bar on the square and watched the scene.

Without warning, the town suddenly went black, and a cheer rose from the plaza. My husband asked a local man what had happened to the

electricity. The man shrugged. "Maybe some boys. A prank."

"Does it happen often?" my husband persisted.

The man paused to calculate. "Oh, maybe one hundred times a year," he said, then laughed uproariously, obviously kidding us. In the dark, sweet tropical night, San Blas partied on.

To birders, San Blas is simply heaven, for behind its fulsome beaches lie mile upon mile of mangrove swamps filled with avian wonders. Early one morning we climbed into a small skiff manned by an unassuming guide named Fernando and glided through narrow, twisting waterways overarched by jungle. Sunlight fell in prismatic pieces through the tangled fronds and vines as the slow-motion world of the swamp gradually revealed itself. Iguanas, standing as still as lime green visions, adorned cliff banks. Green herons and white egrets craned their necks gracefully, staring into the shallow water. In the thick canopy of one tree sat five members of the area's most famous species—the boat-billed heron, a strangely beautiful bird with the body of a heron and the bill of a duck.

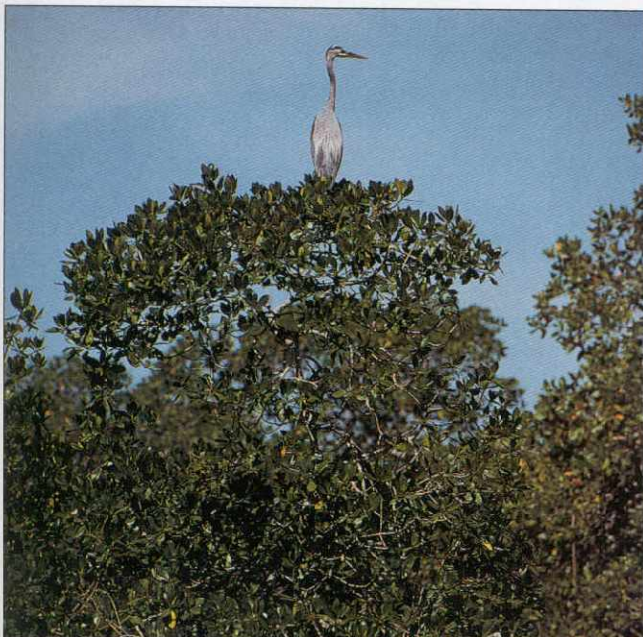
Our ride ended at La Tovara, a freshwater spring where a café with cold *cervezas* (beers) stood in the midst of the jungle. Above a spring-fed swimming lagoon, a dilapidated courtyard flanked by fallen columns looked like an illusion, a set from *Apocalypse Now*. Like the rest of San Blas, you'd almost have to see it to believe it.

Or maybe not. Longfellow wrote his last poem about the bells of San Blas. He never came here, only heard about this exotic, once majestic place of empire. But the very idea of such a place seemed to set him dreaming.

*But to me, a dreamer of dreams,
To whom what is and what seems,
Are often one and the same,—
The Bells of San Blas to me
Have a strange, wild melody,
And are something more than a name. □*

A longtime writer for the magazine, K.M. Kostyal is partial to assignments that take her south of the border. Maggie Steber photographed the New Orleans story for the September/October 1994 issue.





Towering palms shade the pool at Las Brisas (The Breezes) resort, popular both with surfers, who come to San Blas to catch its perfect waves, and with bird-watchers, who flock here for the avian abundance. In the expansive mangrove swamps at the edge of town, birders can easily spot great blue herons (left), as well as the area's famous boat-billed herons. Another regional specialty, *pescado ahumado* (far left)—fish smoked over mangrove fires—can be found at any beach restaurant.