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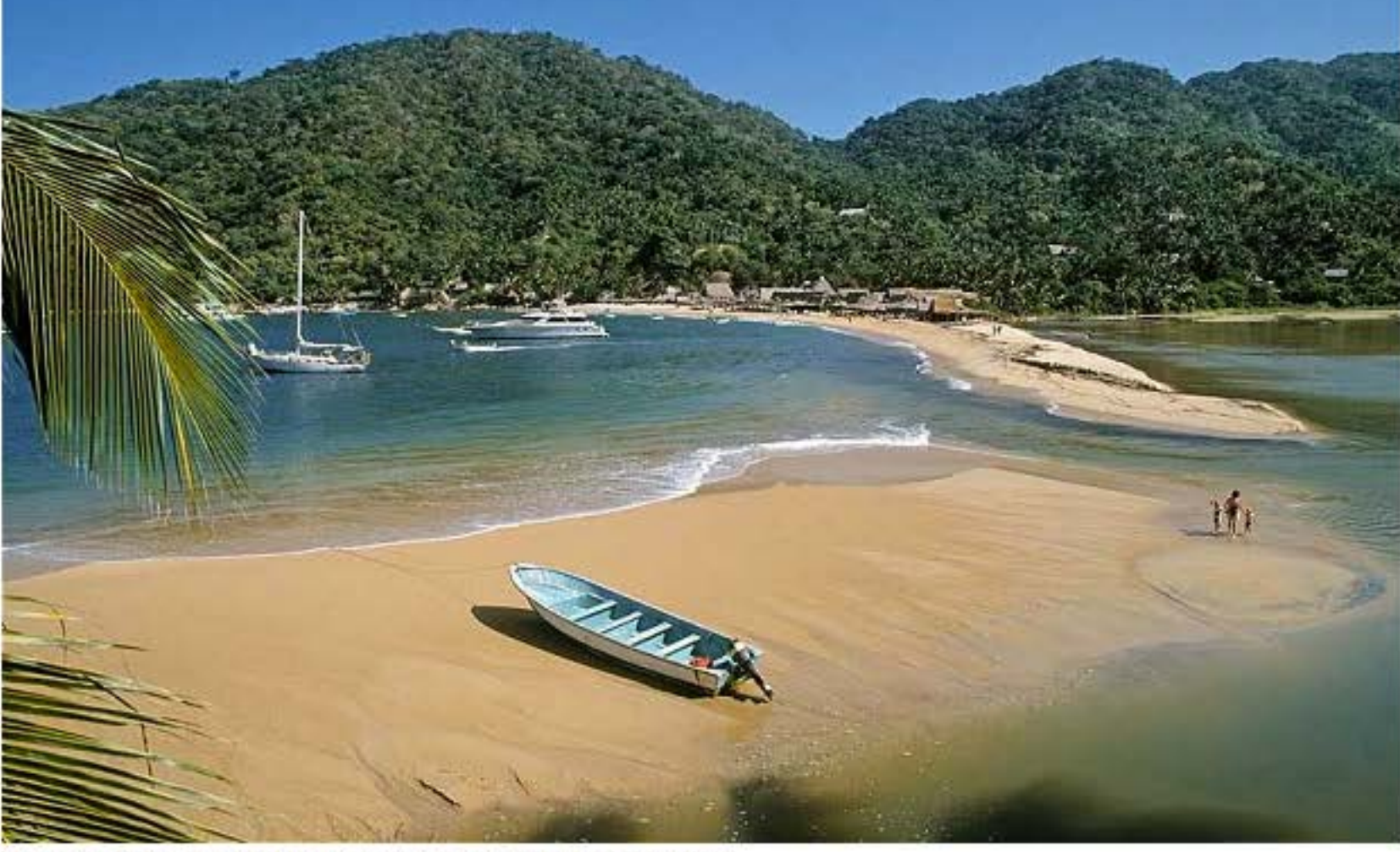
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Mexico's hidden beaches reached by boat

Some of Mexico's most pristine beaches can only be reached in a lancha - a fibreglass sea vessel. John Fisher goes on a voyage of discovery along the country's Pacific and Caribbean coasts.



Visitors to Mexico are waking up to the country's natural resources

By **John Fisher**

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Mexico is hot right now. And not just in the physical sense – tourist numbers are booming (arrivals from Britain are up 30 per cent) as the country makes a concerted effort to recover from news reports about drug wars and to assert its eco-friendly and cultural credentials. There's plenty to work with, starting with seemingly endless beaches lining both the Caribbean and Pacific coasts.

Mexico has always offered a mixture of exceptional luxury resorts and ancient glories; these days, visitors are waking up to the country's natural resources, too, protected in a series of recently created national parks and biosphere reserves. Five-star, all-inclusive packages on the Riviera Maya start at about £1,200 per person over the summer, falling below £1,000 in September.

Puerto Vallarta's hidden beaches

A Mexican *lancha* is not a vessel for the faint-hearted. Long, narrow and crudely moulded from fibreglass, it is driven by the largest outboard the owner can afford, invariably cranked up to full throttle. There's little protection from the sun or spray, though a cooler full of beer and Cokes offers some consolation. And with room for just half a dozen, a *lancha* offers escape from the crowds to dozens of pristine beaches that are inaccessible by road.

Thirty minutes off the coast of Puerto Vallarta, halfway up Mexico's Pacific seaboard, the *lancha* reaches the Marieta Islands, at the heart of a big marine national park created from what was once a naval firing range. Locals will tell you that the extraordinary natural formations here were caused, in part, by the shelling and explosions.

Playa del Amor, an image of which has gone viral on the internet and brought new fame to the region, is certainly exceptional: diving from the *lancha*, you swim through a 40ft-long natural rock tunnel, emerging to an entirely enclosed circular lagoon and hidden beach. Its new-found celebrity means you'll need to be up early if you want the sand to yourself, but the islands have plenty of other lonely swimming and snorkelling spots, only marginally less spectacular.

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Elsewhere around the Bahía de Banderas, the bay at whose centre Puerto Vallarta sits, waterborne transport offers the only access to half a dozen more white-sand beaches, including the old hippy hang-out of Yelapa, hemmed in by tropical hills and coconut palms. Yelapa has managed to retain a rustic, laid-back feel, despite the arrival of day trippers, electricity and satellite dishes; locals still hook octopus and surgeonfish from the pier, frigate birds glide over the water and turkey vultures skulk in the trees.

Where to stay

Casa Amorita Just five rooms in the centre of town, with balconies and cool tiled floors; there's a Venetian-tile pool and a roof bar and terrace with spellbinding views of the ocean and cathedral (0052 322 222 4926; [casaamorita.com](#); double rooms from £62).

Casa Velas The pick of the elegant new resorts along Vallarta's northern coast, with spa, golf and several pools; ultra-stylish suites blend Mexican and contemporary decor (322 226 6688; [hotelcasavelas.com](#); from £165).



Where to eat

Joe Jack's Fish Shack Fabulous seafood: this place is best known for its fish and chips and chowders, the tastiest in town; sit at the bar downstairs, or enjoy the views from the rooftop dining area (Basilio Badillo 212; 322 222 2099; [joejacks-fishshack.com](#)).

Café des Artistes Upmarket gourmet dining in a French-Mexican fusion style – the intriguing menu features plenty of local seafood (Guadalupe Sánchez 740; 322 222 3228; [cafedesartistes.com](#)).

What to do

Puerto Vallarta is very much a resort, but with mesmerising sunsets, miles of sandy beaches and a laid-back, colonial centre, it is smaller and more subdued than Acapulco or Cancun. Trips to the Marieta Islands, for the Playa del Amor, are run by **Vallarta Under Sea** (322 209 0025; [vallartaundersea.com](#)). *Lanchas* for Yelapa and other beaches around the bay leave from Boca de Tomatlán, south of town.

Huatulco and the southern Pacific coast

About 940 miles to the south east, another *lancha* blasts out of the bay of Huatulco, heading north to Playa Cacaluta, a gorgeous stretch of sand in another protected national park. Like Playa del Amor, Cacaluta has enjoyed its moment of celebrity: it featured in the breakthrough Mexican film *Y Tu Mamá También*.



Today it's the most northerly of the Huatulco bays, an area chosen by the Mexican government in the 1980s as the site of its latest purpose-built, environmentally conscious resort, intended to rival Cancun. Somehow Huatulco never quite took off, and today, though there are plenty of big resort hotels, the visitors are predominantly Mexican, their numbers small enough to preserve the pristine nature of the farther-flung bays.

If it's more of a back-to-nature experience you're after, head for adjacent villages on the coast north of Huatulco: Puerto Ángel, Zipolite, San Agustínillo and Mazunte. Here, wooden *cabañas* line the beach, some with no more than a sand floor and a hook to hang your hammock: modern equivalents offer air conditioning and en suites, along with intimate proximity to the ocean.

Where to stay

Posada del Arquitecto Simple, eco-conscious beachfront *cabañas* in Mazunte with great ocean views and a café-bar ([posadadelarquitecto.com](#); hammock space £2.50, *cabaña* £25).

Cabañas Punta Placer Four luxurious cabins on the beach in San Agustínillo, each containing two circular rooms: gorgeous all-white spaces with drape beds, bathrooms and tranquil terraces, plus fridge and Wi-Fi. The owners run a variety of boat trips and inland tours ([puntaplacer.com](#); from £55).

Quinta Real An exotic whitewashed luxury resort in Huatulco, embellished with Moorish domes and curves: lavish suites, private beach club, multiple restaurants and a colony of torpid iguanas in the nearby palms (958 581 0428; [quintareal.com](#); from £160).

Where to eat

El Alquimista International and Mexican food served on the beach. What really draws the evening crowds, though, is a combination of cocktails, beach bonfires and chill-out music (Playa Shambalaya, Zipolite; 958 587 8961; [el-alquimista.com](#)).

Ve El Mar Simple seafood restaurant with tables on the sand, crowds, music and vendors; the speciality is a pineapple scooped out and filled with sweet Pacific lobster (Playa Santa Cruz, Huatulco; 958 587 0364).

What to do

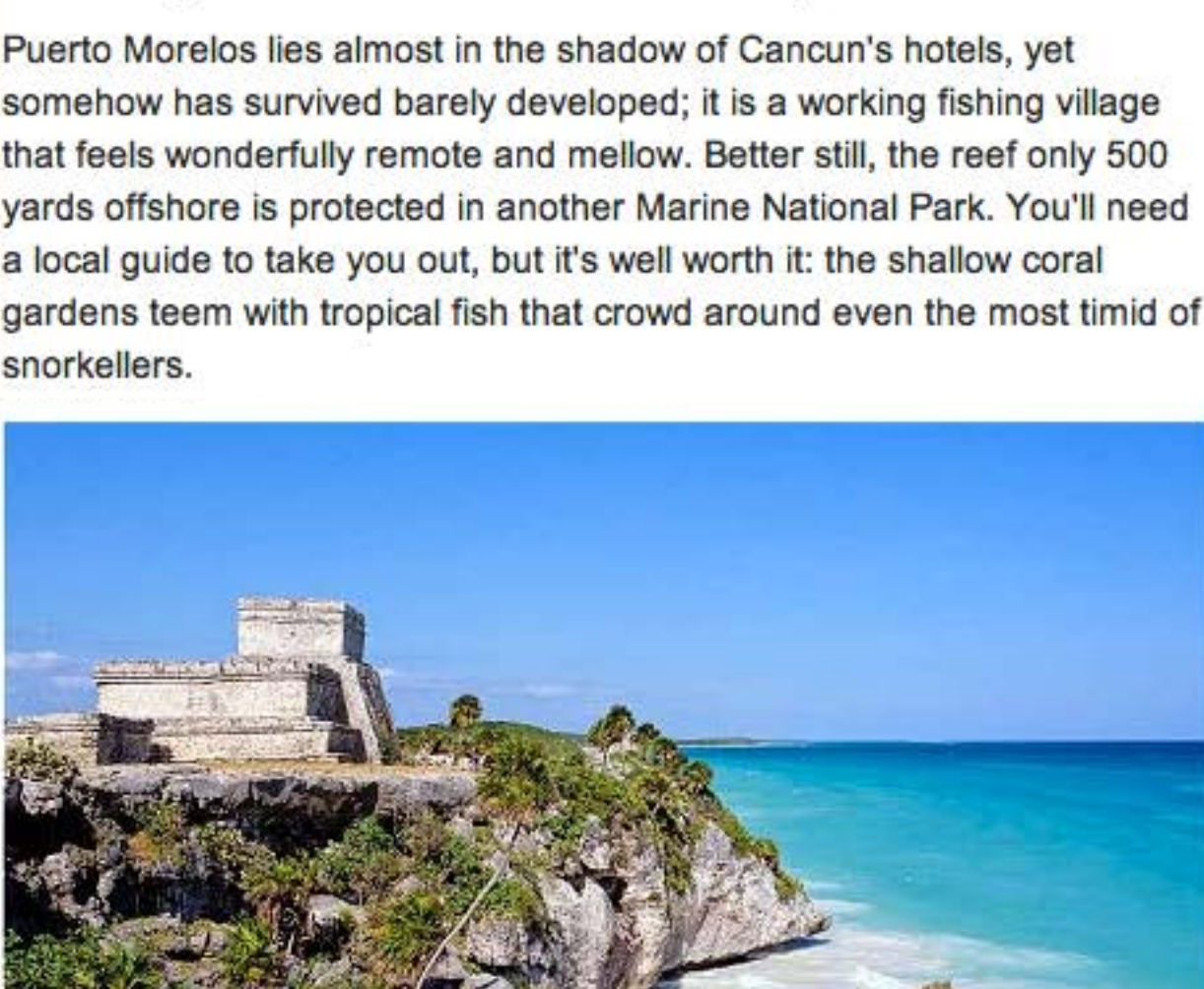
Lanchas for Playa Cacaluta and the other bays leave from the harbour at Santa Cruz. Explora México (958 587 2058; [explorahuatulco.com](#)) organises trips into the jungly interior to spectacular waterfalls, and rafting from gentle to seriously scary, as well as early-morning birdwatching. Day trips cost about £32.

The Riviera Maya

The Riviera Maya, stretching south from Cancun on Mexico's Caribbean coast, attracts the vast majority of British visitors to Mexico, thanks to direct charter and scheduled flights from London. For all its notoriety as a brash and noisy resort – and you should definitely avoid the place during American college spring break – Cancun does have world-class beaches; its sand is so white and fine that even on the most blazing of days it stays cool to the touch.

On the coast to the south, resort hotels line the coast, hidden in their gated enclosures. They are thinly spread, however, so to escape any crowds all you have to do is walk a few hundred yards from the sunbeds.

Puerto Morelos lies almost in the shadow of Cancun's hotels, yet somehow has survived barely developed; it is a working fishing village that feels wonderfully remote and mellow. Better still, the reef only 500 yards offshore is protected in another Marine National Park. You'll need a local guide to take you out, but it's well worth it: the shallow coral gardens teem with tropical fish that crowd around even the most timid of snorkellers.



Marking the southern end of the Riviera Maya is Tulum, where beautiful Mayan ruins stand guard over the beach. The sand stretches for miles, through Tulum and on into the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve. Here, a narrow spit of land divides scarily deserted beaches from a fresh and saltwater lagoon backed by tropical forest.

Wild cats – jaguar and puma among them – inhabit the park, along with spider and howler monkeys; you may hear the monkeys, but it's the birds you're most likely to see, about 300 species of them taking advantage of the wide variety of protected habitats.

Where to stay

Dos Ceibas Colourful, spacious *cabañas* in Tulum with an eco theme – solar power and candles for lighting, yoga and meditation classes on tap; turtles hatch on the beach directly outside (984 877 6024; [dosceibas.com](#); from £40).

Esencia With only 29 exquisitely elegant rooms set back from a near-deserted beach, plunge pools and a spa, Esencia offers intimate luxury of the most elite kind, and an alternative to the vast five-star resorts (001 877 528 3490; [hotelesencia.com](#); from £350).

Where to eat

La Playita Casual spot serving up the fresh catch of the day – a whole fish for two and a few beers cost the equivalent of £12 (on the beach in Puerto Morelos; no phone).

La Buena Vida This funky beach-bar and restaurant, with precarious tree-house seating, serves great margaritas and tacos (Half Moon Bay, Akumal; 984 875 9061; [labuenavidarestaurant.com](#)).

What to do

Almost Heaven Adventures (998 871 0230; [almostheavenadventures.com](#)) arranges snorkelling and diving trips to the Puerto Morelos National Marine Park, as well as fishing and, on land, adventure tours.

The best trips into the **Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve**, run by locals, are with the Centro Ecológico Sian Ka'an (Highway 307 at the entrance to the Tulum ruins; 984 871 2499; [siankaan.org](#)).

Xel-Há, about eight miles north of Tulum, is centred on a natural formation of lagoons, inlets and underground caves, with wonderful snorkelling, large numbers of surprisingly big fish, and activities from kayaking to cliff jumping, rope swings to gently tubing down a river.

Despite a hefty entrance fee, crowds and a theme-park feel, Xel-Há ([xelha.com](#); £50, under-12s half-price) is one of the highlights of this coast, especially if you have children: you can easily spend an entire day here and, if you do, it can seem pretty good value. The price is genuinely all-inclusive – not just lockers, towels and snorkel gear, but all you can eat and drink (including a free bar).

Getting there

British Airways (0844 493 0787; [ba.com](#)) and Virgin Atlantic (0844 209 7777; [virgin-atlantic.com](#)) offer direct flights from London to Cancun. Thomson (thomson.co.uk) has direct flights from Gatwick and various regional airports; Thomas Cook (flythomascook.com) from Manchester.

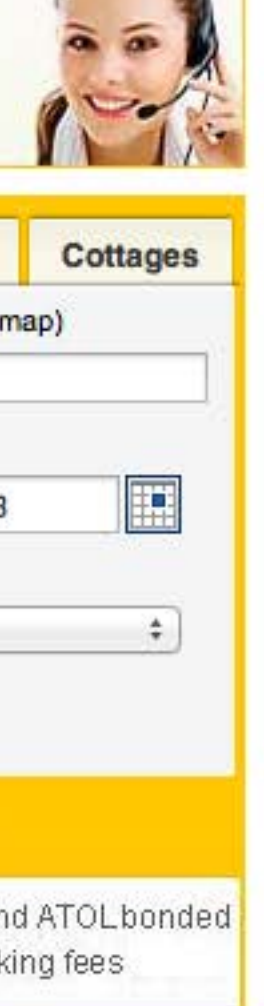
For Puerto Vallarta or Huatulco (see below) you'll need to change planes, either in Mexico City (direct flights with British Airways) or in the United States. All the big package operators offer holidays in the principal Riviera Maya resorts, but for somewhere more intimate, or on the Pacific coast, you're better off with a specialist such as Audley Travel (01993 838638; [audleytravel.com](#)) or Cathy Matos Mexican Tours (020 8492 0000; [mextours.co.uk](#))

Safety

While Mexico's drug wars have faded from the headlines, in truth they haven't gone away. But tourists were never the targets, or the victims; for visitors, Mexico is as safe as any comparable long-haul destination. For the latest advice, see [gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/mexico](#).

John Fisher is the author of *The Rough Guide to Mexico*; the ninth edition has recently been published

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