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Dinner at Betty's: Best of the Riviera Nayarit

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Tribune News Service

MARCH 25, 2019, 5:45 AM

SAN BLAS, Mexico Does your favorite celebrity chef spring to mind when you're feeling puckish, clicking through the channels and looking for a cooking show? No?

The name "Betty Vasquez" didn't ring my bell, either. But when I searched the internet for "Mexico famous chefs," I found her in San Blas, in the state of Nayarit, north of Puerto Vallarta.



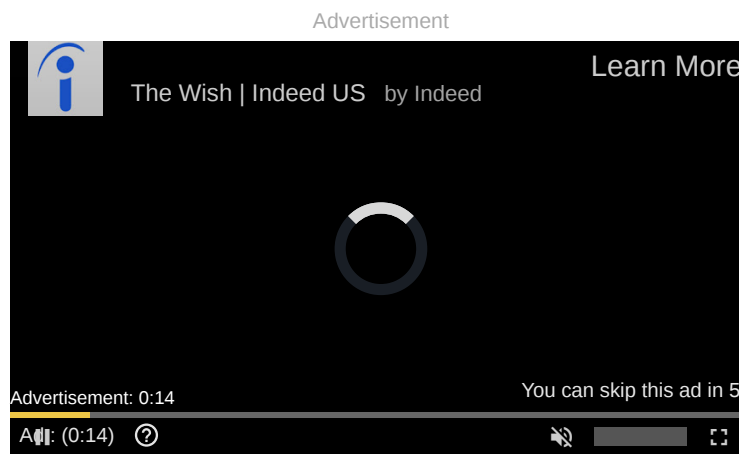
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Later on, when Steve, my husband, suggested that we spend one of our Puerto Vallarta vacation days driving north along the Riviera Nayarit, I agreed, as long as it included dinner at Betty's, in San Blas.

Until then, I hadn't realized that the border between the two states, Jalisco and Nayarit, is just north of the airport, at the Rio (river) Ameco. Beyond the border you're in wonderland, on one of Mexico's last, unspoiled tropical coasts.

Still a bit off the grid, it's a glorious refuge for wildlife, with hundreds of empty sand beaches, clear-water streams and mangrove swamps thick with birds, fish, crocodiles, small mammals and even lynx-like cats.

Driving there we'd pass a dozen little villages, from Nuevo Vallarta and Flamingoes to Bucerias, Huanacastle, Punta Mita, Sayulita, San Francisco, Lo de Marcos, Guayabitos and Chacala, before ever reaching San Blas.



But it wasn't that far, according to Sonia, the concierge at our hotel, the Miraval, in Nuevo Vallarta. "San Blas is a three-hour drive, lots of curves, but scenic," she said.

"Take your toothbrush and stay overnight. Then you'll have time to stop along the way in Bucerias, Sayulita and San Pancho. Everybody swims in the ocean and you can get lunch."

We left Puerto Vallarta early the next morning heading north on Highway 200, following the coastline, passing miles of sandy shores and rolling waves, thrilled to be seeing something new.

Steve, who'd done some research, wondered whether San Blas, now a sleepy farm town, was the same port of call where, from the 16th century on, Spain's treasure ships, returning from the Philippines, first made landfall, stopping to take on fresh water.

Later, in 1767, when Spain decided to push her empire north, as far as Alaska, San Blas became an official naval port. It was here that Father Junipero Serra, the Spanish priest, and a company of soldiers embarked, sailing north to build California's missions.

Our first stop, in Buceritas, was just long enough to explore the expansive arts and crafts street market, on Lazaro Cardenas Avenue, and for a 10-minute swim in the ocean, a block away. As we were leaving, two friendly Canadians in bathing suits, there for the winter season, stopped to urge us to join them. "It's marvelous," they said.

The next stop was the Four Seasons and the W Hotel, for a look at each resort's very special lobby art, including paintings, pottery and Huichol beaded figures and murals.

A few miles on we reached Sayulita, an art colony and one of Mexico's historic "magic towns." With galleries, shops, cafes, coffee shops, cottages and sheds crowded onto every buildable inch, its cobblestone lanes were as boisterous as they were colorful. Joining mobs of shoppers, mostly Mexican vacationers, we found a beachside cafe and ordered ice tea.

Eventually we reached San Pancho San Francisco, officially a place I'll remember because we sat on the central plaza and watched the iguanas in a tree, then spotted a street artist who sold me a primitive painting. "My father paints all of these," he said, showing me a half-dozen different scenes. "He makes the paper, too."

Colored flags strung between the rooftops a recent trend, it seems led the way to the ocean and Las Palmas Restaurant on the beach, where we sat under an umbrella, watched the surfers and ordered lunch. Lingering over a platter with six kinds of tacos and a couple of pints, an hour ticked away before we noticed it. By the time we reached San Blas the sun was leaning westward, bathing the ocean in a silvery sheen.

As we circled the plaza, passing mothers pushing babies in strollers, old men playing checkers, and skinny kids chasing around the fountain, I caught a whiff of barbecued pork. A wave of nostalgia made my heart thump, and I felt like a fifth-grader again, traveling with my parents.

San Blas, I could see, wouldn't be on the average traveler's bucket list. But simplicity is its charm. If you've seen Alfonso Cuarón's film "Roma," a story of ordinary people coping with life in Mexico in the 1970s, you'll know what I mean.

As we pulled into the gas station, the attendant, a tall guy in cowboy boots, ambled over to man the pump.

"If you want to taste real Nayarit cooking," he said, spotting the tourist map on the dashboard, "try the Hotel Garza Canela, that way," he said, pointing toward the ocean. "They have a restaurant there, and a pool."

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"It's right there, across the patio," Rosa, behind the desk, said as she pointed the way.

Stepping outside I realized that we were behind a wall in a colonial-style hacienda, with leafy trees shading a spacious patio and garden with several other buildings and a swimming pool.

"My father loved those trees," said the lady at the restaurant door, her brown hair twisted into a bun. "He spent hours out there, weeding and watering. Come in, I'm Betty," she said smiling.

I was so thrilled to meet her that I grinned like an idiot, but she shook hands and looked pleased. "And you've come all this way, just to eat here?" she said. "I am so glad you're here," she said, showing us to a table.

"What do you think?" I asked Steve, after she'd donned an apron and disappeared into the kitchen. "Worth two stars?"

Twenty minutes later we compared our dinners. "This is delicious," he said, sharing a taste of baked pork loin, with a fruit-and-chipotle sauce. "Is yours the curried shrimp?" he asked. "Am I tasting coconut milk?"

We were scanning the dessert menu when she returned with coffee, and since it was early and the restaurant was still empty, she sat down to talk.

"Tell me, will you be here long?" she said. "I loved Paris when I studied at the Cordon Bleu, but this is our family home. My roots are here. Do you have time to tour around? There's a lot to see."

I got out my pad and pen. "What else should we see?" Scribbling, I made a list. Visit the fort on San Basilio hill. Look out at the town and ocean view. See the big white rock. The Huichol people call it Tatei Haramara, the sea goddess. Walk through the old church, La Nuestra Senora del Rosario, near the fort. Swim at Las Islitas beach, on Matanchen Bay. Bring bug spray. Don't miss the highlight, the naturalist-guided boat tour on Santiago River estuary in La Tovara National Park.

"You know," she said, pausing to think, "Why don't I show you around? I'm going out of town, but I'm free in the morning. We're filming the next season of "MasterChef Mexico" and I have to be there. I'm one of the show's three judges."

After our tour with Betty, we took the guided boat ride through La Tovara's estuary, with naturalist Francisco Garcia. Gliding from shadowy mangroves to sunlit freshwater pools, seeing rare birds and strange trees, was wonderful and enchanting.

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Betty was right. The boat ride was almost as memorable as dinner at the El Delfin. And as always, the best adventure was the one I didn't plan.

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Touring the Riviera Nayarit: see www.rivieranayarit.com

Hotel Garza Canela, www.garzacanela.com: rooms or suites for up to six, US \$90-\$275.

Entrees at El Delfin restaurant: US \$10-\$25

Driving from Puerto Vallarta: National Hwy 200 North to signs to Tepic, then State 16 to Zacualpan and San Blas.

From Puerto Vallarta: 156 km., 79 miles, 3 hours by car

From Mazatlan: 283 km., 176 miles

From Guadalajara: 261 km., 162 miles, three hours by car

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