



WORD TRAVELS FA
FOR GIRLS ON THE GO: Wheth travel solo or in packs, two new offer places for women of all ag *Fly Solo: The 50 Best Places of Girl to Travel Alone* and *50 Best Getaways in North America*. Pa

EDITOR: Lisa Lenoir TO REACH US: (312) 321-2194, travel@

TWIN CITIES



Hand-painted plates from Zihuatanejo, Mexico feature flora and fauna motifs from the area. -STEVE HAGGERTY/COLORWORLD/PHOTOS FOR THE SUN-TIMES

Zihuatanejo and Ixtapa showcase old and new Mexico

BY ANNE Z. COOKE AND STEVE HAGGERTY

BARRA DE POTOSI, Mexico — Sliding his kayak into a mangrove thicket, Pablo Mendizabal crawled carefully out onto a slimy trunk, reached between the roots and pulled out an empty soda bottle.

"You've got sharp eyes," said one of the kayakers, peering into the shadows. "I never even saw that thing. But where does it come from, so far out here?"

"Most likely a local fisherman," said Mendizabal, tossing the bottle onto a small but growing heap of trash between his legs. "It's a lack of education," he said. "The people from the village don't know what plastics are doing to the lagoon."

Mendizabal, a biologist and owner of an

eco-tour company based in Ixtapa, on Mexico's Pacific Coast, was spending the morning guiding a kayak trip through Laguna de Potosi, a federal wildlife refuge near the fishing village of Barra de Potosi.

A maze of ponds and channels winding through 25-foot-high mangrove thickets, the lagoon adjoins the ocean here on the Costa Grande, 12 miles south of the twin resort towns of Ixtapa and Zihuatanejo. Mostly brackish water, the lagoon provides protected habitat for fish, iguanas, endemic birds and migratory flocks.

Birders' paradise

The regular arrival of dozens of species bring birders to the lagoon, especially during the dry season — December through May — when the mangrove drop some of



Coconut palms are reflected in the infinity pool beside the beach at Villa Del Sol, Zihuatanejo, Mexico.

their leaves and the birds are easier to spot. For kayakers, who can rent boats in the village, it's an easy and interesting paddle.

Leading the way, Mendizabal stopped now and again to point out a bird and to point out places where the mangrove's hanging tendrils drooped low into the water, the beginnings of a new root. Above us, the sunlight filtered down, illuminating patches of dark water. Beside the bow, juvenile snappers darted away. A female trogon with a pale yellow breast, found only along this coast, perched on an upper branch of the mangrove forest and squawked at the intruders, who oohed and aaahed appreciatively.

"Down there, that's a green heron," said Mendizabal, pointing into a thicket of sticks. We peered toward the spot, unsuccessfully searching for whatever it was he'd spotted. Finally, a pair of yellow legs hopped to an upper branch, and the heron appeared, right there all the time. "They're

See MEXICO, Page 4C

SINCE THE TWO ARE CLOSE TOGETHER, YOU CAN HAVE THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS.

MEXICO

Continued from Page 1C

Zihuatanejo and Ixtapa offer best of both worlds

not very good fliers, so they hide in the branches for protection," said Mendizabal.

Until the 1960s, Zihuatanejo was a sleepy fishing village of 5,000 residents, with a few hotels and fewer tourists. But that changed in the mid-1970s, when Ixtapa, the government-developed hotel zone, was built. Today, about 80,000 people live in the area, either in Ixtapa or in Zihuatanejo (or ZEE-wha, as it's called).

Colorful Zihuatanejo

Since the two are close together, you can have the best of both worlds. We prefer the feel and smells of old Mexico, so we headed for Zihuatanejo first. Founded in 1523 on the east shore of an oyster-shaped bay, the town clusters along the shore and up the hills behind it. The downtown's narrow streets are a riot of shapes and colors, from three-story colonial buildings to cement-block stores with flowering vines, the fishy-smelling waterfront, a covered open market packed with dolls, buckets, bushels of nuts, sides of beef and piles of fruit. Between the potholed streets and the dusty cars, there's enough chaotic bustle to satisfy the most intrepid wanderer.

The days are hot and dusty, but not too hot to prevent the owners of every shop, craft stall and open-air restaurant from arriving early to hose off the sidewalk and lounge in the shade of their front doors. Pretty soon, the shoppers arrive, toting heavy bags and pushing bicycles. People climb on and off rattletail buses and old ladies window-shop. The town is even prettier at night, when rows of miniature twinkle lights, each strand nailed on trees, along eaves and around doors, click on and cheerful voices carry out of open restaurant windows.

Most of Zihua's hotels are family owned, with rooms on two to four stories overlooking a courtyard. But there's plenty of choice, from the posh award winners to budget



Alebríjes, hand-carved wood figures from Oaxaca, are sold in art galleries in Zihuatanejo, Mexico. —STEVE HAGGERTY/COLORWORLD/FOR THE SUN-TIMES

inns. The best hotels, of course, are on Zihuatanejo Bay's two most beautiful beaches, Playa Madera and Playa La Ropa. If you book a hotel a block back from the beach, it will be cheaper. Hotels on the sand are the nicest — and most expensive.

We stayed at the Villa Del Sol, splurging on the beach-front location and the colonial-style *casitas* (guest houses), tucked away among tropical gardens. The hotel's two excellent restaurants, one slightly more formal and the other a cantina and bar, overlook the beach. Both are a good candidate for Mexico's most romantic dinner location.

Classically Mexican, with stuccoed wall, arched doorways, red tile roofs and hand-decorated tiles, the Villa Del Sol's double rooms are affordable in low season, including late May; the honeymoon couple sitting near us at dinner said they paid \$275 a night, the lowest promotional rate. The Villa

also has several beautiful pools, individual air conditioning, tennis courts, prompt service and a variety of beach sports.

Family friendly Ixtapa

At the end of our vacation, we moved to the Barcelo Hotel, a budget-priced multistory resort hotel in Ixtapa, geared for families and groups. A square, cement structure, the Barcelo's rooms open onto a glass-covered atrium with a lounge, bar, restaurant and reception area. On the ocean side, the rooms look over the pool area, several connected pools, a swim-up bar and rows of lounge chairs and umbrellas. The ocean and sand are a few yards beyond, but because this is open ocean, waves and swimming conditions vary widely.

The Barcelo's best feature, if you have children (as we do), is the pricing, with all meals, snacks and nonalcoholic drinks included in

the room price. Since we weren't always checking meal prices, we stopped worrying about what the kids ate or didn't eat. And since food was available all day long, at one place or another, they were never hungry.

Ixtapa (there are nine hotels here) is also closer to the area's two 18-hole golf courses, and to Delfiniti, a swim-with-the-dolphins facility. You can also rent bikes for rides along the beach walk. And Ixtapa is where most of Adventours, Pablo Mendizabal's adventure company, starts most of its outings. We took the guided six-hour eco-tour, ferrying over to Ixtapa Island, a wildlife preserve, biking through the forest, kayaking along the shoreline, snorkeling in the rocks and eating lunch on the beach.

As we drove back from Barra de Potosi, the weather began to change, with a mere hint of clouds gathering over the ocean. "When you've lived here long enough you



A long stone-and-cement walkway takes foot traffic between downtown Zihuatanejo and Playa La Madera, one of the area's top resorts. —ANNE WALLACE ALLEN/AP

IF YOU GO

ZIHUATANEJO AND IXTAPA, MEXICO

GETTING THERE: Fly non-stop to the Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo Airport or through Mexico City. Taxi rides from the airport to the Villa del Sol in Zihuatanejo are set at \$21. Be sure to purchase your ticket at the booth inside the airport lounge.

GETTING AROUND: For seeing things from a local perspective, get around town on local buses, which go between Ixtapa, Zihuatanejo and the beaches. Fares run about 40 cents. Taxi service from Playa La Ropa and Zihuatanejo is about \$5.

ACCOMMODATIONS: Double rooms at the Villa Del Sol, a member of Small Luxury

Hotels, start at \$300 per night. Ask for discounts and promotions available during low and shoulder seasons, from mid-May through November. Meals and drinks are priced separately. Call (888) 389-2645, e-mail reservation@villadelosol.net or visit www.hotelvilladelosol.net.

All-inclusive prices at the Barcelo, in Ixtapa, start at \$77 per adult and \$32 per child for a double room with two queen beds. Some prices are not all-inclusive and some higher prices apply during holiday seasons. Check the rates at www.barcelo.com.

TOURS: Adventours leads four-, five- and six-hour guided eco-tours priced from \$56 to \$76 per person. Call 011-52 (755) 553-1069, e-mail adventours@zihuatanejo.net or visit www.ixtapa-adventours.com or www.zihuatanejo.net.

can smell the rain before it comes," said Mendizabal, rolling down the window to feel the breeze. For the first time, the air felt humid, and the leaf buds on the trees looked ready to burst open.

"You wouldn't believe that these hills, so brown and barren they look dead, would come to life un-

less you were here and saw it," he said. "Two weeks after the rain starts, everything turns a bright vivid green." And another season begins.

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty are California-based freelance writers.