



A surfer studies the waves in front of Conrad Punta de Mita, a gated, luxury retreat about an hour northwest of Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. The resort is along a Pacific Coast peninsula treasured by surfers for its point break and has become an enclave of private retreats.

NECEE REGIS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

## How to build flexibility into your vacation plans



**The Navigator**  
CHRISTOPHER ELLIOTT

As they begin to plan their summer vacations, travelers don't just want flexibility, they need it. That includes Katy Kassian. She doesn't know where she's going yet, but she knows how she'll get

flights without any fees up to seven days before departure when they book round-trip flights and a hotel together. For cruise passengers, it also has a "Plane to Port Commitment."

"If a customer misses their cruise departure due to a JetBlue flight delay or cancellation, we'll help them get to the next port of call," says Andres Barry, president of JetBlue Travel Products.

Shelley Ewing, president of TierOne Travel, is a fan of Disney Cruise Line's flexibility. The company modified its cancellation fee schedule, widening its refund window to allow some guests to cancel up to 60 days before sailing on selected sailings.

Ewing also recommends Royal Caribbean, which allows some travelers to cancel up to 48 hours before their sail date and get back the full amount paid as a future cruise credit. (As always, these terms are subject to change.)

A travel insurance policy can offset some of the cancellation risks, experts say. "There are certain types of travel insurance that will provide maximum flexibility for your trip," says Joe Cronin, president of International Citizens Insurance, a health insurance site for expatriates.

There are two types of insurance. Standard travel insurance covers named perils, such as an unexpected cancellation or a death in the family. A cancel-for-any-reason policy is exactly what it sounds like, and it allows travelers to recoup a large percentage of their expenses.

"You can cancel for any reason whatsoever, usually up to two days before departure, for a reimbursement up to 75 percent of prepaid nonrefundable expenses," says Chelsea Capwell, a spokeswoman for Travel Insurance Master, an online travel insurance aggregator. But you have to buy the policy early to get cancel-for-any-reason coverage — usually within one to 21 days of the initial trip deposit.

Everyone wants flexibility this summer, because no one knows what will happen. We could get another wave of coronavirus cases. The war in Ukraine could spread. And you can do all of these things — hire an agent, research the most flexible policies, buy insurance — and still find yourself on the wrong end of a strict policy.

Too often, travelers throw their hands in the air and walk away. But that overlooks the most effective strategy for making your vacation as flexible as possible: Ask. If you need a late checkout, ask the front desk. If you need to cut your stay short, ask. If you have to reschedule your stay or want a refund, there's no harm in asking.

For the first time in years, maybe even decades, the travel industry wants to be as accommodating as possible. Galak, the professor, suspects the travel industry's unprecedented flexibility is a limited-time offer. But although he believes policies will tighten again as summer approaches, he doubts they will return to their pre-pandemic rigidity.

"Consumers simply won't stand for it," he says.

Elliott is a consumer advocate, journalist and co-founder of the advocacy group Travelers United. Email him at [chris@elliott.org](mailto:chris@elliott.org).

# In Mexico, riding a wave of nostalgia

'Those days are gone': A surfer retraces his steps in Mazatlán, San Blas and Punta de Mita to see how much his 1960s-era haunts have changed

BY NECEE REGIS

In the late '60s, my husband, Jim, and his college pals in L.A. would load surfboards on top of a beat-up van and head south along the Mexican coast during spring break, stopping in Mazatlán, San Blas and Punta de Mita. They slept in their van or under palapas on the beach — never spending more than \$2 a night — and relied on local fishermen and vendors to supply them with fresh fish and fruit.

After hearing Jim's idyllic-sounding surfing stories for years, I suggested a road trip to revisit the haunts of his youth. We started in Mazatlán, at the mouth of the Gulf of California on the Pacific Coast, where we now spend the winter months. Our goal was to find not just the towns, but also the exact stretches of beach where he stayed, where geography, winds and water currents converged to create world-renowned surf breaks.

Under a cloudless February sky, the dry desert air from the nearby Sierra Madre Occidental Mountains heated the blacktop on the two-lane highway, making for perfect road trip conditions on the drive to San Blas. Along the route, the landscape morphed from marshes and lagoons to mango, agave and banana farms. Trucks streamed by in both directions, passing each other in an imaginary but mutually understood center lane. Side-of-the-road truck stops offered dried shrimp, shrimp ceviche, shrimp tacos and tamales, as well as jicama, jackfruit, coconuts and jugs of water.

We arrived in San Blas in less than four hours. Located in the state of Nayarit on the northern edge of Matanchén Bay, it's a sleepy town known for its history as a shipbuilding center and port during colonial days; its naval base; its birding opportunities; and its bugs (mosquitoes and no-see-ums), which swarm at dawn and dusk. San Blas is also celebrated in the surfing community for its fine sand beaches and what was once touted as the world's longest surfable wave.

It wasn't difficult to locate Jim's old surfing spot, because overdevelopment hasn't spoiled the landscape in San Blas. We drove through the colorful arch at Playa Las Islitas and turned onto a dusty dirt road along the miles-long beach lined with palm trees, thatched-roof shacks selling beach gear and open-air seaside restaurants serving grilled fish, ceviche, shrimp and beer.

Although the beach looks the same, some artificial jetties and a hurricane have filled the bay with

sand, so visitors have to wade out quite far to swim. The waves are now more suitable for beginner surfers or children. Surfers looking for larger waves these days head to Stoners Point, reached at the end of Las Islitas via an unmaintained dirt road.

Jim said he and his friends used to drive on the beach, taking turns picking each other up at the end of their half-mile or longer rides. "Those days are gone," he said. "But the beach is still breathtaking."

Spectacular scenery is not limited to the beach. At the top of San Basilio Hill, the ruins of a 1770 fort, La Contaduría, command a striking view of the town and harbor. Steps away, the romantic stone shell of the Nuestra Señora del Rosario church, circa 1769, provides Instagram-worthy backdrops. The crumbling church was also the inspiration for the last poem penned by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "The Bells of San Blas."

We couldn't leave San Blas without an afternoon of birding. Our hotel's concierge suggested the perfect guide: 74-year-old Chencho, a San Blas native who knew his way around the estuaries, coastal mangrove inlets and coves of the La Tovar National Park as intimately as I know the paths to my favorite swimming spots in my hometown woods. We were able to get close to and identify 28 species on our mangrove cruise, including familiar birds such as egrets, herons, ibises and anhingas, as well as new-to-us species such as the petite vermilion flycatcher and the primordial-looking boat-billed heron.

After three nights in San Blas, we set our sights on Punta de Mita, in search of the sweet surf spot that, back in the day, was celebrated as a classic Malibu-like point break, a long break wrapping around a small, rocky reef. Jim referred to it as "my own little Shangri-La," a place where he and his buddies would surf all day and share a palapa (an open-sided structure with a palm-thatched roof) under the stars on a powdery beach at night.

It proved almost as elusive as the fictional Shangri-La.

About a three-hour drive south from San Blas and about an hour northwest of Puerto Vallarta, Punta de Mita — a knob-shaped peninsula on the northern end of Banderas Bay — has significantly changed since 1969. Much of the sparsely populated fishing and farming community is now a gated, private reserve of luxury resorts, private homes, golf courses and exclusive restaurants. (The gated community has been

SEE MEXICO ON F5

### If You Go

#### WHERE TO STAY Hotel Garza Canela

Paredes No. 106 Sur, San Blas  
011-52-323-285-0112

[garzacanela.com/en](http://garzacanela.com/en)  
Family-owned hotel with clean, simply furnished rooms and suites in traditional colonial-style architecture. In-town location. Rates from about \$74 per night.

#### Xiobella Luxury Boutique Hotel

Calle Playa Careyeros, Punta Negra, Punta de Mita  
011-52-322-175-2699

[xiobella.com/en](http://xiobella.com/en)  
At the end of a dirt road, this oceanside, all-inclusive boutique hotel features a pool, restaurant, WiFi, air conditioning and spa. Rates from about \$337 per night.

#### Conrad Punta de Mita

Punta de Mita Highway, Sayulita Km 2, Litibu  
011-52-329-298-4300

[conradpuntademitita.com](http://conradpuntademitita.com)  
Sprawling, gated, luxury retreat along beach with 265 guest rooms and 25 suites. Family-friendly with restaurants, bars, spa, fitness room, pools, game room and kids' club. Rates from about \$625 per night.

#### WHERE TO EAT El Delfin

Hotel Garza Canela, Paredes No. 106 Sur, San Blas  
011-52-323-285-0112

[bit.ly/el-delfin](http://bit.ly/el-delfin)  
Chef-owner Betty Vázquez offers creative menus at the Hotel Garza Canela. Traditional Mexican breakfast. Lunch and dinner feature fresh seafood and shrimp, chicken, pasta, salads and soup. Save room for homemade desserts. Open Thursday through Tuesday 8 to 10 a.m. for breakfast and 1 to 8:30 p.m. for lunch and dinner; closed Wednesday. Entrees from about \$11.

#### El Lanchero

Playa Las Islitas, San Blas  
011-52-311-340-1107

[bit.ly/el-lanchero](http://bit.ly/el-lanchero)  
Enjoy lobsters, shrimp, freshly caught finfish and oysters under a seaside palapa with your feet in the sand. Also serves hamburgers, empanadas and more. One of many restaurants along this beach. Open Tuesday through Sunday 9 a.m.; usually closes when the sun sets. Lunch from about \$6.

#### La Pescadora

Ave. El Anclote 10, Punta de Mita  
011-52-329-291-5212

[bit.ly/la-pescadora](http://bit.ly/la-pescadora)

Several notches above usual seaside palapas (cloth napkins!), this restaurant specializes in raw, marinated, grilled and fried seafood. Impeccable service, full bar and views of Banderas Bay along Playa Punta de Mita. Open daily noon to 9 p.m. Entrees from about \$16.

#### El Coral

Ave. El Anclote 4, Punta de Mita, Nayarit  
011-52-329-111-2424

The oldest restaurant along Playa Punta de Mita, this casual sand-in-your-toes establishment is filled with tourists and locals catching up on the gossip of the day. Specializing in seafood — shrimp, lobsters, octopus and local fresh fish — plus guacamole, beef fajitas, nachos and quesadillas. Open daily 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. Entrees from about \$8.

#### WHAT TO DO

##### La Contaduría and Nuestra Señora del Rosario Temple

El cerro de San Basilio, San Blas  
Tour what is left of the 18th-century fort, La Contaduría, and enjoy a scenic overview of the city and port. Steps away are the ruins of the Nuestra Señora del Rosario Temple. Open daily 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. Admission about \$1.

##### La Tovar National Park

Embarcadero el Conchal, El Conchal 63743, San Blas  
Take a river cruise along fresh and saltwater estuaries and coastal mangrove inlets and coves. The nature preserve is home to many species of endemic and migratory birds, caiman and turtles. Stop by the embarcadero to see whether a tour is departing, or reserve a private guide through a hotel concierge. Tours run daily, 9 a.m. to dusk. Prices vary per length of trip, from one to three hours. From about \$6 per person. Private four-hour tour for two, about \$25 per person.

##### Accion Tropical

Ave. El Anclote, 16 local 2. Punta de Mita  
011-52-329-291-6633  
[acciontropicalmita.com](http://acciontropicalmita.com)  
Open since 1996, the first surf school in Punta de Mita now offers surfing and stand-up paddleboard lessons, board and equipment rentals, transportation to surf spots, seasonal whale-watching excursions and snorkeling trips to the nearby Islas Marietas National Park. Lessons from about \$80 per person.

#### INFORMATION

[rivieranayarit.com](http://rivieranayarit.com)

### TRAVEL

Editor: Nicole Arthur • Deputy Editor: Elizabeth Chang • Art Director: Talia Trackim • Photo Editor: Monique Woo • Staff Writer: Andrea Sachs • Editorial Assistant: Helen Carefoot • Travel Advertising: Ron Ulrich, 202-334-5289, [ronald.ulrich@washpost.com](mailto:ronald.ulrich@washpost.com) • To respond to one of our articles: E-mail [travel@washpost.com](mailto:travel@washpost.com), call 202-334-7750 or write: Washington Post Travel section, 1301 K St. NW Washington, D.C. 20001.

### SIGN LANGUAGE



CHARLES H. ANDERSON

This sign was spotted by Charles H. Anderson of St. Leonard, Md., at the Alaska Raptor Center in Sitka. Have you seen an amusing sign in your travels? We want to feature your photo in this space!

**Here's what to do:** Email your high-resolution JPEG images to [travel@washpost.com](mailto:travel@washpost.com) with "Sign Language" in the subject line. Please include your name, place of residence, sign location and contact information. Selected entries will appear in Travel's Sunday print section. Photos become property of The Washington Post, which may edit, publish, distribute or republish them in any form. No purchase necessary.

GO HERE, NOT THERE

# Fidalgo Island: More than a steppingstone to the San Juans

BY M.L. LYKE

Offering alternatives to overcrowded destinations.

In prime months, the lush **San Juan Islands** attract thousands of tourists. Visitors pack the ferry terminal on Fidalgo Island, eager to hop to one of the other islands that dot the northwest Salish Sea. Ridership typically jumps about 50 percent in summer months, and rates follow; a car and driver will pay from around \$50 to \$70 for a round trip this summer.

The jumbo green-and-white ferries stop at four of the biggest islands in the San Juan archipelago: Lopez, Shaw, Orcas and San Juan. Each island has its special charms.

Shaw is intensely private, with few visitor services except for one small grocery, a campground and a park. The cloistered nuns who live there have found a perfect retreat.

Outgoing Lopez is known as the "Friendly Isle." Drivers smile and wave at friend or stranger. It's the flattest of the islands, great for biking, with pastoral fields dotted with sheep, charming old farmhouses, locally sourced restaurants and the tucked-away bed-and-breakfasts that characterize these bucolic islands.

San Juan Island draws lovers of the Northwest's iconic orcas, a.k.a. killer whales. The island has a large fleet of whale-watching boats, a well-curated whale museum and a shore-based orca-viewing park. The island's lively downtown, Friday Harbor, offers fine-art galleries, boutiques, restaurants and pubs with local brews, though several buildings were destroyed in a recent fire.

Orcas Island, largest of the San Juan Islands, has a deep artistic groove expressed in lovingly tended gardens, galleries of fine pottery and paintings, farm-to-table restaurants, concerts and film festivals, and wildly creative parades and happenings. Well-maintained trails wind around lakes and up mountains to breathtaking views.

These serene islands offer endless beauty and respite. But in peak season — Memorial Day through Labor Day weekends —



PHOTOS BY ISTOCK

A bluff overlooks a strait from a park in the port town of Anacortes on Washington's Fidalgo Island. Sometimes called the "First of the San Juans," the island is often seen simply as a place to catch a ferry elsewhere in the area — but it is a destination itself.

travelers can spend long hours queued up in their cars at the ferry terminal on Fidalgo Island. (Walk-ons pay less and stress less.) What many don't realize is they are already in a Northwest paradise. It's all around them, right there, on the island sometimes called the "First of the San Juans."

**Location:** The San Juan Islands can be reached from the Anacortes Ferry Terminal at 5316 Ferry Terminal Rd. on Fidalgo Island. Check for updates at [bit.ly/washington-ferries](http://bit.ly/washington-ferries).

First stop on a **Fidalgo Island** tour is Anacortes. The port city of about 18,000 has retained its salty, working-waterfront character even as it has gussied up in recent decades. Look down the main drag, past the upscale res-



Cattle Point Lighthouse on San Juan Island, which draws tourists keen to catch sight of the Northwest's orca whales.

taurants and shops, and you may see a massive 200-foot fishing trawler towering high in a boat-yard dock.

Boats are everywhere, and there are numerous vessel slips in local marinas. If you like walking along docks, you'll find Alaskan gill-netters, luxury cruisers, racing sailboats and classic wooden rowboats. Adventurers can rent kayaks, solo or duo, or sign up for guided nature tours. And you don't need to go to the San Juans to go whale-watching: Boats depart regularly from Anacortes spring through summer.

Old Town — a historical section of Anacortes with turn-of-the-century brick charm — invites slow strolling. Top-rated restaurants such as Adrift and A Town Bistro serve beautifully

prepared food that's fresh from the sea and neighboring farmlands. Old Town streets are lined with art galleries, antique stores, bookstores, a restored 1890s hotel with spa, and niche shops with offerings such as designer clothes, charcuterie and vinyl records.

*Visitors are often stunned by the number of trails that crisscross Fidalgo, covering miles of shore and forest. Paths lead to beaver ponds and reflection lakes, driftwood beaches and old-growth forests.*

Visitors are often stunned by the number of scenic nature trails that crisscross Fidalgo, covering miles of shore and forest. Paths lead to beaver ponds and reflection lakes, driftwood beaches and old-growth forests. They zigzag up hills, reaching rocky balds with breathtaking 360-degree views.

One of Fidalgo's crown jewels is 220-acre Washington Park, which looks out on the San Juan archipelago. Situated at Fidalgo's west end, it shares much of the rest of the San Juans' striking geology, flora, fauna and wilderness vibe. Grabbing a west-facing park bench, visitors in the know can watch the crowded summer ferries thread their way out to the other islands and relax. They know that, without ferry or fuss, they've already arrived.

**Location:** Fidalgo Island is about 80 miles north of Seattle and connected by bridge to Skagit County and Whidbey Island.

Lyke is a writer based in the Pacific Northwest. Her website is [marilynlyke.com](http://marilynlyke.com).

## Waving hello to Pacific Coast surf spots from long ago

MEXICO FROM F2

branded Punta Mita. The geographic area that includes the town is Punta de Mita.)

We wandered, disoriented, and consulted online maps, hoping to match Jim's memories with the changed landscape. We got our answer from the proprietor of Accion Tropical, a surfing and snorkeling center located in the bustling village. The area where we stood — a stretch of beach with lively seaside restaurants, surf centers, craft shops, yoga studios and boutique clothing stores — had sprung up in the early 1990s, when the government relocated residents from an area that is now within Punta Mita. The addition of rock jetties that extend into the sea, designed to offer safe harbor to boats, changed the currents. The result was an enormous loss of sand that left a pebbly, rock-strewn beach in front of the previously perfect break.

No wonder it all looked different! Lalo Fernandez, the proprietor, suggested we visit the far end of the beach, near where the area's oldest restaurant, El Coral, was hosting its usual lunchtime crowds.

It was there, beyond the far-



LEFT: Palm trees, thatched-roof shops and simple open-air seafood restaurants line miles of beach in San Blas, Mexico.



PHOTOS BY NECEE REGIS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

RIGHT: The crumbling stone shell of the Nuestra Señora del Rosario church, circa 1769, sits on a hill above San Blas.

thest jetty, that Jim recognized the spot — and the wave. "I remember looking at the mountains and the sweep of the beach and thinking this was such a beautiful place," he said. Two 100-foot Italian yachts were anchored offshore in what was once a remote, uninhabited location.

Of course, it's still a beautiful place. We celebrated with lunch at seaside restaurant La Pescadora. Salty breezes cooled our sun-warmed skin as a whole grilled snapper marinated in smoky adobo arrived with piles of rice, salad, fresh corn tortillas and chips with two salsas. We toasted with a bloody mary and Pacifico beer and declared the journey a success.

Today, surfers are found much farther south along the shore, at Playa La Lancha. They park along Highway 200, grab their boards and follow an unmarked path for a 10-minute hike through an overgrown, junglelike landscape. Eventually, they arrive at a sweep of sandy beach with an A-frame point break and, if the swells are cooperating, six-foot waves — their own Shangri-La.

Regis is a writer based in Wellfleet, Mass. Her website is [neccee.com](http://neccee.com).

more

HEALTH & WELLNESS?

Washington Post newsletters deliver more of what you're looking for. Discover and subscribe for free at [washingtonpost.com/newsletters](http://washingtonpost.com/newsletters)