

## TRAVEL

# *The Best Beaches in Mexico You've Never Heard Of*

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Cabo Pulmo, Baja California, Mexico | ©fitopardo.com/moment/getty images

Winter's got us firmly clutched in her icy death grip with no relief in sight, and flying south to kick back on a beach in Mexico sounds pretty dang appealing right about now. Unless, of course, you're joined by 1,500 of your closest friends, relatives, strangers, their mothers, grandmothers, and screaming children.

Finding an untapped beach along the coast of Mexico has become something of a challenge as the sleepy towns and secret coves along its shorelines get discovered, rediscovered, Instagrammed, and overdeveloped. But it's not impossible. All you need is a sense of adventure and, in some cases, a set of wheels to dig into your *Cast Away* fantasy on one of these rustic, off-the-radar stretches of sand.



Costa Maya | Bill Diodato/Getty Images

## ***Costa Maya***

### *Quintana Roo*

Tulum is anything but low-key these days; instead of arriving late to the party, skip it altogether and keep heading south. Practically at the border of Belize, at the very southernmost point of Quintana Roo, you'll find the Costa Maya, a stretch of coast well loved by locals. On one side you have the gorgeous Caribbean Sea and with its #instaporn colors, and on the other, lush, verdant mangroves teeming with wildlife. Onshore, there's the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve, where visitors stand a good chance of spying monkeys and jaguars.

Make Mahahual your jumping off point for exploring; although the town's main eyesore is a small cruise terminal, it's thoroughly backpacker friendly with small hotels, hostels, and beach bars. Consider Posada Pachamama, a small guesthouse in the heart of the town, and don't skip Nohoch Kay, a beachside restaurant serving up whole fish bathed in garlic or white-wine sauce.



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### *Oaxaca*

Lagunas de Chacahua is about as far off that beaten path as you can get, friends. Located between Puerto Escondido and Huatulco, this village sits on the channel that strings Chacahua Lagoon to the Pacific. Beach bums, backpackers, and chasers of chill all hang in harmony on this rugged beach, a surfer's paradise where Australians flock annually to chase massive waves. Come supertime locals and visitors gather on "Restaurant Row," a string of ubiquitous beach shacks and bars slinging various versions of the same ceviche or fish taco. Don't expect to lay your

head anywhere too luxurious in Chacahua -- bungalows reign supreme here, and are usually made from bamboo and palm fronds and available on a first come, first serve basis (the internet is somewhat nonexistent here). On the plus side, they can be rented for as little as 100 pesos a night.



Cabo Pulmo | ullstein bild/getty images

## ***Cabo Pulmo***

### *Baja California Sur*

If you can stomach the drive, it's worth the 60 bumpy miles outside of Cabo San Lucas to explore the 5-mile beach of Cabo Pulmo. Whereas Cabo San Lucas and San Jose del Cabo cater to Richie Rich's with money to burn, Cabo Pulmo is your basic, barefoot beach bum hideaway that's delightfully unpretentious and tiny to boot. Surrounded by red rock desert and mountains, the town itself only has a population of maybe 100, served by two cantinas and four restaurants. What's there to do, you ask? It's home to Cabo Pulmo National Marine Park, a paradise for divers who will no doubt curse us for blowing up their spot.

The best (only?) hotel options in town is Cabo Pulmo Beach Resort, a *Robinson Crusoe*-style hotel with bungalows equipped with kitchens and barbecues. The hotel can help organize a host of local activities like diving, snorkeling, surfing, and hiking. Keep in mind that the majority of Cabo Pulmo is cash-only.



Celestún | Mark D Callanan/getty images

## *Celestún*

### *Yucatán*

The city of Mérida has flourished into a buzzy destination, but those in search of some bona fide chill time would do best to head outside the city to Celestún. It's got all the dressings you'd expect from a slice of Caribbean paradise (sugary sand, check; crystal-clear water, check) yet it's blissfully laidback and uncrowded, save for resident fishermen and locals catching a break from the city. The real draw here is the Biosfera Ría Celestún, a wildlife sanctuary home to hundreds of brilliantly pink flamingos who gather here year-round. Nab yourself a local with a boat who'll take you to see the full spectacle -- they are at their most colorful from November to mid-March. For the full escapist effect, book a room at Casa de Celeste Vida, a small guest house located directly on the beach and less than a mile from "downtown." But for those who still want to bed down in the city to partake in Mérida's energetic vibe, it's a relatively painless two-and-a-half-hour bus ride to the beach, or an hour and 45 minutes in a *colectivo*.



**bahía san agustín** | Eye Ubiquitous/Universal Images Group/Getty images

## *Bahía San Agustín*

### *Oaxaca*

The cruise port of Huatulco on the southern coast of Oaxaca is comprised of nine different bays, and the most hidden and arguably most beautiful is Bahía San Agustín, a small fishing village 9 miles west of Santa Cruz Huatulco. At the end of a dusty dirt road off of coastal Highway 200, you'll find a mile-long, crescent stretch of golden beach and cobalt-colored water. Bahía San Agustín trades the resorts and tourist-packed restaurants that plague Huatulco's other bays for rustic palapa beach shacks slinging grilled fish tacos, fresh ceviche, and frosty Pacificos. You'll share the sand with mostly locals who've come to escape the fray of gringos nearby. Snorkeling in the calm waters is the main event of the day; plenty of huts will rent out masks. Getting there is a bit of a hike, but that's kind of the point, right? Grab a taxi from Santa Cruz, or snag the bus between Huatulco and Pochutla and take a taxi from there.



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## *Playa del Caballo*

### *Jalisco*

After you've been asked for the thousandth time if you want to buy a Seahawks Luchador mask or a bag of weed on the beaches of Puerto Vallarta, you'll be begging for some solitude. One of the best things to do in PV is hop a water taxi to "secluded" beaches like Yelapa and Las Animas... thing is, it's an activity enjoyed by many, thus defeating the purpose. But tucked between the well-trodden shores of Boca de Tomatlan and Las Animas is Playa del Caballo, a beach that's straight out of *Castaway*. There's nothing here but towering palm trees, psychedelic blue water, and lean-tos built out of palm fronds left by campers past.

You may see the occasional local who has hiked in from Boca de Tomatlan, or a few other travelers who have scoured the secret beach blogs. Don't worry about



bringing in your own sustenance -- there's a full bar at Casitas Maraika, just north of the beach on a cliff overlooking the water, where you can munch on tacos and burritos. It also has bungalows to rent out, should you want to spend the night.

To get to Playa del Caballo, take the bus from Puerto Vallarta to Boca de Tomatlan. From there, you can take a water taxi to Las Animas and walk north, or you can embark on the ridge hiking trail that hugs the coastline and stops at several other secluded beaches along the way.



Chacala | Brian Vander Brug/Los Angeles Times/Getty Images

## *Chacala*

### *Nayarit*

Plenty of other beach towns north of Puerto Vallarta in neighboring Nayarit have been overrun by tourists, yet somehow Chacala has managed to cling to its secret

status. This fisherman village has a population of just 300 plus a steady stream of beach hut hopping surfers. Bed down at Villa Celeste Chacala, a bright and colorful guest house designed in the traditional Mexican hacienda style, right on the beach. All rooms have complete kitchens, and the hotel offers up a BBQ for guests to grill their own seafood. But if cooking's not your speed, hit Quezada for broiled fish on the beach; for breakfast the pro-move is Majahua, tucked back in lush jungle overlooking the cove. The wildlife is pretty, er, wild here -- keep your eyes peeled for white-nose coatis and ocelots.



playa mayto | Dan Gair/Lonely Planet Images/Getty Images

## ***Playa Mayto***

### *Jalisco*

Invest in your own set of wheels and set off south from Puerto Vallarta along Highway 200, which hugs the Bay of Banderas before winding up into the mountains and Selva El Tuito National Park. This is the Cabo Corrientes: 45 miles of untamed shoreline. Between craggy coves you'll find clusters of secret beaches, many only accessible by boat, and the rugged Playa Mayto is among the most beautiful you can still reach by foot. Fringed in palm trees, the beach itself is virtually empty save for one family-run hotel with clean, basic rooms and a small restaurant serving up three meals a day. Budget-conscious travelers can pitch a tent at the on-site campground, as well.

Explorers will undoubtedly wind up in Villa Del Mar, a nearby community where outdoor activities are the main event, like horseback riding, motorcycling, snorkeling, or visiting the turtle hatcheries. It's also worth a trip into Tehuamixtle, which is the largest "town" nearby, though it's more akin to a fishing village with a few sleepy, sun drenched porch patio bars and sea views. Not too shabby.

*Meagan is a travel writer living and breathing in NYC. But if you give her a plane ticket today, she will be somewhere else tomorrow. She like tacos, music, and making lists. But travel is her life.*