

Chillin' in Chacala

BUDGET VACATIONS HELP A SMALL MEXICAN COMMUNITY



A view of the beach from one of Chacala's papala-thatched restaurants; Chacala visitors may get to enjoy impromptu concerts at one of the local restaurants; Carla runs the Chacala restaurant and guesthouse, Las Brisas.

article & photos by **Ande Wanderer**

Most folks haven't heard of Playa Chacala, and that's part of its beauty. The idyllic fishing village 56 miles north of Puerto Vallarta provides a low-cost, authentic vacation alternative to the mega-resorts for which Mexico is famed (some say "shamed"). A visit here is a recipe for relaxation and has little negative environmental impact. It also provides needed income to a small community still recovering from 2002's Hurricane Kenna.

The village has about 350 full-time residents, only a handful of whom speak any English. If you go, expect to communicate in Spanish or sign language. Locals are patient listeners and are eager to chat with visitors.

Everyone keeps their doors unlocked, and the pueblo's restaurants may offer to keep a running tab for you so you don't have to deal with money throughout your visit. In addition to lounging on the white sands beach, visitors to Chacala can also enjoy surfing, snorkeling, horseback riding, fishing, whale watching, and even meditation and yoga at Mar de Jade, a spiritual retreat center outfitted with a hot pool and steam room (see sidebar). You can also hike the surrounding area, with its lush fruit and tobacco plantations and discover pre-Columbian petroglyphs.

Budget travelers usually rent a room

from a local family for anywhere from \$9-\$40 dollars a night. There are plenty to be had—no need to make reservations except during Christmas and Easter Week.

The previously mentioned Mar de Jade

is an upscale option for those looking for a little more structure, and it is a good place to stay with children. The center provides free medical services, legal aid, school scholarships, and an emergency fund for local residents.

Volunteer opportunities in Chacala include helping students (many of whose parents are illiterate) in the after-school program or lending a hand in constructing new houses with Techos de Mexico (Mexican Roofs), a sister program to Habitat for Humanity. The program helps locals build not only housing but also additional accommodation to rent to visitors. Once their loans are paid off through payments of 50 percent of earnings the families have a permanent source of income. The rooms built by Techos de Mexico are airy and clean; some also

have kitchenettes. For those in the health-care field Casa Clinica offers volunteer opportunities (with a minimum stay of three weeks), and a chance to learn about tropical diseases, community health care, and Spanish medical terminology.

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Medical students can receive university credit through the program.

Chacala's visitors usually pass the twilight hours dawdling over dinner in one of the restaurants on the beach. They may also enjoy an impromptu sing-along with locals or play a hand of cards. The other option is to read and retire early. Playa Chacala offers the antithesis of the tequila-drowned party scene and fancy resorts that so many visitors seek in Mexico. Once you are on the beach, watching the fishermen come to shore at sunset while the water laps at your feet it's hard not to feel you have discovered the authentic Mexico. And you have. ■

Ande Wanderer is a writer and photographer who lives in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Check out her website at www.andewanderer.com.