

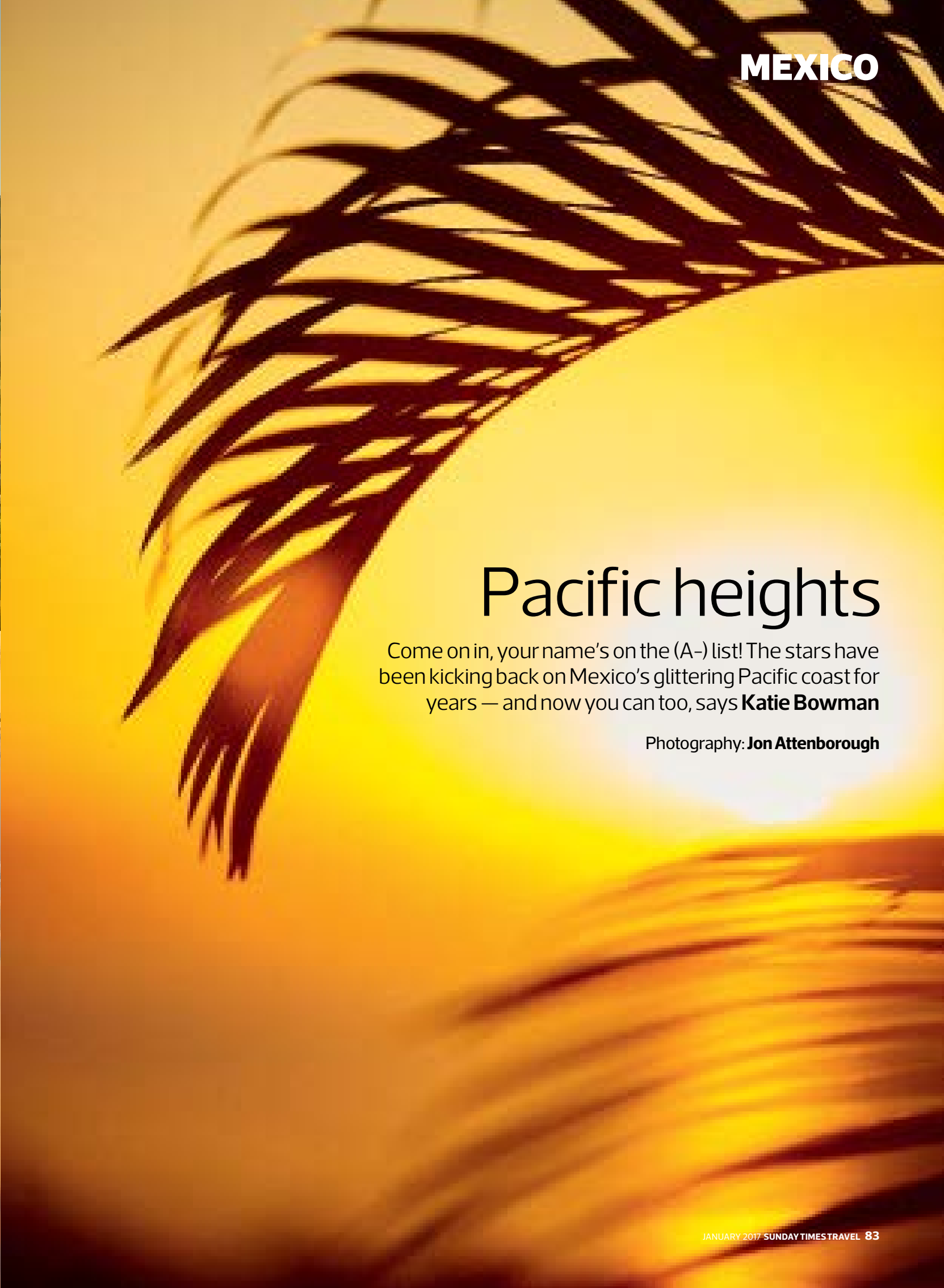
Jungle belle: the sleepy little surf town of Sayulita. Opposite, sunset in Puerto Vallarta



Pacific heights

Come on in, your name's on the (A-) list! The stars have been kicking back on Mexico's glittering Pacific coast for years — and now you can too, says **Katie Bowman**

Photography: **Jon Attenborough**





Mi casa, su casa: the Burton-Taylor bridge at Casa Kimberly. Opposite, view from the St Regis in Punta Mita



I'm no star stalker.

**AS SEEN
ON SCREEN** ▶
Mexico's Pacific coast is a movie star itself. See it as the fishing village it once was in *Night of the Iguana* (1964), starring Richard Burton, or as the chic hot spot it is today in *Limitless* (2011), featuring Bradley Cooper

My smartphone doesn't vibrate interminably as news of Jennifer Aniston's latest fringe comes in. Nor do I listen out for the 'plip' of *OK!* magazine on the doormat like a stay-at-home dog awaiting his owner's return. But I am, I'll confess, fascinated by celebrities' travel lives. So when I see Jennifer Lawrence snorkelling with sea turtles off Mexico's west coast – a destination that's already bewitched me with images of empty bicarbonate-of-soda sands; lush Jurassic-like jungle, with palm fronds big enough to surf on; thatched-cabana living (hammocks mandatory); and fresh fish tacos, dripping habanero sauce – it's almost a stamp of approval. You can sneer if you want. But don't tell me you've never enjoyed your Bellini 10 per cent more when the barman tells you George Clooney ordered one the day before.

Mexico gets further gold stars (in both senses) because, unlike LA or St Tropez, it's easy-going and all-welcoming. Velvet ropes and VIP bars have no place here. Which is why the A-list loves it so much – Kate Hudson, Matt Damon, Ewan McGregor, Jennifer Aniston, Beyoncé, Kanye West, John Mayer, Rihanna and Orlando Bloom included. You're as likely to be mopping Tabasco off your chin beside a scruffy surfer as next to Lady Gaga. Hotels,

too, might host A-list guests, but many offer Z-list rates (£76 a night for a *casita* won't touch your Margarita fund).

But the best reason to choose *this* star-studded paradise above all others? Above glitzy Hawaii, chi-chi St Barts or the Amalfi Coast? Getting here has become a cinch! Until recently, Mexico's Pacific coast was inaccessible both financially and geographically (involving expensive indirect flights via the US, eating up three travel days of your trip and around £900). But Thomson now flies nonstop to Puerto Vallarta, a beautiful beachy hub on the western shore; last-minute return fares can be snaffled for under £300. So, get on board. Your name *is* down and you *are* coming in. Here's where to see and be seen...

Sayulita: For surfy serenity

If Sayulita were a star, she'd be make-up-free Gwyneth or no-fuss J-Law (who both holiday here). You're on the laid-back Riviera Nayarit, part of historic Jalisco state – home of Tequila and mariachi – yet just 45 minutes' drive north of Puerto Vallarta airport (taxis are safe, as is hiring a car). Imagine the Mexico you might have seen in dog-eared history books or sepia photographs on restaurant walls – where horses pull cartloads of guava across cobbles, and *papel picado* (that vibrant street bunting) criss-crosses the sky, while a moustachioed trio wails of lost love in the bar. Look down the street and you'll spy ▶

If Puerto Vallarta were a star, she'd be Elizabeth Taylor. In fact, she was: the diva lived here in the '60s

surf beyond the market stalls, an aquamarine froth tossing about surfers and swimsuits. Look up the way, and there's a wall of forest, teeming with geckos, armadillos and hummingbirds, as if it were still 1484 and Cortés was a mere twinkle in his papi's eye. That is Sayulita.

I settled in at Don Pedro's – a thatched beach restaurant, open to the sea – and made myself familiar with his shrimp tacos: three crisp corn tortillas, each buckling under the weight of crunchy cabbage strips, fiery red onion, sweet tomato chunks, and shrimp in light-as-a-4.5-tog-duvet batter, all doused in Salsa Huichol Picante. Then, when the sun's strength dwindled from Hadean to simply *scorchio*, it was time to try stand-up paddleboarding – a most marvellous Sayulita pastime that marries the coolness of surf with the tranquillity of watercolour painting, yet still gives you a flat tummy (so *that's* how gym-hating Cameron Diaz does it). Instructor Bapas weaved us through the swimmers, until we were out on the open water, millpond-still that day, drifting through the peace. Out further still, we paddled around the cove to placid Playa de los Muertos, the area's 'secret beach'. I squinted for Gwyneth, but didn't spot her.

Sayulita is in that perfect stage of gentrification, too – still raw enough to feel authentic, but developed enough to have its first boutique hotel and a store selling the hand-woven Aztec rugs you've been eyeing up in said hotel all week. If you'd come here 10 years ago, you'd have had to have rented a room above the bar. If you go 10 years from now, that same bar will probably be a Starbucks.

Puerto Vallarta: For old-school glamour

If Puerto Vallarta were a star, she'd be Elizabeth Taylor. In fact, she *was* Elizabeth Taylor, since the diva lived here in the mid-'60s while Richard Burton was filming *The Night of the Iguana*. So enchanted were they both by the then-teensy fishing village, Dick bought one house, then purchased Liz a second villa across the cobbled street, and linked them by a stone bridge that still stands today (the house is now an intimate hotel, in fact). Myth has it, the turbulent lovebirds had at least one formidable fight a day, which sent them off to their separate villas, then invariably ended with a conciliatory smooch on the bridge by nightfall.

And that's what Puerto Vallarta Old Town is all about – showiness, hedonism, but with a retro appeal. Eva Longoria recently chose PV for her nuptials as, in her own words, she wanted a 'big fat Mexican wedding'. Unlike tourist-developed Cancún, Los Cabos or the Riviera Maya,

Puerto Vallarta developed organically, around a genuine harbour where life still revolves around the day's catch. I took a walk through the Old Town grid – Calles Hidalgo, Juarez, Matamoros – ducking into the Catholic church of the Parroquia de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe de Puerto Vallarta. It was gilt-edged gorgeous, with a gold crown atop the bell tower, but untouristy, too – old ladies were selling hand-cream on the steps, while a stray dog was happily disturbing an orderly line of nuns outside.

Then it was on to Isla Río Cuale, a jungly little island in the middle of town, reached by a spindly suspended rope-bridge. Between twisted tree roots reminiscent of Angkor Wat, flea-market stalls balanced, along with a handful of wooden benches taken by coy, young couples on first dates (they also call this the 'romantic zone'). When a sprinkle of rain arrived, everybody took shelter beneath the giant, protective arms of the banyan trees.

If you buy only one tourist ticket in Puerto Vallarta, make it a street-food tour. Locals Amanda and 'Lobo' (Wolf) led my circuit, bringing together Amanda's infatuation for tacos with Lobo's for Tequila. I could rave about my Jalapeño Margarita at rowdy Bar La Playa (the barman uses Tajin chilli on the rim, not salt), or the succulent 50p tacos '*al pastor*' at Pancho's (the salty pork is offset spectacularly by slivers of pineapple), or the Mexican candies we bought for colleagues back home (tamarind, *dulce de leche* and coconut). But it was the *chapulines* that will stay with me for ever. Grasshoppers. Delicious, earthy, and not-as-brittle-as-you'd-think grasshoppers. As the rain came down in torrents outside, chef Hugo at Maia restaurant told us how he'd stolen his grandmother's guacamole recipe, because of her ingenious use of fried *chapulines*. *Gracias*, Granny Hugo.

Punta Mita: For A-list cosseting

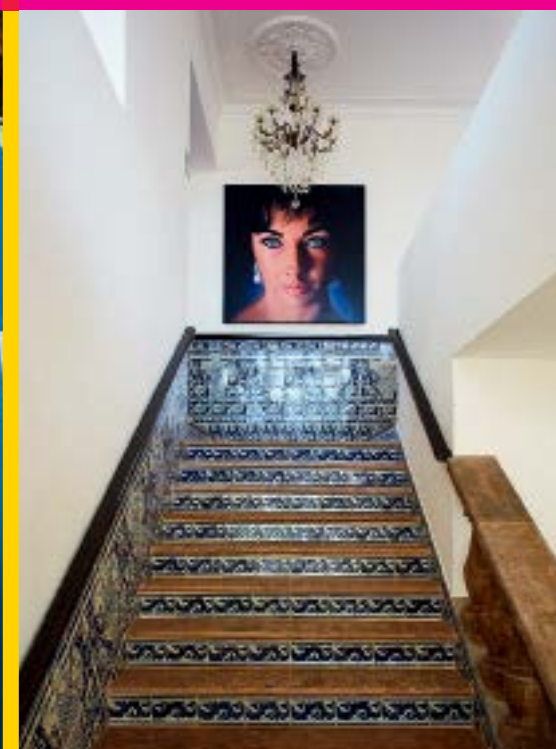
And last but not least, Punta Mita. If Punta Mita were a star, she'd be the top bod – Beyoncé (if you're thinking Grammy winners); Matt Damon (if you prefer Oscars); Bill Gates (if you're a tech head); or Kimye (if you're into that sort of thing). And, of course, all of them have holidayed in Punta Mita; Bill even has his umpteenth house here.

When you've trodden enough colonial cobbles, or haggled for enough hand-stitched cushions, and you find yourself ready for a cold Corona by the pool, this is where to check in. Punta Mita is a five-star-fabulous resort town, just half an hour's drive west of Puerto Vallarta. Its starriest stay is the St Regis – one of those clever luxury >

WHAT TO BUY: HOT SAUCE

Look for the serious sombrero'd man on the label of locally produced Salsa Huichol and buy a bottle as a souvenir. But dodge Tapatio, Tabasco and El Mexicano (they're all actually made in the US)

Mex appeal: clockwise from top left, the Cleopatra room at Casa Kimberly; colourful accessories for sale in Sayulita; volleyball beach at the St Regis; Bar La Playa's Jalapeño Margarita; Sayulita's vibrant main street; guacamole and grasshoppers at Maia restaurant; coconut seller in Sayulita; surf and SUP boards on Sayulita beach; Liz's starry image at Casa Kimberly



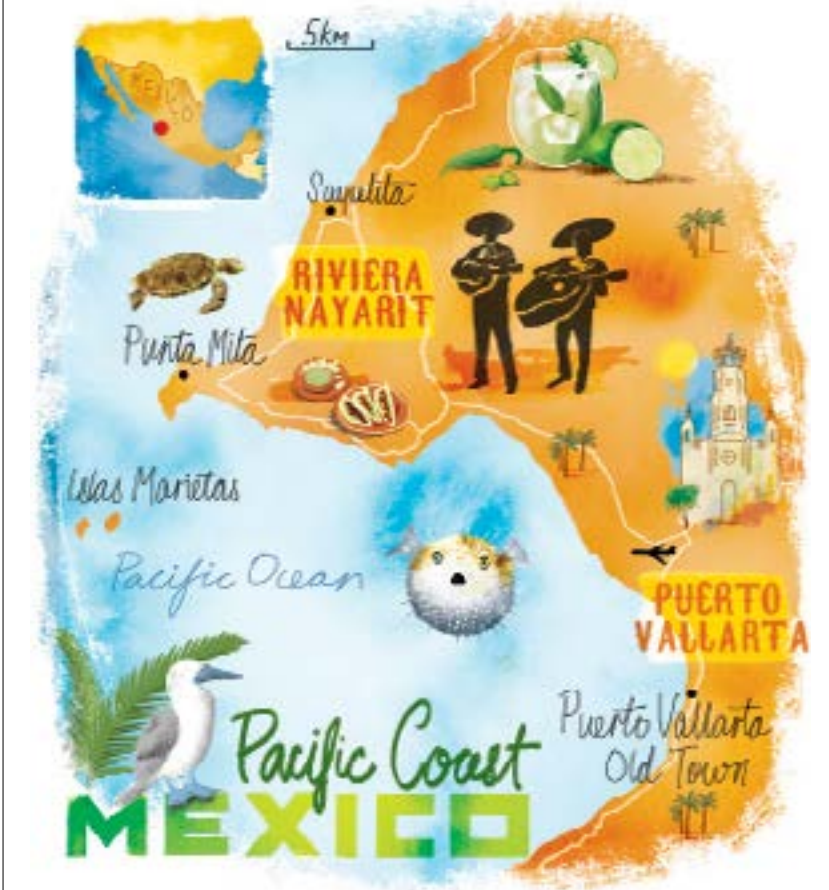
What's SUP:
Stand-up
paddleboarding off
Los Muertos beach,
Sayulita. Opposite,
palmy pathways at
the St Regis hotel



hotels that cossets guests away in an hibiscus-scented, air-conditioned bubble that they never want to leave, yet gives them enough *bona fide* Mexican touches (live local mariachi on the beach; obscure national fruits at the breakfast buffet) that they don't feel guilty about it. I soon overcame my guilt – not least because, if it weren't for the St Regis, I'd never have made my most memorable Mexican culinary discovery (after the grasshoppers): *aguachile*. This is a sparky starter, where slices of raw shrimp are 'cooked' by the potent mix of lime juice, salt, onion, chilli, and coriander they bathe in. It was a revelation. I became that person in the hotel restaurant who orders the same dish every night, each time my polite waiter having to pretend he is impressed by my local food knowledge. Filling in the gaps between *aguachile* with pool time, beach walks and sundowners, I quickly fell for Punta Mita.

Brilliantly, if bizarrely, you can experience one of Mexico's greatest wildlife adventures from this otherwise insular five-star world. Just offshore from Punta Mita are the Islas Marietas, a national marine park with a cap on visitor numbers. This is because it's such a unique aquatic environment, you can spot (without trying hard) the blue-footed booby, a sensationally, surreally, seemingly cyan-painted bird only otherwise found in the Galápagos. On the Marietas, you can swim through ancient stone arches, and snorkel with Olive Ridley sea turtles, spiky pufferfish or fantastical flying needlefish. At one point, my guide Josue and I found ourselves engulfed by a school of sturgeon – every move we made, they followed, every U-turn, they mimicked. It was magical. This was the last place on Earth I'd expected an Attenborough moment.

In fact, when I looked back on my week of grasshoppers-en-guac, manta rays, cathedral calm, not to mention my market-stall finds (a *piñata* shipped 9,500km is as cultured as fourth-birthday party gifts get), there'd been many surprises from Mexico's Pacific coast. It may have been the celebs who'd piqued my interest, but it was the blue-footed booby that was the real star. ■



map: Scott Jessop

Get Me There

Go independent

Thomson (thomson.co.uk) is the only airline to fly direct to Puerto Vallarta from the UK, with departures from Manchester and Gatwick; flight frequency varies seasonally, so you might be limited to once-a-week departures. Return fares officially start at £645, but can be found last-minute on the website from £269. If you can't fly on the days that Thomson flies, you must travel indirect. Check **Skyscanner.net** for routes via the US and Mexico, and expect to pay between £700 and £900 return.

Where to stay

In Sayulita, **Haramara Retreat** (001 866 8014084, haramararetreat.com) has double cabanas from £242, half board. **Amor Boutique Hotel** (00 52 329 2913000, amorboutiquehotel.com) has doubles from £76, room only. In Puerto Vallarta, **Casa Velas** (00 1877 418 3011, hotelcasavelas.com) has doubles from £379, all-inclusive. **Casa Kimberly** (00 52 322 222 1336, casakimberly.com), Liz Taylor's

former home, has doubles from £232, room only. In Punta Mita, the **St Regis** (00 52 329 2915800, starwoodhotels.com) has doubles from £320, room only. Nearby, between Puerto Vallarta and Punta Mita, **Grand Sirenis Mattali Hills** (00 52 322 115 7700, sirenishotels.com) has doubles from £148, room only.

Go packaged

You can put this trip together yourself with an online operator that features both the budget and upscale hotels. **Ebookers** (ebookers.com), for example, has 14 nights at the Grand Sirenis Mattali Hills from £1,454pp, all-inclusive, including direct flights from Gatwick. Or try **Expedia** (expedia.co.uk).

Further information

An **SUP paddleboarding** lesson in Sayulita costs £32pp for a group of four (lunazulsurfing.com). The **Puerto Vallarta 'Mex-ology' Food Tour** costs £52pp (puertovallartafoodtours.com). **Punta Mita Expeditions** (puntamitaexpeditions.com) can take you on a 'Marine Safari' of the Isla Marietas from £106pp. See **rivieranayarit.com** and **visitpuertovallarta.com** for information.