



# Mexico's 'Happy Coast' Has Unspoiled Beaches, Rare Turtle Species, and Sunsets That Light the Sea on Fire

Ingrid Rojas Contreras dives deep to uncover the raw, unspoiled beauty of Costalegre, Mexico.

By [Ingrid Rojas Contreras](#) | Updated on January 22, 2024



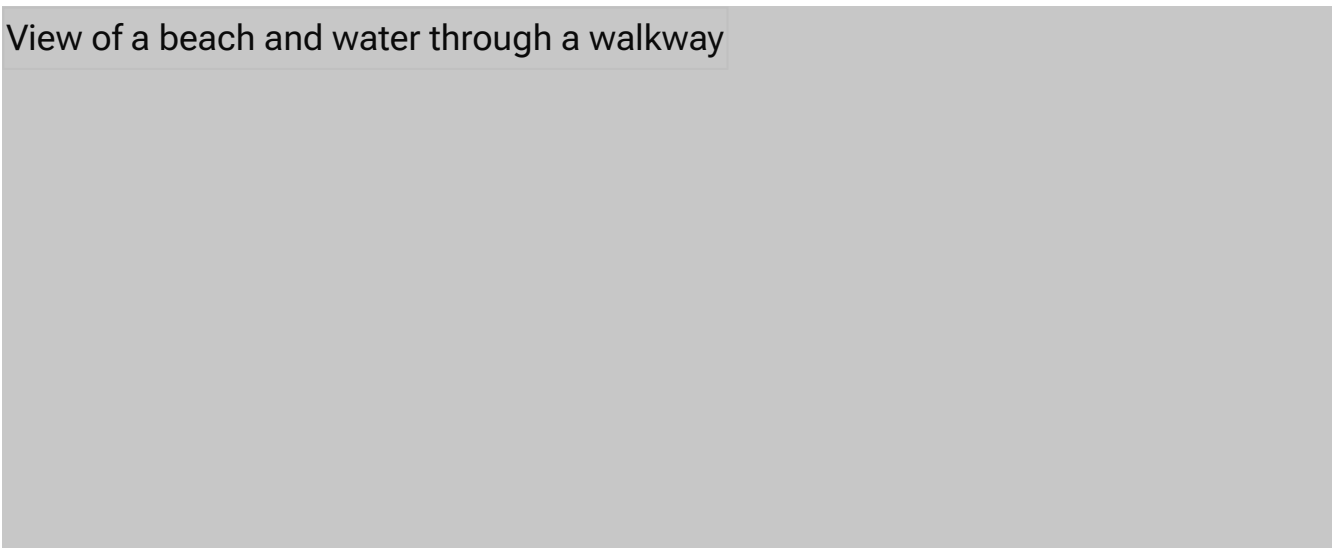


From left: Pristine beaches are the main attraction at Xala, a resort in development in Costalegre; tacos at Nacho, the taqueria at the Four Seasons. PHOTO: ANNE MENKE

We were flying in a Jeep past sand dunes lining the cerulean waters of [Mexico's Pacific coast](#). The breeze, balmy and salt-tinged, flowed through my hair. At the wheel, Ricardo Santa Cruz smiled as he turned onto a dirt road lined with palm trees. "The ultimate luxury is to have space, and a real communion with nature," he said.

Santa Cruz is a cofounder of [Xala](#), a multimillion-dollar development slated to open in late 2026 in Costalegre, or "the happy coast" — a part of the western state of Jalisco, south of Puerto Vallarta, that's full of unspoiled beaches, capes, and bays.

View of a beach and water through a walkway





Architecture takes center stage at the Four Seasons Resort Tamarindo. PHOTO: ANNE MENKE

Comparisons to the once off-the-beaten-path Riviera Maya come to mind, as do reservations about that region's ultimate fate. Its once-vibrant spirit quickly turned into something more sterile under the economic pressures of overdevelopment. Along Costalegre, however, there's a trend for regenerative, high-end tourism in places like Xala and the [Four Seasons Resort Tamarindo](#), which opened in November 2022 on a nature reserve 63 miles south. Much of the land along the coast is owned by private developers, who have worked together in partnership with the government to ensure that Costalegre's wild beauty is carefully preserved.



A view of beachside villas at the Four Seasons Resort Tamarindo. PHOTO: ANNE MENKE

Xala, which has been 15 years in the making, will include a Six Senses hotel, low-density luxury residences, bars and restaurants, and an organic farm. The owners' commitment to social impact, land stewardship, and the right of future generations to enjoy the coast have led Xala to help develop a waterway that has brought clean water to more than 200 families of nearby ranchers and farmers.

Pair of photos from the Four Seasons Tamarindo, one showing salt being grated onto a plated dish, and one showing a restaurant team

From left: Hamachi al pastor at Sal, a restaurant at the Four Seasons; staff at the Four Seasons Resort Tamarindo's Nacho Restaurant. PHOTO: ANNE MENKE

As we neared a mango grove, Santa Cruz slowed down and turned onto a wide, shaded aisle of trees. They were young and not yet bearing fruit. Santa Cruz explained that mangoes were chosen because they oxygenate the land.

When I visited in May 2023, Xala was also in its early stages. Much of it was under construction, yet the place was buzzing. Along with journalists like me, local and international surfers, skateboarders, and bikers had all made the trek to preview the site and enjoy activities that will be available once the property opens. Jagger Eaton, Olympic bronze medalist in skateboarding, took his board out on the pump track, a paved run that's like a motocross course, half-pipe, and surf break all in one.

Heimana Reynolds, world champion and Olympic skateboarder from Hawaii, looked on.

Pair of photos from The Four Seasons Tamarindo, one showing a diver underwater, and one showing a villa plunge pool

From left: Chef Hugo Martinez diving off the coast at the Four Seasons; a private plunge pool at the resort. PHOTO: ANNE MENKE

Eaton and Reynolds were there with Heart Supply, a skateboarding company that is their sponsor. In late 2021, Heart Supply arrived at Xala, where the terrain park had just been completed, and gave local kids a free lesson from the pros. The event was perfectly aligned with the spirit of Xala, which seeks to fold the local community into its ventures rather than keep it at a distance.



I sat in a reclining sun chair on my balcony and watched a green parrot land in a copse of trees. A rustling in the bushes revealed a coati, a Mexican member of the raccoon family with a long, slender nose, long tail, and cute brown eyes, that had come to drink from the pool. On the horizon, sea stacks, vertical columns of rock, rose like pyramids from the waves.

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As sunset reddened the horizon, we all rode golf carts to the Chalacatepec turtle sanctuary a few minutes away. In Costalegre, nests have to be protected from both animals and humans. The sanctuary staff place the eggs they collect in incubation pens. By the time of my visit, the sanctuary had collected from nearly 7,000 nests. At the beach, hundreds of hatchlings in large crates were climbing all over one another, ready to brave the waves, which I noticed were breaking with force. In the crate there were loggerhead, green, and leatherback hatchlings — all endangered species.

Pair of photos from Mexico, one showing a charity director, and one showing baby sea turtles

From left: Heart Foundation director Ceci Paredes at Xala; a turtle release at Xala. PHOTO: ANNE MENKE

We stood back as the crates were tipped, and watched with bated breath as the tiny creatures made a beeline for the waves. As we watched them, so full of life, pull themselves across the sand, I couldn't help saying a little prayer. Finally, they were engulfed in foam. When the waves retreated, some were gone, some were not. The ones remaining, rolled over by the force of the ocean, tried their luck once more. In 10 minutes or so, all of them had gone.

Actor Richard Gere, a partner at Xala, was also at the site while I was there. Gere has visited many beautiful parts of Mexico, but “this was the one that touched my heart the most,” he said, sitting with me by the pump track for some shade. “It should remain wild.” He joined the project, he explained, because of its mission to preserve and regenerate the landscape. “There are so many places that are beautiful and endangered, and my hope is we can set an example for what is possible in other parts of the world.” His wife, Alejandra Gere, wandered into our conversation, and as Gere caught her up, she vehemently agreed: “Those of us who live in cities have lost a bit of the understanding that we are connected to people and to the land. Local communities are our communities.”

Pair of photos from Mexico, one showing a patio with a table, and one showing pineapple themed decor

From left: The view from a villa at the Four Seasons; ceramics at the resort. PHOTO: ANNE MENKE

A two-hour drive south through a verdant jungle landscape, a hand-built stone road leads to the [Four Seasons Resort Tamarindo](#). The property (an honoree on [T+L's 2023 It List](#)) was designed to exist in harmony with its surroundings, and Mexican architects and designers including Victor Legorreta and Mauricio Rocha have created an open, inviting spectacle of nature.

As I stepped into the lobby, Hervé Roche, manager of the resort, introduced himself

and pointed to the ocean, where I saw the unmistakable spray of a whale spout in the distance. The resort sits on a plot of 3,000 acres, yet only 2 percent of the land has been developed. The rest will be left as nature intended.

Pair of photos of and from the lighthouse at a resort property in Mexico

From left: The lighthouse at Xala; the view from the lighthouse. PHOTO: ANNE MENKE

My room, an ocean-facing suite on the side of the cliff, was endlessly inviting. It featured a mix of traditional and modern Mexican design: the plates were red clay and the rugs hand-woven jute, each highlighting the intricate line work of Indigenous iconography. The sleek tables and lamps, plus the open architecture, nodded to both pre-Hispanic Mexican culture and to the Modernist design of Mexican architect Luis Barragán.

I sat in a reclining sun chair on my balcony and watched a green parrot land in a copse of trees. A rustling in the bushes revealed a coati, a Mexican member of the raccoon family with a long, slender nose, long tail, and cute brown eyes, that had come to drink from the pool. On the horizon, sea stacks, vertical columns of rock, rose like pyramids from the waves.

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Pair of photos from the Four Seasons Tamarindo, one showing a plated appetizer, and one showing the reception desk

From left: Molote de plátano, an appetizer at Sal; the reception desk at the 220-key Four Seasons Resort Tamarindo. PHOTO: ANNE MENKE

I didn't know much about the local environment before my arrival. But after a few days of meeting everyone from biologists to people native to the region, I learned all about crested caracara birds, the yellow bloom of panicua trees — or *tecomaxóchitl* in Nahuatl — and sea stacks known to fishermen as *las iglesias*, or the churches, because of their steepled shape.

Like Xala, Four Seasons Tamarindo is invested in land stewardship. The staff includes a number of scientists, like resident biologist Francisco León, who told me the resort was home to the lilac-crowned parrot, badgers, wild boars, and all sorts of reptiles. On our walk through the property, we saw termite nests, tasted some fruit, and spent time looking at *papelillo rojo* trees, whose resin is turned into copal, the Mesoamerican incense so important to Indigenous communities.

Pair of photos from Mexico, one showing a pool terrace, and one showing a fisherman holding his catch

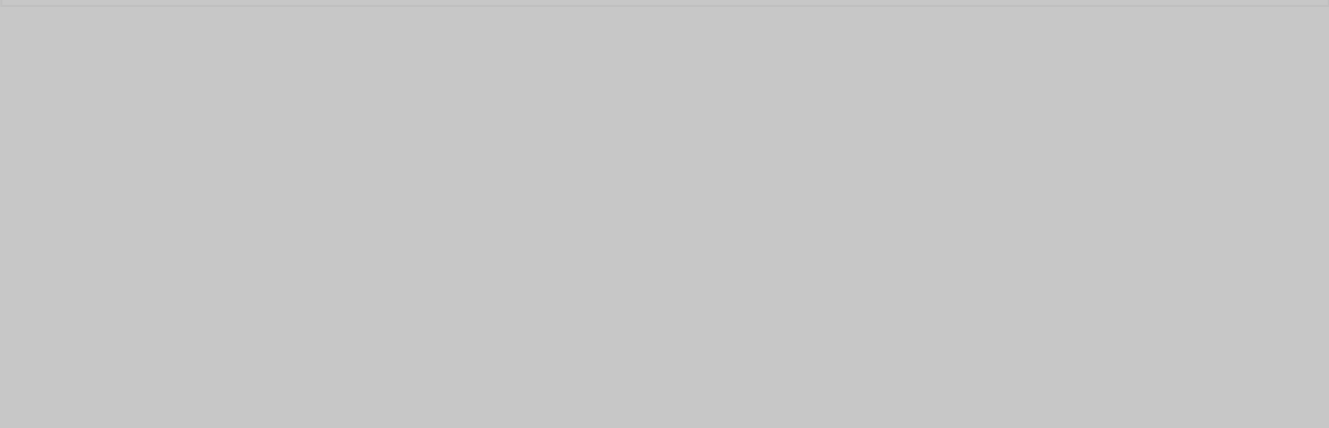



From left: A cliffside pool at the Four Seasons Resort Tamarindo; a local fisherman with his catch at Xala. PHOTO: ANNE MENKE

A night safari revealed scorpions, which glowed in response to the UV flashlights we shined onto the path. They were small and beautiful to behold. I stared at the outline of their pincers, oohing and aahing — from a safe distance, of course.

The activities at the Four Seasons are numerous. I spent an hour photographing spiders under a macro lens with guidance from Mauricio Ramos, the resort's photographer-in-residence, a frequent contributor to *National Geographic*. I kayaked off the beach, watching the tranquil water beneath me fluctuate between blues, depending on the depth. I sunned and splashed at all three pools. No matter where I sat, a thoughtful staffer would arrive with a cooler containing an Evian face-spritz, sunscreen, and cold water.

Pair of photos from Xala in Mexico, one showing a model in a mango grove, and one showing a portrait of the resort's founder



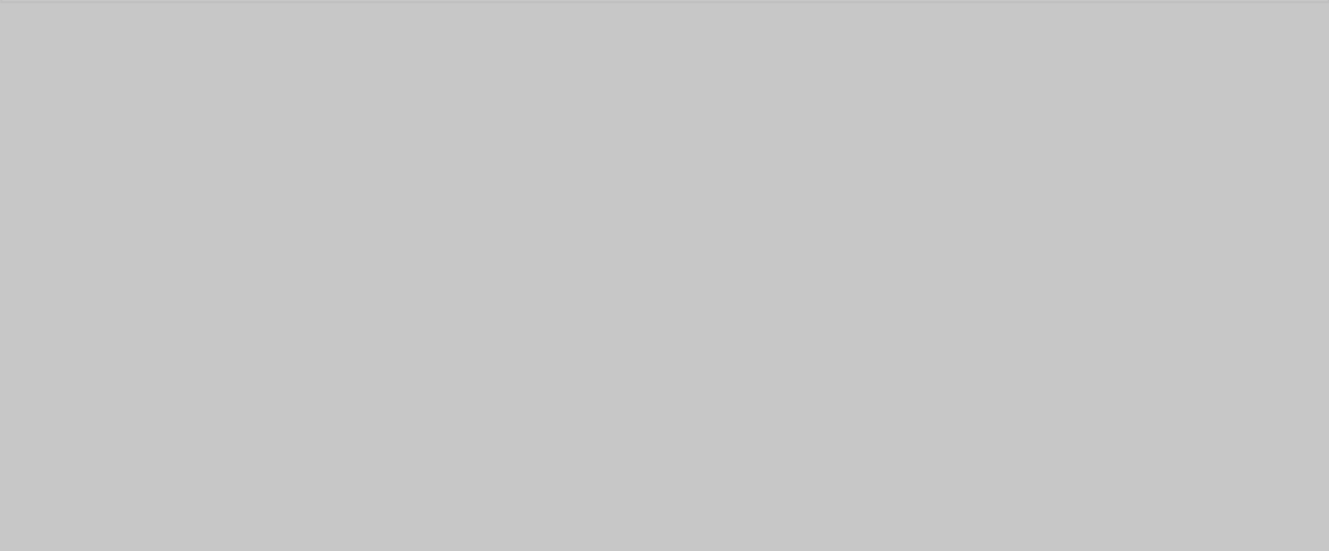



From left: Walking through the mango grove at Xala; Ricardo Santa Cruz, one of Xala's founding partners. PHOTO: ANNE MENKE

One memorable experience the resort offers is a sunset boat ride. Staffer Ricardo Ayala and Beto Verde, a seasoned local fisherman, were at the helm of mine. Verde told me he handfishes, as his father and grandfather used to, meaning that he doesn't use a rod — only a line, weight, hook, and bait. I sipped champagne, enjoying the view, the sounds of the ocean, and Ayala and Verde's stories of the sea. Ayala told me how, after a hurricane, in the neighboring town of La Manzanilla, he saw waves drag crocodiles into the sea.

Verde cut the motor by a large sea cliff, and in a moment I understood why. Sunsets over the water are always arresting, but this one was different. Through an arched opening in the cliff, we watched the sun go down. As it dipped, fitting exactly inside the arch, the water glowed bright red, as if it were burning. Pelicans flew by, skimming the surface. Ayala said fishermen had been coming to see this event for as long as anyone could remember.

Pair of photos from The Four Seasons Tamarindo, one showing a guest room, and one showing detail of a colorful staff uniform





From left: A guest room at the resort; staffers at the Four Seasons. PHOTO: ANNE MENKE

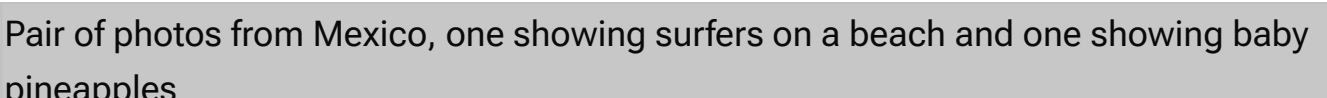
In the surrounding towns, fishing is an important part of the community's culture, and it is likewise exalted at the resort. Hugo Martinez, or Chef Hugo as he's known, free dives in the rough waters facing the hotel and collects clams with his bare hands; sometimes he goes octopus hunting with a harpoon. Chef Hugo has been free diving since he was 15 (like Ayala and Verde, he comes from a family of fishermen). Between his passed-down knowledge of fishermen's names for certain rocks and his love of ocean geography, he knows where clams and oysters can be found. He told me there were blue mussels by the Copper, a rock named for its copper-like stains. Depending on the season, he also collects spiny oysters, licorice sea cradles, queen clams, and gooseneck barnacles.



I thought about the care, craftsmanship, and artistry in the dish, and I overflowed with thanks of my own as I took a bite.

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My favorite restaurant at Tamarindo was Sal, named after the melt-on-your-tongue local salt. Tucked away on a lower floor, Sal faces the ocean waves. When I got to my table, I was presented with a small dish of salt. I had noticed the minerally scent in the air, and when I finally tasted the salt, I was beside myself. I fell in love even more once I learned it was harvested by a schoolteacher in a nearby town. At Sal, I ate *flauta de mar*, marinated sliced tuna, and king crab, caught that day and wrapped in a blue-corn tortilla. The crisp corn tostada topped with octopus, chipotle *aguachile*, and avocado was refined and delicious.



Pair of photos from Mexico, one showing surfers on a beach and one showing baby pineapples

pineapples

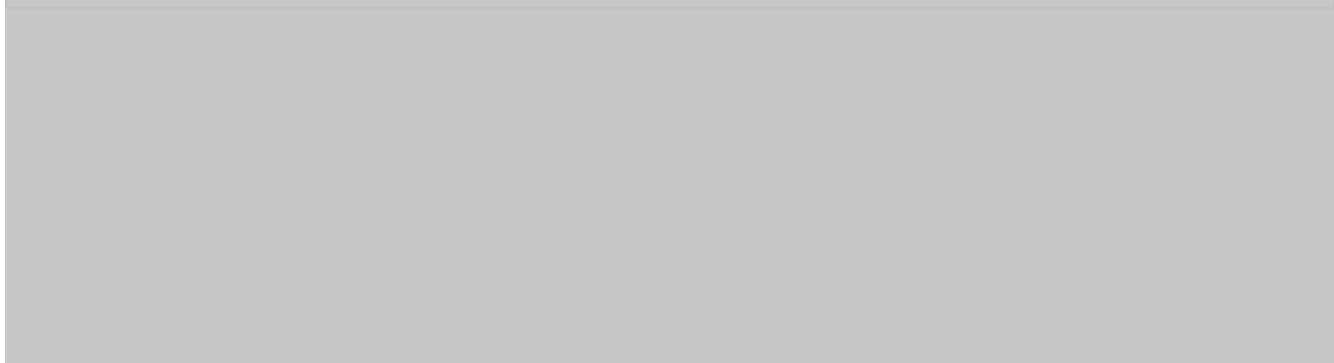



From left: Enjoying surf breaks off the beach at Xala; pineapples growing at Xala. PHOTO: ANNE MENKE

The next day, culinary director Nicolás Piatti walked me through Tamarindo's farm, Rancho Ortega. Though I was there to learn about sustainability, I was still high on the taste of that salt, so I asked Piatti about it. He smiled at my reverence and said that he found it special, too. How would you describe it? I asked. "It is low in sodium, has a floral aroma almost perfumed with morning air, humid, nut finish." I nodded in agreement.

Piatti can grow what he likes at Rancho Ortega. There were guayabas, *granada*, *higos*, corn, cacao, and a field of agave. In one of the rooms, a woman was hand-forming tortillas, which we tasted right off the press. They were salty and perfect.

Pair of photos from the Four Seasons Resort Tamarindo, one showing a patio, and one showing sheep in a field





From left: Outdoor space at the Four Seasons Resort Tamarindo, in Mexico; sheep in an agave field at the Four Seasons's farm, Rancho Ortega. PHOTO: ANNE MENKE

That afternoon I went to Nacho, the resort's upscale taqueria, and ordered the *sikil pak*, a traditional Mayan dip made with pumpkin seeds, garlic, tomato, and habaneros that was lightly spicy and creamy. The *quesadilla milpa*, stuffed with Oaxacan cheese, beans, avocado, squash blossoms, and hoja santa leaves, was delicious and comforting. The petals of the blossoms themselves were pressed into the tortilla, making it look like a sacred object. I recalled as I ate it that the Otomí people make decorative tortillas on occasions of giving thanks. I thought about the care, craftsmanship, and artistry in the dish, and I overflowed with thanks of my own as I took a bite.

It is striking how much we can be changed by a plate of food, a ride on a boat, or a conversation with a local. This trip had deepened my knowledge of a place and its people, and left me feeling sated and, yes, grateful.

*A version of this story first appeared in the February 2024 issue of Travel + Leisure under the headline "The Coast Is Clear."*

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