

South-of-the-Border Surf

A surfing enthusiast catches a wave in two prime Mexican surf towns | By Rob Dunton

I've never seen a classroom like it.

Situated amid miles of pristine coastline, a portable canopy shades eight plastic chairs in a semicircle facing the Pacific Ocean. The beach serves as a blackboard, and the local "school bus," a red 4X4 pickup truck, sits parked on the sand beneath a quiver of easy-to-ride foam surfboards.

Sinaloa Surf School is now in session.

Perched on a bay an hour and 15 minutes north of Mazatlán in the remote fishing village of Barras de Piaxtla, the school and its partner organization, Sinaloa Surf Adventures, offer the only accommodations in the area—a grand total of five double rooms and one private house. Crowds aren't an issue. While Surf Adventures caters to experienced surfers—taking them to inaccessible breaks by boat for 10-foot waves and epic rides—the Surf School focuses on novices. When guests aren't surfing, there is plenty of time to re-energize in a hammock, kayak in the nearby estuary, explore the neighboring fishing village or zip into bustling Mazatlán for a great meal, a massage or a night on the town.

Mark Becker, professor emeritus and general manager of the school, strolls the beach until he finds a good drawing stick, then convenes class. I meet my classmates who arrived three days before for the full-week program: a wisecracking group from New Jersey and a buff ex-Navy pilot from Redondo Beach who wants to finally be able to answer "Yes" when people ask him if he surfs. I've flown down with two friends for a four-day session. Skill level in the group ranges from beginner to struggling intermediate.

Based on a complex formula that includes tides, wind and local weather, as well as the location, size and date of recent tropical storms anywhere in the Pacific, and how the class is progressing, Mark selects a beach with the right angle, exposure and bottom (sand or rocky) that will deliver optimal waves for the day. He has



NORTH OF IXTAPA/ZIHUATANEJO LIES SUPERB SURF TOWN SALADITA.

fine-tuned his skills over 15 years. Two years ago he decided to trade in his teaching credential and collared shirt to live his passion in Mexico.

The commute to class each morning is much of the adventure. After packing the red 4X4 with wet suits, leashes, surfboards, snacks and the classroom's canopy and chairs, we pull away from the two-story abode that functions as

hotel, cantina and hammock central, then enter the maze of unmarked trails that cross the backcountry. I sit in the back with the payload of gear as the dry-brush landscape flies by on either side. Each time I think we're near the beach, we make another turn to take us farther south. We finally find a short, wobbly bridge over a small ravine, cross it, power through a patch of soft sand, then hit the wide-open beach. For miles we cruise along the firm, damp sand of low tide, and during the entire drive pass only four people: two riding bikes on the beach with their dog, and two hapless hombres who have gotten their car stuck in a section of soft sand. We radio the school HQ to send another vehicle to tow them out, and continue on to class.

Each day's surf session starts with a highly interactive lecture on a pertinent topic. Today, Mark's years as a science teacher in San Diego shine through as he illustrates wave dynamics and paddling strategies. Other topics he'll cover include surf history and lingo, water safety, wave forecasting and balance training. Lightbulbs go on in my head as I learn why waves vary over rock or sand bottoms, and how swells come in sets that can be timed for ease of entry and exit. We stop for a moment to marvel at a group of dolphins that swims into the surf zone to ride the waves. When they move on, we continue. After 45 minutes of discourse, it's time to suit up and hit the waves.

I pull on my rash-guard shirt, buckle my surf hat (both the shirt and the hat are for sun protection), attach my leash and head out

ROB DUNTON (3)



SINALOA SURF SCHOOL STUDENTS TAKE IN THE DAY'S INSTRUCTION, THEN HEAD INTO THE SURF TO TRY THEIR SKILLS.

CATCHING A WAVE AT SALADITA.

ROB DUNTON



into the surf. Mark selected this spot for its forgiving sand bottom and small- to medium-size waves. He paddles out with us to provide real-time observation and advice. To save my strength, I walk my board out through the surf as far as possible—a major-league beginner move, but all my body can handle in these back-to-back days. After barely missing three waves in a row, I hear Mark call out, “Rob, try to be a bit more forward on your takeoff. Maybe just an inch or two more forward on your board will help the wave catch you.” I apply the suggestion and notice an almost immediate improvement. With each bit of fine-tuning—a bit more arch in my back, popping up on my board more quickly—my rides get longer and more frequent.

As I sit on my board waiting for the next round of waves, I savor the delights of this sport: the warm ocean and passing sea life, the enveloping water that catches my every fall, the joy of learning and moving fast without noise, engines or fuel—just a board and some wax for my feet to grip. All of this invigorates my spirit—except for the endless paddling. I reflect on the *Six Million Dollar Man*, a blend of man and machine who would never tire of paddling. *If only*. ... If I could buy a pair of arms that wouldn't quit, I would.

But then I remember: Big Kahunas are not born. They are made. One paddle and one wave at time.

AFTER SIX WEEKS OF HONING MY NEWFOUND SKILLS at my local beach in San Diego, my arms grow stronger (if only a tad) and my balance better. It's time to return to Mexico for my first surfing safari—to reap the

rewards of my practice, or eat humble pie.

Fifty minutes north of Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo on Mexico's Pacific coast lies Saladita, a handful of houses, bungalows and thatched lean-tos at the end of a dirt road surrounded by miles of empty beach. Like The Ranch, Loma Bonita and other hot surfing spots within 30 to 90 minutes of the renowned resort areas, Saladita has transitioned over the years from a locals-only “secret spot” to a destination surf break. Besides great surfing, making the trek to these hard-to-find locations offers the opportunity to experience first-hand undeveloped and untouristed Mexico, where locals still live simple, unhurried lives in the quiet countryside.

I first heard of Saladita 18 months ago from a die-hard surfing buddy who knew my beginner/intermediate skill level. He described it as having some of the best longboard waves (read: good for beginners) he had ever seen—a point break where it's both easy to paddle out and easy to ride. As if I weren't sold already, he added that the water was warm, the waves consistent and the crowds limited (by California standards, anyway). Next came directions: “Go north out of town and turn left at the second village; keep going until you hit a dirt road. Make a left at the fork by the broken fence, then right at the brown-spotted cow. ...” Right. Unable to find a map or viable directions to Saladita on the Internet, I e-mailed the local tourist office in Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo, which gave me the name of a local surfing guide and instructor, Sixto.

“I started surfing 20 years ago,” Sixto reminisces as he drives me toward Saladita

LODGING

AT SALADITA

Save the driving each day and stay right on the beach at Saladita. There's no nightlife and few food options, but accommodations run the gamut and are priced fairly.

SALADITA SURFING RESORT CAMP

Cool, rustic bungalows right on the beach.

Rates: \$65–\$95/night.

SurfCampMx@aol.com; www.saladita.com.

CASA DE LAS OLAS (House of Waves)

Rates: \$65–\$120 per floor/night (each floor has multiple bedrooms and sleeps four). Private bungalow runs \$95/night. www.houseofwaves.net.

IN ZIHUATANEJO

Sixto or his staff can pick you up at any of these resorts and take you to the best surf of the day.

LA CASA QUE CANTA

Top-rated architectural gem.

Low-season rates: \$375–\$675/night.

High-season rates: \$415–\$750/night.

888-523-5050; www.lacasaquecanta.com.

HOTEL VILLA DEL SOL

Beachfront location, exquisite cuisine.

Low-season rates: \$300–\$1,100/night.

High-season rates: \$430–\$1,500/night.

Four-night minimum (except June–September). 888-389-2645; www.hotelvilladelosol.com.

IN MAZATLÁN

CASA DE LEYENDAS BED & BREAKFAST

Rates (year-round): \$79–\$115 per night.

602-445-6192; www.casadeleyendas.com.

in his weathered Suburban with a stack of surfboards strapped to the roof. “Back then, it was harder to find a surfboard than it was to save the money to buy it! With so few surfers there were almost no boards. Finally, when I was 19, a friend who worked in a restaurant in Zihuatanejo traded four meals for an old battered surfboard. He and I shared it, and we got nicked and cut by the dings in the fiberglass because no stores

sold the supplies to repair it.”

Sixto Mendez Ayala grew up in Zihuatanejo and could be the poster boy for Latino surfers worldwide: fit and bronze, with a warm smile and wavy black hair that suits his casual attire perfectly. Combining a passion for surfing with his innate entrepreneurial talent, Sixto grew a cottage business of selling T-shirts from a card table into the largest surfing retail store in southern Mexico in just five years. This unassuming surfer, who tears up waves most mornings from dawn until noon, is also a successful businessman and devoted husband and father.

After an easy drive on generally empty Highway 200—passing low-lying hills and ravines, and parched farmland (we’re visiting during the December-through-April dry season)—we exit at Los Llanos, a typical Mexican roadside village comprising of simple concrete buildings housing subsistence businesses that cater to the town folk. Over the course of 1,000 yards on the only paved road in town, we pass a

general store and sundries shop, a *tortilleria* and a colorful BBQ chicken stand that smells heavenly. Past town begins the maze of roads my friend had tried to describe, which Sixto navigates as if on autopilot.

We pull up next to Jacqueline’s Restaurant, set amid a row of 10 beachfront bungalows and houses. Vehicles topped with surfboard racks fill the lot next to a palm-thatched area full of tables, chairs and surfboards that overlooks the famed point break I’ve come for.

It’s just after 7 A.M. and the area is hopping. Lourdes, native surf diva and proprietor of the restaurant, is busy renting boards and taking breakfast orders. Part-time resident, and international and U.S. surfing champion Corky Carroll waxes up his surfboard while talking with friends. An expat massage therapist sets up a massage table while indigenous families unpack boxes of handmade trinkets and crafts for sale. Excited visitors, such as myself, make a beeline for the surf.

Saladita’s geography dictates a simple

philosophy: A longer paddle earns you a longer ride. Unfortunately, surfing lacks the equivalent of a chairlift or golf cart (unless you’re a big-wave tow-in surfer). I must, in effect, crawl my way out for each ride. Even without waves to paddle through, it takes me almost 40 minutes to reach the farthest and biggest break, due to the point break’s configuration.

Finally, I power my 9’6” longboard in front of a gentle 4-foot wave and feel it catch. The taste of warm salt water on my lips, I stand up and let the wave push me forward as it slowly collapses, the last phase of permutation from its origin out at sea to its final demise on shore.

I teeter and stumble but stay upright, keeping my balance by using small jittery steps. As the seconds multiply, this ride grows to be the longest of my life, and I decide to push the envelope. With newfound confidence, I shuffle forward and cautiously drape five toes over the nose—I’m “hanging five”! A palpable jolt rushes through me—I haven’t felt like this since I

SURF'S UP

SINALOA SURF CAMP (Mazatlán area)

Prices include equipment, transfers, accommodations, meals, instruction, a DVD of the students' week and a free tour of a local destination. Food is great, accommodations basic and the instruction excellent. A superb value.

7-day package: \$900–\$1050 per person.

4-day package: \$560–\$710 per person.

Maximum of 12 guests per week (15 if one group); group discounts available.

619-316-5498; www.sinaloasurfschool.com.

ANFIBIOS SURF SHOP (Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo)

At this, Sixto's shop, a half-day of surfing with guide, transportation and board costs about \$60.

52-755-5-54-5693; www.anfibios.com.mx.

was 5 years old, when I pedaled a two-wheeler for the first time without falling.

For 3 ½ hours, I enjoy better rides than I've ever experienced. I make turns and moves I've never been able to before, and if it weren't for the fact that my arms have ceased to work, I'd surf until dark.

Back on shore, over a plate of Lourdes' pancakes and huevos rancheros, I think about friends back home who would do almost anything to catch just one of these waves. It's the reason world-class surfers retire here and why the small parking lot at the end of an unmarked road is jammed at 7 A.M. with cars carrying 12- to 70-year-olds from as far away as Australia. It's the surf. And it is why I'll be back tomorrow—and the next day. 🌊

Rob Dunton is a travel writer living in San Diego. After 10 years of trying to surf, he's happy to say he's finally getting the hang of it.

GETTING THERE



Alaska Airlines (alaskaair.com, 800-ALASKAAIR) serves Mazatlán and Ixtapa/Zihuatanejo daily. To book a complete Alaska Airlines Vacations package to Mexico, go to the Web or call 800-468-2248.