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On the beach at Villa Del Sol, on Mexico's Pacific coast


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The Waterfall Pool and casitas at Villa Del Sol, Zihuatanejo, Mex. (Tribune Media / Steve Haggerty)

ZIHUATANEJO, Mexico -- There are dozens of beach resorts on Mexico's Pacific Coast. You've probably stayed at some of them. But there's only one Zihuatanejo, and one Villa Del Sol.

At first you're wowed, and then you're impressed. The red tile roofs, the shaded arcades and the curving staircases reflect Mexico's Spanish colonial heritage. The beachside palapas and the gentle waves that curl and swirl on Zihuatanejo's most picturesque beach are undeniably seductive.

The resort's 70 casitas, in low-rise haciendas tucked away behind coconut palm fronds and cascading bougainvilleas -- each with its own private entrance, patio and hammock -- aren't just luxurious but romantic. By now you've realized there really is something special about the place. But what is it?

Villa Del Sol is proof that a community with winding lanes and lush landscaping is infinitely more inviting than one built on a rectilinear grid, all straight lines and right angles. There's the soft curve of stucco and palm-frond thatch; the winding paths that lead through a forest of ferns, drooping bamboo and red hibiscus. It's the look of a village that started small and grew over time.



Tropical gardens and a curved staircase lead to a Garden Suite,... (Tribune Media / Steve Haggerty)

Which it did, in the late 1970s, when Helmut Leins, the owner, bought acreage on Playa La Ropa and built nine casitas facing the ocean. Every few years, Leins built a few more, tucking them in around the resort's four pools, and others beside the lagoon and across the tennis courts.

When he was finished, all the rooms and suites were no more than five minutes from the beach. With five in our family, we were in a secluded Garden Suite in the middle of the property, with a private plunge pool. We were steps from the spa and the gift shop and "the library," a large buffet cupboard crammed to the hinges with loaner books in three languages.

What a treat it was when a pot of hot coffee (or tea), a basket of fresh pastry and a newspaper appeared early each morning on our patio table. How lovely that someone else came to sweep up and make the beds, and that our next-door neighbors, whom we rarely saw, smiled when they passed us in the restaurant? How convenient to have two award-winning restaurants around the corner. I was ready to unpack my clothes, plug in my computer and stay for the winter.

Next time I'll ask for one of the first rooms built, numbers one through nine. Small but charming, they have private patios, sliding glass doors, a sitting area and chairs downstairs, with natural wood trim and open beams. The king-size bed is in the loft. As in all the rooms, Mexican crafts and handmade tiles add color and design. Standard comforts include 400-count linens, satellite TV, electronic safes, robes, hairdryers, air conditioning, overhead fans and broadband Internet service.

If you're a stranger to Zihuatanejo (zee-whah-tuh-NAY-ho), you probably know that it's a bustling fishing village 180 miles north of Acapulco. When you're ready to explore, check out the central market's open stalls selling piles of fruit, bags of beans, nuts, flour, juice, wheels of cheese, whole piglets to roast, chops and steak, baskets, buckets, brooms, toys and children's clothes. Stroll down Cinco de Mayo, the place to go for souvenirs, beach balls, and sandals.

In the Marina area, at the waterfront, look for quality shops selling hand-embroidered clothes, masks, fine woven rugs, and authentic crafts and art. Handcrafted lacquered boxes and gourds run the gamut, from souvenirs priced at \$5 to objets d'art, priced to an astonishing \$8,000.

Instead of a taxi, take the bus into town, an adventure by itself. It runs every 10 minutes from the nearby corner and costs 45 cents per ride. The regulated price of a taxi from the airport to the Villa is \$29; buy your ticket near the baggage claim and don't let any taxi driver say otherwise. A taxi from the Villa to the airport is \$21. Go figure.

INCIDENTAL INTELLIGENCE:

GOING THERE: Fly nonstop from Los Angeles, Houston, Phoenix and St. Louis. Or connect through those and other cities, including Mexico City's new modern airport.

RESERVATIONS: Mexico's economy has improved, so prices have risen overall. But prices at the Villa Del Sol, a world-class resort ranked annually on several "best hotel" lists and a member of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World group, have stayed comparatively moderate.

A Superior double room for two is \$380 per night during the shoulder season: April and May, and Oct. 1 to Dec. 16. The same room is \$430 in high season: Dec. 17 to March 31, not counting the mandatory American Plan (breakfast and dinner) at \$60 per person per day.

In summer, from June 1 to Sept. 30, the same room is \$330. From the United States, call 1-888-389-2645. In Mexico, dial 755-555-5500. E-mail to reservation@hotelvilladelsol.net, or visit www.hotelvilladelsol.net.

ART: With four numbered color images with captions.

CAPTIONS:

IMAGE 1. Social hour at the infinity pool, Playa La Ropa, Villa Del Sol, Zihuatanejo, Mexico. Photo by Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld. Slug: WF-ADDRESSES-POOL

IMAGE 2. The Waterfall Pool and casitas at Villa Del Sol, Zihuatanejo, Mexico. Photo by Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld. Slug: WF-ADDRESSES-CASITAS

IMAGE 3. Tropical gardens and a curved staircase lead to a Garden Suite, Villa Del Sol, Zihuatanejo, Mexico. Photo by Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld. Slug: WF-ADDRESSES-GARDENS

IMAGE 4. Lagoon Suites' shaded patios look over the fountain, Villa Del Sol, Zihuatanejo, Mexico. Photo by Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld. Slug: WF-ADDRESSES-LAGOON

(Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty explore the world from Venice, Calif. They can be reached at TravelsWithAnne@cs.com.)

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Tropical gardens and a curved staircase lead to a Garden Suite, Villa Del Sol, Zihuatanejo, Mex. (Tribune Media / Steve Haggerty)

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