

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

FRONT PAGE

LOCAL [Home](#)

[Email Story](#)

NATIONAL

WORLD

WEATHER

EDITORIALS

OPINIONS-
LETTERS

SPORTS

SCENE

LIFE

REAL ESTATE

CLASSIFIEDS

BUSINESS

ADVERTISING
INFO

SPECIAL
SECTIONS

FEATURES

ARCHIVES

REPRINT FORMS

SITE INDEX

PHOTO
GALLERY-NEW
OKIES

Pacific coasting: Mellow Zihuatanejo and fancier Ixtapa welcome nature lovers

ANNE Z. COOKE and STEVE HAGGERTY, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENTS

September 10, 2006 8:20 AM

Sliding his kayak into a thicket of mangrove roots, Pablo Mendizabal crawled carefully out onto one of the slimy black trunks, reached into the murky water and fished out a half-submerged plastic bottle.

"Thrown out by picnickers?" asked a curious visitor. "No, more likely a fisherman," said Mr. Mendizabal, tossing it into the bottom of the boat. "Somebody who lives over there, in the village, who doesn't realize how bad these things are for the lagoon."

A biologist and owner of an eco-tour company in Ixtapa, on Mexico's Pacific coast, Mr. Mendizabal was spending the morning leading a group of kayakers through the tangle of channels and ponds in Laguna de Potosi, a federal wildlife refuge near the fishing village of Barra de Potosi.

The lagoon, a lush forest of marshes and mangrove swamps, lies close to the beach, 12 miles southeast of the twin towns of Zihuatanejo and Ixtapa on the Costa Grande, 150 miles northwest of Acapulco. Nearly five miles long, the preserve's brackish water is both natural habitat and a safe haven for fish, reptiles and nearly one-third of Mexico's resident and migratory bird species. Birders, who discovered the area long ago, are frequent visitors. More recently, the lagoon has been a popular destination for kayakers, who can rent boats in the village.

On this day in late May, the end of the dry season here on the Costa Grande, birding was tops on the agenda as the visitors explored the canals that meander beneath the mangrove canopy. Here and there, Mr. Mendizabal stopped to identify a bird or to point out the mangrove's hanging vines, tendrils that droop lower and lower until they finally touch water.

From overhead, sunlight filtered down, streaking the leaves and illuminating patches of dark water. Around the kayaks, juvenile snappers darted away. A female trogon with a pale yellow breast, indigenous to western Mexico, perched on an upper branch of the mangrove forest. A "first" for some of the birders, they elicited



Coconut palms are reflected in the pool beside the beach at the spiffy \ Sol in Zihuatanejo, Mexico. STEVE HAGGERTY PHOTOS



TOM DE WALT ILLUSTRATION

delighted ooohs.

"Look, that's a green heron, right there, do you see it?" asked Mr. Mendizabal, pointing into a thicket of sticks. We stopped, searching for a bird-like form, but to no avail. Finally we spotted a pair of yellow legs and a short brown neck, the only clue that the heron, perfectly camouflaged, was no more than five feet away. "They don't fly that well, so they hide among the branches for protection," explained Mr. Mendizabal.

Since the 1960s, when Highway 200, Mexico's coastal road, was extended to Zihuatanejo, then a quiet fishing village of 5,000 people, the region has changed dramatically. The earliest arrivals discovered the area's sandy white beaches and gentle surf; developers, of course, were right behind them. After the mid-1970s, when Fonatur, the government tourism agency, began to develop Ixtapa, the purpose-built hotel zone five miles from Zihuatanejo, the population quickly expanded. Today, about 80,000 people live in and around Ixtapa and Zihuatanejo.

But the changes also brought newcomers like Mr. Mendizabal. As an ecologist, he supports efforts to protect the mangroves' unique ecosystem, and visits the lagoon often to monitor its health. He also promotes environmental education by leading individual and group tours for birders, wildlife biologists and special interest groups.

But as a businessman, he depends on tourism. Most of the travelers who sign up for eco-tours with his company, Adventours, are based in Ixtapa, at one of the nine multi-story hotels built in a row along Playa del Palmar. And though Mr. Mendizabal prefers Zihuatanejo's old-fashioned charm, he lives in Ixtapa, where nothing is older than about 28 years. "The phone, the electricity, the plumbing, they all work," he said.

• • •

It's that same surprising combination -- the new, the old, and the unspoiled out-of-doors -- that makes Zihuatanejo (ZEE-wha, as people call it) such a rewarding place to visit. Founded in 1523 on the east shore of a small, oyster-shaped bay, Zihuatanejo is a rambling seaside community with some architectural charm, a little colonial ambience, colorful gardens, a historic and fishy-smelling waterfront, a gargantuan covered marketplace, pot-holed streets and enough chaotic bustle to satisfy the most intrepid adventurer.

During the day it's hot and dusty, but not hot enough to prevent every shop, craft stall and open-air restaurant from doing business. After breakfast, when the store owners have hosed off the sidewalks and are lounging in their open doors, the other half of the town arrives with shopping bags and pesos in hand. People climb on and off rattletrap buses and bicyclists speed past. At night, though, lights twinkle across the bay, rows of miniature sparkle lights nailed on trees and rooftops click on, cheerful voices carry out of open restaurant windows and the place feels magical.

If you like the feel of the ebbs and flows of humanity -- as we do -- you can also stay in one of Zihuatanejo's many small hotels, including budget, moderate and luxury ones. Zihua's eastside beaches, Playa Madera and Playa la Ropa. A few hotels are right on the beach. Most of them are a little further back, sometimes even several blocks back up the steep -- often very steep -- hillside that climbs up this side of the bay. Halfway up, buses pass on their way into town, an eight-minute scenic ride.



Pablo Mendizabal



At top, a busy street corner in downtown Zihuatanejo, a more easygoing corner to the resort area of Ixtapa just up the coast. Above, Zihuatanejo's Playa del Palmar offers numerous beach activities.

Hotel prices don't seem to depend on their distance from the sand, but they could, because these beach Playa la Ropa, particularly, deserve an award in all categories. The sand is silky, soft and clean and the waves, moderated by the bay's narrow entrance, are large but even, swirling in circles and leaving a scalloped edge on the sand.

We spent three completely self-pampering days in late May at the classically Mexican hotel, the Villa del Sol, choosing it because it's on the sand. As a bonus, the service was spot-on and the meals superb; in the off-season, promotional rates for double rooms drop considerably.

Then we moved to the Barcelo Hotel in Ixtapa, to sample the other side of the vacation experience, one more typical of visitors who prefer big-city style hotels. Like most of Ixtapa's hotels, the Barcelo has several bars, restaurants, a poolside bar, swimming pools for children and adults and several indoor and outdoor lounge areas.

All-inclusive prices are a big asset, since the children can eat as much as they want, when they want, in an informal setting. Our two kids immediately adapted to this arrangement, and spent most of their time running around unsupervised between the buffet and the swimming pool.

Because we were there at the end of May, in low season, our fellow guests were Mexican families. But the language differences didn't keep the kids from making friends with some other children their ages.

Ixtapa was convenient, too, for swimming with the dolphins at the Delfiniti aquarium, and for playing golf. The area's 18-hole courses is only 10 minutes away. It was convenient, too, for joining Adventours' six-day eco-tour with Mr. Mendizabal to Ixtapa Island, another nearby preserve, undeveloped and unspoiled. The tour, which included bicycling, kayaking and snorkeling, included all the equipment, lunch, guides and tickets and a water taxi to and from the island.

As we started back to the hotel, thick clouds began to gather overhead, the first time we'd seen them since our arrival. The air felt humid, and on the trees, miniature buds waited, ready to open.

"I can smell the rain before it comes," said Mr. Mendizabal, scanning the sky. "In fact, you wouldn't believe these dry barren hills could look so different unless you were here to see the change. After two weeks of everything turns to green, bright green, a magic forest, I sometimes think. I hope you'll see it next time."

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty are Marina del Rey-based freelance writers.

IF YOU GO

Adventours leads four-, five- and six-hour guided eco-tours priced from \$56 to \$76 per person. Call 011 52-755-553-1069, e-mail adventours@zihuatanejo.net, or visit www.zihuatanejo.net.

Listed prices for superior double rooms at the Villa del Sol in Zihuatanejo, a member of Small Luxury Hotels of the World, start at \$300 per night; additional discounts may be available during certain weeks. All meals and drinks are charged separately. Call 888-389-2645, e-mail reservation@villadelsol.net, or visit www.hotelvilladelsol.com.

All-inclusive prices at the Barcelo, in Ixtapa, start at \$77 per adult and \$32 per child for a double room with two queen beds. Higher prices apply according to the season and room availability. See www.barcelo.com.