

This week's dream: Chasing the counterculture on Mexico's Pacific coast

Costa Chica isn't like other Mexican beach regions you might know, said Freda Moon in *The New York Times*. Because there are no direct international flights, "the outsiders who end up on this stretch of Pacific coastline are here for a reason." Many are surfers, drawn to the dangerous waves that also help explain why this region of Oaxaca has remained immune to "Cancún-esque" overdevelopment. Instead, it's home to coastal Mexico's "few remaining pockets of weirdness and eccentricity." During a five-day visit that took me from a world-class artists' retreat to a party town to a boutique hotel created out of a former nudist resort, "I was struck again and again by how different these countercultural enclaves are from each other."

Casa Wabi, the artists' retreat, wasn't the showy gallery complex I had expected when I'd read that Pritzker Prize-winning architect Tadao Ando had designed the main building. I snuck into the property while staying nearby in a chicly minimal-



Surfers test the waves at La Punta in January.

ist one-room Airbnb, and discovered that Casa Wabi is less about its architecture than about an idea about art's place in the world. It was essentially an open-air workshop—a small array of structures tucked near the beach in a maze of tall brambles. Working my way east, I next stopped in Brisas de Zicatela, a rowdy surfer town pulsing with music and an international crowd of beautiful people. The unofficial uniforms

seemed to be "ultrashort" jean cutoffs and blond dreadlocks for the women and tattoos and man-buns for the barefoot men. I was happier a few miles away at Playa Puerto Angelito, a swimmable beach where a dozen oysters cost less than \$5.50.

Costa Chica ends near two neighboring towns, Mazunte and Zipolite, that offer their own twists on counterculture. Mazunte is home to yogis and healing centers and, oddly, some excellent Italian pizzerias apparently run by teenagers. Zipolite, which is home to a small but vibrant gay community, also harbors one of Mexico's only nude beaches, and I chose to stay nearby at a particularly amusing moment—during a swingers' convention. It's easy to make fun of such scenes, and my hosts at the boutique hotel certainly did. One co-owner dismissed the Mazunte crowd as wannabe hippies. Zipolite, he said, "has the real thing—you can spot them from their gray ponytails." *The Airbnb mentioned above, known as Casa Tiny, rents for \$170 a night.*

Hotel of the week



A cottage living room

Twin Farms

Barnard, Vt.

"If you want to stay at the best hotel on the planet, just head to Vermont," said Kristi Palma in *The Boston Globe*. Twin Farms, a bucolic adults-only getaway, was last week named Hotel of the Year by *Forbes Travel Guide*, the outfit that awards star ratings based on incognito visits. The property's record-breaking score owes much to personalized service, including custom-prepared meals. But all starts with the setting. The 10-room main building and 10 cottages, including one for modern art connoisseurs, are scattered across 300 rolling acres once owned by novelist Sinclair Lewis. twinfarms.com, from \$2,000 for a two-night stay

Getting the flavor of...

Utah's Goblin Valley

Bryce Canyon National Park gets more attention, but Utah's own Goblin Valley State Park is "every bit as impressive and Mars-like," said Kastalia Medrano in *Thrillist.com*. Known for its thousands of goblins, or hoodoos—"those bizarre-looking rock spires that we've come to associate with Bryce Canyon"—Goblin Valley can hold its own with any national park. Those hoodoos, which are created when a rock column erodes more quickly than its cap, seem to stretch to the horizon in every direction, and you're free to wander among them. The park, four hours south of Salt Lake City, is open year-round, but it's best to visit this desert in cooler months. Skilled canyoners can get backcountry permits for \$2 to rappel into the Goblin's Lair, a natural sandstone cave, and hikers and mountain bikers can both enjoy established trails. Stick around in the evening for top-notch stargazing: Goblin Valley is certified as an International Dark Sky Park.

Quality time with the Golden Gate

Even "the quintessential 21st-century city" has pockets of windswept natural splendor, said Helen Carefoot in *The Washington Post*. During a recent trip back home, I joined my mother and brother for a hike in San Francisco's Lands End, a park within the Golden Gate National Recreation Area that provides "many of the Bay Area's most jaw-dropping vistas." Our trail followed the path of a defunct rail line and took us past Point Lobos (a favorite spot for sea lions) and through "a dark green canopy of cypress and eucalyptus." The Golden Gate Bridge isn't exactly close, but glimpses of it are constant, and Eagle's Point and the beaches offer unobstructed views. We stopped at the stone labyrinth that an artist built on one open bluff, and at Cliff House, an aptly named restaurant whose marvelous observation deck is open to noncustomers. "The three of us looked out on the blue expanse, and I felt my last bits of stress wash away with the tide."

Last-minute travel deals

Spring skiing at Whistler

Ski Whistler, the British Columbia resort that hosted 2010's Winter Olympics, and enjoy slope-side luxury at the Fairmont Chateau. The hotel is offering free lift passes and 15 percent off all rooms. Rates now start at \$378 a night. fairmont.com/whistler

Ireland by van

Vagabond, a tour operator for travelers in Ireland, is offering 10 percent off journeys departing in March and April. Choose between laid-back "Driftwood" tours and tours that mix sightseeing with hiking, kayaking, surfing, and similar activities. vagabondtoursofireland.com

Easy Carmel-by-the-Sea

The Coachman's Inn in picturesque Carmel-by-the-Sea, Calif., is offering a 30 percent discount on weeknight stays through May 14. Doubles with fireplaces now start at \$188 at the centrally located property, run by a small boutique chain. coachmansinn.com