

TRAVEL

TIME TO GET AWAY

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SWEET SIMPLICITY

MEXICO: Yoga retreat leaves the city and tourists behind

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SPECIAL TO THE PROVINCE

The word dances from the lips with the promise of flirtatious beauty.

I'd heard about Sayulita for years - little whispers of a town not far from Mexico's Puerto Vallarta, yet one offering a completely different experience, with none of the city's towering all-inclusive resorts jostling for space on the beach front. So I followed the flirtation to the shores of Sayulita to attend a

retreat that promised sun, surf and the replenishing postures of yoga. I was looking for the sweet simplicity of a Mexican village uncorrupted by tourists, a place where visitors mingled with locals and the beach was devoid of obnoxious noise.

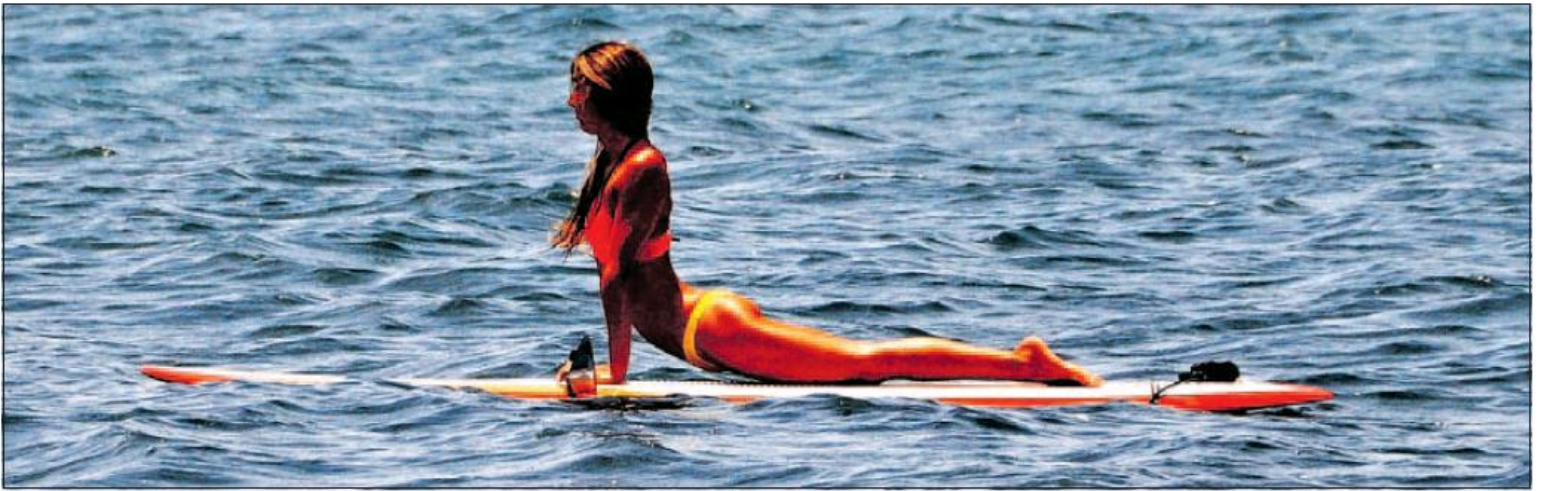
You truly leave the city behind you when you travel to Sayulita. Twenty minutes out of the airport, the convenience stores that dot the highway begin to disappear, replaced by rugged hills thick with tropical foliage. We travel on a highway surround-

ed by Mexican jungle, a green zone that protects the country's remaining jaguars and is the breeding ground of crabs who cross that very road in their thousands as they travel to the beach each year. Trees lean over the highway, their branches forming a canopy over passing cars, and the road winds and curves until suddenly we're on a dirt path and the town feels close.

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avulita - a luscious tropical beach town not far from Puerto Vallarta - enables you to truly leave the bustle and towering all-inclusive resorts. — SUBMITTED PHOTO



Sayulita's long arc of pristine, white sand is a revered beach among the world's surfing enthusiasts. — SUBMITTED PHOTOS



After morning yoga, it's off to the beach to be schooled in the arts of surfing.

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"We're taking the long way around town because the main bridge has been washed away," says my driver, Mario. He's talking about the four solid days of rain that fell in September, causing floods from which Sayulita is still recovering. The road is narrow, dark and uneven and for a moment I wonder what I'm doing here. Then, suddenly, I hear the whoosh of waves and we've arrived. We approach the dim lights of the hotel Villa Amor in the darkness but I can feel the bay wrapped in a gentle semi circle around us.

The retreat has been organized by Via Yoga, a Seattle.-based company co-owned by Kelly Kemp. "Our guests love this place," says Kemp, who has hosted 60 retreats in Sayulita since Via Yoga began in 2003. "It's a lively town with great restaurants, and even though there are more tourists coming here these days, Sayulita has kept its charm."

The ten of us attending this retreat — two men and eight women — range in age from 28 to 50, and come from all over North America. Our days are anchored at both ends by yoga: an energizing class full of flowing asanas and challenging postures in the morning, and another with long, nourishing stretches and deep, meditative silences in the evening. Our studio overlooks the ocean, and the comforting sound of the waves fills our ears as we move creaky limbs from one posture to another. "Respect your body and obey its limits," cautions our instructor, Jill Lawson.



The town is delightfully accessible and everything is within walking distance.

By Day 6, though, there's marked improvement in our skills and riding the waves has become a challenge we're gradually mastering.

Sayulita is a delightfully accessible town where everything is walking distance. A jaunt into town reveals an eclectic selection of restaurants, galleries, boutiques and gift shops, but it's only in the decade that they've mushroomed. Today tourism is the bread and butter of most town residents and vendors troll the beach selling everything from pies to blankets, baskets to sarongs.

Preciado, who juggles surfing classes with spear fishing expeditions and real estate work, remembers a time when there were few tourists in town and house prices were affordable. "Now they've become too expensive for Mexicans," he reflects. A home overlooking the beach can easily sell in the range of \$800,000 and all the buyers are foreigners. "Most of the realtors are American, too," he says.

Still, there's a sense that the essential fabric of Sayulita has remained unchanged even as the visitors come and go. As darkness falls locals gather in the town plaza to talk about their day.

If you go

Via Yoga (www.viayoga.com) offers six-day yoga retreats to Sayulita that include accommodation, some meals, daily yoga and surf classes and a daylong snorkelling excursion. Prices start at \$2,395 with discounts for groups of 8 or more. Info: (800) 603-YOGA.

Don't Miss: A day trip excursion to Las Islas Marietas, a UNESCO nature reserve a half-hour by boat from Sayulita. Home to the blue-footed booby, the islands offer great snorkelling, diving and whale-watching activities (the latter between December and March).

Dining Fine: Head eight kilometres north of Sayulita for dinner in San Pancho, a smaller town with beautiful restaurants, quiet charm and elegant homes. We sampled Thai rolls and pasta on a Mexican fusion menu at Café del Mar, a tree house-like restaurant with a spectacular view of sunset.

delicious," we tell her when she emerges for a break. The broad smile on her face describes

Once the morning yoga class is done, the beach becomes the centre of daylight action. It's a long arc of white sand that descends gradually to the ocean, and a revered beach among surfing enthusiasts. Advanced surfers ride the tubes in a spectacular display of balance and skill, while beginners like us clamber clumsily onto their boards as instructors cheer them on.

Our instructor, Israel Preciado, 29, puts us through the moves on the sand before letting us loose in the water. In the first hour, we ride small ripples with trepidation, balanced precariously on the boards for just seconds at a time.

Kids dart around the pillars in a game of tag, elders exchange stories and a sense of warmth and camaraderie fills the air. At Don Pedro's, one of the town's largest beachside restaurants, couples fill the dance floor with the rhythmic moves of salsa, danced to the music of a live band. A feeling of energy and liveliness fills the night air.

We dine at Antonia's, a restaurant located on the patio of Antonia's home and one where family members help clear plates and take orders while the matriarch presides over the kitchen. Antonia delivers homemade burritos, enchiladas, guacamole and other local favourites. "It's

her pride in her cuisine and her pleasure in sharing her food with others.

Six days flash by, a blur of surfing classes, group meals and many hours of replenishing stretches on the yoga mat. The backdrop is nothing short of exquisite: a superb hotel on the cusp of the ocean, and a town full of unique character and charm. Aching backs and hips have mysteriously disappeared after 11 yoga classes with just the right combination of laughter and intensity. We're invigorated, suntanned and replenished by yoga and the feel of the ocean against our skin. And though we know it's inevitable, we're in no mood to go home.