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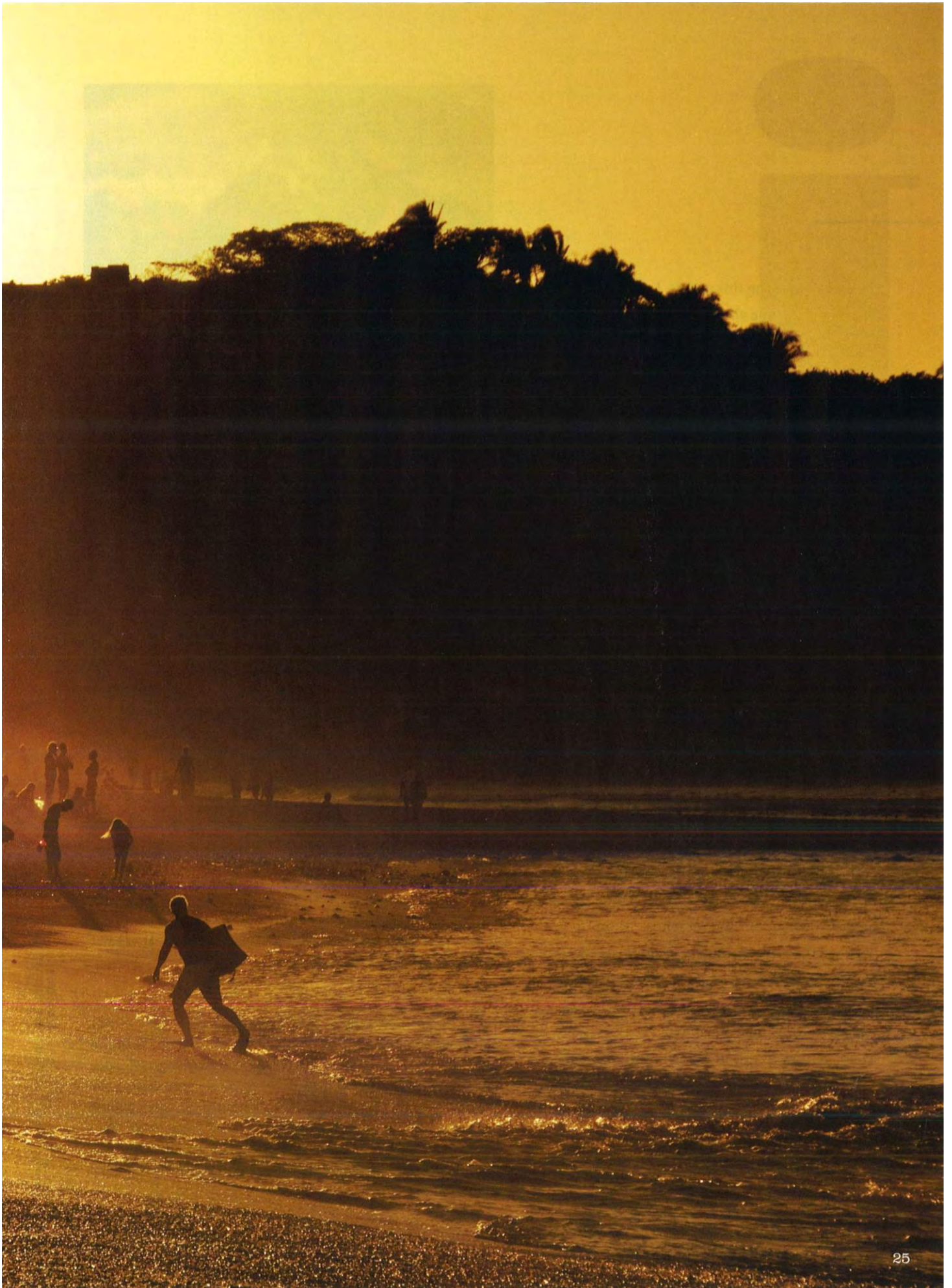
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AAA members

A tropical beach scene at sunset. The sky is a warm, golden yellow, and the sun is low on the horizon, creating a strong silhouette effect. Several tall palm trees are visible, their fronds reaching towards the sky. In the foreground, the wet sand of the beach is glistening with the reflection of the setting sun. In the middle ground, several people are silhouetted against the bright light, some standing and some walking. The overall mood is serene and dreamlike.

mexico dreamin'

Discover secret Sayulita, where
the jungle meets the sea

BY NICOLE MEOLI



I hesitate in writing this article. I mean, I know this is a magazine about travel, among other things, but sometimes travel writers experience a place we wish would remain a secret. However, I digress.

Sayulita is a beautiful tiny fishing and surfing village in Mexico where time stands still. Shop owners up with the sun hose off the evening's dust from their stoops as chickens mill about. Women prepare fresh corn tortillas streetside. Lazy dogs lounge in the shade, giving merely half an eyelid lift as I pass by. The streets are barely paved and most are worn-down cobblestone. Locals saunter along the town's square, coffee in hand, catching up with each other on village gossip. Uniformed schoolchildren giggle and play in the streets as they make their short trek to school. It's one of the few places in the Mexico that isn't completely overrun with pushy, obnoxious, camera-toting, margarita-drenched tourists ... yet.

Despite all of the translations of Sayulita ("place of the flies," "place of the dogs," "little Sayula"), the name should mean "a little peace and a whole lot of rest and rejuvenation." I noticed the serenity almost instantly as the car that picked us up at the airport left the multilane highway from Puerto Vallarta and ventured north into the jungle via a two-lane road. Within 20 minutes of winding through lush, tropical rolling hills, we had arrived in our very own hidden paradise.

So here's a glimpse into my journal of Sayulita discoveries. But, please, shhhh ... don't tell anyone.



Villa Amor

I am in Villa Bonita for my first three nights. And I know why it's called *bonita*. The sumptuous yet rustic oceanfront villa shimmers with white marble floors, an illuminated kitchen counter and a colossal balcony that's really more of an outdoor living and dining room—complete with a stellar view of Sayulita Bay. So much exotic glamour surrounds, I half expect Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman to waltz in at any moment. The constant ocean breeze flowing through the villa and sound of waves below is invigorating. I drift off with the ocean each night and sleep better than I have all year.

The next day, I have delicious tacos and firey salsa at "O," the onsite restaurant. Afterward, I grab a sea kayak (complimentary to all guests of Villa Amor) and paddle away to the deserted beach across the bay, which took a while to reach. (Tip: Off-season rates, July, August and September, start at around \$60 a night.)

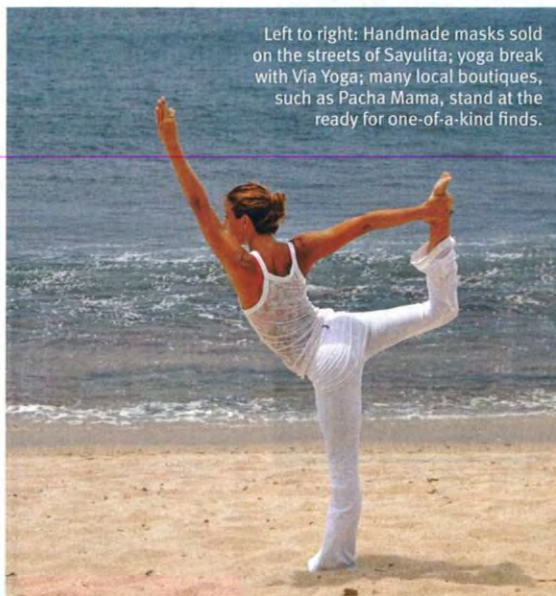
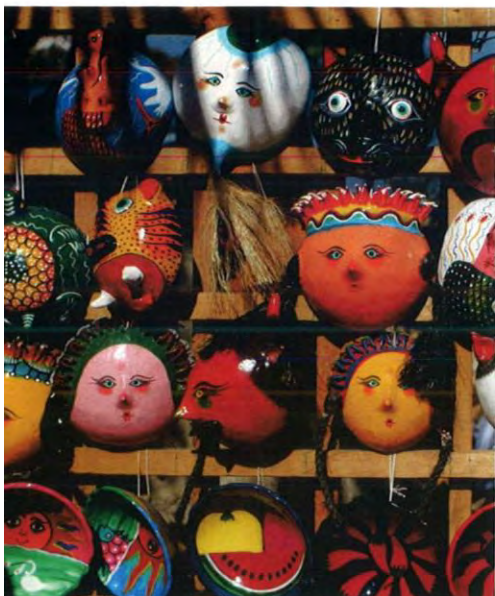
Sayulita

At night, the square is festive and comes to life in a way different from the daytime buzz. Many frequent the tables of outdoor cafés and restaurants—everyone laughing and care-free—a friendly, welcoming place. I make my way around the square and beyond, trying a new restaurant each night; among my favorites are Sayulita Cafe, Calypso, Tierra Viva, Miro Vino, and the tiny Panino's Bakery. I eat my weight in seafood, most of which was caught at 3 p.m. the same day. It really is a fishing village.



Many of the balconies at Villa Amor are as large or larger than the rooms themselves. Left: Tacos at O restaurant.

Here's a glimpse into my journal of Sayulita discoveries. But, please, shhhh ... don't tell anyone.



Left to right: Handmade masks sold on the streets of Sayulita; yoga break with Via Yoga; many local boutiques, such as Pacha Mama, stand at the ready for one-of-a-kind finds.



Definitely worth a stop: Sayulita Fish Taco Restaurant & Bar (SFT). Despite the 340 illuminated bottles of tequila lining the walls of this warmly lit, cozy cubbyhole, Miguel (bartender) and the shrimp tacos are really the star attractions of SFT. After giving me the lowdown on the vast and artistic sea of bottles around me, he tells everything and more about the different types of tequilas—where they come from, how they are made and tequila facts that will surprise you.

It's the same as walking into a winery for tastings. Miguel pours tequila flights of three where you can sip to sample different types of a tequila—blanco, reposado, añejo, etc. Tequila is an art, as Miguel, the passionate aficionado will show you.

Via Yoga

I meet Kelly Kemp and Michelle Gantz out front of Villa Amor one morning—both are from Seattle. The two own and operate Via Yoga, which offers yoga and surf retreats in Sayulita. Kemp and Gantz did it right with these six-night escapes: accommodations at Villa Amor, two 90-minute yoga or pilates classes each day, daily surfing lessons, breakfast each morning and three group dinners with your fellow yogis. And you're not on some crazy, strict schedule either; there's plenty of free time to wander about, snorkel, hike, eat tacos, sip tequila, have a massage or just snooze on the beach. **Retreat dates for Sayulita: Nov. 20–26, Jan. 15–21, Jan. 28–Feb. 3, Feb. 11–17, March 18–24, April 15–21 and April 21–27.** They also offers similar retreats in Todos Santos, Mex., and Costa Rica. www.viayoga.com.

Playa Escondida

I spend the final half of my trip at the private and remote Playa Escondida. I feel like Tarzan's Jane when checking in to this jungle hideaway. Even though Playa



Escondida is only a 10-minute cab ride (or 30-minute walk) from Sayulita, I swear I am on my own private island. Twenty-six cabanified villas and bungalows nestled amid the palm trees and lush landscape of the jungle make up this resort, plus a two-cabana spa (with masseuse Elise who gives a mean Swedish massage), a great restaurant next to the infinity pool and a beachside bar on a very private beach. Many of the villas are beachfront, like the one in which I stay called Sol 1. I am so close to the ocean, I think I might wake up drenched and with seashells stuck in my hair.

But I am so relaxed, that would be just fine with me. **!**

BELOW: COURTESY OF PEACE MEXICO
OPPOSITE: NICOLE MEOLI



Children benefit greatly from Peace's programs.

GIVING BACK Volunteer a few hours or days of your Sayulita vacation to make a difference in the lives of locals. An amazing nonprofit organization called **PEACE MEXICO** exists to work with, educate and help communities in Mexico through several programs: **Ayuda a los Animales**—A free mobile spay/neuter clinic operating 48 weeks a year in Puerto Vallarta and the nearby State of Nayarit (which includes Sayulita). Adoptions are held monthly in Bucerias, close to Sayulita; **Casa Comunidad**—Through classes and educational programs, children and adults receive necessary skills to successfully contribute to their multicultural/multilingual communities; and **Community Pride**—A neighborhood cleanup and recycling program to develop community pride and protection of the environment.

Since 2003, PEACE has vastly improved the quality of life of many locals and animals through its dedication to the Mexican culture, natural resource preservation and social responsibility. To volunteer or find out more, visit www.peacemexico.org. —N.M.



The bridge over
Playa Escondida's
Infinity pool.