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My week in Mexico's hidden paradise

A visit to Mexico's Happy Coast included moments of solitude on rugged beaches, lavish resorts, and an understanding of why the wealthy flock to this hidden gem.



Costalegre is Mexico's "Happy Coast." Monica Humphries/Business Insider



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I arrived at Mexico's Happy Coast stressed, anxious, and, frankly, unhappy.

Within minutes of arriving in Puerto Vallarta, I was standing at the rental car company, utterly confused. Three hundred unplanned dollars later, I was driving three hours on a pothole-filled road to my first resort in Costalegre.

As I crawled behind slow mopeds and put my rental car's suspension to the test on countless speed bumps, I couldn't help but wonder if the nausea from the winding roads and the scratch in my throat from nearby wildfires would be worth it.

I also questioned how a place earned a name like the Happy Coast if it feels impossible to reach.



A casita at Las Rosadas in Costalegre. Monica Humphries/Business Insider

Situated on the Pacific Coast of Mexico, Costalegre is a roughly 200-mile stretch of coastline between Puerto Vallarta and Manzanillo. It's a region of extremes — small seaside towns sit near multimillion-dollar resorts.

For years, it's been a quiet retreat enticing the elite, where everyone from Mick Jagger to Bill Gates has vacationed. The properties — and the thousands of acres surrounding them — are mostly privately owned and developed by families who have promised to keep the ecosystems largely untouched.

I spent a week driving dirt roads, sipping margaritas with strangers, and resort hopping across Costalegre. Before landing in Mexico, luxury vacation destinations were synonymous with extravagance. Costalegre challenged those beliefs.

By the time I said goodbye to the rocky coastline, I was captivated by a remote region that prioritized nature and weaved luxury into every aspect of the stay.

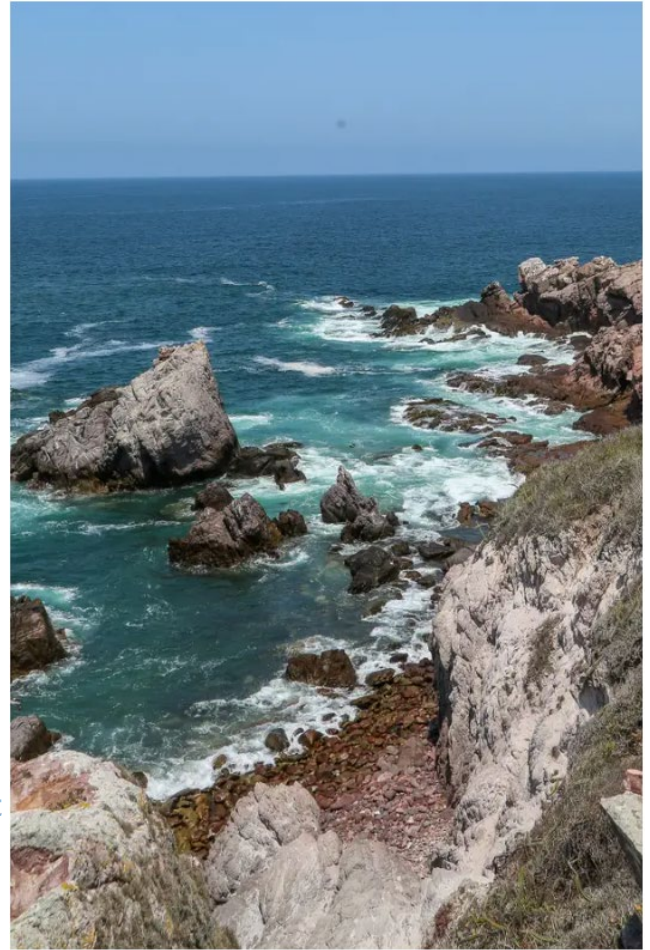
If you know, you know

When I told friends and family I was heading to Mexico, they assumed I was setting off for Cancún or Tulum; maybe Mexico City. Not a single person I spoke to had heard of Costalegre.

"It's still unknown," said Alba Garcia, the director of rooms at the Four Seasons Tamarindo, a luxury hot spot in Costalegre. "It's an 'if you know, you know' kind of vibe."

Maria Campos, the director of client services at Las Rosadas, a collection of private villas and residences along Costalegre, grew up in the small town of Chamela, where she said the coast was typically called Costa Sur. In 1990, the state of Jalisco officially deemed the region a priority tourism area and named it the Costalegre Ecological Tourism Corridor.

Unlike Finland, which has data to support its designation as the happiest country in the world, Costalegre, which translates to "coast of joy," taunts its title casually and confidently.



A rocky shoreline in Costalegre, Mexico. Monica Humphries/Business Insider

When asked how guests wind up in the region, I was rarely told it was because they wanted to visit Costalegre. Some people stumbled on a property while researching Puerto Vallarta; most received a rave review from a friend.

Likely, if you've heard of Costalegre, it's because of the private community of Careyes.

In 1968, Italian banker Gian Franco Brignone flew over Mexico's Pacific Coast. Impressed by what he saw from the small Cessna plane, he purchased 13,000 acres of the coastline to build a colorful retreat. (Careyes declined to share how much Brignone paid for the land.)



Gian Franco Brignone at Careyes. Careyes

"There was not anything when my father first started," Emanuela Brignone Cattaneo, Brignone's daughter, told me over dinner one evening. "My father would show friends, and then those friends would buy land."

Careyes now sits on 35,000 acres with a 25,000-acre biosphere, 46 multimillion-dollar villas, 40 casitas, 55 suites, and three bungalows. It's a colorful neighborhood with villas in cobalt blues, highlighter yellows, and dusty pinks. A few dozen permanent residents call it home, but most properties cater to vacationers throughout the year.

"It's Mediterranean meets Mexico," Kim Kessler, a Careyes resident and the founder of KIPR Global, the public relations agency that represents Careyes, explained.



A villa in Careyes. Monica Humphries/Business Insider

While Careyes' architecture and color palette leave an impression, its visitors are what put it on the map.

It's where Heidi Klum and Seal married and Cindy Crawford posed for Playboy. It's known for its annual Lunar New Year party, and celebrities like Tom Ford, Naomi Campbell, and Uma Thurman have vacationed there.

Careyes might've been the first luxury development, but it certainly wasn't the last.

Two decades later, French-British financier and politician James Goldsmith started building an estate nearby. Today, it's the luxury resort Cuixmala. Following Cuixmala's construction, the 18-suite Las Alamandas opened in 1990. More recently, in 2002, the Four Seasons Tamarindo opened its doors, and the smaller operation Las Rosadas popped up along the coastline in 2005.

For now, there are just a handful of luxury resorts on the rocky coastline. (Xala, a billion-dollar development, is set to open a Six Senses resort in 2026.)

With limited properties, the vacation experience is far from a Cabo, Cancún, or Tulum. Once you arrive at a resort, you won't see other buildings stretching into the sky. There are no middle-tier resorts with crowded pools or clubs bumping the bass late into the night. Souvenir shops are limited to small resort boutiques with local art instead of shot glasses and T-shirts.



The reporter at Las Rosadas on Costalegre. Monica Humphries/Business Insider

Instead, Costalegre is quiet and private.

Multiple times throughout my trip, it was just me and my travel partner on a beach in complete solitude, something that feels impossible to discover in today's world.

This seclusion is exactly what appeals to the residents and vacationers enamored by the Happy Coast.

"I don't think there are too many places in the world where you can walk three kilometers down the coast and there's no one there," Viviana Dean, who lives full-time in Careyes, told me while sipping a margarita overlooking the ocean. "Even after 30 years, I can't believe I'm alone in this beautiful place."

While plenty love Costalegre, Kessler said that's not the case for everyone.

"For people that want Chanel and Gucci and all of that, you won't find that here," Kessler said. "I think it has far more of a refined but understated clientele that appreciates luxury and nature."

A rich realization

By the end of the trip, I realized what makes Costalegre rare is an equation of simplicity, seclusion, and splendor.

Yes, the remote seashell-filled beaches at Las Rosadas were impressive, but having that paired with a private infinity pool made the entire experience luxe.

Sure, the pristine jungle at the Four Seasons Tamarindo was memorable, but fresh pastries and a concierge just a text message away created a five-star experience.



Rooms at the Four Seasons Tamarindo. Monica Humphries/Business Insider

When Kessler invited me to a morning yoga class at Careyes, the setup was simple. We lowered into Warrior 2 and listened as waves crashed nearby.

After class, I overheard a group chatting.

"There are three brands everyone, everyone around the world knows. Versace, Gucci, and Armani," one woman said.

As the debate turned into a story about partying with Gianni Versace, I laughed to myself. This is the quintessential conversation I pictured having on a vacation in this wealthy hot spot.

The group dispersed. Some headed to their private villas, where chefs had breakfast waiting for them. Visitors, on the other hand, might pop between the area's five pools or walk along the coastline to take in the rugged scenery.

For vacationers, itineraries tend to be light. There aren't museums to check off or popular archaeological sites to explore. Unsurprisingly, the focus is on the outdoors.

At Las Alamandas, for instance, afternoons can be spent on horseback navigating the property's 2,000 acres, and evenings picnicking during sunset.

It's a slightly different scene when you reach towns like Barra de Navidad and Melaque, which cater to locals, snowbirds, and regional tourists. Here, you'll find streets lined with colorful beach supplies, buses shuttling in people for day trips, karaoke nights, and beach vendors slinging mangos, pineapples, and coconuts.

There's much more action in these seaside towns, but the wealthy travelers I spoke to rarely had plans to head that far south.



A suite at Las Alamas in Costalegre. Monica Humphries/Business Insider

Leaving happy

I ended my trip back at the Puerto Vallarta International Airport, overwhelmed by crowds, noises, and intercom announcements.

It was a harsh welcome back to reality, but I was calm, relaxed, and — you guessed it — happy.

Sitting at my gate waiting for economy class to board, I thought about why Costalegre felt remarkable.

Yes, it was the stunning resorts, but it was also pristine nature and the welcoming people I met.

Families like the Brignones and resort owners like Isabel Goldsmith, who owns Las Alamandas, light up when discussing their properties and the ecosystems that surround them. They said they plan to keep Costalegre's habitats largely undeveloped.

The hope is for it to remain a hidden gem, although each property I visited also shared plans to grow.

Kessler said Careyes would max out at developing 7%. Meanwhile, the Four Seasons, which sits on 3,000 acres, has only developed 2% of the land with plans

to cap the number at 3%. A small percentage of Las Alamandas is developed, but Goldsmith said she plans to add residences to the property in the coming years.

Campos said she hopes the area where she grew up will largely remain untouched.

"I pray it will never get overbuilt the way the other places have," Campos said. "I go to Cabo, and it's just exploded."

These moments of solitude, bookended by down duvets, meals by award-winning chefs, and the most breathtaking pools, made me pray, too.

And I'm not a religious person.



A view from the reporter's suite at the Four Seasons Tamarindo. Monica Humphries/Business Insider