



Coastal Cool

Mexico's waterfront destinations get down to business with stylish flair

BY MARK CHESNUT

Nearly everyone likes a good view. But in Mexico, beach resorts are more than just a place to gaze at the beautiful sand and sea; they're also prime spots to add a hip, artistic touch to meetings and incentive trips. We call it coastal cool—and here are a few ways to get it.

BAJA CALIFORNIA

Considering that Los Cabos has become a preferred destination for movie stars, world leaders and other high-profile figures, it's no surprise that this Baja California hot spot excels at providing stylish accommodations and venues.

Meeting planners can choose from unique options like the Barefoot Elegance Experience, a re-imagining of a Spanish grape stomp at the Fiesta Americana Grand Los Cabos, or a Nautical Theme Night, which brings live bossa nova music and dancing to the beach at Pueblo Bonito Pacifica Resort & Spa.

Groups interested in wine and dining might also consider a stay at Esperanza, An Auberge Resort, which recently introduced new meetings and events offerings including free "Margarita and Mojito Mixer" cocktail-making classes. And if contemporary music is a potential draw, then a new hotel called El Ganzo should be on the radar. This 66-room boutique property, which debuted in November, has its own on-site recording studio and hosts resident artists as well as live performances.

PACIFIC COAST

Mexico's Pacific Coast is lined with thousands of miles of gorgeous sand, and its top beach resort destinations offer countless opportu-

nities to add a hip vibe to events.

A planner might begin an itinerary at the retro-chic Hotel Boca Chica—a member of Design Hotels in Acapulco, where Rita Hayworth once stayed—or Pearl, the most stylish enclave at the Fairmont Acapulco Princess, then bring the group to shop for silver in Taxco and wrap up the trip with cocktails on the beach at Playa El Palmar or Zibustanejo Bay.

Mazatlan, which is marketed as the "Colonial City on the Beach," along with a sophisticated meetings and incentives infrastructure, Mazatlan also offers visitors the experience of one of the most highly cultural destinations in Mexico," says Carlos Berdegue, vice president of the Mazatlan Hotel Association.

So after sipping expertly prepared refreshments at places like El Estero lounge bar at the Hotel Riu Emerald Bay, groups can head to the historic city center to enjoy gourmet restaurants, admire historic architecture and perhaps attend a live dance, music or theater performance at the beautifully restored Angela Peralta Theater.

Also big on culture is Puerto Vallarta, where more than 30 art galleries display the work of Mexican and international artists. Art lovers can have their fill during gallery openings and weekly art walks that are held year-round.

"Puerto Vallarta is a booming destination that combines the best of Mexico's past, present and future," says Guillermo Oben, director of the Puerto Vallarta Tourism Board.

Among the freshest event venues

Clockwise from top: JW Marriott Cancun lounge; Hilton Los Cabos specialty drink; Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita, Riviera Nayarit; Level 42, Riviera Maya Jazz Festival



in Puerto Vallarta is Los Muertos Pier, which reopened in January after a \$2.4 million renovation—complete with a waterfront promenade, attractive lighting and a dock that groups can use for transportation to private beaches.

Just north of Puerto Vallarta is the Riviera Nayarit, where groups can indulge in a musical vibe at the 348-room Hard Rock Hotel Vallarta, which debuted in August 2012 following a revamp of the former Vallarta Palace.

"Loved by artists and beach enthusiasts for its extraordinary beauty and genuine charm, Riviera Nayarit offers business travelers a myriad of cultural and leisure activities to explore before or after their meetings—certainly a destination to extend a business trip," according to Richard Zarkin, public relations manager of the Riviera Nayarit CVB.

In Manzanillo, South of Puerto Vallarta, groups can check into places like Hotel Las Hadas, a Moorish-style resort that served as a setting for the 1979 movie *J0*, and enjoy an evening out at places like Colima Bay Cafe, where techno, house and dance music fill the dance floor.

MEXICAN CARIBBEAN & GULF COASTS

Mexico's east coast has more than just pure white sand and fascinating ancient ruins (although those two factors are reason enough to visit). It's also home to exceptional meeting facilities, trend-setting hotels and venues that know how to serve groups with style.

In Cancun, groups can make imaginative toasts at the all-inclusive Sandos Cancun Luxury Experience Resort, which debuted last year as a revamp of the former Le Meridien. The hotel's team-building sessions include cocktail-making and mixology competitions, as well as tequila-tasting sessions.

Music is a big part of the experience at the 371-room, adults-only, all-inclusive Live Aqua Cancun, where an in-house DJ oversees all of the music—and also spins at the resort's sleekly stylish Egos bar, which is available for private events. Another cool option is Noir, a new nightclub that recently opened at the Moon Palace Golf & Spa Resort. Created by celebrated architect and interior designer Francois Frossard, the venue accommodates 350 for private events.

South of Cancun, the stretch of coastline dubbed the Riviera Maya is another region

that continues to up the ante on service and style. Groups can satisfy their sweet tooth at the new Cupcake Cafe, a gourmet, adults-only snack place at the Sandos Playacar Beach Resort & Spa, which recently renovated its haciendas and introduced a new temezcal facility and ritual.

Groups staying at the all-inclusive Riu Palace Mexico in Playa del Carmen, which reopened in December following a \$20 million renovation, can make use of themed venues including the Bar Cubano lobby bar, La Bodega Mexican restaurant and Krystal fusion restaurant.

Carlos Mora, meetings manager for the Riviera Maya Destination Marketing Office, says the region caters to a variety of groups.

"Eco-conscious and sustainable meetings are a natural fit for the region, as well as events that have a strong emphasis on culture, adventure, health and wellness components," he says.

On Mexico's largest island, Cozumel, natural beauty and a relaxed ambience are critical parts of its coastal cool appeal. "Cozumel offers a great variety of spas and relaxing places just to enjoy the nature and tranquility," says Pablo Alfonso Aguilar



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Torres, promotion manager at the Cozumel Tourist Promotion Board. "Downtown, shopping, dinner places and sunsets are unforgettable in Cozumel."

In addition to on-site hotel facilities, group-friendly venues include Mr. Sancho's Beach Club, which has a 500-seat restaurant and an extensive Tequila menu, and Nachi-Cocoon, a beach club and water sports center that hosts beach receptions.

Tracing Mexico's eastern coastline north

and west, your finger will eventually land on the city of Veracruz, a historic metropolis and also a hub for business. The neighborhood called Boca del Rio is one of the best locations for groups, with upscale hotels that offer easy access to the World Trade Center convention space and extensive dining and nightlife choices.

But one of the hippest options in the entire state is located outside the city. Azucar, which is part of style-conscious Mexican

hotel group Grupo Habita and a member of Design Hotels, is a paradisiacal beachfront getaway located in the coastal town of Tecolutla. Azucar's pool area, gardens and salon can host events for up to 300. 

MARK CHESNUT has been covering Mexico for nearly 15 years and has written for media outlets south of the border including Travel + Leisure Mexico and Aeromexico's in-flight magazine.

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