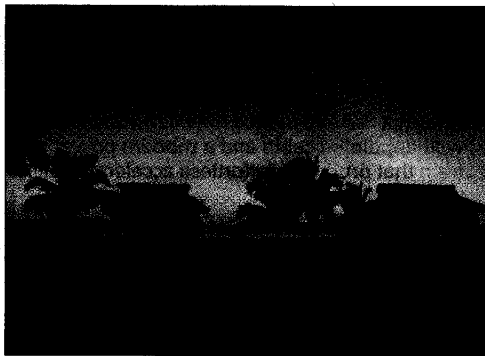


This week's dream: The surreal beauty of Mexico's Costa Alegre

I can easily understand why French poet André Breton once called Mexico "the most surrealist country in the world," said Julia Chaplin in *Travel + Leisure*. On the Costa Alegre, a "blissfully underdeveloped" stretch of Pacific coastline, every day seems to freely blend decadence, whimsy, and bold, dreamy visuals of a kind you'd expect in a Frida Kahlo painting. For decades now, the area from Puerto Vallarta south to Manzanillo has been a magnet for artists, naturalists, surfers, and various other dreamers who've been easily folded into the tolerant local culture. Among their rewards: "night air that feels like silk" and "a climate so perfect that many houses are built without walls."

My first destination was a luxury eco-resort so off the beaten path that I had cactus scratches on my rental car by the time I found it. Cold-eyed armed guards met me at the gate, but the vibe inside the



Hotelito Desconocido: An otherworldly serenity

Hotelito Desconocido property was more "Fellini meets Robinson Crusoe," with thatched-roof guest huts perched on stilts at the shoreline and staffers bustling about the psychedelic surrounding gardens. At sunset, I panicked when I realized that the huts don't have electricity, but hundreds of torches and candles soon cast the entire resort in an exotic glow.

My fellow guests mostly avoided Puerto Vallarta, but I had to see it. Avoiding the trinket shops and crowded bars, I instead explored the newly rediscovered old quarter, where Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton once owned homes. In a hilly section behind the city, narrow cobblestone streets cut between dilapidated mansions built by 18th-century ship captains. We headed north for dinner, first stopping in the high-end suburb of Punta de Mita to gawk at Imanta, an over-the-top beach resort where guests stay in Mayan-style stone houses. In nearby Sayulita, a surf town filled with smoothie stands, taquerias, and "lots of young, tanned hippies," I chose a restaurant where diners sit on swings attached to a tree. It wasn't easy eating seafood linguine on a moving seat, but I had to admire the owners' interest in subverting convention. "I'm sure André Breton would have approved, too."

At the Hotelito Desconocido (hotelito.com), doubles start at \$452.

Getting the flavor of...

Virginia's space rockets

Witnessing a rocket launch turns out to be a "bizarrely emotional" experience, said Melanie D.G. Kaplan in *The Washington Post*. That was the rediscovery a few fellow space nuts and I shared last month when we stood a couple miles from Virginia's Wallops Flight Facility and watched a 13-story rocket blast off for a rendezvous with the International Space Station. If you're keeping such a moment on your own bucket list, checking it off "just got a lot easier." Wallops Island is located less than two hours from Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., and recent upgrades have allowed it to line up several launches a year by the private firms now helping NASA run space missions. As Jan. 9's countdown began, I didn't know how I'd respond. But 10 seconds after the rocket lifted silently from its pad, the sound "hit me square in the chest." Looking skyward as the rocket raced upward, I felt my eyes watering. "It wasn't because of the wind."

Greenville's comeback

Greenville, S.C., is becoming "a beacon of change for the new South," said Joseph Hooper in *Men's Journal*. Left for dead in the 1960s after its textile mills closed, this city of 60,000 owes much of its resurgence to the decision of Michelin and BMW to locate factories here, yet the "once-blighted" downtown "is now an attraction in itself." Restaurants are the big draw, but you'll want to poke around the 19th-century Mast General Store and follow the river walkway to the bridge that spans Reedy River Falls. The nearby Blue Ridge Mountains and "rolling Piedmont hills" have helped make Greenville a mecca for outdoor sports, while the Baptist school Bob Jones University gives the city a significant claim to fame in art circles. The Bob Jones University Museum & Gallery, which holds important works by Rubens and Van Dyck, purports to harbor the largest collection of religious art outside the Vatican.

Hotel of the week



Lima for art lovers

Arts Boutique Hotel B

Lima, Peru

This 17-room boutique property feels less like a hotel than "the mansion of a rich, eccentric art collector," said Danielle Pergament in *The New York Times*. A converted 1914 manor house that's surrounded by similar architectural marvels, Hotel B adorns virtually all of its rooms with oil paintings or photographs that are "clearly meant to stop you in your tracks." Choose a unit in the historic wing and ask for a claw-foot tub; the staff will draw a bubble bath on request. All meals can be had downstairs, but just outside are the Pacific and one of Lima's best neighborhoods—leafy, romantic Barranco. *hotelb.pe; doubles from \$270*

Last-minute travel deals

Costa Rican eco-retreat

Rejuvenate during an eight-day retreat at the Villa Blanca Cloud Forest Hotel and save \$700 by booking before Feb. 16. The \$1,895 package is available for stays starting April 20 or June 21 and includes meals, yoga classes, and a rain-forest tour. learningjourneys.com

Cooking in Umbria

Through April 30, save 45 percent on three-night stays at the ancient and picturesque Tenuta di Canonica estate in central Italy's Umbrian hills. The \$647 package includes cooking classes, two dinners for two, and a wine tasting. tenutadicanonica.com

The 'Best of Turkey'

Explore Turkey's colorful bazaars, ornate mosques, and Mediterranean beaches during a two-week, multicity tour starting at \$2,199 a person. Airfare from New York City is included. Book by Feb. 25 for tours starting in April. friendlyplanet.com