

# MEXICO NOW



Soulful, sunny, and sophisticated, the country's hotels have never been better, with coastal enclaves and cities alike turning into world-class destinations. // By Bruce Wallin



**PACIFIC HEIGHTS**  
 Clockwise from far left: A One&Only Mandarinina pool; one of Four Seasons Resort Tamarindo's 157 rooms; One&Only Mandarinina's spectacular location, Ana Martínez of Conrad Punta de Mita's Agave Studio; the restaurant at Casona Sforza; one of that resort's Alberto Kalach-designed villas; on the beach at Four Seasons Resort Tamarindo.

**MEXICO IS HAVING** a moment. Impelled by escapist yearnings—and, not insignificantly, an open-door policy—travelers have flocked to the country's shores throughout the tumult of the 2020s. But as the decade settles down, the growing appeal of this geographically and culturally diverse nation promises to spread far beyond the Cabos and Cancun. From the surf-pounded coast of Oaxaca to the colorful streets of Querétaro, new hotels, resorts, and restaurants—and even alternatives to tequila—are making Mexico more of an essential destination than ever before.

**PACIFIC COAST**

Nature and culture collide in spectacular fashion along the mainland's west coast, where Mexico's upscale evolution is surging full speed ahead. The incomparable Costalegre—a sprawling and still-wild region dotted with sublime (and surreal) resorts like Careyes—is restaking its claim as Mexico's most exclusive stretch with the April opening of the **Four Seasons Resort Tamarindo** ([fourseasons.com](http://fourseasons.com)). Blessed with a spectacular setting between Manzanillo and Puerto Vallarta, the 157-room resort—and the property's David Fleming-designed golf course—unfolds over 3,000 acres of jungle and three swimmable beaches. North of Vallarta, meanwhile, the Riviera Nayarit has made a sybaritic splash with recent debuts including **One&Only Mandarinina** ([oneandonlyresorts.com](http://oneandonlyresorts.com)) on a dramatic coastal ridge, and the **Conrad Punta de Mita** ([hilton.com/en/conrad](http://hilton.com/en/conrad)) on a made-for-families sandy beach. The new **Susurros del Corazón** from **Auberge Resorts** ([aubergeresorts.com](http://aubergeresorts.com)), opening this summer, promises to extend the region's streak.

Kayaking, snorkeling, surfing, and other ocean-based activities are all close at hand thanks to the resort's setting on a nearly 2,000-foot-long beach. Three pools located just up from the sand anchor the 59-suite property, which will also include 30 Auberge-branded residences plus four restaurants, an 11-room spa, and a children's club. Along a pristine stretch south of Zihuatanejo, the regenerative resort **Playa Viva** (see "Extreme Green," page 56) just unveiled six manta-ray-inspired treehouses to add to its collection of highly creative—and thoroughly sustainable—accommodations. The nearby **Hotelito by MUSA** ([stayatmusa.mx](http://stayatmusa.mx)) opens this year as part of what's planned as a minimalist, self-sustaining community of homes and contemporary surf shacks on a 165-acre beachfront site flanked by palm groves. A member of Design Hotels, the 13-room Hotelito will reflect the eclectic nature of the community's founders—the Mexican-Canadian couple behind **LOOT**, a local architecture, construction, retail, and surf-lifestyle brand. Mexican architect Alberto Kalach is behind two new retreats in the Oaxcan coastal town of Puerto Escondido. The adults-only **Casona Sforza** (see "Oaxacan by Design," page 58) opened last year on a forested perch where the Colotepec River meets the sea. A collaboration between Kalach and Mexico's Grupo Habita, **Hotel Terrestre** ([terrestrehotel.com](http://terrestrehotel.com)) debuts this year with 14 wood, brick, and concrete villas, each with private pool. The Design Hotels member was built entirely with local materials and will operate completely off-grid.



**RAICILLA REVOLUTION**

Tequila is still king in Jalisco, but another agave-based spirit—raicilla—is staking its claim in connoisseur circles. Long the moonshine to tequila's bourbon, raicilla finally received its due in 2019, when the Mexican government bestowed upon it a Jalisco Denominación de Origen. More refined versions of the spirit—which can be made from any agave variety except for tequila's blue weber—soon followed. "There's artisanal raicilla and ancestral raicilla. Raicilla from the mountains and raicilla from the coast," says expert Ana Martínez, who leads the tasting program at the Conrad Punta de Mita resort's Agave Studio. "It's amazing the quality that we have now, in just a couple years." Here, Martínez shares a few of her favorite pours, which she suggests enjoying as they do in Mexico—as "besitos," or little kisses.

**LA REINA** hails from the town of Atenguillo, at nearly 5,500 feet elevation in the Sierra Madre. The 100% organic distillery crafts artisanal and ancestral raicillas, the latter made with pre-Hispanic stills. "It's the same agave maximiliana, but the ancestral is more intense in flavor because of the still." [raicillalareina.com](http://raicillalareina.com)

and verde agaves cooked in an underground oven for 72 hours. Its "very intense" character—marked by citrus, vegetal, and floral flavors—distinguishes this spirit from its mountain counterparts. [raicillasperlas.com](http://raicillasperlas.com)

**HACIENDA EL DIVISADERO** makes raicillas from a range of agaves, including one that requires 14 years to mature. "It's very traditional, very herbal." The distillery, set in the mountains outside of Puerto Vallarta, also produces versatile agave blends ideal for cocktails. [haciendaeldivisadero.com](http://haciendaeldivisadero.com)

**LA ESTANCIA** is made from agave maximiliana in the historic mining town of San Sebastián del Oeste. The agave ferments in old Jack Daniel's barrels before being bottled in hand-crafted vessels made from recycled Coca-Cola bottles. [estancia-raicilla.com](http://estancia-raicilla.com)

**LAS PERLAS DE JALISCO** is a raicilla de costa made from single-origin amarillo

**THE AGAVE STUDIO** is experimenting with its own raicillas—of Martínez's making. "I have one aging in sherry barrels and another in sherry barrels. We're not selling them; it's only for the tasting experience." [hilton.com/en/conrad](http://hilton.com/en/conrad)

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: RUPERT PEACE, CHRISTIAN HORRAN, RUPERT PEACE, © CONRAD PUNTA MITA, PARK STUDIO, ALEX KROTOV, CHRISTIAN HORRAN



**RISING UP**  
Breakfast at Habitas Bacalar and, far right, a view over its lake; a freestanding bath at Etéreo, center.



**YUCATÁN AND THE CARIBBEAN**

Crystal-clear cenotes, white-sand beaches, jungle-shrouded Mayan ruins—the Yucatán Peninsula is awash in both natural and man-made wonders. The latter include some of the planet’s most popular tropical resorts, many of which can be found along the Riviera Maya. Stretching south from Cancun to Tulum, the region is augmenting its already considerable crop of luxury properties with an influx of idyllic upstarts in 2022. First up is Auberge Resorts Collection’s **Etéreo** ([aubergeresorts.com](http://aubergeresorts.com)), which opened in December as the inaugural hotel in the new Kanai development. The 75-room retreat is set amid mangroves along a pristine section of the community’s 1.2-mile-long beach. The world’s second-largest barrier reef is just 250 feet offshore, while five restaurants, two swimming pools, a children’s club, and Kanai’s two 18-hole golf courses support life back on land. Also coming to this new Riviera Maya resort community is the **St. Regis Kanai** ([st-regis-marriott.com](http://st-regis-marriott.com)), which is scheduled to open by year’s end with 124 rooms and suites plus 32 villas with private pools. Inspired by Mayan astronomy, the resort’s connected semicircular structures will maximize views of both sea and stars from private terraces. The Kanai’s collection of elite retreats continues with the opening of the **Riviera Maya Edition** ([editionhotels.com](http://editionhotels.com)) in late 2022. The property—the Edition brand’s first in Mexico—will feature 180 rooms and suites plus a sprawling outdoor deck made for epic events and parties. The party never stops in Tulum, which welcomed its first international luxury brand in January with the opening of the **Conrad Tulum** ([hilton.com/en/conrad](http://hilton.com/en/conrad)). With 11 restaurants and bars and more than 50,000-square-foot of event space, the beachfront property promises to honor the bohemian beach town’s revelrous roots. Offering a secluded escape from the party scene, **Casa Chablé** ([chablehotels.com](http://chablehotels.com)) will debut later this year in the Sian Ka’an reserve outside of Tulum. Sibling property to the beloved Chablé Yucatán outside of Mérida, the 10-residence boutique hotel is set on a white-sand islet where guests can watch the sun rise over the Caribbean on one side and set over the Sian Ka’an lagoon on the other. The Yucatán’s Lake Bacalar has become another insider alternative to Tulum, with its implausibly blue waters and wellness-themed retreats. **Habitas Bacalar** ([ourhabitas.com](http://ourhabitas.com)) elevated the area’s eco-spiritual vibe when it opened last



**EXTREME GREEN**

David Leventhal is the founder of Regenerative Travel, a global collection of hotels and resorts committed to going above and beyond the concept of conservation. Among the group’s properties is Leventhal’s own **PLAYA VIVA** ([playaviva.com](http://playaviva.com)), a luxe eco-retreat 30 miles south of Zihuatanejo that just debuted six mind-blowing manta-ray-shaped treehouses.

**WHAT IS REGENERATIVE TRAVEL?** The simple answer is a move from doing less damage to doing more good. How did this place get to be the way it is? What was the role of man in degrading what was once here? And what’s our role in bringing back the abundance of what was once here? That can happen anywhere.

**WHAT DOES THAT LOOK LIKE AT PLAYA VIVA?** It’s everything from mangrove restoration to reforesting the 200 acres of what was once a coastal forest and got degraded into a coconut, mango, and tamarind grove. And that’s just on our property. In the community we’re focusing on education, health, and economic development—it’s not just about providing jobs. And now we’re doing an entire watershed regeneration project. Playa Viva is set at the base of this lagoon, which is formed by the Juluchuca River. If that watershed is dirty, Playa Viva is dirty. Most people think they’re only responsible for what’s happening within their four walls. We understand that we’re responsible for the downstream effect and the upstream effect of what we do.

**TELL US ABOUT YOUR NEW TREEHOUSES.** I don’t like doing Bali in Mexico. It’s important from a regenerative standpoint that we honor place, and that what we do here is of here. The treehouses were inspired by manta rays—it’s like a mama manta ray coming out of the water and getting stuck in the trees as she comes back down.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TANVEER BADAL, THE INGALLIS; TANVEER BADAL, RODRIGO GARCIA



**A NEW DAWN**  
A treehouse at Playa Viva

KEVIN STEELE

summer with 35 cabanas, some perched along the lake’s iridescent shore. Temazcal ceremonies, floating meditations, and stand-up-paddleboard yoga sessions embrace both the beauty and quirks of the Bacalar region. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Cancun will see its most anticipated debut in decades when the 150-suite **Waldorf Astoria Cancun** ([hilton.com/en/waldorf-astoria/](http://hilton.com/en/waldorf-astoria/)) opens this fall on a 100-acre beachfront site.

**BAJA PENINSULA**

Nowhere is the move beyond Mexico’s tried-and-true beach towns more evident than in the southern reaches of the Baja Peninsula. The Los Cabos corridor—the wild and wildly popular stretch where the Sea of Cortez meets the Pacific Ocean at peninsula’s tip—still beckons with its unmatched arsenal of ultra-luxe resorts. But savvy travelers are straying north, east, and west in search of laid-back locales with an upscale streak of their own. Long the anti-Cabo option for artists, surfers, and spiritualists, Todos Santos is taking it up a notch in 2022. The area, which spills down from a hilltop town to a series of smaller beach communities, will see its finest resort reopen in November when **Rancho Pescadero** ([ranchopescadero.com](http://ranchopescadero.com)) reemerges from a nearly four-year-long rebuild. Essentially all

new, the beachfront retreat will be home to 103 rooms including 12 ocean villas, 10 penthouses, and a hacienda suite. A beach club and lounge will bring a Greek Island vibe to Todos Santos, while an “ethnobotanical” culinary program will offer guests the chance to harvest their own ingredients in an organic garden. Guests of **Habitas Todos Santos** ([ourhabitas.com](http://ourhabitas.com)), opening by mid-2022, can visit the resort’s onsite dog sanctuary or head to the adventure lodge for surfing, biking, and hiking excursions. Set amid coconut palms and cacti on an oceanfront dune, the property will feature 35 desert-hued rooms, a beach club, and a communal space designed for small concerts and screenings. Across the peninsula from Todos Santos, on the serene East Cape, the resort community of Costa Palmas is a world apart. Already home to a beach club, a superyacht marina, a Robert Trent Jones II golf course, and a Four Seasons resort, this Sea of Cortez stunner will soon welcome Aman’s first hotel in Mexico. Scheduled to open in 2024, **Amanvari** ([aman.com](http://aman.com)) will break the Baja mold with its collection of suites and four- to seven-bedroom residences, anchored by a main pavilion with restaurants, a library, and a 90-foot infinity pool. An easy hop north by superyacht from Costa Palmas, the historic port town of La Paz is the jumping-off point for epic excursions ranging



**MEXICAN SCENES**  
From left: White-washed alcoves in Casa Polanco; Monte Uzulu, San Agustínillo; Habitas Bacalar on its eponymous lake; Enrique Olvera's Carao at One&Only Mandarinina, Riviera Nayarit.



from whale-shark diving in the Sea of Cortez to sandboarding in the coastal dunes. The 1950s-era *Perla* ([hamakhotels.com](http://hamakhotels.com))—John Steinbeck's novella "The Pearl" is set in the city—is reopening in October after a top-to-bottom refit. The landmark property sits on the "malecón" (esplanade) at the base of the Queen's Pier, named in tribute to Queen Elizabeth II's 1983 visit to La Paz.

**THE CITIES**

While their beach-resort brethren have long been the favorite ones—especially in the era of social distancing—Mexico's myriad metropolises are primed for a popularity boost, anchored by a new wave of eye-catching hotels from Monterrey to San Miguel de Allende.

The capital kicked things off last October with the debut of *The Ritz-Carlton, Mexico City* ([ritzcarlton.com](http://ritzcarlton.com)). Perched high in a tower above Paseo de Reforma and Chapultepec Park, the financial-

district newcomer affords inspiring views from every room, most of all the sprawling terrace of the nearly 2,000-square-foot Ritz-Carlton Suite. Opening this spring, *Casa Polanco* ([casapolanco.com](http://casapolanco.com)) provides an alternative view of the capital, occupying a 1940s mansion in the city's luxury-retail-and-restaurant epicenter. The neocolonial villa underwent an exhaustive restoration and conversion led by architect Claudio Gantous and mother-daughter interior designers Monica Romo and Monica Novelo. The result is an exclusive 19-room retreat filled with period antiques and intimate amenities like a private restaurant and honor bar.

The perennially—and deservedly—popular city of San Miguel de Allende is also witnessing a compelling conversion with the opening of *La Valise San Miguel de Allende* ([lavalise.com](http://lavalise.com)) in May. Set amid San Miguel's spired churches, leafy zocalós, contemporary art galleries, and colonial mansions, the six-suite hideaway offers a haven in the city's heart. An expansive garden

area includes a swimming pool and an installation by Mexican surrealist Pedro Friedeberg.

Positioned both geographically and culturally between San Miguel and Mexico City, Querétaro is typically ignored by international tourists. But the city of some one million residents—and ample colonial charms of its own, including a pink 18th-century aqueduct—is raising its profile in 2022 with the debut of two game-changing hotels. Marriott's Luxury Collection will introduce its first Hacienda property outside of the Yucatán with the opening of *Hacienda Carretas* ([the-luxury-collection.marriott.com](http://the-luxury-collection.marriott.com)). The 16th-century estate is undergoing a renovation by Legorreta Arquitectos and, when completed later this year, will feature 61 residential-style rooms with aqueduct views. Displaying Querétaro's contemporary side, the *Hércules* ([hamakhotels.com](http://hamakhotels.com)) is part of a new retail development with restaurants, boutiques, and galleries. The hotel, scheduled to open in October, will include its own craft brewery—apt for a city with one of Mexico's best beer scenes. Some of the country's finest wineries are also close at hand, and the *Hércules* will offer viticultural tours of Querétaro and surrounds.

Similarly overlooked by most foreigners, Monterrey is a stunning contemporary city squeezed amid three rugged mountain ranges in Mexico's arid north. Outdoor adventures are aplenty, but Mexico's wealthiest per-capita city also offers first-rate barbecue, historic neighborhoods, and world-class museums. The new *JW Marriott Monterrey Valle* ([marriott.com](http://marriott.com)) is a hub for excursions both natural and cultural, with Chipinque National Park and the Museum of Contemporary Art, MARCO, each within a 10-minute drive. Opened last May, the hotel features 250 rooms and suites with views of the surrounding peaks. JW Marriott is also coming to the Jalisco capital of Guadalajara—home to tequila and mariachi music—with the opening of the *JW Marriott Hotel Guadalajara* later this year.

FROM LEFT: © CASA POLANCO; © MANUEL ZUÑIGA, TANVERE RADAL, RUBERT PEACE (2)

**OAXACAN BY DESIGN**

Indigenous textiles, black pottery, colorful wooden alebrijes—Oaxaca's inimitable arts and crafts have long lured professional decorators to this culturally rich southern state. The region's revered artistic traditions are on display at a trio of new boutique hotels, from the cobblestoned colonial heart of the capital city to the rugged tropical shores of the Pacific coast. Set in a 17th-century mansion near Oaxaca City's central plaza, *HOTEL SIN NOMBRE* ([hotelsinnombre.com](http://hotelsinnombre.com)) opened as a 22-room retreat in 2020 after a meticulous restoration led by Portuguese architect João Boto Caeiro. A central courtyard connects to a grand staircase lined with Teotitlán del Valle textiles by Oaxacan master Rey David. Elsewhere, discover a contemporary (read: neon) interpretation of a traditional Mixtec goldsmith design by local artist Sabino Guisu and black-and-white nudes by photographer Alberto "El Negrito" Ibáñez.

Marketers have rendered the phrase small Mexican fishing village meaningless over the years, but San Agustínillo is the real deal. The languid Oaxacan coastal town unfolds over a series of three bays backed by the jungles of the Sierra Madre del Sur mountains. *MONTE UZULU* ([monteuzulu.com](http://monteuzulu.com)), which debuted in 2020, offers views of both jungle and sea from its 11 bohemian suites. Mexico City studio Taller LU'UM sourced works from throughout the country for the wood-and-stone spaces, which include maculí furniture by local carpenters and hand-woven bedspreads from Teotitlán del Valle.

Opened last year in the surf city of Puerto Escondido, *CASONA SFORZA* ([casonasforza.com](http://casonasforza.com)) features rugs from Teotitlán del Valle, textiles from Oaxaca Valley, and glassware, pottery, and cabinetry from the local workshops of Pueblo del Sol, a sustainable community project that the hotel helps support. Eleven suites are set within an elegantly asymmetrical amalgam of arches and vaults by the Mexican architect Alberto Kalach. Head out from your suite for surfing, whale watching, and other Pacific-based pursuits, as well as immersive full-day art tours of Pueblo del Sol.



**ENRIQUE OLVERA'S QUICK BITES**

Enrique Olvera catapulted Mexico City's food scene into the future when he opened Pujol at the turn of the 21st century. A couple of decades on, and the 46-year-old chef and restaurateur continues to shatter preconceptions of Mexican cuisine. His latest effort, Carao at **ONE&ONLY MANDARINA** ([oneandonlyresorts.com](http://oneandonlyresorts.com)), pairs his forward-thinking fare with the rich culinary traditions of coastal Nayarit.

**DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE DISH FROM THE RIVIERA NAYARIT?**  
The zarandeado fish is a classic of the region. It is marinated in an "adobo," a mixture of spices and chilis. I like that it usually goes to the center of the table—it is a dish to share with friends and family, with cold beer, and hopefully with the ocean right in front of your eyes. Of course, we have our version in Carao at One&Only Mandarinina.

**WHAT ARE YOU MOST EXCITED ABOUT WITH MEXICO CITY'S FOOD SCENE RIGHT NOW?** Mexico City is fantastic because there are always a thousand things going on; there are always new projects brewing in every way. For me, that's the incredible thing about the city. I'm more into classic restaurants in the city—I really like Rosetta by Elena Reygadas and Máximo Bistrot by Eduardo García and Gabriela López. For drinks at night I really like Tokio bar in Colonia Juárez and, of course, Ticuchi, our agave distillates bar.

**YOUR AFFINITY FOR OAXACA IS WELL KNOWN. WHAT IS IT ABOUT OAXACAN CUISINE THAT YOU LOVE, AND WHAT ARE A FEW FAVORITE SPOTS?**  
I love the richness and above all the generosity that there is in Oaxaca, in every sense—in its landscapes, in the vegetables and fruits of the region, and the flavors offered by its different cuisines. In the warmth of the friends who always welcome me there. I love to visit the markets. Casa Oaxaca is always a stop in Oaxaca and, of course, Alfonsina, a restaurant with amazing local food—simple with no pretensions but deep in flavors.

**WHERE ELSE DO YOU LIKE TO GO FOR AN ESCAPE IN MEXICO?** I love Baja California. The beauty of the desert meeting the ocean is something that captivates me every time I have the opportunity to go.