

Mazatlán Adventures

Family fun on Mexico's
Pacific Coast

By Eric Lucas

You cannot ride into the sunset like a movie character on the beach north of Mazatlán; this strand of golden sand stretches north/south beside the Sea of Cortés, and the sun, therefore, sets to the Pacific horizon at 90 degrees. So, horse and rider parallel the sunset, silhouetted against the evening's hues of amber, vermilion and butterscotch.

My 17-year-old stepdaughter has just taken such a horseback ride on the Playa Bruja beachfront. Kirsten's teenage code of conduct usually forbids visible expressions of enthusiasm in front of adults. Not now, however.

"That was awesome!" she marvels as she alights on the sand, eyes sparkling.

It was also marvelous for Kirsten's mom, Leslie, and me to witness: goldenrod sand, sky like a peach slice and the splendid sight of a teenage girl astride the roan, obviously in heaven.



DOUGLAS FEEBLEE / ISTOCK PHOTOS; (TURTLE) COURTESY, MAZATLÁN AQUARIUM

MEXICO *Travel*

Dorada (Golden Zone).

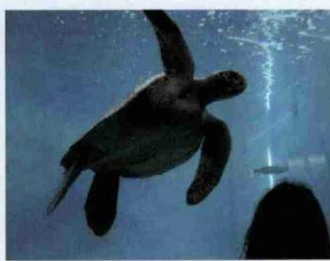
Here, the incoming waves rolled to the beach, 4-foot crests in regular ranks, singing a siren song I first heard as a boy. Bodysurfing is the down-to-earth (down-to-water, I guess) version of a sport that eventually morphed into many other forms—atop long boards and on kite-drawn boards. I like my outdoor activities basic, so shortly after our arrival, I'd waded out into the 72-degree azure water to ride the waves.

The late-autumn air was a perfect 84 degrees, and the afternoon sun hovered high over Isla de los Pájaros (Bird Island), one of Mazatlán's three signature offshore islets. In bodysurfing your body is your board, and like bicycle riding, it is a skill that stays with you for life, so I easily caught the first good wave and coasted in 20 yards to shore.

"You remind me of a 10-year-old," Leslie observed as I stood up out of the foamy water and brushed off the sand.

"You bet," I said. "That's how old I was when I learned to do this."

IN ORDER FOR LESLIE to partake in her favorite activity—zip lining—we embark the next day on a 40-minute van ride into the countryside east of Mazatlán, where the foothills of the Sierra Madre Occidental rise out of the coastal plain. A couple of creatures scurry across the road just in front of our vehicle. "Tejónes!" we cry, offering the Spanish name for what are known in English as coatis—local cousins of raccoons. A half-mile later, our driver points out a "Mexican eagle," the crested caracara, a graceful white-necked raptor whose 4-foot wingspan makes it one of the world's largest falcons—and whose flight over the road makes our journey a wildlife-



Opposite: Sailing and other fun water activities are accessible from Zona Dorada beaches. Above: Sea turtles are among the many aquatic creatures on view at the Mazatlán Aquarium.

watching excursion of sorts.

For me, our destination, Huana Coa Canopy Adventure, is also a "wild life watching" venue: A course of nine zip lines zigzags down from a high ridge through Sinaloa scrub jungle, and riders soar as much as 300 feet above ravines and forest to wind up in a huge banyan tree at the base. Open heights are not my thing, so my official job is to take a watchful perch on the hill just below the takeoff platform and attempt to snap pictures of Leslie and Kirsten as they start their descents. Leslie straps into the harness and grins; I press the button and ...

Off she goes. Who knows if my photographic reaction time is as fast as her ride? The noise of the harness zipping down the steel cable sounds like a metal fiddle as she whizzes 200 yards or so over a deep ravine on the first line. At the bottom, a half-hour later, she reports it was a thrilling trip.

"You really do get a different perspective on the forest canopy when you're zipping above it in the air," she says. Kirsten, for her part, has reinstated the teenage code and declares that it was "good," with a grin that belies the off-handed summary.

And me? I'd walked back down the

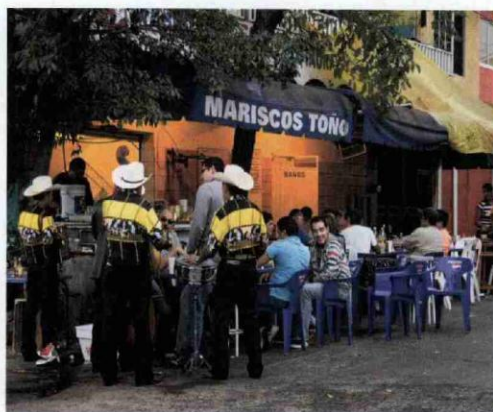
We'd paid 200 pesos to one of the many **Mazatlán** activity vendors who provide recreation to visitors. Sure, it's a touristy thing; but tourists we are, in one of Mexico's best destinations for families on vacation.

Mazatlán has many fine beachfront resort hotels, innumerable family-style restaurants, dozens of sights to see and things to do, and convenient transportation for plying the shoreline byways.

LIKE KIRSTEN, it had taken me mere minutes to find something I love to do—and right in front of our hotel in Mazatlán's most popular beachfront area, the Zona

access road, admiring a tarantula and scorpion along the way, listening to cicadas in the woods, and marveling at the hundreds of white-and-green butterflies that fluttered in the cool air in the shady spots of a dry creek bed.

OTHER LOCAL CREATURES are the big attraction at the newly expanded **Mazatlán Aquarium**, one of Mexico's best, which we visit the next day. The aquarium boasts 34 saltwater tanks (in which sea horses, sea turtles, octopuses and many fish swim) and 17 freshwater tanks, as well as a frog area and an aviary. Huge California sea lions delight dozens of schoolkids in a show during which the marine mammals kiss (yes, really) four tough-guy parents drawn from the audience.



Left: A mariachi band serenades diners at a sidewalk cafe in Mazatlán Viejo ("Old Mazatlán"). Below: Zip-line riders at Huana Coa Canopy Adventure get a bird's-eye view of the region's scrub jungle.

"Que bueno, que bueno," declares the trainer after each interspecies buss. Meanwhile, I'm amazed by the incredible 10-foot leap straight up out of the water that the star of the show makes to touch a beach



ball suspended from the roof.

As our family strolls the grounds of the aquarium afterward, we encounter more interspecies interaction: We are bemused to discover that *rayas violacea* ("violet stingrays") from local waters are curious creatures that will turn over to present their bellies for rubbing when they spy people at the edge of their touch tank. It's somewhere between charming and bizarre; we all laugh each time a ray turns belly-up for our attentions, and we stroke its underside. Across the way, in another pen, crocodiles and green turtles coexist, even napping together.

That night, at the beachside Diego's Beach House, we explore the diversity of Sinaloan cuisine. It, too, relies on local waters: *pescado zarandeado* is barbecued fish fillet, prepared with the freshest fish of the day (usually dorado, but sometimes tuna, parrot fish or Pacific snapper); *pulpo* is octopus, also grilled over charcoal; *caldo de oso* is a stew composed of shrimp boiled with jalapeño chiles; *camarones aguachiles* is a divine form of ceviche consisting of raw shrimp marinated with lime juice, salt and pepper, and serrano chiles.

As dark descends, a troupe of young performance artists appears on the beach—drum-driven fire dancers whose

Exploring Mazatlán

The best English-language travel information for Mazatlán is on the Mazatlán Hotel Association's website, www.gomazatlan.com.

LODGING

Casa Lucila Hotel Boutique: A complete change of pace from the hotel zone is available at this premier property in Old Town Mazatlán. The third-floor dipping pool looks out over the city's harbor; Olas Altas #16; 52-669-982-1100; www.casalucila.com.

El Cid Marina Beach: This resort offers waterfront- and marina-front suites, ocean-view rooms, a lagoon and a tranquil private beach; 866-796-5571; www.elcid.com.

Estrella del Mar Golf and Beach Resort: This full-fledged resort along the Pacific shore south of Mazatlán includes an 18-hole Robert Trent Jones Jr.-designed golf course and a facility devoted to raising endangered sea turtles; Km 10 Camino Isla de la Piedra; 877-629-2852; www.estrelladelmar.com.

Hotel Playa Mazatlan: This charming beachfront getaway is located on Mazatlán's bay. Dine at La Terraza, which offers live music and dancing nightly; Av. Playa Gaviotas 202; 800-762-5816; www.hotelplayamazatlan.com.

The Inn at Mazatlan: One of the finest mainstream resort hotels on the Zona Dorada beachfront is the Inn at Mazatlan. Its two towers offer every guest a view of the ocean and Mazatlán's offshore islands; 800-262-0526; www.innatmazatlan.com.mx.

DINING

Diego's Beach House: The happy-go-lucky beachfront atmosphere (Diego's is on the beach at the north end of the Zona Dorada) belies the restaurant's exceptional attention to detail in seafood preparation; Calle Florida #100; 52-669-986-1816.

Pedro y Lola: Local musicians often serenade diners at the restaurant's alfresco tables on the Plazuela Machado in Old Town. Menu standouts include the Pedro Infante, a spicy pork stew named for the famed singer; Av. Constitución esq. con Carnaval; 52-669-982-2589; www.restaurantpedroylola.com.

ACTIVITIES

Aqua Sports Center: Catamaran and kayak rentals are available from this Zona Dorada beach concessionaire; 52-669-913-0451; www.mazatlan-aquasports.com.

Huana Coa Canopy Adventure: Carretera Internacional al Norte, entronque al Habal Camino a la Noria, Km 17; 52-669-990-1100; www.huanacoa.com.

Mazatlán Aquarium: Av. de los Deportes 111; 52-669-981-7815; www.acuariomazatlan.com.

Teatro Ángela Peralta: This restored 1870s theater on Plazuela Machado, named for famous 19th-century Mexican opera singer Ángela Peralta, hosts concerts and other performances; 52-669-982-4446. —E.L.

light trails make Ferris wheel patterns in the night. We cap off the evening at another local restaurant by enjoying a final **Mazatlán** delicacy: guava *pay* (pie). It's like Key lime pie, only crisper in flavor.

Even the cab ride back to the hotel is a distinctive Mazatlán experience. The city's unique open-air taxicabs, called *pulmonías*, resemble a cross between a golf cart and a 1970s-era Volkswagen "Thing." They were designed by a local businessman who wanted to replace the horse-drawn buggies still in use in the mid-20th century. The name in Spanish means "pneumonia," and was supposedly applied because drivers of the city's conventional taxis originally urged visitors not to use *pulmonías*, as the passengers might catch colds.

No other Mexico destination has the *pulmonías*, and as we ride along the city's approximately 4-mile-long *malecón* (boardwalk) in the mild evening air, I cannot imagine them as anything but a health benefit. We pass by the statue of Pedro Infante, a legendary singer and actor who was born in Mazatlán. Overhead the half-moon illuminates the incoming waves; inline skaters wend their way around evening strollers; and pickup musical groups play *banda*, a dynamic horn-driven local style. All of this is a colorful reminder of the fact that Mazatlán is not just a vacation destination, but also a bustling city, home to more than 460,000 people.

MAZATLÁN IS ALSO an active seaport whose harbor-entrance lighthouse, perched on a steep hilltop at about 515 feet above sea level, is one of the world's highest such facilities still in use. Leslie and I cruise by it on a boat tour that also takes us past sea caves, scored by ceaseless waves and supposedly once used by pirates and later by youngsters on romantic boat jaunts. We're on our own today, while Kirsten spends time with her grandmother, who winters in Mazatlán. The excursion takes us back across the harbor to Isla de la Piedra (Stone Island)—a popular destination for day-trippers because its long, golden beach is lined with cafes and operators renting adventure gear. We choose a two-person kayak, and paddle out through gentle

swells (no bodysurfing today) toward an offshore sea stack, laughing at the way a surfacing loon startles us.

Later, at lunch, we hire a wandering troubadour, Ephraim, to play for us. He starts with *Cerca del Mar* (*By the Sea*), and when we ask for an encore—a love song not usually requested by tourists—he grins knowingly and launches into *Mi Linda Esposa* (*My Beautiful Wife*), a song made famous by Mexico's Los Tigres del Norte. Ephraim's careful strumming is like musical lace, and his voice is rich.

*Ya nuestro pelo negro de blanco se vistió
Ya nuestros hijos viven su juventud hermosa
Y aun sigo enamorado de ti mi linda esposa*

"Now that our black hair is dressed in white," he sings—"now that our children live their beautiful youth—and I'm still in love with you, my beautiful wife."

The next day finds us embracing the beautiful, youthful life of parents and kids as we depart on a rented catamaran for Bird Island, a 20-minute sail from the Zona Dorada beach. Here, after tacking back and forth in tricky winds and admiring the way the local pelicans can simply soar wherever they wish, we eventually haul the boat up on a tiny beach for a half-hour's respite. There's no one else here. The salty breeze curls around the island from the northwest. Kirsten wanders off to daydream on a shoreline rock. The water of the sandy-bottomed cove is emerald, and Leslie and I swim out 20 yards to float in the sea, feeling forever young no matter whether our hair is dressed in white. I can relate to the lyrics of Ephraim's evocative *canción*, and I am immeasurably fond of—*y aun sigo enamorado*—everything around me. ▲

Eric Lucas writes from Seattle.

GETTING THERE



Alaska Airlines offers regular flights to Mazatlán. To book an Alaska Airlines Vacations package to Mexico, visit the Web at alaskaair.com or call 800-468-2248.