



A tropical village can provide an inexpensive and unique alternative to the more popular vacation destination resorts

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You awaken to another day of icy rain falling from a mercury sky. You slop to class through piles of rotting leaves and grimy puddles, only to sit through hours of class in permanently soggy clothing; you quietly succumb to seasonal depression.

Ahhh ... winter in the Willamette Valley.

But don't despair: Spring Break '01 is just around the corner, and it's never too early to start planning an escape from classroom drudgery into sunshine and relaxation. After all, according to the authority on the subject, MTV, spring break is exclusively for the benefit of carousing college students.

But before settling for the customary road trips to Tahoe or Shasta, or blowing spring term tuition on airline tickets to Southern California, Arizona or Mazatlan, check out Buena Vista, Mexico.

Buena Vista is located on the Tropic of Cancer, 60 miles north of Cabo San Lucas, a town fabled among college students for streets flowing with tequila, scantily clad beauties and the crashing waves of the Pacific.

Buena Vista is a significantly less hopping town than San Lucas: Tourists go unmolested by beach vendors crying their overpriced wares and adventurous hikers have miles of black-and-white beaches at their disposal. It is possible to converse with people who are not American, and swimming is actually safe — and virtually effortless — in the warm, salty Sea of Cortez. Feel free to guzzle gallons of tap water without the usual side effects. And most importantly, a trip to Buena Vista makes for an inex-

pensive and unique vacation.

Getting there

Reaching Buena Vista requires a bit more creativity than its more popular counterparts to the south. Travelers must plan their transportation weeks before their arrival at the Los Cabos airport, which is the gateway to Southern Baja. Unlike the classic tourist towns, Buena Vista doesn't have expensive resorts, which usually provide shuttles to and from the airport.

Eduardo is a taxi driver working for an American couple who live in Nevada and own rental houses in Buena Vista. Travelers make reservations, and Eduardo greets them at the airport with a Ford mini-van and a piece of cardboard, upon which is scrawled the names of the males in the party. Eduardo is soft-spoken and takes his job seriously.

"These roads — they are very narrow; they have very big trucks. American tourists get nervous when drivers go fast," he explained. "Tourists don't want to start their holiday with a crash."

The road to Buena Vista, Highway 1, is indeed quite narrow. It snakes through rolling hills covered with sagebrush and saguaro cactuses. Wrecked car bodies, animal carcasses and trash abound on the sides of the road, despite frequent signs encouraging motorists not to litter. The scenery is stark and arid; it hardly seems tropical. Small, government-owned gas stations appear out of nowhere, recognizable only by light-up signs advertising various brands of *cerveza*: Tecate, Corona, Dos Equis.

Suddenly, Highway 1 crests a hill, and the expanse of the aqua-

marine Sea of Cortez stretches out before the brown landscape.

Your room, sir

The main tourist accommodations in Buena Vista consist of sprawling stucco houses on a cliff overlooking the sea. They are collectively called Casas de Cortez and are owned by Eduardo's employers, the aforementioned Nevada couple. For between \$500 and \$1,500 per week, a group of people can rent a 3,000 square-foot house with three bathrooms and six beds. Vibrant, ceramic tile-work comprises the interiors of all the houses.

In addition, all houses are equipped with gas stoves, refrigerators, microwaves, toasters, televisions, VCRs and stereos. These appliance-heavy houses are devoid of locks on the doors. But the woman who cleans the houses, Angelita, gave her assurance that theft is not a problem in Buena Vista. It is a very safe town, she said in Spanish.

Feed me

Buena Vista is also an inexpensive town. Besides the reasonable housing rates, the overall lack of tourism and resorts encourages travelers to buy their own food at one of several nearby *supermercados*, which carry mainly American food. The nearest resort is several miles down the beach, and its restaurant, specializing in fine American cuisine, is available to

hotel guests only.

But the town is not without its own attractions. Buena Vista features several excellent restaurants and *taquerias*. The largest eatery is family-owned Calafia, just across Highway 1 from the beachside houses. Calafia, and the town's other restaurants, specializes in spicy, fresh salsa and deep-fried seafood. In fact, most of the food is fried, even the beans and rice.

"Everything is fresh here," Calafia's owner said. "The avocados, the fish, the chicken. We only cook with fresh food. That is why we are the best restaurant on Baja."

Although the liberal use of oil can be somewhat of a shock to American health sensibilities and digestion, the tasty food is well worth the extra calories. And the liquid sunshine of freshly squeezed orange juice is available almost everywhere.

What to do, what to do

In all honesty, Buena Vista encourages tourists to be creative in finding things to do. The nightlife is almost nonexistent, and the daylife isn't much better. In fact, be sure to take several good books to read on the beach.

But the little town still has its share of sunbathers (2), beachside bars (1) and windsurf shops (3). On the bright side, the lack of entertainment options allows an easy-going person to truly experience the town at his own pace and become familiar with the shops and the locals.

For example, after two days, Juan, the Bartender not only knows

his customers' names, but also their favorite beer, preference for lemons or limes and penchants for early-morning jogs down the beach.

"I like getting to know the customers," Juan said. "A good bartender can go to San Lucas and make a lot more money, but I like the quiet. Nicer people come here ... not so many drunk college kids."

Ahem.

One of the most interesting and entertaining things about Buena Vista is the vast amount of American expatriates. It's smart to cultivate their acquaintance: They know where to eat, where to shop, where to hike; they may even invite you in for a beer. And this unique brand of American isn't hard to meet — they spend most of their time walking their dogs and riding ATVs up and down the beach.

One expatriate is 73 and originally from Florence. When she was 60, she joined the Peace Corps and spent four years in Swaziland, which is near South Africa. Upon her return to the Oregon Coast, she found that she couldn't take the cold, the rain or "the American attitude." So she moved to Baja with her two dogs.

"People are so much nicer here," she said. "It's a laid-back life. And when you're old, it's hard to adjust to cold weather. Oregon just has too much rain."

So true.

If this winter finds your soul sagging under the weight of so many raindrops, talk to a travel agent, search the Internet or go straight to www.bajavacations.com and check out the many options for even the tightest of budgets. You will be glad you did.