



Karla Cifuentes

## LIFESTYLE

# Why the Costalegre coast is Mexico's best-kept secret

From the candy coloured castles of Careyes to the lowkey luxury of the Four Seasons Tamarindo  
IYKYK...



BY EMILY MADDICK

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*The Costalegre coast is one of Mexico's best kept secrets...until now.*

One of my least favourite acronyms in the acronym-obsessed, life-in-abbreviation-social-media-saturated times we're currently all living through (enduring?) is undoubtedly, "IYKYK". But, I am stumped to think of any phrase more appropriate than 'If you know, you know' when it comes to conjuring up the magical Costalegre pacific coast in the western, Jalisco region of Mexico - such is its word-of-mouth-preserved appeal. Translated literally as the 'coast of joy', it is easy to see why; especially when it comes to the destinations Careyes and Tamarindo, where the Four Seasons has recently opened, both of which are just a few hours south of the more famous tourist haven of Puerto Vallarta.

Mexico has been having a moment for some time now, with its culture, colours and cuisine infiltrating the design, art, interiors and the culinary worlds. As such, it has certainly cemented itself as the far-flung holiday of choice for Instagram-happy travellers seeking adventure in the guaranteed, year-round sunshine.

"Oh you're going to Mexico, whereabouts?" many people asked when I told them of our upcoming trip. "Tulum? Cabo? Holbox?" they would eagerly inquire, mentioning the country's more popular southern destinations on the east coast or the exceedingly trendy island, Holbox, north west of Cancun. "No, no, we're heading to Careyes and Tamarindo on the west coast," I would respond to mainly blank faces, even from the well-travelled. But for those rare few who knew *exactly* where we were heading - the

select “IYK” - their eyes would light up and a stream of animated joy would pour forth, preceded with a guaranteed, “Oh wow!”

We headed to the region in February for some winter sunshine, spending four days at Careyes, before heading one hour further south to the Four Seasons in Tamarindo for three nights of crazy luxury...

### **What makes Careyes different from other destinations?**

Speaking to fellow travel writers who've visited Careyes, like journalist and Mexico expert, Meagan Drillinger, who is currently living there, it's hard to know how exactly to describe it. The logo for the resort is simply: “?!”. And by the end of our stay we laughed that we understood why, as this pretty much sums up this wholly unique destination: you arrive at Careyes and you question, “Wow, what the hell *is* this place?” then once you become acclimatised and realise how unusual and magical it is, you exclaim: “Oh wow, what the hell **IS** this place!”

Karla Cifuentes

Careyes was founded in 1968 by Italian former banker and New Age visionary, Gian Franco Brignone, who famously flew over the land in a tiny private plane, surveyed the unspoiled jungle, jagged cliffs and miles of golden beaches and declared: "I'll have all of this!" Costa Careyes stretches 12km along the coast and comprises 36,000 acres of preserved land, only two percent of which is developed. The Careyes Foundation which runs educational programmes, art exhibits and environmental and wildlife conservation, promises that only three percent of the total land will ever be developed with the majority of the untouched nature remaining a biosphere.

'Mexico's answer to Positano' on Italy's Amalfi coast is often how Careyes is also often described, thanks to the family's Italian heritage (Gian Franco's two sons, Giorgio and Filippo still own and run the resort) and because of the similar jewel coloured casitas and castles perched on top of the cliffs - however in Careyes most have the local Mexican 'palapa' thatched roofs. It is not however a traditional resort, rather a collection of residences, villas and apartments available to rent.

### **Who's Careyes for?**

'Bohemian luxury' is often the go-to vibe describe for Careyes, thanks to its artistic, spiritual and ecologically-oriented community. Artists, yogis and high-end hippies are amongst the jet-set who both live at and travel to the resort as well as celebrity guests, many of whom return year after year, including Tom Ford, Cindy Crawford, Uma Thurman and Jude Law. For those looking to immerse themselves in nature and wildlife, there's plenty to offer. Art is a huge feature of Careyes, with giant sculptures on deserted beaches, an art gallery in the jungle and also the annual Ondalinda x Careyes festival, a five-day experience of music, arts, and wellness activities on the beach.

Ollie Harrop

It's also the perfect destination for romance and would make a hard-to-beat honeymoon.

For the spiritually-minded seeking some woo woo with their wanderlust, Careyes has plenty to offer from yoga classes to arguably the piece de resistance of all experiences - a sound bath in La Copa del Sol. The 35-foot-high monument is perched on a cliff overhanging the ocean at the furthest point of Careyes and is visible from most of the resort. Described as looking like either an alien spacecraft, some ancient Mayan monument or a Surrealist statue, the sculpture came to Gian Franco in a dream and is testament to universal female energy.

### **What's the accommodation like?**

Fancy residing in a canary yellow, 6 bedroom 'castle' perched on top of a cliff with a private beach, 360 degree panoramic views of the ocean AND a circular 10,000 square foot 'moat' infinity swimming pool? Then the Ocean Castle Sol de Oriente is for you!

Yes, it's the properties (many of which are owned privately and rented out to tourists) at Careyes that really makes it stand apart from any other luxury resort. No two villas are the same with names such as Constellation Dragon and Tigre Del Mar or the glorious pastel pink, Casa Parasol. If you can bag an architecture tour during your stay, then go, go, go!

Karla Cifuentes & Soeren Pallisgaard

From the cliff top castles to the cosy casitas and - my personal favourite and where we stayed - Barbie-pink beach bungalows (or tangerine orange) right on the beach at Playa Rosa - the closest thing to a beach club in Careyes and the social heart of the resort.

Costa Careyes Club and Residences is around the corner from Playa Rosa and is the only area that resembles a more traditional hotel resort with two huge pools overlooking the beach. (For guests staying at the beach bungalows at Playa Rosa or anywhere else on the resort, you have to pay a \$25 charge to use these pools.)



Ollie Harrop

### **What else does Careyes have to offer?**

A boat trip is a must - to take in the splendour of the coastline. The resort can arrange a range of different boating excursions, including a wonderful trip to a private lunch in a remote cove - a Bedouin-style picnic of shrimp ceviche and other delicacies or if you prefer, a candlelit dinner at sunset.

If you're lucky enough to stay during sea turtle breeding season (July through February) then you must hot-foot it to the [Sea Turtle Protection and Conservation Center \(STPCC\)](#) on Playa Teopa, to help release newborn sea turtles into the sea at dusk. The STPCC has been in operation since 1983, protecting the turtles from poachers (the baby turtles are seen as a delicacy in Mexico). We were lucky enough to experience a release, helping over 300 hundred hours-old baby sea turtles make their way into the sea.

Polo is a big feature of Careyes life during the winter months, when it's cooler in the evenings, and the resort pulls in big names from the international polo circuit high-profile tournaments such as the Agua Alta Cup.

Parties are also a BIG feature of Careyes life and the [Ondalinda arts festival](#) on the beach in November is rapidly gaining international acclaim akin to Burning Man (but smaller). There is also an annual film festival and Chinese New Year celebration.

Rental cars are the best way to get around Careyes - taxis are quite unreliable and expensive, so if you plan on exploring, car-hire is the best option.

### **What does Careyes offer for foodies?**

With seven restaurants to choose from there's a lot on offer. Some highlights include:



Playa Rosa, the palapa-shielded beach club, is laid back chill for breakfast, lunch or dinner (although it closes after 9.30pm). It serves a gorgeous breakfast menu or for lunch the largest fresh fish grilled and served with simple vegetables at tables in the sand. La Duna at Careyes Club and Residences is where you can have typical poolside fayre such as burgers, club sandwiches and pizzas.

Soren Pallisgaard

The sushi experience at Shio Sushi - 9 seater sushi bar is possibly some of the best, freshly served sushi I have ever tried. Do sample the 14 course omasake menu - but make sure you go hungry!

Casa de Nada is a rustic beach shack set back from the sea near La Copa Del Sol, so a perfect place to head at dusk to sink some Margaritas and enjoy dinner under the stars around a firepit. The Al Pastor tacos were very delicious.

La Coscolina in the town centre does fantastic classic Mexican food with plenty of meat, the lamb chops are sublime and this is where the Careyes Art Space gallery is showing works from both Mexican artists and local school children. It is a wonderful place to visit to see the work of the Careyes Foundation in action and understand the ethos and beating heart of this extraordinary resort.

### **The Four Seasons Tamarindo**

If you want to be completely, remotely, removed from the world, immersed in nature, but also enjoy all the trappings of luxury that only the Four Seasons is guaranteed to deliver, then this latest outpost of the world-famous five star resort is for you.

Situated 35-minutes drive from Manzanillo airport (or three hours drive south of Puerto Vallarta) and a one hour drive from Careyes.

Set on a 2,000-acre protected eco-preserve between the towns of La Manzanilla and Barra de Navidad, the Four Seasons is so far removed from the rest of the world, that it actually takes 15 minutes to drive from the gates of the property down a winding road flanked by luscious jungle and giant blue agave plants, to reach the hotel lobby. And what a lobby it is! Opening up onto dramatic views of the pacific ocean, La Mansión is the centrepiece of Tamarindo, featuring a vast open-air reception area.

For architecture junkies, this is your jam, in fact the whole resort is quite frankly an architectural marvel and was created by esteemed architects Victor Legorreta and Mauricio Rocha. The pair came together specifically to create this resort which took 10 years to complete and finally opened its doors at the end of 2022. Deliberately designed to be a self-contained, nearly self-sufficient utopia, the resort puts sustainability front and centre and goes to great lengths to promote ecologically responsible practices, especially with its food and beverage programme.

### **Who's the Four Seasons Tamarindo for?**

This is the full Four Seasons high end luxury experience and the perfect compliment to the more bohemian Careyes. And at any given moment, looking around you at the fellow clientele, you feel like you could be in a scene from *The White Lotus*, which is apt as the hit TV show is actually filmed at outposts of the Four Seasons - although this is where the resemblance to the show ends, no murderous staff or guests!

The vibe is lowkey luxury or even stealth wealth - *Succession*'s Shiv or Kendall Roy would not look out of place here either. But it's so relaxed and you are made to feel so welcome and at ease, that anything goes. There were also a large number of families when we visited, which is actually no surprise given the numerous kid-friendly activities on offer at the hotel.

CESAR BEJAR

### **What about the service?**

Special mention needs to be made to the absolutely wonderful staff at Four Seasons Tamarindo. From the moment they greet you at La Mansion with a welcoming wave (once again, ala *The White Lotus*) no demand is too much trouble. And as they whizz you around the resort in one of the fleet of golf buggies (the hotel is so vast that golf buggies are the only way around it all) they seem to know your schedule, such as spa appointments, dinner reservations, even likes and dislikes before you do!

## What is there to do at the resort?

Given that the average guest is unlikely to actually leave the vicinity there is, as you would imagine, plenty to do and most of it centres around nature.

If you want to dive into the nature there are plenty of ways to explore and you can book into an array of complimentary activities with just 24 hours notice such as:

Morning hikes - every day there is a guided nature hike at 8am plus birdwatching on Thursdays and Saturdays. There are also twice weekly ethnobotany walks that particularly explore the indigenous plants and their cultivation.

Bike rides, coffee extraction methods classes, cooking classes (with a special class devoted to the art of guacamole!) and body art are also just some of the complimentary classes on offer.

There is also a photography tour, guided bike rides, a “running concierge” (literally someone who accompanies you on a jog) and of course plenty of water sports including: paddle boarding, kayaking, bodyboarding, shore fishing and snorkelling.

A short buggy ride from La Mansion is the private beach and beach club where you can either play in the surf or watch the pods of pelicans dive bomb the waves for dinner.

If the weather isn't too windy then a boat tour is not to be missed - especially as there's a high chance of seeing whales who migrate through the seas from the end of November until March and whose flumes you can often spot out at sea even from the hotel.

## What are the rooms like?

Did I mention the full Four Seasons high end luxury experience? Nowhere is it more on display than in the 157 bedrooms, which come in three styles: nature, beach and cliffside.

All are housed in freestanding structures - and each has a breathtaking view, whether it's nestled up on the cliffs or down on the beach. Every room has a hammock and private infinity pools available in certain cliffside rooms. The dwellings are brought to life by

some of the most sought-after creatives in Mexico, including designers Estudio Esterlina and Uribe Kraye. There are also delectable La Labo toiletries in every bathroom, including the outdoor showers.

### Instagram content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

### What does Four Seasons offer for foodies?

Coyul is the restaurant at the heart of the resort and where guests can choose from a sensational buffet breakfast every morning. The restaurant boasts that it is in partnership with 'The World's Best Female Chef, Elena Reygadas' who helps oversee the menus. Dinner is classic lowkey luxury and the menu offers a more international theme. If you've come to Mexico for tacos and tequila then you need to know the two Davids and I could not recommend their 'Taco Tasting' or 'Blind Tequila Tasting' more highly.

You will find David who runs the popular taco tasting experience at the poolside restaurant Nacho. The 7-course taco tasting is amazing and includes such winning combinations as tempura lobster tail with wasabi and avocado sour cream or soft blue crab with crispy grasshoppers. Each course washed down with a specially curated cocktail.

Up at the bar at Coyul, you will find the bar manager, also called David, who will guide you - literally - on a blind tequila tasting tour, where guests are blindfolded to enhance the tasting experience. Full of fascinating facts about the history and different varieties of tequila - which is local to the Jalisco region - the most interesting takeaway was how akin to whiskey aged tequila can be.

Sal, perched above Majahua beach was my absolute favourite restaurant on the resort and had distinct Malibu meets Mexico vibes. Boasting barefoot luxury, it offers fresh catch of the day food and is the best place to catch sunset accompanied by the roar of the surf. It's also - in my humble opinion - the best place to catch a margarita.

And last, but certainly not least, if you're in the mood for romance - or maybe even popping the question - it's hard to beat the pop-up dining experience at the 9th hole of the luscious onsite golf course. Words cannot do this spot justice - there's even a natural hole in the rock formation on the horizon where the sun goes down at sunset. And if you're lucky enough to have Vanessa serve you the three course dinner at this magical, remote spot under the stars, you're whole trip will be complete.

### **What about the spa?**

Yes, I can confirm that the spa is most certainly up to the Four Season standards. Calming, chic and beautifully situated with indoor and outdoor, shaded lounging areas surrounded by nature, I had a particularly good full body massage. The staff could also not have been more accommodating to my poor boyfriend's sunburnt shoulders (sorry Ollie!) dowsing and soothing his skin with lashings of fresh Aloe Vera and a specially made pot of cream for him to take away that cleared it up in hours.

But it was the traditional, ceremonial Temazcal 'house of heat' experience that left me blown away. A spiritual and physical purging of sorts, it's difficult to put into words what it is, which is a good thing as Jorge, the man in command of the ancient ritual which takes place in a giant ceremonial clay hut, (like a hot igloo) assured me that no two experiences are ever the same. Ranging between 90 minutes and two hours, the Temazcal involves a lot of chanting, drumming, heavy breathing and heat. Lots of heat, generated by burning stones that are carried on a special shovel into the heart of the hut and that create so much steam that you can't see beyond your fingers. It's intense and spiritual and ancient. Prepare to bare your soul and potentially weep as the heat purges you of the past and rebirths you into a bright new future. I really did leave feeling reborn, which was apt, as that is pretty much how the whole week on the Costalegre coast made us feel. Now that the secret's out, what are you waiting for...?!

**Flights from the UK to Puerto Vallarta or Manzanillo Airport leave daily, but do not fly direct. Transfer in Dallas or Mexico City for Puerto Vallarta. Transfer in New York or Mexico City for Manzanillo**

**Careyes offers stays from £240 + taxes per room per night. This does not include breakfast. To stay in a private villa, prices start from £2,160 per night + taxes.**

**Four Seasons Tamarindo offers stays from £960 per room per night, including breakfast.**

**For more information visit [www.careyes.com](http://www.careyes.com)**

**For more information visit [www.fourseasons.com/tamarindo](http://www.fourseasons.com/tamarindo)**

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