

North from Puerto Vallarta

San Blas

The *Bells of San Blas* was written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. It was his last creation before he died on March 24, 1882.

*What say the Bells of San Blas
To the ships that southward pass
From the harbor of Mazatlan
To them it is nothing more
Than the sound of surf on the shore,
Nothing more to master or man.
But to me, a dreamer of dreams
To whom what is and what seems
Are often one and the same,
The Bells of San Blas to me
Have a strange, wild melody,
And are something more than a name
For bells are the voice of the church
They have tones that touch and search
The hearts of young and old
One sound to all yet each
Lends a meaning to their speech
And the meaning is manifold.*

This is the newest and, so far as I can tell, the most beautiful beach in all of Mexico. The 50 miles/80 km of sand and surf is dotted with a few estuaries and undisturbed by huge hotels. But that will change rapidly and my guess is that in 10 years my comments about the place and the hotels will be history. The town is a tiny fishing village of about 12,000 people and is surrounded by rainforests and mangrove swamps. At present those

stretches of beach hold surfing waves, ruins from the early Spanish explorers, turtle sanctuaries and wildlife-riddled estuaries.

AUTHOR NOTE: *The only drawback to visiting San Blas are the **mosquitoes** and the insects referred to as a **sand fleas**, no-see-ums or jejenes (hay-HAY-nays). Avon's Skin so Soft is good for the jejenes and for your skin. Long shirt-sleeves and long pants are also a help. Insect repellent is a must. The reason there are so many insects is because there are mangrove swamps nearby. Don't let the insects stop you from coming; just come prepared.*

GETTING HERE

Buses from Puerto Vallarta cost about \$12 and take 2½ hours on a first-class bus. San Blas is two hours by bus from Tepic and four from Guadalajara.

The closest **airports** are in Puerto Vallarta, Tepic and Guadalajara.

HISTORY

San Blas, founded in 1768, became an important port for the Spanish. It was **Manuel Rivero y Cordero** who, under command of Carlos II, made



Fray Junipero Serra.

San Blas the port for Spanish ships sailing along the California coast. The Customs House was the first one built in the New World and served as both a tax collection place for incoming goods and as a defense fort. It was also from here that **Fray Junipero Serra**, a Franciscan missionary, ruled the 15 missions along the coast. He arrived in San

Blas on April 1, 1768 and, using two ships that had just been built in the harbor, started colonization of the area. Fray Junipero Serra died in San Carlos Barromeo de Carmelo on August 28, 1784.

MISSIONS ESTABLISHED BY SERRA

1769 – San Fernando de Velicata and San Diego de Alcala

1770 – San Carlos Barromeo de Carmelo

1771 – San Gabriel Arcangel and San Antonio de Padua

1772 – San Luis Obispo de Tolsa

1776 – San Juan Capistrano

1776 – San Francisco de Asis

1777 – Santa Clara de Asis

1782 – San Buenaventura

SERVICES

The **Tourist Office**, *Calle Mercado, Monday to Friday, 8:30 am-5 pm, Saturday until 1 pm*, has maps, a guidebook and pamphlets about the area. The staff speaks English and is quite helpful. They sell used paperbacks written in English.

Police, *Calle Sonola, across from the bus station, ☎ 323-285-0028*.

People at the **Health Center**, *Calle Campeche and Batallion, ☎ 323-285-0232*, speak only Spanish.

Post office, *Calle Sonora and Echeverria, ☎ 323-285-0295, Monday to Friday, 8 am-2 pm*.

ADVENTURES ON FOOT

The Mafia Hotel is not a place you will want to stay, but it is interesting to walk around and have a look at what may have been had nature not intervened. The luxurious stone structure, located on the beach, has over 150

rooms overlooking the ocean. On the opening night, when even the president was there, an army of sand fleas (*jejenes*) attacked, sending the guests back to their homes in the city. Now the building is falling apart. Obviously, the owners had not heard of Skin so Soft by Avon – a sure-fire protection from the pesky biting bugs.

The Ruins, on Cerro de San Basilio at the northeast end of town above the cemetery, include the remains of La Nuestra Señora del Rosario Church and the Contadura, the counting house. The church was built in 1769 and was used until the late 1800s. The counting house was built with large stones and held together with little mortar. It had arched doorways. The old cannons around the building were used to keep British pirates away. During the 18th century, José Maria Mercado used this fortification to successfully keep invaders out.

FACT FILE: *The first ship to arrive and be taxed here was the Chinese Nao coming from the East with silks and spices.*

Although restoration was being done at the ruins, a recent hurricane took out a lot of the work. There is a \$1 entry fee. There is a bathroom at the gate. Open daily from 10 am to 6 pm.

The old **Customs House** is located across the river from the docks. It is constructed of brick that is now crumbling. Next to the ruins is a new, rather nondescript Customs House but it, too, is not in use.

Isla del Rey is on the bay and is actually part of the peninsula, rather than an island. It is the sacred lands of the Huichol Indians and has a pilgrimage trail. The Indians came to this site every spring to worship the sea goddess, Aramara. Today they still come, dressed in traditional costume, to enjoy their spring celebrations. You must cross the estuary by boat to get here (50¢). The dock is across from Tesoro Bungalows.

Cerro Vigia, near ceremonial grounds of Isla del Rey, holds El Faro, the red-and-white striped lighthouse where you can get good views of San Blas. A trail from the dock passes scrub and the Huichol ceremonial ground

before heading up the hill. You must cross the estuary by boat to get here (50¢). The dock is across from Tesoro Bungalows.



ADVENTURES ON WATER

BEACHES

La Islitas Beach has the longest wave in the world, according to the Guinness Book of World Records. This wave is supposed to be about 20 feet long (six meters) and can carry the skilled surfer for a mile or more before petering out. The beach is five miles/eight km south of San Blas and buses pass by every half-hour. There are a number of beachside restaurants, some with hammocks

where you can relax, read and enjoy a beer. You can be certain there will be many experienced surfers talking the talk and waiting for the “Big One”.

Borrego Beach is about half a mile down (south) on the beach and is where those who are into camping hang out. The bugs can be bad, so repellent is essential. Intermediate surfing is good along this beach, but you must bring your own equipment. Boogie boards are also fun here. Snorkeling is not good because of the murky water.

■ WATERFALLS

El Cora Waterfalls are 30 feet/10 meters high. They are located just out of the town of El Cora on an old hacienda that was once owned by Germans. The revolution of 1910-1914 resulted in the land being confiscated by the new rulers. Petroglyphs dot the trail. The walk is not long and there is a cool pool to swim in at the bottom of the falls. The tiny stream that forms the waterfall empties into the river below. It can be crossed below the pool and



a grunt up the side of the cliff will take you to another pool and falls. Take a bus (the white one) or drive from San Blas to El Cora town (10 miles/16 km) along the road to Santa Cruz/Tepic. Turn south at Tecuitata and go five miles/eight km to a loading platform where you can leave your vehicle. Follow the creek downstream. The final bit is steep, so hiking boots are recommended. Bring your bathing suit.

Tecuitata Waterfalls are near the village of the same name. Go the same way as to El Cora, only half a mile past the village of Santa Cruz get off the bus or turn downhill along a dirt road where the sign indicates

Balneario Nuevo Chapultepec. At the bottom of the hill there is a waterslide, a restaurant and a small pool. Walk upstream through the jungle to the Arroyo Campsite and the waterfall. This waterfall is not as spectacular as El Cora, but certainly easier to reach.

ADVENTURES IN NATURE

BIRDING

According to the Audubon Society, San Blas is second only to Panama for having the largest number of bird species. There are many habitats – mangroves, mud flats, lagoons and offshore islands with thorn scrub and pine/oak woodlands – where you might spot rare and exotic birds.

BIRD WATCH: *More common Mexican birds, like the blue bunting, the yellow-winged cacique and the mangrove cuckoo, will be easy to find. However, avid birders should keep a lookout for bare-throated tiger herons, lesser roadrunners, boat-billed herons, Colima pygmy-owls (these are so cute!), Rufous-necked wood-rails, rosy-thrush tanagers and military macaws.*



Military macaws.

Most birders log over 200 species in a week. If you don't have a bird book with you, purchase the one at the tourist office, *Where to Find Birds in San Blas*. This book tells you of other places around town where birds can be seen. A spotting scope or binoculars is essential. Bring insect repellent.



Where to Find Birds in San Blas, by Soalind Novick and Lan Sing Wu, is available by mail (178 Myrtle Court Arcata, CA 95521, US \$4.50) or you can purchase it at one of the hotels/shops in town.

San Cristobal and **El Pozo Estuaries** are birder specialty places, but they are also rich with turtles, iguanas and crocodiles. The vegetation includes vines and giant ferns. Fresh springs run through the estuaries. The boat ride through this area goes for several miles, and San Cristobal estuary connects to the freshwater lake of La Tovara. The El Pazo inlet is where the annual fishing derby starts each year. Boats can be hired either at your hotel or at the dock. **Chencho**, ☎ 323-285-0716, takes morning trips to San Cristobal and the cost, depending on duration, is \$50 for up to five people. He takes you up the river to the lake. You need not go all the way if you are interested in seeing the wildlife in the estuary. This must be negotiated with the boatman.

La Tovara Lagoon is reached by traveling through the jungle and mangrove swamp up the estuary where crocodiles are wild and protected. Because there are so many, seeing them will almost become ho-hum by the end of the trip. However it is the Northern potoos, a bird that likes to be out after dark, that is the big draw. Green kingfishers and great black hawks are also common. Along the way you'll see vines, bromeliads, mangroves and flowering plants. At the right time of year, large hordes of butterflies gather here. An interesting spot on your river journey is an old movie set with huts on stilts set along the water's edge. The trip goes to a spring where you can swim in cool waters and then have a drink or a snack at the restaurant near the dock. The pool is large and the water clear. The spring provides drinking water for San Blas residents. There are fish in the water. **Chencho** (see above), the famous river guide, has an evening trip to the pool that costs \$40 for up to four people. He is at the dock midday taking reservations and may group you with other people to make a load of four. You leave around 4 pm and return after dark. It is a thrill to travel through

the jungle after dark. The sounds are eerie. Birders Novick and Wu suggest you hire **Oscar Partida**, who speaks English and knows his birds very well. He can be contacted by phone, ☎ 323-285-0324, or at Las Brisas Hotel.



You'll see many crocs as you cruise this area.

AUTHOR TIP: *During peak seasons, when private boats are busy, the tourist office will put on a boat that is much cheaper than a private boat but also more crowded. See them at the office for details.*

Roca Elephante is a tiny island (a rock) just offshore to the northwest of the town that has both the blue- and brown-footed boobies as well as red-billed tropicbirds nesting. You will need to hire a boat at the dock to take you there. As you approach the island, swarms of frigate birds will cloud the skies. Peregrine falcons and pelicans also reside on Roca Elephante. You can't go onto the rock, but the boat will circle a number of times until you have had your visual fill.

Singayta Inlet is a jungle environment where El Manglar Environmental Center has built a traditional Nayarit village with a palapa hut that is used as an information center. Their objective is to protect the 260 species of birds in the surrounding forest. The organic nursery has prized orchids, some of which have taken four years to establish themselves. Near the huts are some Aztec petroglyphs. Boats are available to take people into the mangroves and lakes. To get here from San Blas, take the bus to Singayta (on the inlet and where El Manglar Environmental Center is located) from the plaza for a dollar each way. This is one of the most popular birding spots in all of western Mexico, even with the lush population of mosquitoes and sand fleas.

MEPG

The Mangrove Environmental Protection Group in San Blas was started in 1993 to protect the mangroves and surrounding land from mega-tourism and shrimp farms. Their main concern is education and enforcing the laws that have been passed. The president is Juan Garcia, a local businessman. Among other things, the group developed a bicycle path that leads from the entrance of town at Conchal Bridge, all the way to the bay and along the beach to Los Cocos. The most frequent users of this path are the oyster fishers.

Parque Nacional Isla Isabel is a bird and underwater sanctuary 52 miles/70 km from San Blas. It is a narrow volcanic island, one mile/1.6 km long that has a deciduous forest starting to cover the lava base. The island was formed about 3.5 million years ago and has evidence of nine separate volcanoes. There are bare rocks, cliffs and sandy beaches surrounding the small coral reefs just offshore. In the center is a crater lake with water 18 times saltier than the ocean. The landscape is unmatched and the island is often called the Galapagos of Mexico. It is also a birder's paradise, with numerous seabirds; blue- and brown-footed boobies nest here.

FACT FILE: *The interesting thing about boobies is the sibling rivalry. The oldest bird will often kill its nest-mates if food is scarce.*

There was at one time a huge colony of sooty terns on the island, but cats almost made them extinct. The cats were removed and the terns are recovering. Alongside the many endangered birds, Isla Isabel has a healthy community of amphibians, including the fake coral snake and the brown and green iguana. A research station operates for five months of every year, and visitors are welcome to camp as long as they bring all their supplies, including water. The researchers rely on local fishers and the navy to bring in water and supplies. **Ancla Tours** in Nuevo Vallarta, ☎ 322-297-1464, takes people to the island. In San Blas, **Tony Aguayo**, ☎ 323-285-0364, at the end of *Calle Juarez*, is a recommended guide. He charges about \$200 per person (based on two people going) for a full-day island trip. His boat will hold about six people.

Cerro de San Juan Ecological Reserve, ☎ 311-213-1423, is 6,200 feet/2,000 meters high and is another good hiking/birding area between San Blas and Tepic. It's about 15 miles/25 km from San Blas. The area has pine and oak forests.

BIRD WATCH: *Rare birds have been spotted in the San Juan reserve, including Mexican wood nymphs and Rufous-crowned motmots. Although not seen, the eared-poorwills have been heard. There are also yellow grossbeaks, wood-creepers, redstarts and buntings.*

There is a ranch-style lodge at the top of the mountain. To get to the reserve, you must take a bus from the center of town. On the way you can stop at El Mirador del Aguila and look for military macaws.

■ CROCS

Ejido de la Palma Crocodile Farm is three miles/five km south of Matanchen Village, near Las Islitas Beach

(see page 163). These crocs are in captivity. There is a freshwater lake on the site and the surrounding jungle houses butterflies, turtles and lizards. There is an entrance fee of \$2 per person – the money goes toward the protection of the crocs.

OUTFITTERS/TOUR OPERATORS

Bird Treks, 115 Peach Bottom Village, Peach Bottom, PA, ☎ 717-548-3303 (US), 800-224-5399 (Mx), www.birdtreks.com, offers a tour that starts in Puerto Vallarta. It takes half a day traveling to San Blas where you set up home base in one of the better hotels. The next seven nights are spent sleeping at the hotel, while the days are spent hunting birds with expert birders (who are also the tour leaders). The cost is \$2,200 for an all-inclusive package from PV to San Blas and back. This does not include booze, personal supplies (such as mosquito repellent) or tips.

Wings Birding Tours, ☎ 888-293-6443, www.wingsbirds.com, offers birding trips all over the world. I have worked with them in Bolivia and I know they are first class. Their website has a bird list that is far too long to put in here. The tour starts and ends in Puerto Vallarta, with most of the time spent in the San Blas area. This is a nine-day, eight-night tour that includes everything except the pen to tick off the birds seen. The cost is \$2,450 per person for double occupancy. Wings allows only 12 people in a group, plus the leader.

PLACES TO STAY

Casa Morelos, Calle Heroico Batallion # 108, ☎ 323-285-0820, \$, is between town and the beach and two blocks from the bus station. The guest-house has clean rooms without private bathrooms and is owned by the same family who owns **Casa Maria**, just around

HOTEL PRICE SCALE	
Room price, in US \$	
\$	up to \$20
\$\$	\$21-\$50
\$\$\$	\$51-100
\$\$\$\$	\$101-\$150
\$\$\$\$\$	\$151-200

the corner (same phone number). Both have communal cooking areas and gardens in which to sit. These are friendly Mexican establishments that are comfortable but simple.

La Quinta California, *halfway between town and the beach*, ☎ 323-285-0603, \$, has bungalows around a common courtyard that is thickly vegetated with every plant imaginable, including a strangler fig tree. The rooms are not big, but the kitchens are fully equipped with small stove and fridge. Each comfortable two-bedroom bungalow has enough beds to accommodate four people. Prices are reasonable. However, you can get weekly and monthly rates that are even more attractive. There is no daily maid service.

Rafael's Apartments, *Calle Campeche and Calle Hidalgo*, \$\$, has clean apartments that surround an enclosed garden that is second only to La Quinta's. The kitchens have full stoves (ovens included). The place is clean, safe and economical, but there is no phone or e-mail address so you have to take your chances. Hit town and head over here.

Casa Roxanna, *Callejon el Rey #1*, www.sanblasmexico.com/casaroxanna/, \$\$, is a very neat and tidy little place that has a pool with an adjacent bar, and rooms with air conditioning, cupboards and cable TV. The kitchens are fully supplied with fridge and stove and have an apartment-sized working area. The décor is tasteful, the floors tile. The sitting area is large and there is laundry service and secured parking. The large bungalows sleep up to five people and the small up to three. This is a real gem and, as a birder, I could stay here for a month with no problem. The gardens are lush.



© Casa Roxanna

Bungalows Conny, *Calle Chiapis #26*, ☎ 323-285-0986, www.bungalowsconny.com, \$\$, is a Mexican hacienda-style hotel that is comfortable and clean. The rooms have

air conditioning, television, two double beds, private bathrooms and hot water. Laundry service is offered. This place is a good find and just four blocks from the main plaza.

Hotel Bucanero, *Av Juarez #75*, ☎ 323-285-0101, \$\$, is older and with a décor that is more interesting than most in town. In the garden is an anchor and a couple of stuffed crocs. The rooms have high ceilings and are cool, but dingy. There is a pool, but no restaurant. Note that the disco next door could keep you awake on weekends.

Posada del Rey, *Av Campeche #10*, ☎ 323-285-0123, \$\$/\$\$\$, www.sanblasmexico.com/posadadelrey. Some of the dozen rooms have air conditioning, but none of the



© Posada del Rey

private bathrooms has separate shower stalls. There is a small pool with a poolside bar, a beach-supply shop and a restaurant. The owners are friendly and will arrange tours for you. They speak English, French and Spanish.

Tesoro de San Blas, *Calle Campeche and Hidalgo*, ☎ 323-285-0537, www.geocities.com/dougcb68/tsb.htm, \$\$, features rustic, three-room bungalows that have hot-water showers in the bathrooms, gas hot plates and refrigerators in the kitchens and a comfortable sitting space in the living rooms. The cabins are kept clean. There is a large maintained garden full of exotic plants like mango, banana and papaya. There is also off-street parking. One small room in the house is available for rent. The cabins are on the estuary so the view of the lighthouse adds to the sunsets. Birders like to use this as a home base because they can walk around the estuary when bird activity is high.

Hotel Hacienda Flamingos, *Calle Juarez # 105*, ☎ 323-285-0930 or 285-0485 (no English spoken), www.sanblas.com.mx, \$\$\$, is right in town close to the plaza. This is the restored German import house, first built in 1883 to receive goods from the orient. It was then called

Casa Delius. The last officer to work at the Customs House was displaced in 1932 and had to find other work. His grandson purchased the building out of nostalgia in 1990 and started restoration that has been done to perfection. Photos of the family remain in the hallways that still have the original tiles. There is a pool, a fountain that works all the time and a lush garden. The eight rooms are as beautifully finished as the rest of the building and come with private bathrooms, air conditioning and coffee makers (coffee is supplied).

Hotel Garza Canela, *Calle Paredes # 106 South*, ☎ 323-285-0112, www.garzacanela.com/accommodations.htm, \$\$\$, has 45 large rooms with tiled floors, air conditioning and fans, satellite TV, safe deposit boxes and private bathrooms with all the amenities. Some larger rooms have a fully supplied kitchenette with fridge and stove. There is also a pool surrounded by a well-tended garden, private parking, laundry service, souvenir shop, travel agent and a babysitting service. Your breakfast and purified water is included in the price. The restaurant is open beam, with linen tablecloths, good service and home-made foods. This is a family-run establishment and their pride in excellence is obvious. The owners are friendly, helpful and knowledgeable about the area. They speak English and some German.

Miramar Paraiso Hotel, *Km 18 on the highway between San Blas and Puerto Vallarta*, ☎ 323-254-9030, www.sanblas-yogaretreats.com, \$\$\$, is 20 minutes by bus from San Blas. This restored colonial mansion overlooks the ocean and has a path leading to the beach about 200 yards away. Two pools and palapa huts dots the lush grounds. There are six different styles of rooms, some with a balcony, some with extra-large windows and some that hold up to four people. All rooms have a private bathroom and shower. The Miramar is also a yoga



© San Blas Yoga Retreats

retreat. Two yoga classes are offered daily: the morning class is more strenuous, while the evening class focuses on meditation and relaxation. They also offer a jungle survival course that would be of interest to anyone planning on hiking in the tropics in the future. Between classes you can do some exploring. The food is vegetarian and the lifestyle conducive to losing weight. They encourage daily hiking, Kombucha mushroom therapy and cleansing fasts. The lady who does the mushroom therapy also teaches dance, surfing and aerobics. Massage therapy is available. The owner does Huichol beadwork and will give lessons. Seven nights here, including meals and one excursion per day (minimum of four people) is about \$1,200.

CAMPING

Los Cocos Trailer Park, *Batallon Rd*, (1.5 km from Zocalo), ☎ 323-285-0055, \$, has 120 trailer pads with hookups, plus an area designated for tenting, all tucked into a coconut grove. There are hot showers and the popular Coco Loco Bar.

PLACES TO EAT

El Delfin, at *Hotel Garza Canela*, ☎ 323-285-0610, 1-9 pm, is extremely clean and the water is safe to drink. The cost for a dinner is about \$10 per serving. This is a first-class restaurant and should be tried at least once – for that special night out. If you are tired of seafood, the steak here is excellent.

La Familia, *Calle Batallon #18*, ☎ 323-285-0258, is best for dinner. Their seafood is famous – try their fried snapper. The décor is totally Mexican and the service is down-home friendly.

McDonald's, *Calle Juarez #35*, 7 am-10 pm, offers hamburgers that are nothing like the US chain version. These actually have tons of meat in them. Other meals are offered, too, but nothing that stands out. This is a popular place, which means the food is tasty and nobody gets sick from eating it.

Wala Wala, *Juarez #29, 8 am-10 pm daily except Sunday*. People come here for the fresh uncooked vegetables (they are safe to eat as they are washed in purified water). This, too, is a popular place, in part because of its simplicity and sparkling cleanliness. Meals cost under \$10.

El Pescadito, *Calle Juarez and Canalizo*, is on the plaza. It comes highly recommended, although I didn't try it.

El Cocodrilaro, *Calle Juarez and Canalizo, 8 am-10 pm*. The specialty here is spaghetti for \$8 per serving. They have large servings and good service.

The Bakery, *Calle Cuauhtemoc*, around the corner from Posada del Rey, is the place to try great Mexican chocolate that has been baked into interesting cakes, cookies and tarts.

Jaltemba Bay

Jaltemba Bay is a wide palm-dotted bay that has four villages around it and one scenic island. The villages start at Punta Raza, a rocky point that serves as the southern tip of the bay. From south to north, they are **Los Ayala**, **Rincon de Guayabitos**, **La Peñita** and **La Colina**. The island, visible from all villages, is **Isla Peña**. The town of La Peñita is joined by a bridge to Rincon de Guayabitos two miles/three km away. La Peñita has one traffic light, so "laid back" is what you can expect here among the 8,000 residents. The most restful places are in Rincon de Guayabitos, although there are some splendid spots in busier La Peñita.

