

Colourful and Quaint - Barra de Navidad
Red Deer Advocate - 2007



Photo by: Greg Olsen

A dark-haired woman pushes a pink stroller with two tiny Pomeranian dogs inside it, a surfer paddles his board out to sea with a beer bottle in one hand, and a local woman passes by with pineapple drinks balanced on a tray on top of her head. This is Barra de Navidad, a rustic Mexican beach village that has been attracting visitors for decades. If you sit on the beachfront Malecon you can watch the world go by – in the form of an eclectic collection of colourful locals, ex-pat hippies, yuppies, and ultra rich vacationers.

Located just over 100-km north of downtown Manzanillo and about 300-km south of Puerto Vallarta, Barra was once a harbour for the Spanish fleet. In 1564, Spanish galleons set off to find China, but instead discovered the Philippine Islands, an event that is still a point of pride for the approximately 5000 villagers. In those days Barra was a very busy seaport known as Puerto Xalisco. In recent decades, the village served as a hideout for draft dodgers and hippies during the Vietnam War and today has become a laid-back fishing village and beach retreat where locals and tourists mix. The name Barra de Navidad means “Christmas Sandbar” or “The Bar of Christmas.”

I quickly checked my watch as we boarded a bus in downtown Manzanillo to take us to Barra de Navidad. It’s hard to get used to Mexico’s laid back atmosphere during a one-week vacation, and I noted that the bus was running on MST (Mexican Standard Time), because it was about 20-minutes later than the posted time. Our driver did not speak English, but I was able to pronounce “Barra de Navidad” reasonably well, and asked him to please let us know when we had reached the stop, so that we didn’t end up in Puerto Vallarta.

Our 60-minute ride took us past farms, houses, and villages and as far as we could tell, we were the only English-speaking people on the bus. When we reached Barra, the bus driver called out the stop and we exited onto the cobblestone street.

The downtown core of Barra de Navidad is a good place for shopping and many small shops, or La Tiendas, line the streets. Nothing is very new or modern in the village, but the shops and restaurants that line the streets have a kind of rustic charm and it is this lack of “flash” that appeals to many visitors. The area between Veracruz and Lopez de Legazpi is particularly appealing for shopping, because it is closed to vehicular traffic. Legazpi is the main beachside street, but few of the streets in the village are marked, so it can be difficult to figure out where you are. The only signs in abundance are those directing you to the beach and the Malecon.

The Malecon, or seawall, is the heart of Barra de Navidad and the place where most of the action takes place in this quiet village. From here you can enjoy panoramic views of Bahia de Navidad (the side of the beach suitable for body surfing), Laguna de Navidad (the sheltered lagoon where boats are anchored) and Isla Navidad, the site of the one ultra luxurious property in the area, the Grand Bay Hotel.

Although Isla Navidad is not an island, it is separated from Barra and can only be reached via boat. It’s also interesting to note that Barra de Navidad is in the Mexican state of Jalisco, while nearby Isla Navidad is in Colima State.

We relaxed on a bench on the Malecon and enjoyed watching people pass by as our daughter had her hair braided by a local girl. Watching the surfers, fishermen, families, and vacationers is a fascinating pastime. The most interesting person we came across was a woman pushing a bright pink baby stroller with two small dogs inside. I couldn’t resist speaking to her as she passed by directly in front of us. She said that she liked to keep the dogs inside the stroller as a means of protection from larger unleashed dogs. “The dogs are getting a lot of attention from locals,” she said as her dogs growled softly at me. “I don’t think they are used to seeing small dogs here.” While that might be the case, I couldn’t help thinking that the dogs’ mode of transportation might also be part of the reason for the added attention. You don’t see dogs being pushed in a stroller very often – even in a place like Barra de Navidad.

After a swim at the beach, we explored nearby Pueblo Colimilla on Isla Navidad. The main reason for going across was to check out the seafood restaurants, but it was also fun to see the multimillion dollar yachts harboured near the Grand Bay Hotel. In Pueblo Colimilla there are several restaurants to choose from, but few offer any alternative to seafood. Clams are a specialty on Isla Navidad, as fresh clams are harvested in the lagoon every day.

We watched a local fisherman filling a bucket with clams as we sat on the docks waiting for our return boat ride to Barra before catching the bus back to Manzanillo. Exploring the village of Barra de Navidad is a chance to see a quieter less developed Mexico and is

a good way to wind down to a enjoy the slower, more relaxed pace of Mexico – and you never know what you might see while you are sitting on the Malecon.

If You Go:

-Barra de Navidad makes a great day trip from Manzanillo or an inexpensive vacation destination. Accommodation in Barra starts at around \$50 USD per night for a clean budget property. A stay at the luxurious Grand Bay Hotel on Isla Navidad will start at \$220 USD per night.

-From the Manzanillo airport it is only about 30-minutes to Barra and taxis are available. From downtown Manzanillo to Barra the fare is approximately \$70 USD roundtrip by taxi or you can take the bus for \$8 USD roundtrip. Puerto Vallarta is 3 hours by car from Barra or 5 hours by bus in Highway 200.

-A return boat trip to Pueblo Colimilla from Laguna de Navidad will cost \$150 pesos (\$16 CAD) for the entire travelling party. You can catch the boat at the panga docks on the lagoon side of the Malecon.

-Expect to pay cash in most restaurants and shops in Barra. The Mexican peso is the preferred currency, but US dollars may also be accepted. Canadian dollars are not widely accepted. Haggling is expected in shops, but not in restaurants. The most convenient an inexpensive way to get Mexican pesos is to withdraw them from an ATM machine using your Canadian bankcard. In Barra, the ATM is located next to the police station on Veracruz Street.

-For more information on Barra de Navidad, visit the official tourism website at: www.barradenavidad.com. For restaurant and accommodation reviews, visit: <http://www.frommers.com/destinations/barradenavidadandmelaque>.

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