

# ‘House That Sings’ in Mexico hits all the right notes

By Necee Regis

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

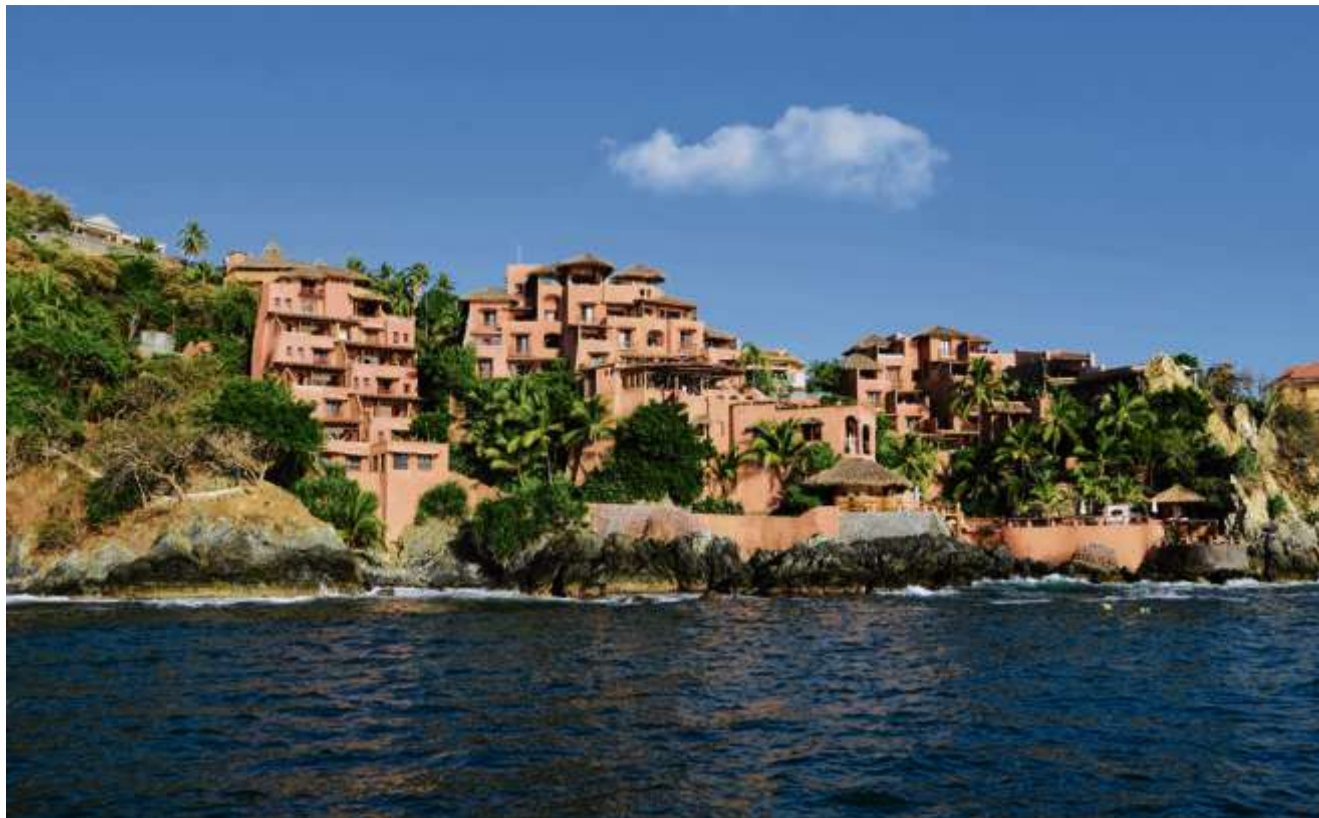
ZIHUATANEJO, Mexico — Sometimes hotel websites are misleading, promising accommodations that pale in comparison to reality. In the case of La Casa Que Canta (The House That Sings), a 25-suite boutique hotel in the Pacific town of Zihuatanejo, Mexico, I was expecting something nice, even super-nice, but after perusing the website and booking a room, I was unprepared for the spectacular beauty of the property and its environs.

A member of Small Luxury Hotels of the World, a worldwide collection of small, independent hotels, La Casa Que Canta checks all the boxes you’d expect when it comes to luxury — airport pickup, chilled facial towel, and welcome beverage on arrival, spacious suites with five-star bedding, and fine dining featuring locally sourced products. And yet, from the moment my husband and I arrived until the minute we departed, we experienced a kind of Zen calm and happiness one doesn’t often get at corporate-branded luxury establishments. (As we taxied back to the airport, my husband commented, “I’d like to stay here for 15 ... years.”)

Built 25-plus years ago by the Mexican architect Enrique Zozaya, the three main buildings (Mar, Luna, and Sol) cascade down a rocky hillside toward glittery Zihuatanejo Bay. The hacienda-style structures — think curved adobe arches, tropical woodwork, terracotta-tiled roofs, and open-air spaces — lead one to the next via a network of stone and pebbled stairways shaded by towering palms, flowering hibiscus, bougainvillea, orchid trees, and ixora. Is magical too strong a descriptive word? I think not.

The other operative word here is privacy. One can always find a secluded spot in the public sphere — with a pair of lounge chairs and chilled lime-infused water — where the only things to disturb your reverie are the calls of kiskadees or the hiss of waves receding from a craggy cove.

Lolling is a de rigueur activity. It’s hard to choose between the infinity pool and the salt water pool, each with multi-level terraces sporting cushioned lounges, shade umbrellas, and waiter service for beverages and snacks. A subset of lolling might be a trip to the Spa by Clarins to indulge in Mexican body wraps (prickly pear cac-



A view of La Casa Que Canta (above) in Zihuatanejo, Mexico, and a view (right) from one of the resort’s infinity swimming pools.

tus, coconut, or grapefruit), a salty safflower body scrub, Clarins facials, mani-pedi service, or deep tissue or relaxing body massages. (My 85-minute, tension-melting massage was \$139.)

If you must get some exercise, other than climbing the multitude of stairs, there’s an onsite gym, or the staff can organize fishing expeditions, private snorkeling, diving and water sports at nearby beaches, yoga classes, trips to a bird sanctuary, a tour of downtown Zihuatanejo, or golf excursions to 18-hole courses designed by Robert Trent Jones or Robert Van Hagge. New this season: The property is sponsoring private or group whale-watching tours outside of the bay.

It’s often tempting to simply stay in your room. (Guilty as charged.) Every suite, named after a famous Mexican song, has a water view, and even the smallest “terrace suites” (and at 650 to 1,035 square feet, I use the term smallest loosely) have open-air living rooms with sun loungers where you can contemplate your place in the universe



PHOTOS BY NECEE REGIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

while sipping a mango margarita. In addition to spacious bathrooms stocked with locally-made soaps, amenities include a Nespresso coffee maker (when you’re too lazy to call room service), daily fruit and mini bar replenishment, waffle bathrobes, and slippers. Rooms don’t have TVs, but if you must get your Netflix fix on your smartphone or tablet, the Wi-Fi is complimentary. For evening turndown service, artistic tapestries are

“stitched” on the bedspread using fresh flower petals and leaves, creating images such as hummingbirds sipping nectar from blossoms, or pelicans in love. This alone is worth the journey.

As for COVID-19 protocols, at this writing, all the staff are fully vaccinated, undergo temperature checks daily, and wear face masks. Guests needed to mask in common areas. Hand sanitizer stations are dispersed around the property. The hotel provides onsite

COVID testing for guests returning to the United States.

Breakfast and lunch can be enjoyed in your suite, poolside, or at the hotel’s open-air restaurant, Mar y Cielo. At dinner, tables replace lounge chairs on the terraces offering panoramic views of the sea, the setting sun, and — if you linger — the moon and stars.

As you might expect, ingredients are fresh and local, and menus focus on dishes that accentuate the rich culinary heritage of Mexico. What was unexpected is the menu selection changes every day, a challenging feat for the chef, no doubt, and for guests choosing among the tempting offerings. One thing that remains constant is the salsa made tableside in a stone molcajete. The salsa is tangy and smoky with roasted tomatoes and garlic, chili habaneros, serrano peppers, onions and cilantro, served with house made bread and platanos chips. Fish recently plucked from the sea — on our visit red snapper, white snapper, corvina, grouper, and lobster — were presented on a platter before cooking whole, filleted, grilled, or baked with sauces.

At dusk in the sultry evening breeze, as decorative orbs of light clicked on and house lights sparkled on the distant shore, the mood veered toward romantic. How could it not? (Did I mention this is an adult-only property? That helps.)

For those who want a group experience with friends or family — yes, including children — the property has two adjacent villas that each sleep eight. The four suites in each villa, larger than many apartments I’ve lived in, have their own individual plunge pools, views of Playa La Ropa, and include a private chef and maid service. One villa, El Murmullo, has a sprawling al fresco space that can accommodate 100 for dinner, a perfect spot for destination weddings.

All good things must come to an end, as did our brief visit to La Casa Que Canta. Yet, like a haunting melody, The House That Sings is a memory I won’t soon forget.

*La Casa Que Canta. Rates from \$275 (low season); \$375 (high season). Check online for special promotions. 888-523-5050; [www.lacasaquecanta.com/en/m\\_1\\_luxury-hotel-iatapazihuatanejo-mexico.php](http://www.lacasaquecanta.com/en/m_1_luxury-hotel-iatapazihuatanejo-mexico.php).*

Necee Regis can be reached at [neceeregis@gmail.com](mailto:neceeregis@gmail.com).



BETH JONES FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

## Rincon, P.R.: a thriving resort town with a chill, surfer vibe

By Beth Jones

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

RINCON, Puerto Rico — Puerto Rico is known as La Isla del Encanto, the Enchanted Island. And it is an island of enchantment. But like any enchantment, beauty holds an edge of shadow. For Puerto Rico, the beauty is everywhere: bright sunshine punctuated by brief, cooling rainstorms, turquoise Caribbean water, mangos growing wild along the roads, a thousand beaches shaded by coconut palms, lush green hill country, luminescent bays, sweet apple bananas, coffee that for decades was considered the world’s best, and easy access from the US mainland.

But there are shadows. Hurricane Maria (followed by Irma) devastated the island in 2017 and a series of earthquakes in 2019 caused further damage. Aid was slow in arriving, numerous schools were permanently closed, roads and electrical grids severely damaged. And then COVID-19 hollowed out tourism for two years. Puerto Rico also has a long history of corruption, controversy, poverty, and Cinderella-style stepsister treatment from the mainland, and no

(at least not yet) happy ending.

But the sun continues to shine on Puerto Rico. Aid has been arriving, if slowly, and some infrastructure has been rebuilt. Tourism has returned, as was evidenced in a recent trip I took with my 17-year-old son and nephew to visit their grandparents.

My parents have spent every winter in Puerto Rico for 16 years, except for the season following Maria and last year due to COVID. They relax into the embrace of the island from January through April. And we follow the sun every year to join them for a week or more.

The island endures, persists, and is a magical place to visit. While many young Puerto Ricans leave for jobs and opportunities on the mainland and return to retire — more recently there’s been an influx of two types of transplants to the island: families who’ve decided to ditch the expense, accelerated pace, and hassles of mainland life to start farms and small businesses around the island, and during COVID, digital nomads, day traders, and cryptocurrency investors have shaken up the is-

land’s real estate market.

My parents spend their winters in Rincon, “the surfing capital of the Caribbean,” in the northwest of the island. Rincon has retained a chill, surfer vibe, even as it’s become more populated. There’s a small batch kombucha manufacturer, plenty of places to take surfing lessons, camper vans along the surfing beaches, yoga studios, and a lot more traffic than past years.

On most days you can watch surfers — and sometimes whales — from the park beside El Faro de Punta Higuero, Rincon’s circa 1922 lighthouse (there’s also a decommissioned nuclear plant at Domes Beach, below the park). On Thursday nights a popular art walk has reopened post-COVID and once again spills out of the plaza onto the street. The Rincon Beer Factory brews a variety of alcoholic beers as well as tangy non-alcoholic ginger beer, and local bars with empanadas, pizza, sandwiches, and pastries line the plaza beside T-shirt and souvenir shops, municipal buildings, and a new theater that will, hopefully, be open one day.

In the years that my parents have

The author’s parents walk the beach.

been visiting Rincon, the town has gone from fairly sleepy, with a quiet crumbling plaza and mostly local places to eat, to a thriving year-round resort town with an ever increasing influx of wave riders, vacationing families, and remote workers.

We’ve been going for long enough that we hit the ground running (albeit running at a relaxed vacation speed). On the first day we always head out the door to the miles of sandy beach behind my parents’ apartment in Anasco, 2 miles from the center of Rincon. Pre-Maria the beach had a grove of palms and large shade trees; it’s still beautiful, but the contour has changed and most of the palm trees were lost to the hurricanes.

We visit our local chicken truck before all the salty, crisp rotisserie birds are gone. The chickens are routinely chopped into pieces with a machete, and boxed with a variety of side dishes — yucca and sweet potatoes in garlic sauce, green bananas, mamposteo (stewed beans and rice). Food trucks are a staple across the island; some are built into old school buses, others are in converted trailers and vans. We also buy a supply of limbers, frozen juices in plastic cups. They’re a popular snack and flavors range from coconut, passion fruit, pineapple, and mango, to cheese, tamarind, and corn. The legend of the limber’s name dates to 1928, when Charles Lindbergh flew solo to Puerto Rico on his 26th birthday and was welcomed with a cup of frozen juice. Our go-to limber shop, which also has great frappes, is Kahuna Frappe on the north side of Rincon.

Lush mountains, deep caves, winding rivers, wide beaches, colonial towns, and coffee farms perched on top of precarious slopes are all within an easy drive of Rincon. We avoid the strip malls along highways and spend limited time in the larger towns that still include many empty storefronts.

A favorite annual day is spent horseback riding with Tropical Trail Rides in Isabela, then lunch, swimming, and snorkeling at the beachside Eclipse restaurant. The stable has been run by the same family for years, and their horses are Paso Finos, a breed that dates back to horses originally brought from Spain. Pasos have a four-beat gait, between a trot and a canter, that’s incredibly smooth. The ride passes through overgrown almond groves (and beside

launch pads that remain from the Cuban Missile Crisis) to a wide, stunning expanse of open sea along Survival beach. We climb a cliff that overlooks the coast, and, heartbreakingly, there are often damaged wooden boats and discarded clothing half buried in sand from Dominican refugees who are the reason the beach is named “Survival.”

It can be a challenging but worthwhile drive into the hilly coffee farming region of Utuado to find Tanama River Adventures. Utuado is forested, with karst cliffs, bat-filled caves, and Taino history dating back to around 1200 A.D. The eco-tour starts with a short hike to the Tanama river, past giant glades of bamboo to reach a shaded pool and a long float in old tire tubes through a river cave where headlamps provide the only light.

Caguana Ceremonial Park & Museum is nearby, recognized as the Caribbean’s most important Taino archeological site. Little is known about the ball games that were played on the ceremonial fields, though some believe they were the earliest version of soccer. Symbols on a series of extraordinary petroglyphs also remain largely a mystery.

My nephew is a golfer and this year we spent an afternoon at Punta Borinquen, the oldest public golf course in Puerto Rico, with a clubhouse that was built for Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1940. The par 72 course is spectacular, reaching to the edge of a cliff with views over the Caribbean.

There’s easy access to snorkeling at Crash Boat Beach in Aguadilla, and if you bring small pieces of fruit to toss in the water, you’ll be swarmed with tropical fish. Crash Boat is considered a party beach, where the soft sand and clear water are backed by food kiosks and a bar.

We found new restaurants this year — Mimosa in Aguada is farm-to-table — and visited long-time favorites — La Cambija in Rincon for pinchos (grilled fish and meat on skewers), Pal Monte, in the hills above Rincon, and Tambo and La Casa Islena on Puntas Beach.

Vacation has a different tempo when the destination is familiar. Time still moves quickly, but there’s no rush, and the Caribbean moves slowly regardless. Coffee in the morning is different watching the sun flecked Caribbean with the grandparents. This year was a relief because we were back after a difficult two years, in a place where we all know how to relax.

Beth Jones can be reached at [beth.jones7@gmail.com](mailto:beth.jones7@gmail.com).