

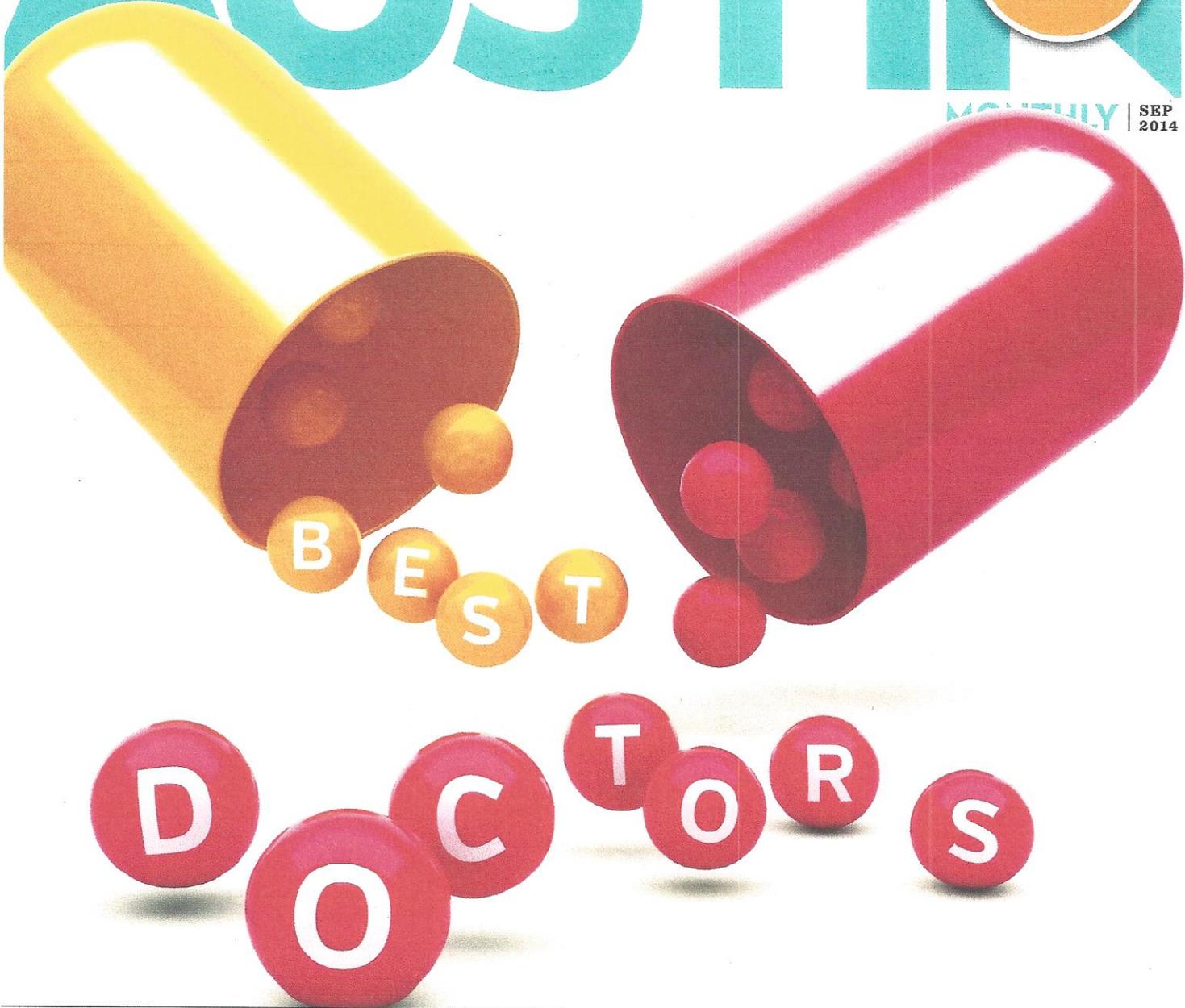
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 P-15 P17

Travel

AMAZING PLACES TO GO, NEAR AND FAR SEPTEMBER 2014



**SHORE
THING**

Search for sea turtles and savor the gorgeous sunsets of scenic Central Mexico. **PAGE 150**

PHOTO FROM SHUTTERSTOCK

WAVE ON WAVE

Explore breathtaking beaches, ancient ruins and quaint fishing villages in picturesque Central Mexico

BY BECCA HENSLEY

It's happy hour on the **Riviera Nayarit**, a scenic stretch of Pacific Ocean shoreline walled in by the **Sierra Madre Mountains** in **Central Mexico**. But a whole cadre of sunburned revelers at the **Four Seasons Punta Mita** couldn't care less about a drink—at least not until they've heard Enrique Alejos, the hotel's cultural concierge, wax poetic on tequila. We gather to be tutored on Mexico's indigenous beverage in the resort's gourmet grocery store. By law, the fruit of the blue agave plant can only be produced into tequila in nearby **Jalisco** and portions of a few other Mexican states, including Nayarit.

Alejos packs everything anyone ever wanted to know about tequila into a one-hour interactive crash course. We students fulfill our curiosity with this free class, then satisfy our thirst with a conclusive tasting of some of Mexico's most exclusive, handcrafted brands. It's all in a day's work for the only cultural concierge at any

Four Seasons in the world and veteran of this hotel for 13 years. In a given week, he might take guests stargazing, hike with them to ancient ruins, unravel the mysteries of the native Huichol Indians who still thrive today nearby or teach the basics of Spanish to kids who want to practice with staff. From around August to December, turtle season, he immerses clients in the area's endangered sea turtle conservation activities, showing visitors the resort's

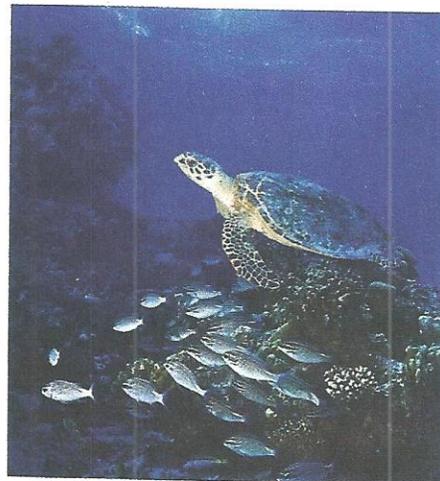
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Insider Tips

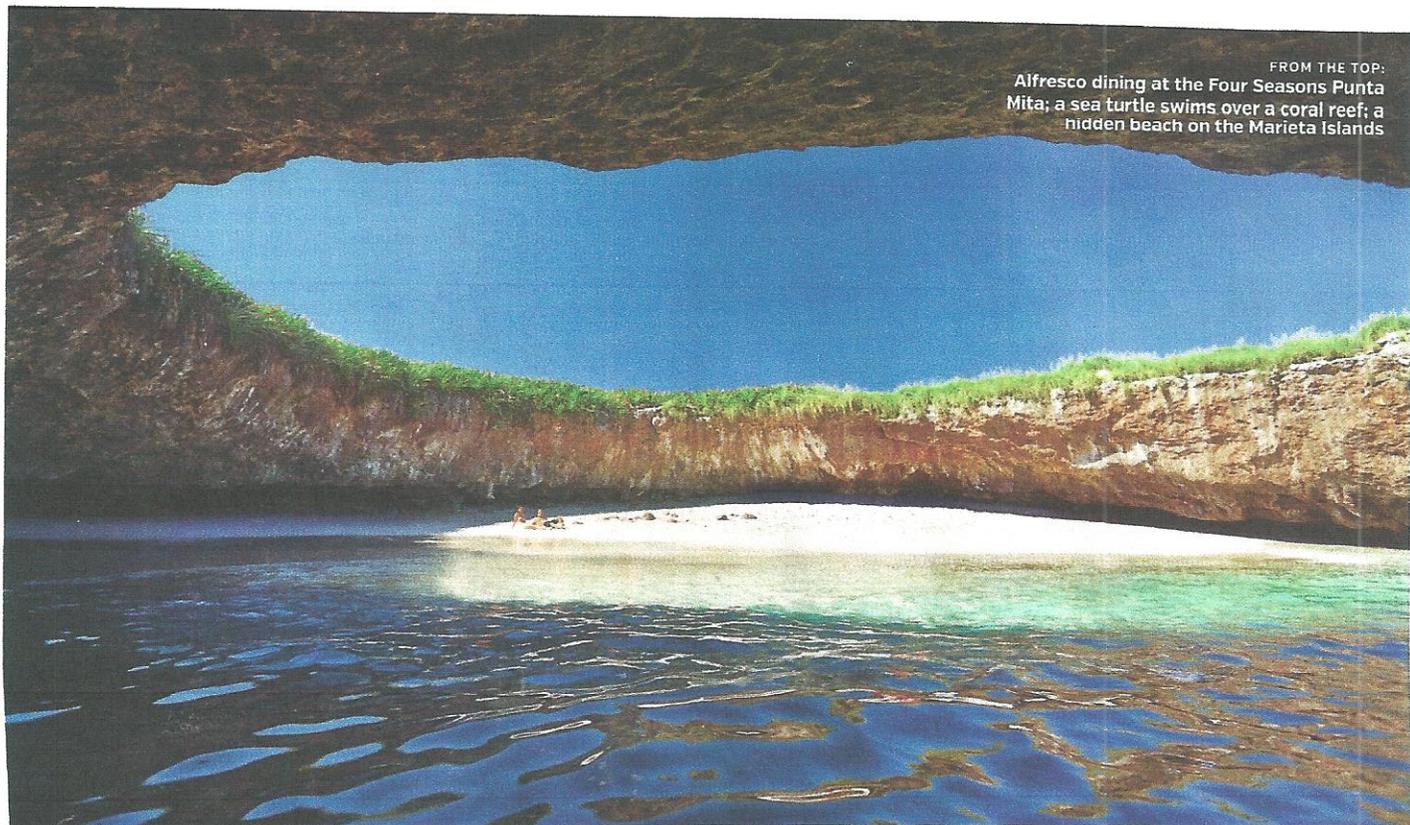
Take a boat ride to the uninhabited Marieta Islands, awash with marine life, caves and hidden beaches.

For souvenirs, buy animal figurines decorated with intricate beadwork made by the native Huichol Indians, also known as the Peyote People.

For an extended wellness stay, check into Haramara Retreat, a thatched-roof yoga facility in Sayulita.



FROM THE TOP:
Alfresco dining at the Four Seasons Punta Mita; a sea turtle swims over a coral reef; a hidden beach on the Marieta Islands



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Continued from page 150

staff-protected nests, then accompanies them as they release just-hatched turtles into the sea.

On a peninsula that straddles the sometimes-tumultuous Pacific Ocean on one side and the clearer **Banderas Bay** on the other, the resort exudes authentic Mexican appeal. Its three restaurants and golf course's famous **Tail of the Whale** par-three hole draws locals and tourists alike. But so does the rest of the expansive coast, speckled with picturesque fishing villages, laden with emerald jungle and developed with intelligent sensibility.

We take a drive just 30 minutes away to check out **Sayulita**, one of the coast's better known hamlets. Loopy, foliage-lined roads lead the way. Rustic huts stand alongside glamorous homes, and sturdy horses and posh cars share the lanes. Around a corner, on a crescent of silvery sand, Sayulita bursts with bohemian chic. A surfing town infused with Zen power and seasoned with expats and an international clientele, this artists' haven redefines the Mexico of our imaginings. Cafes, galleries, boutiques and yoga studios line a network of streets that radiate from the sand. This could be a far-flung Southern California in the 1960s—and yet the burg has a definite Mexican accent. Huichol Indians preside over carts selling their artistry, fish taco stands flourish, surfboard shops offer boards with logos written in Spanish and bright, bold colors in architecture light the streets.

We shop at **Gypsy Galeria** for artwork gathered from all regions of Mexico, consider a surfing lesson from family-owned **Lunazul Surf** and feed our Frida fetish at **Revolución de Sueño**, which celebrates Mexican history and culture with cool crafts and accessories. Our lunch at open-air **Don Pedro's** on the beach, featuring fish sandwiches smeared with lime chipotle mayo and fried shrimp tacos, punctuates the adventure. But with happy hour nigh, we hurry back to our hotel, where a class with Alejos awaits us. His topic today? Chocolate. How sweet it is. 