



From left: Pristine beaches of Punta Mita; Lobby, Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita, Mexico.

PUNTA MITA

Tranquility by the bay.

by **Cameron Johnson**

The entrance to Punta Mita is a nondescript set of gates. As we signal the guard, who then checks our identification, I look around. I don't see a flaming sword, but if this isn't Eden, it's pretty close.

Punta Mita, Mexico, is a 45-minute drive northwest of Puerto Vallarta. It lies on a peninsula, a small lesser-than sign hitched to Mexico's mainland, located at the northern tip of Banderas Bay, Mexico's deepest natural bay, and flanked by the Sierra Madre mountains to the east. The route from the airport takes you out of the city and along the coast to the exclusive, gated community that is fast becoming the transcendental destination of choice in Mexico.

Mere footsteps past the gates (which are actually the first of several sets; security and privacy are more than just catchwords in this community), you can sense the serenity that is less engineered and more just naturally evident in every detail of the place. Paths that curve through the properties are lined with flowers and vibrant greenery, affording glimpses of natural marvels and properties as inspirational as the sparkling ocean. The four-storey building limit ensures views that are both frequent and magnificent. It is also quiet: golf carts are the transportation mode of choice, which itself lends a feeling of tranquility. It is difficult to feel stressed whilst riding in a golf cart—when you're not actually golfing, anyway.

More important than the beauty of the paths, though, is where they lead—which, in the case of Punta Mita, includes destinations such as the Four Seasons and St. Regis resorts, as well as a number of other private resorts and properties.

The community is all part of the carefully coordinated master plan of Mexican owner and developer DINE. The company first purchased the land in 1993. Four years later, it broke ground on the Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita, which opened in 1999. The resort comprises guest rooms in several different buildings, all with an airy, Mexican-style design. There are

also the Four Seasons Private Villas, where residents can enjoy serene oceanfront views from their own infinity pools and ubiquitous hammocks.

Two more options will be ready very soon. The St. Regis Resort & Residences will be completed later this year, and will feature rooms, as well as villas for fractional and whole ownership. And 2010 will see the opening of La Solana Resort.

There are also several other developments available for those seeking to purchase a plot in paradise. Porta Fortuna is the project of father-and-son developer team Cliff and Fred Damavandi, and their company Inspired Resorts. Located on a pristine stretch of beach, the community will eventually include residences ranging from Zen Casitas (two-storey units) to four-bedroom beach villa estates. The land is bordered by two golf courses (the second will open later this year), which frame the ocean view. The site is under construction, but even with the busyness of 200 workers, there is a feeling of relaxation. I mention this, and Cliff laughs. He comments on the intrinsic feeling of respite that is, really, everywhere: "To me, there's more culture shock going back than there is coming here."

The two Jack Nicklaus Signature Golf Courses add to both the scenery and to the extensive list of activities. One of the courses features the world's only natural island hole. Players hit onto an island just offshore, and then either cross a rock bridge at low tide or get a ride by boat at high tide. (Lacking both the skill and replacement golf balls required for such a feat, I give the hole a figurative miss in lieu of a literal one.)

But to truly appreciate the natural beauty of the location, you really have to step off the land. Boat trips around the bay allow you an up-close glimpse of the Marieta Islands. Visible from shore, the islands are a nature sanctuary, and although you can't set foot on them, you can watch the thousands of birds—specifically the most famous resident, the rare blue-footed booby—from just a few metres away.

The bay itself is home to many creatures, including turtles, dolphins and humpback whales. The latter recognize the relaxing benefits of Punta Mita; whales frequent the bay in the winter, using the sheltered waters to give birth. It makes sense that even the animals know about the area's features, seeking respite in the warm waters. The sense of beauty and relaxation that is Punta Mita is just that tangible. ●

FOUR SEASONS PHOTO BY MARY NICHOLS.