

Alaska Airlines

SEPTEMBER 2009

Energy Center

Dynamic Houston
is Alaska Airlines'
newest destination

The Nuna pool at Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita has a view of Banderas Bay.



JOHN RUSSO / COURTESY FOUR SEASONS HOTELS AND RESORTS

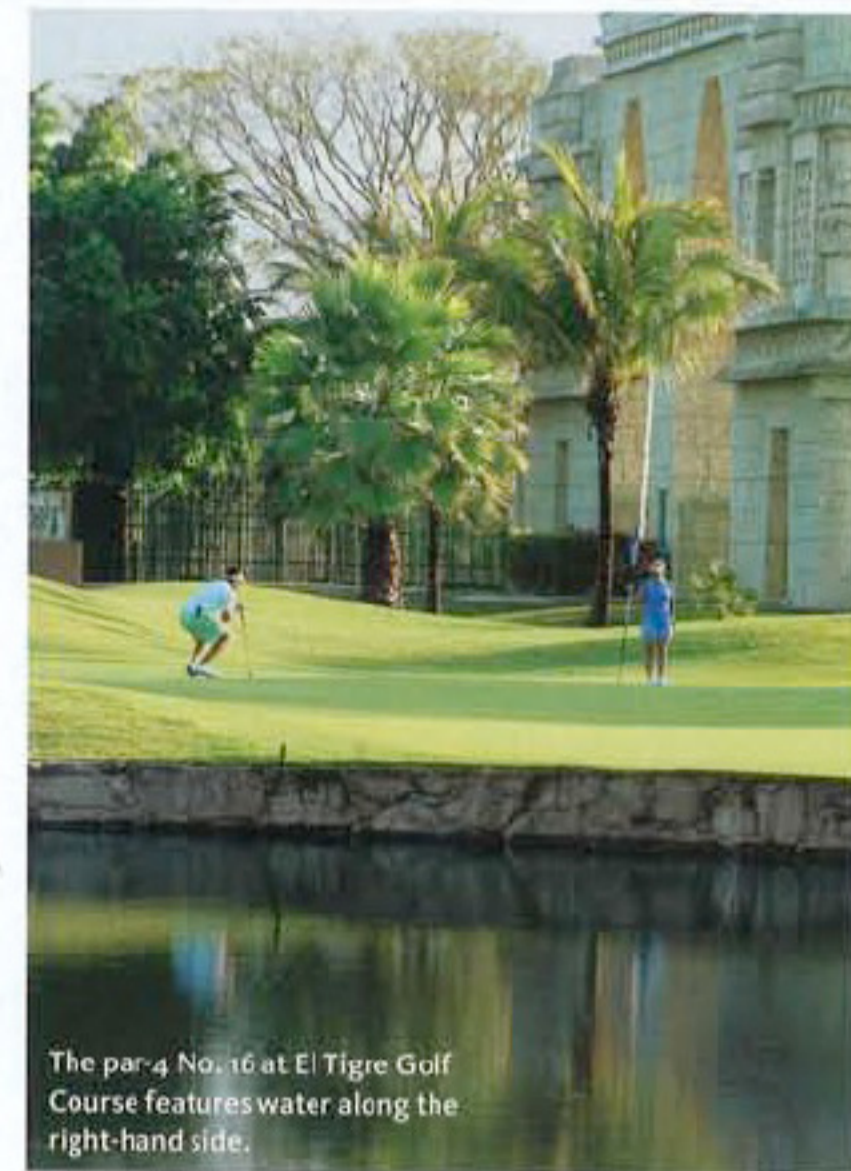
St. Regis hotels) and Playa Las Tortugas, an eco-development with its own Sea Turtle Conservation Camp, where biologists and volunteers work to preserve sea turtle populations.

Whale-watching, hiking, snorkeling and horseback riding are among the attractions in the sleepy surf towns of the Riviera Nayarit. But the area is also establishing itself as a premier golf destination, and the aim of my sortie is to play the south end's five golf courses.

Some of the game's great architects—Jack Nicklaus, Greg Norman and Robert Trent Jones II—have been creating exciting new venues here, such as the Bahia Golf Course and two others in development. Some of the courses are associated with grand hotels and housing communities, while others are available for the public to play.

Soon after entering Nayarit, I come upon Nuevo Vallarta, an idyllic development that is a mix of modern glass condos, single-family homes tucked among palm groves overlooking the water, and neatly coiffed resorts. Nuevo Vallarta is also home to a vast marina, where one can charter a fishing boat or sailboat.

I, however, go straight to the Nayar Golf Course, situated just north of where the Ameca flows into the salty blue waters of the Pacific. Designed by Jim Lipe in 2002, this easygoing course winds through palm-lined flats within the Mayan Resorts complex. It's the perfect venue for a family golf outing—or for a group of friends. The back nine is currently under renovation (by Nicklaus Design) and will reopen next March, but the front side is 3,641 yards of Bermuda-grass fun. Its wide fairways are dotted with lakes, palms and bunkers. Wind off the ocean provides an invisible hazard—and a great excuse to



The par-4 No. 16 at El Tigre Golf Course features water along the right-hand side.

PARADISE VILLAGE GROUP / EL TIGRE

explain wayward approaches.

Nuevo Vallarta is also home to Tiger—no, not that Tiger, but El Tigre Golf Course, part of the Paradise Village Beach Resort. Robert von Hagge crafted one of his best Mexican courses here among 12 lakes, 144 free-form and pot bunkers, and grassy swales. The features unfurl across rolling hills with purple bougainvillea, red hibiscus and gumbo-limbo trees.

El Tigre plays to a muscular 7,239 yards; wide fairways sculpted with gentle mounds and fair placement of water hazards make for an exciting round. Although a splashing stream accompanies golfers from the first tee to the peninsula green on No. 1, the course grows truly interesting on the par-5 fourth, where sand demands focus on the second shot and then encroaches upon the green. No. 5 presents a monstrous 474-yard risk/reward puzzle over a lake and perfectly round pot bunkers. It's followed by a par 3 with an island green fronting a view of the rugged Sierra Madre in the distance.

Memorable holes on the back nine include the 13th—sporting a double fairway and a fun-house green—and the par-3 17th. It is 250 yards of mayhem with a putting surface tucked between sand and water, not to mention Bengal tigers that live in a natural enclosure behind the tee box. El Tigre's elegant Spanish-style clubhouse provides a great

Links and Luxury

Golfing Mexico's Riviera Nayarit | By Jeff Wallach

Driving across the Ameca River—just a mile north of the airport in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico—I adjust not only the time on my watch, but also my mind-set. The river marks the border between Jalisco and Nayarit states, and time zones. It also symbolizes a transition from the bustling beach scene of Puerto Vallarta to an area where the word *crowd* might best describe hatchling sea turtles scrambling into the warm Pacific Ocean along pristine beaches.

I'm headed to the laid-back Riviera Nayarit, a swath of sandy coast that stretches nearly 100 miles from Nuevo Vallarta out to Punta Mita and up the curving shoreline to the fishing village of San Blas. It is a destination for upscale travelers as well as those who crave a genuine Mexican beach experience. The region boasts properties as varied as the Punta Mita resort and residential community (with Four Seasons and



Releasing hatchlings onto the beach at Playa Las Tortugas Sea Turtle Conservation Camp.

COURTESY PLAYA LAS TORTUGAS



The beach at Sayulita, a village along the Riviera Nayarit, is popular with surfers.

STEVE BLY / ALAMY

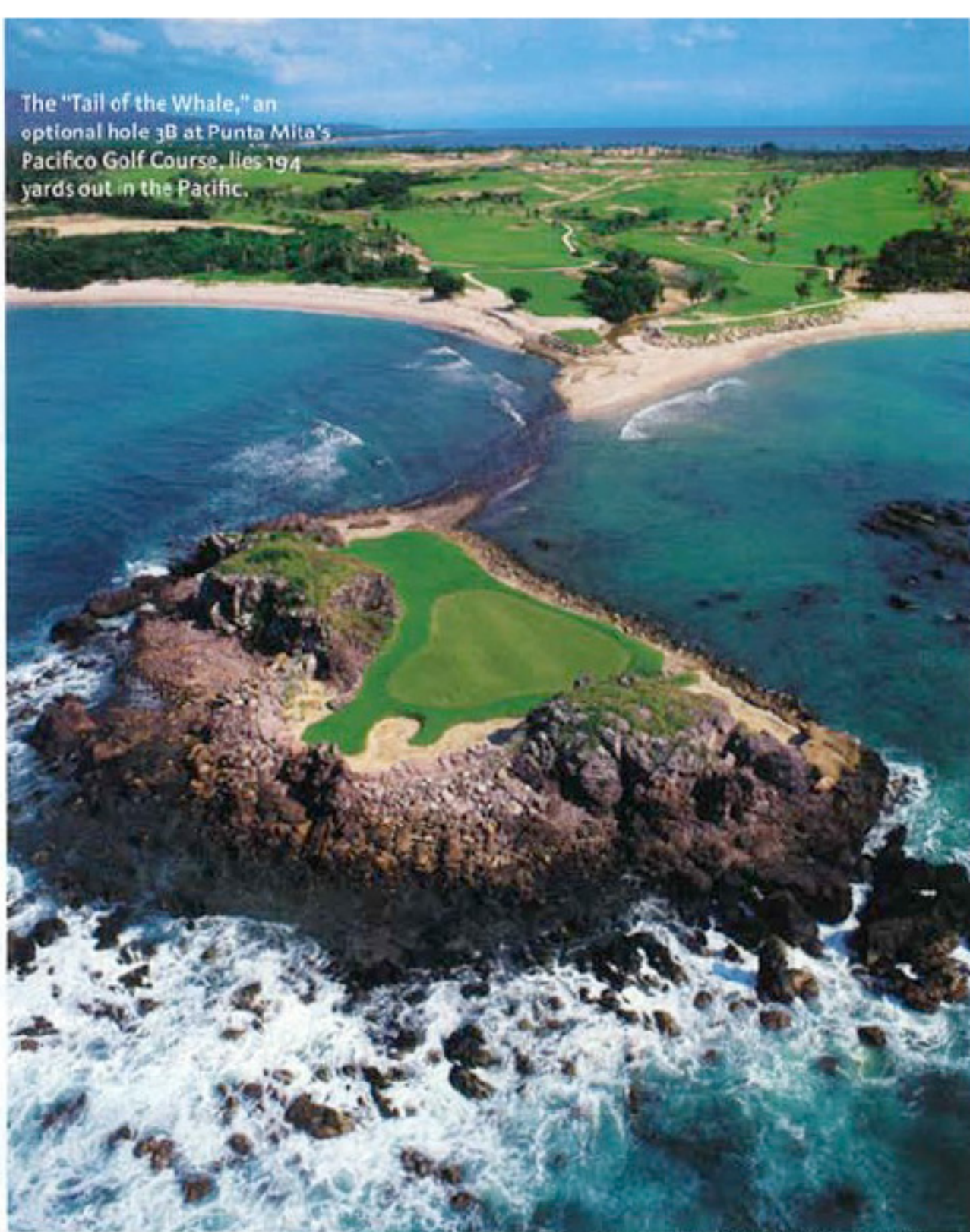
place to have a drink while your playing partner revisits every shot—even though you were there to see each of them.

Also in Nuevo Vallarta, Flamingos Golf (by English golf-course architect Percy Clifford) provides a sense of entering the wilderness. While the most obvious attraction of the town is the seashore, moving inland takes me into tropical jungle that is dense with strangler fig and rubber trees. I keep imagining that Indiana Jones might rush from the bordering forest onto the green at any moment, chased by enemy caddies.

Holes play around and over (and sometimes into) natural lagoons, estuaries and mangroves full of birds ready to taunt you for a mishit. Mango trees and more than 2,000 palms stand ready to deflect errant shots. Flamingos, which opened in 1978 and underwent a \$3 million renovation in 2000, has matured into its setting, as evidenced by how comfortable deer, hare and turtles feel occasionally roaming onto the course.

The 6,853-yard track opens with a narrow fairway slicing through the jungle. The next three holes, though more open, snap back with length, playing 452, 611 and 547 yards respectively. Respect is the operative word on the entire front nine,

The "Tail of the Whale," an optional hole 3B at Punta Mita's Pacifico Golf Course, lies 194 yards out in the Pacific.



COURTESY, FOUR SEASONS HOTELS AND RESORTS

which is 500 yards longer than the back. Great holes on the back side include No. 12, which plays over a ravine with trees to the right and water to the left.

Moving north from Nuevo Vallarta, the landmass spears out into the ocean, transitioning from the forests of the Sierra Madre foothills into a drier peninsula. Punta Mita marks the end of the large tureen of Banderas Bay and the beginning of the rest of the Nayarit coast. For those who prefer a sandwich to a sand wedge, Punta Mita boasts world-class cuisine (please see sidebar). Mountain-biking and horse trails cut through the area, and nearby small towns up the coast offer their own specialties: Sayulita has a great surf break, San Francisco is home to a polo club, and San Blas features a historic Spanish fort. Many of the towns also have galleries of original art and handicrafts,

such as the colorful beaded animals made by the Huichol Indians.

Punta Mita is the pinnacle of luxury golf resorts in the area—in fact, last year *Condé Nast Traveler* readers rated Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita as the No. 1 golf resort in North America and the UK. I decide to start with Punta Mita's 7,035-yard Bahia Golf Course, the younger of two Jack Nicklaus designs, which opened in 2008. Just getting to some of the greens can prove an adventure, given ledges that drop steeply into bunkers and other entertaining features—entertaining if you're the architect, that is! The par-3 fifth hole presents a demanding 173-yard poke that carries over a nasty bunker but not over the green. The front nine features three each of par 3s, 4s and 5s, creating a rhythm as upbeat as a Mexican mariachi ballad.

The back side of the Bahia course opens

WHERE TO STAY

Stepping into the lobby at **THE GRAND MAYAN** in Nuevo Vallarta (800-292-9446, www.mayanresorts.com) provides the kind of slightly disorienting experience that travel is all about: The dark room is lined with gigantic replica Mayan statues several stories tall, which become visible only as your eyes adjust to the light. The entire property expresses a fusion of ancient Mayan styling and supermodern décor, with sleek lines and polished marble floors. Guestrooms are cool and welcoming (time-share rates are variable). The pool complex features a river, fountains and waterfalls, and a flume slide.

The luxurious 1,500-acre **PUNTA MITA** resort and residential community is home to both **FOUR SEASONS** (52-329-291-6000, www.fourseasons.com/puntamita) and **ST. REGIS** hotels (52-329-291-5800, www.stregis.com/puntamita). Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita features 173 rooms, mostly casita-style and from \$415 per night, with tiled roofs and views of the beach and the hills. Highlights include the Apuane Spa and the Tamai Pool complex, complete with a waterfall and high-tech cabanas. The poolside restaurant may well serve the world's best guacamole. The St. Regis Punta Mita Resort consists of 120 rooms (from \$279 per night) that utilize river stone, marble, onyx, wood and clay in a convergence of natural luxury. You may never want to leave your room, each replete with terrace or balcony, outdoor shower and butler service—they'll even unpack your bags for you. Check out the biweekly champagne sabrage ritual in the Altamira Lobby Bar.

Travelers seeking a different kind of Riviera Nayarit experience can head north an hour from Punta Mita to **PLAYA LAS TORTUGAS** (866-443-0056, www.playalastortugas.com). The secluded resort features villas (from \$220 per night) set amid a cocconut plantation beside miles of undeveloped beach and a natural estuary. Kayaking, canoeing, horseback riding and other activities are available. Guests can even volunteer at the on-site Sea Turtle Conservation Camp, and many find releasing hatchlings into the ocean on some nights to be a highlight of their travels.

onto a seaside plain with two large lakes, and no shortage of wind. No. 15 capers steeply toward the water while also canting left in the direction of a bunker. Hit a low running draw to the left side of the fairway and you'll feel like a long-drive champion.

But the real golf treat at Punta Mita is the older sibling, ten-year-old Pacifico Golf Course. Seven holes samba along the ocean, and 11 offer ocean views. The 7,014-yard course opens with several fairways defined by sandy waste areas. No. 3—at least the first No. 3—plays over a wetland, and maximizes excitement for what's coming next: hole 3B, an optional hole that floats 194 yards out in the Pacific from the black tees and is the only natural island green in the world. At high tide, golfers climb into partly submers-

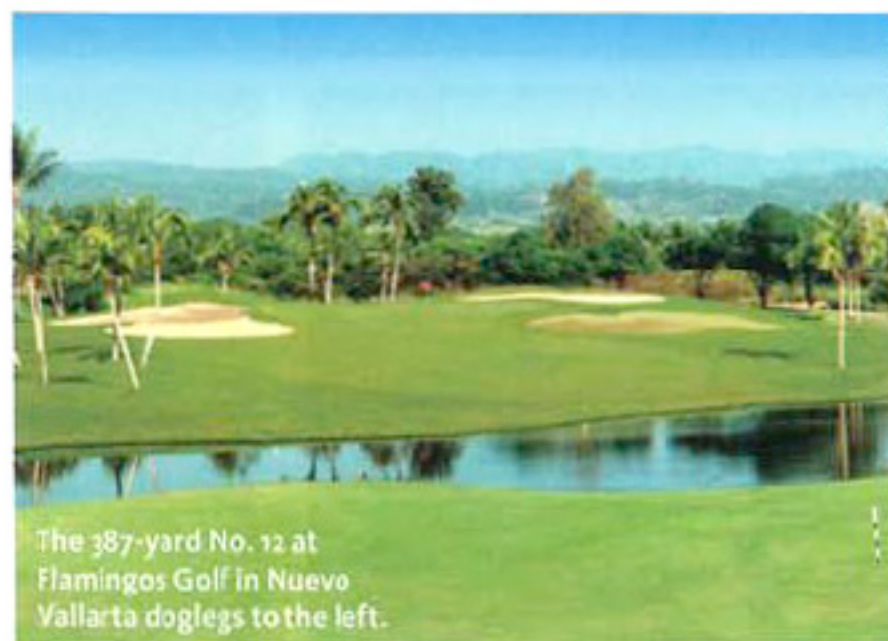
WHERE TO EAT

EL TACÓN DE MARLIN (52-322-221-1914, 8106 Boulevard Francisco M. Ascencio, Puerto Vallarta) serves one of the best seafood burritos in the universe. Just across the pedestrian bridge from the Puerto Vallarta airport, this hidden gem has been a secret favorite of flight attendants and pilots for years.

Chef Sylvain Desbois is the culinary wizard behind the Mexican-accented Mediterranean cuisine at the St. Regis Punta Mita Resort's **CAROLINA**. Try the roasted Caribbean lobster or the *canelón*—an artichoke stuffed with lobster, foie gras and truffle.

CAFÉ DES ARTISTES DEL MAR (52-329-291-5415), near Punta Mita, plates an upscale version of a Riviera Nayarit specialty: *pecado zarandeado*. In this case, it consists of grilled salmon with a secret sauce. Grilled swordfish, giant Portuguese shrimp and red snapper fill out the seasonal menu created by chef Thierry Blouet.

For more information about Riviera Nayarit, visit www.rivieranayarit.com. —J.W.



The 387-yard No. 12 at Flamingos Golf in Nuevo Vallarta doglegs to the left.

ible golf carts to reach their birdie (or double-bogey) putts. Other treats such as cross-bunkering and creek-carries continue to delight me throughout the round.

As I make the turn, uniformed attendants whisk cool towels and mango smoothies out to my cart—service and great conditioning help Pacifico stand out from all other courses in the area. The bunker in the middle of the fairway on No. 13 almost ends my round early; there are no easy shots on the hole, but hitting out of sand beside a lake is one of the tougher options. At least I know I'm headed for a great hotel after I've lost my last golf ball.

Although most of Riviera Nayarit's golf offerings end at Punta Mita, new developments are under way farther north: a Greg Norman course at Litibu, just on the other side of the point from Punta Mita, and a new Robert Trent Jones II layout at Punta Raza. In the meantime, there's plenty to explore up the undisturbed coast: Pursue water sports, hiking and other activities, or enjoy their opposite—pure, laid-back, turtle-slow Mexican beach time in a quietly developing tropical locale. ▲

Jeff Wallach is a freelance sports and travel writer living in Portland.

GETTING THERE



Alaska Airlines offers daily flights to Puerto Vallarta. To book a complete Alaska Airlines Vacations package to Mexico, visit the Web at alaskaair.com or call 800-468-2248.