

BY JULIA COOK
The Herald Mexico

Sayulita, a town on the coast of Nayarit, is in the midst of an identity crisis. It is fast growing out of its label as a quaint fishing village, but won't be a city anytime soon. Its hotels and rental houses are neither boutique nor belong to chains. Addresses of restaurants and boutiques are often forgotten and rarely used. The town's only tourist attraction is its beach and the waves that roll up onto the sand.

Nestled into a slim bay 40 minutes north of Puerto Vallarta, Sayulita's year-round population hovers around a mere 2,000 residents. As recently as a decade ago, it was a settlement where U.S. citizens were few and far between. If tourists ventured to Sayulita, they were drawn by word-of-mouth recommendations from friends who had already ridden the bay's gentle, waves. The town went unmentioned in guide books.

In the last five years, all that has changed. Americans are increasingly retiring south of the border, and Sayulita is prime real estate. What used to be a trickle of tourists has become a steady stream. And locals are hoping it doesn't become a flood.

BETWEEN JUNGLE AND SEA

When Paul and Patty Southworth decided to uproot their two children from their home in Portland, Oregon, and move south of the border, they intended to stay for only a few years — long enough for their sons to become fluent in Spanish.

They based their choice on the town's authenticity. In Sayulita, lodged between the jungle and the sea with just a cobbled road connecting it to nearby Puerto Vallarta, no one spoke English.

Ten years later, their children are bilingual teenagers with Mexican citizenship and much of what drew them to Sayulita has changed.

Eight years ago, a paved highway linked Sayulita with Punta Mita to the north and Puerto Vallarta to the south. The town that never had a supermarket sprouted two mini-mercados. Internet cafes followed, and now, roughly 25 percent of Sayulita's year-round residents are U.S. expatriates.

Octavia Jolley, from Carmel, Calif., first packed her suitcases for Sayulita in 2001, when a friend lured her to visit. Since she arrived, she's noticed a marked difference in the community's makeup.

"All the media exposure opened it up — the publicity of it being a beginner surf spot, now that the surf image and culture are so in vogue," she said. "Two years ago, there were only two surf shops. Now everyone rents boards along the beach."

A 2003 New York Times travel article labeled the town as "in danger of becoming a hotspot" and a 2004 AARP The Magazine feature heralded it as the most agreeable of Mexican retirement sites. Other international press coverage has also turned the tourism and retirement spotlight on Sayulita.

The influx of international visitors, Patty Southworth said, caught the Mexican village off guard. "No one had a clue what to do with the whole tourism thing. The idea of someone giving them money to have a good time was totally foreign," she said.

With English fluency and a house on the beach, she and her husband became unofficial interlocutors. They, and other U.S. citizens who stumbled upon Sayulita before the waves of visitors, helped the town's transition from rural village to charming tourist spot go smoothly. They run a beachside café, Captain Pablo's. Patty gives surf lessons and Paul takes tourists to sea on fishing and snorkeling expeditions.

As Sayulita expands, locals are cautiously optimistic that it won't grow too large and change the tranquil lifestyle they've grown to love. Thus far, they are right: Despite a now-thriving tourism industry, Sayulita hasn't lost the authenticity that drew the Southworth family.

DOWNTOWN BUSTLE

The modest town center measures five by five blocks. The beach is framed by the upscale Villa Amor hotel, a sprawling, luxury hotel by Sayulita standards, at

WHERE TO SHOP

•**Galeria la hamaca:** The only time a small child will ever beg to go to a folk-art gallery may be when its floor is coated with deep, fine sand. Offers fine assortment of hammocks, delicately wrought beaded jewelry and detailed textiles. Revolución No. 110. Tel: (329) 291-3039.

•**Pachamama boutique:** The subject of a two-page spread in May's Elle Magazine, this blisteringly trendy shop tenders black Tahitian pearl jewelry, suede and leather purses and hand-made housewares. Beware of high price tags and pangs of temptation. 4B Calle Delfin. Tel: (329) 291-3468.



HANG TEN: The main attraction of this once sleepy tourist town is still the gentle waves that roll up on the shore.

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WHERE TO STAY



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BEACHSIDE WANDERERS: Above, locals offer horseback riding on the beach. Right, Villa Amor Hotel is an attractive place to bed down for the night.

the bay's south end and numerous residential communities to the north.

Orange, yellow, blue and green dominate the village's color scheme. Palm trees and tropical plants abound. Palapa roofs made of thatched leaves and branches top Sayulita's buildings. Living rooms are outdoors. Dogs roam without leashes. While fans are ubiquitous, air conditioning is not.

Still, tourists, and the currency they bring along, have left a mark. The perfectly foamed cappuccinos at El Espresso, an outdoor breakfast spot on the town plaza, and trendy boutiques evidence their arrival.

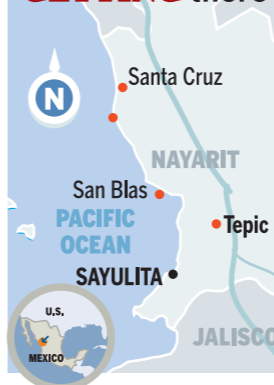
•**Aurinko bungalows:** Seven clean, spare suites. Either a double room and adjoining bathroom or two rooms with two single beds and a shared bathroom. All suites include al fresco living area, with couches, chairs, hammock, dining table and fully-equipped kitchenette. Prices range from 693 to 1,095 pesos per suite during summer season; in winter months, the prices are roughly 20 percent higher. Calle Marlin. Tel: (329) 291-3150.

•**Villa Amor:** Appropriately-named beachfront resort with 35 rooms and villas and plenty of shady, oddly-shaped nooks and crannies. Tourist activities range from surfing and kayaking to horseback riding and golf. Prices run from US\$75 off-season/US\$105 holiday

Prices, too, are high. A simple dinner at any of the beachside cafés of grilled catch-of-the-day fish, rice and vegetables will likely be tasty, but set you back about 150 pesos per person (nearly US\$15), plus drinks. And the honeymoon suite at Villa Amor costs US\$450 in peak season, approaching the rates of more mainstream Mexican resorts.

Attractions have ballooned beyond the odd surf lesson. Sayulita is a water-sport paradise. Surfing, snorkeling and fishing lessons and excursions are readily available. Zip-line rides through the jungle can be found if you ask around, as well as horseback rides and dips with

GETTING there



season for a standard one-bedroom room to the US\$350/US\$450 grand villa, complete with full kitchen and private pool. Tel: (329) 291-3010. www.villaamor.com

•**Private houses:** The website www.sayulita.com offers various resources for finding one of the many private houses for rent in Sayulita.



PHOTO BY GINA MÉNDEZ

dolphins.

Sayulita initially attracted visitors with its steady, 2- to 4-foot swells and its waters are still peppered with surfers at most hours of the day. It's the sort of place where business owners are liable to leave their posts and take up their boards whenever the waves are good.

Right now, Sayulita has the best of both worlds. Its updated additions don't detract from the main attraction — the beach still takes center stage.

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WHERE TO EAT

Capitan pablo's: •Paul and Patty Southworth's oceanfront, palapa-topped restaurant offers appropriately sea-worthy dishes like coconut shrimp and flavorful marlin burritos (at 40 pesos, the best lunch deal in town). **Prices range from 40 to 200 pesos per person for lunch or dinner. Gaviotas No. 8.**

El espresso: •Pancakes, eggs, chilaquiles and more on the town's main square, which is still the center of action, accompanied by fresh juice, strong coffee or frothy smoothies. The outdoor palapa-covered dining area is cool and agreeable in the morning, but gets steamy in the afternoon. Breakfast prices range from 40 to 70 pesos. Revolución No. 51.