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In Mazatlan, visitors can get beyond tourist traps

The souped-up vehicle that looks like a golf cart is tearing down the Avenida del Mar with the urgency of an ambulance on its way to save...

By **Kyle Wagner**
The Denver Post

MAZATLAN, Mexico — The souped-up vehicle that looks like a golf cart is tearing down the Avenida del Mar with the urgency of an ambulance on its way to save a life — except that it's going so fast that we're the ones in danger of becoming the victims.

The Malecon, a 6-mile boardwalk that runs parallel to the Avenida del Mar and the Pacific Ocean that surrounds much of the Mazatlan peninsula, is a blur of lights and people. The night is a surreal blend of laughter and shouting and beep-beep, ocean breeze and clear, starry sky and the edgy adrenaline rush of the unfamiliar.

The driver seems to be oblivious. Like most operators of the doorless, open-air taxis converted for street use with Volkswagen Beetle parts — named pulmonmas for the locals' joke that one can catch pneumonia in them — he has installed a sound system whose primary purpose is to call out his musical predilections.

"Last dance, last chance for love," he half-shouts, half-croons off-key with Donna Summer. "Yes, it's my last cha-a-ance, for romance, to-ni-ight."

He beeps at a passing pulmonma, and our cart lurches into a two-wheeled turn around a corner. There has been some talk of stricter laws, seat belts, maybe, or a crackdown on passenger limits or the distraction of noise pollution, but as with most things legal in Mazatlan's state of Sinaloa, it is just idle musing.

"You like the disco?" the driver asks. We nod, clutching the sides of the cart. He switches to "Disco Duck."

We arrive intact at our hotel, and after an exchange of a few coveted dollars, much preferred over pesos, we stand still for a few seconds before bursting into giddy laughter. "Can we do it again?" ask my daughters.

I flag down another pulmonma, and off we go.

Like a goofy ride in a tricked-out golf cart, a trip to Mazatlan is one of those things you can do over and over, precisely because it has that appealing combination of the familiar and the fun. It offers the sparkling water and beaches, fishing and water sports, history and culture, dining and nightlife of the other destination cities of Mexico — but here there's enough of a real city beneath the tourist traps to warrant repeat visits to the place that has been dubbed the "Pearl of Paradise."

"The pulmonma is such a Mazatlan thing to do," said Marianne Biassoti de Fontes the next day in the Zona Dorada, or Golden Zone, over lattes at Rico's, one of



enlarge JUDY WILEY / WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM/MCT
This sunny, salt-drenched view from a room on the second floor of El Cid Castilla Beach resort in Mazatlan, Mexico, is Pacific perfection.

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If You Go Mazatlan

Getting around:

- The city is divided into two main sections. In the northern part of the 13-mile peninsula is the Zona Dorado, or Golden Zone, which houses the big hotels and marinas. South is the Centro Historico, or Old Town, which sits next to El Centro, the main downtown area. Connecting the two is the Avenida del Mar, which runs parallel to the Malecon, a boardwalk famous for its enormous bronze sculptures.

- Taxis and the open-air pulmonmas — converted VW Bugs — are the easiest way to navigate the area. They're relatively cheap (it costs \$4-\$8 to go from the Golden Zone to downtown), although the pulmonmas aren't regulated as the taxis are, so it's best to negotiate the price when you get in. Also, be aware that the pulmonmas, so named because the joke was that you could catch pneumonia riding in them, are wide open to the elements, often have sound systems that make Vegas nightclubs seem quiet by comparison, have no seat belts and sometimes seem to be driven by people training for the Indy 500. That said, they are a quintessential Mazatlan experience and very fun.

- Downtown and Old Town are easily navigated on foot, and many of the hotels offer shuttles to major attractions, as well as to the airport. Resist the urge to rent a scooter to get around. The driving in Mazatlan is famously crazy, also a good reason to avoid renting a car; another is that parking is almost impossible.

Where to stay

- El Cid Marina Beach Hotel, www.elcid.com. Many visitors know about the bigger El Cid properties, but a best-kept secret is the El Cid Marina, a smaller El Cid with picturesque boat docks at the edge of the ocean and a cozier feel that is less overwhelming than its siblings but still offers all of the great El Cid amenities — such as the groovy pools with giant, climbable rocks kids can jump from and constant family-friendly activities, as well as things such as yoga and bingo (a newsletter is stuck under the door each morning). A 1-minute ferry ride takes you to the beach, and a free shuttle goes back and forth constantly around the El Cids (the others are closer to the Golden Zone) so that if you tire of the restaurants or pools at one you can try the others. • Casa Lucila, www.casalucila.com/. A classy alternative to the all-inclusives, this quiet, elegant, European-style boutique hotel in an old German-built mansion sits across the street from the Pacific Ocean; Old Town and the Plaza Machado are close. The rooms are strikingly simple and filled with beautiful furniture from Italy and Mexico, as well as Bose CD players and flat-screen TVs, plush robes and Jacuzzi tubs. • Hotel Playa Mazatlan, www.hotelplayamazatlan.com. The sprawling oceanfront Hotel Playa offers rocking chairs on the porch with beach views for an afternoon siesta and spacious rooms with writing desks, Wi-Fi, terra-cotta tile floors and plasma-screen TVs. The well-stocked fitness center is sided by a spa, and the EduVentura Kiosk zip line and climbing wall runs through

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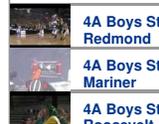
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three coffee bars she owns with her husband, Rogilio Fuentes.

The pulmonma is so beloved it has been honored with a life-size bronze statue on the Malecon, which is lined with several such shrines to Mazatlan's lifestyle. There also is a monument to beer, one to fishing and one celebrating a typical Sinaloan family, along with fountains that make the paved walkway an inviting destination for a warm-weather stroll.

Street-food vendors set up on the narrow beach below, accessible by steps. And at one end of the Malecon, near the T-intersection that leads toward Centro Histrico, or Old Town, fishermen still spend each morning hauling out the day's catches that makes dining locally such a seafood-lover's dream. It's what they have done here seemingly forever, and officially since this city — still Mexico's largest commercial port — was founded in the 1820s. Just above the fishermen, a statue of a naked man and woman, a lighthouse, a marlin and a fishing net, keep watch.

Mazatlan is big on monuments.

"There's pretty much a statue for everything," said Biassoti de Fontes. "We like to commemorate things with a monument, and then we have a big party to celebrate putting up the monument, and then every year we have to celebrate it again."

Marianne Biassoti met Rogilio Fontes in San Luis Obispo in the mid-90s. He was a Tijuana native studying civil engineering at Cal Poly Tech; she was there looking to become a journalist. But in 1996, some friends convinced them that Mazatlan was ripe for an American beer company to give Pacifico, which had been brewed in the city since 1900, a run for its money.

"It didn't work out," Biassoti de Fontes said. "But we just fell so in love with Mazatlan, and we wanted to stay. So we started looking around at what was missing around here, what we might be able to do. And we came up with a coffee cafe."

They started with one Rico's, offering free Wi-Fi with their shade-grown organic beans and elaborate espresso drinks, and they now have three shops.

Business has been booming, in part because there haven't been that many options for Internet service, especially for tourists, but mostly because there aren't many other options for good coffee — especially not the barista-crafted, European-style coffee Rico's makes.

At least there weren't until just a few months ago. Locals are lamenting the fact that Starbucks recently moved in, which means the face of one of Mexico's most interesting cities — less glitzy than Acapulco, a little grittier and less cheesy than the Riviera Maya, with fewer cruise ships than Cozumel and way fewer wet T-shirt contests than Cancun — may be about to change.

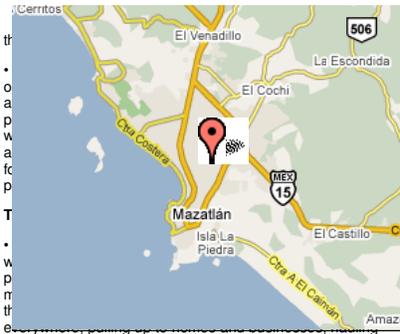
At El Cid Marina Hotel early one morning, about two dozen youngsters pretended to be cliff divers and hid in the caves at one of the resort hotel's elaborate pools. At a moment's notice, a 1-minute ferry ride could take us to the private beach on the other side of the marina — most of the beaches at this end of Mazatlan are linked to a hotel, which blessedly means no vendors inquiring about jewelry sales, hair-braiding or Jet Ski rentals.

"We bought because no one here bothers us," said Cindy Armstrong, a Houston native who with her husband bought a time share two years ago in the El Cid system. They and their four children, ages 8 to 16, were in Mazatlan for their annual two-week vacation. "We feel safe. We love the food. We plop our stuff down, and I sit here by the pool all day and catch up on my trashy novels. The kids go do their thing, and it's heaven every time."

Armstrong said the family had visited other destinations in Mexico, but had chosen Mazatlan because it had a good mix of vacation and regular options. "It's like a real place," she said. "After I'm done with the beach, sometimes I want to go do stuff that's not totally touristy."

And that's one of the unusual things about Mazatlan — people sometimes recommend the oddest, non-tourist things to check out, such as going to the movies. It costs less than half the price of seeing one in the United States, the films are almost always shown in English with Spanish subtitles, and popcorn and a soda cost two bucks. And some of the theaters are kind of snazzy.

Mazatlan also prides itself on its strong cultural offerings, such as the circa-1860s Teatro Angela Peralta,



the jugs in and out. They make the ice with it, wash produce with it, do everything with it, and the running water in the hotels is safe as well.

• *Money:* Dollars are accepted in most places, but there are a few where it is pesos-only, and it's just a good idea to have pesos handy. There are ATMs all over the place, and that's often the way to get the best exchange rate. Don't worry about having any before you go, because the rates are better in Mexico and there's an ATM at the airport near the seating area just outside of customs. There also are ATMs in touristy areas — just be alert and aware while withdrawing. If you can't find an ATM, look for a bank, which will have limited hours but the best rates, or a Casa de Cambios, the next-best rates and longer hours.

Also, don't use your debit card like a credit card here at restaurants, shops or hotels — they are famous targets for theft.



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named for the Mexican opera singer who died of yellow fever in this city. The building offers beautiful black-and-white photos of years gone by, and the adjacent dance school features regular performances.

The Teatro sits just off the Plazuela Machado, a tree-lined hangout with artsy shops and eateries that offer alfresco dining. It attracts locals and tourists alike, and is often the site of local festivals and impromptu celebrations.

Like any other self-respecting city, Mazatlan has its "best-ofs," with its El Faro lighthouse being a top contender. Tourists hike to the hilltop beacon on a dirt trail that takes about an hour round-trip and rewards the hot and thirsty with spectacular views of the city and coastline.

Cliff divers get another view, from their perches high above the Olas Altas, or "high waves." They ask for tips from tourists to perform their bare-chested stunts. Half the time it looks as though they are going to smash into the rocks, but since 1961, when the tradition started as a bet between two men, there has been only one serious injury.

A way to get your own view from even higher up is via a zip line at the new EduVentura facility at the Hotel Playa Mazatlan. It's a sort of zip line lite, a setup that doesn't hurtle you through the jungle but instead runs through the resort, still well over the tops of palm trees and buildings and affording panoramic shots of the ocean, but with less of a sense of isolation and no giant, slimy bugs.

First, though, we climb the rock wall and rappel a bit, to warm up — and warm up to the idea of being so high. Then it's time to buckle up and clip onto the zip line.

I pull on the heavy-duty workman's gloves, grab the line and look down. Not such a good idea. I look up and leap. Someone is screaming — it turns out to be me. "Can we do it again?" my daughters ask.

What the heck. It had to be safer than a pulmonma taxi.

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