



**MEXICAN D**





**ONE AGENT'S SOLO FAM TRIP:**  
California travel consultant Robbe  
Pollack investigates the local pace.

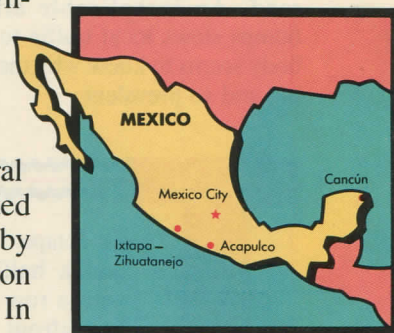
**E**merging quickly yet quietly on the Pacific coast just north of Acapulco is a resort that boasts enough diversity to fulfil the warm-weather fantasies of an assortment of clients, whether their

dream of an idyllic Mexican holiday is one long siesta in the sun, or something more upbeat, say a fresh alternative to the Cancún tempo. The place? Ixtapa, together with its sister village, Zihuatanejo. The resort's broad-based appeal lies in its engaging split personality: new and old, trendy and timeless, swanky and unaffected. Only four miles apart but separated by a rocky peninsula, the two towns sit side by side on a little-developed tropical-forested stretch of Pacific coastline.

Fifteen years ago, a Mexican government computer concluded that the towns had the crystalline water, sunny climate, and white sand beaches necessary to make a great resort. So Ixtapa's high-rise hotels rose tower by tower from a mangrove swamp, and Zihuatanejo—which was and still is a quaint fishing village on a beautiful bay—got electricity, water, phone service, and a highway. Mariachi met disco, and both are better for it.

Cancún was the first of several carefully planned resorts created this way, virtually from scratch, by the Mexican government promotion and tourism agency, Fonatur. In 1975, Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo came on the scene, and, today, Fonatur is promoting a new resort, Huatulco, on the Oaxaca coast. Cancún is a runaway success; one million tourists were expected to fill its 7,000 rooms to 98 percent capacity in 1987. Though Huatulco opened in December, only 1,140 rooms (including a Club Med) and an airport will be in operation by March.

Ixtapa's own tourism suffered a setback in September 1985, when an earthquake that devastated Mexico City, 200 miles to the northeast, also damaged most of the resort's hotels. But Cancún's upstart cousin is on the rebound. There are now 4,500 rooms available in Ixtapa—



MARK FOX

# REAM

**By Anne Cassidy**  
**Photography by Steve Smith**



Zihuatanejo. For what the resort lacks in Mayan ruins and Caribbean access, it makes up for in splendid sunsets and the tufted Sierra Madre foothills, which lace the Pacific with intriguing bays and coves. Perhaps best of all, the twin towns offer plenty of luxury but enough rough edges to assure they're still Mexican.

The yin and yang of Ixtapa and Zihuatanejo attract a diverse clientele: honeymooners and deep-sea fishermen, young families and retired couples, travelers with deep pockets as well as those with shallow ones. The destination's a good value and can be as cheap or as expensive as your client wants to make it.

Zihuatanejo means "land of the women," because it was a matriarchy in Aztec times. Now it's known affectionately as "Z-what" or simply "Z." Z's airport, just a few miles outside of town, used to be a mere landing strip for DC-3's bringing adventurous travelers who knew about the scenic village before Fonatur put it on the map. Today taxis line up to whisk crowds away to Ixtapa, a 25-minute, \$8 (U.S.) ride.

Many reminders of old-fashioned Mexico persist on the trip into new-fashioned Ixtapa: Cab drivers take their time. Horses and cows graze perilously close to the road. An inexplicable array of speed bumps slows local traffic to a crawl. Nobody seems to know why the bumps are so big and so prevalent.

**T**he Ixtapa "strip" is two and a half miles long, with a row of balconied, beachfront hotels reminiscent of Miami or Waikiki. Across the street, boutiques sell U.S. designer clothes, restaurants serve pizza and other non-Mexican foods, and a one-hour film developer stands ready to produce instant memories—perfect diversions for sunburned sojourners or those who like their foreign countries in small doses. A new marina is supposed to be completed by late 1988. And that, apart from a few condos in the hills, is all there is to Ixtapa.

All hotels are on the beach, but because all Mexican beaches are public and the Ixtapa surf can be rough, there seems to be a "pool war" going on. Each new property tries to make its swimming hole the most elaborate one on the block, with swim-up bars, arched bridges, waterslides, and fountains. The Camino Real, for example, features four such decorative pools.

Indeed, the architectural drama is in a class all its own at the **Camino Real**. Its unadorned, adobe-colored facade makes

the luxury hotel seem a part of the landscape, as if it grew from the ground, a latter-day Aztec find. Flowering jacaranda, bougainvillea, camelinas, and margaritas soften the hotel's lines, and tiny frogs and lizards linger on the warm stone walkways that lead down to the ocean. Tucked away on a crescent beach about a mile from the center of town, the Camino Real plunges down the hillside, its recessed rooms built into the slope so that most of them are below the lobby, rather than above it.

Each room has a balcony that nearly doubles the living space and comfortably contains a table and two chairs, a chaise longue, a hammock, and lush flowering plants that frame a blue-and-white view—deep-blue ocean and white clouds. Sliding doors automatically turn off the air conditioning when they're opened, which makes the balcony and room feel like the beach below.

The **Krystal** is a favorite hotel on the Ixtapa strip for a young clientele. It has a lively lobby, a Mexican flavor, and a disco with a light show that rivals any in New York or L.A. The newest hotel is the **Dorado Pacifico**, featuring 285 balconied rooms.

About four miles away from Ixtapa, on Playa Quieta, is the red-tile-roofed village of **Club Med**, with a miniclub for children. Youngsters are supervised from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., and 2- to 7-year-olds can stay at no charge from January 2 to February 6 and from April 9 to 30. Clients who'd rather not lock themselves into a week of Club Med's prepaid, "back-to-camp" style can pay a day-use fee—usually \$90 to \$100—to sample the place. Lunch is a sumptuous spread, and there are plenty of organized beach and pool activities.

Clients who favor a truly Mexican experience might prefer the mixed bag of Zihuatanejo hotels. The **Villa del Sol**, a small hideaway of bungalows with canopied beds and balconies with hammocks, sits on the nicest beach in Zihuatanejo and is adorned with colorful Mexican tiles and native woods. The twin hotels **Sotavento** and **Catalina** are older, more Mexican (the Zihuatanejo Rotary Club meets at the Catalina), decorated simply, and built dramatically into the cliff. Zihuatanejo also has numerous budget hotels and bungalows, although given the rigors of telephoning Mexico for reservations, they can be difficult to book.

The rhythm here is much the same as in any beach resort. Mornings are given to swims, beach walks, alfresco breakfasts, sets of tennis, rounds of golf. Several hotels have marvelous courts with lights and free lessons, and there's an 18-hole Robert Trent Jones Jr. golf course, the Palma

Real, complete with an ocean view and a bird sanctuary. (Ixtapa is loaded with pelicans.) For sports fishermen whose days aren't complete without hooking a marlin or sailfish, deep-sea fishing can be arranged through any hotel.

Traditionally, Mexican afternoons are devoted to the siesta. Many stores close from 1 to 4 p.m. and reopen from 4 to 8 p.m. But for your clients who'd rather not sleep their time away, there's parasailing on the beach, snorkeling offshore, scuba diving, or guided horseback rides into the hills or across the beach. Visitors who don't book packages that include these activities can arrange them through their hotels or a local tour operator, such as the reputable Turismo Caleta (manager: Mario Hernandez), which has offices in Ixtapa and Zihuatanejo.

**S**hopping in Ixtapa isn't much different from doing the stores in Beverly Hills. The prices are about the same, and most merchants gladly accept U.S. currency. Ixtapa has several shopping malls. Some of them are completed, others are missing floors or stores. (Remember, this is Mexico.) But they all blend into one. Clients can sate themselves on Ralph Lauren, Fiorucci, and Aca Joe or on pricey Mexican garments from **La Fuente**, which features beautifully embroidered dresses by the country's top designers.

For authentic local color, though, Zihuatanejo is the place to shop. An early morning trip to the **mercado** (market) yields mangoes, miniature bananas, tiny limes, and freshly made tortillas for an afternoon picnic. There's also earthenware pottery, belts, scarves, and baskets—all below the prices charged in nearby tourist shops.

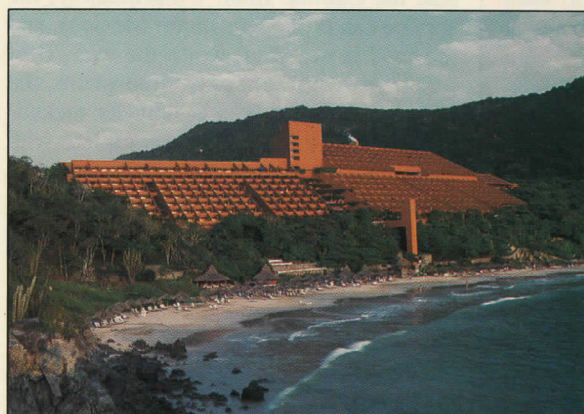
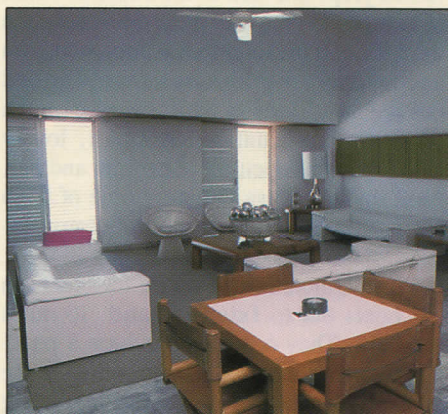
Down the street from the market on Paseo Cocotal is a state handcraft store that displays carved wooden trays, straw hats, and embroidered shirts. All items are sold at fixed prices there, although bargaining is expected in most tourist shops, which are concentrated in the area bound by Juan N. Alvarez, Catalina Gonzalez, Cinco de Mayo, and Vicente Guerrero Streets. Specialties here include pottery, tooled leather, silver, obsidian, and hand-woven rugs. At **Artesanias Adriana**, a souvenir stand on Juan Alvarez, Oaxacan pottery goes for a song. Also noteworthy: the sterling silver sold at the corner of Cuauhtémoc and Nicolás Bravo.

Everyone's favorite pastime occurs at sunset. Up and down the beaches and in the bays that skirt the shore, sunburned





**"A pleasant surprise" is how Robbe Pollack of Travel Trends Inc. in Northridge, California (left), sums up Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo after a fact-gathering visit to help her plan a group stay. "It's a high-class resort with an old-Mexico flavor. I'd send people here who really want to unwind: singles, couples, or families. The destination also offers travelers a lot for their money."**



**"The Camino Real [left] is the only truly deluxe hotel in Ixtapa. It's unbelievably beautiful and romantic. The spacious rooms [far left] have balconies that make you feel like you're in a private world, rather than in the middle of a huge hotel. Perfect for honeymooners. (I missed my husband!)"**

tourists toast the setting sun with happy-hour margaritas. The rock islands in the bay across from Ixtapa's main beach—Los Moros de los Péricos (a bird sanctuary) and Piedra Solitaria—make the sun's shimmering descent even more spectacular. Mariachi bands tune up for the evening ahead, as clients prepare themselves for their most important, perhaps only, decision of the day: where to eat dinner.

Although there's a world of cuisines to choose from (French, Japanese, Italian, American—you name it), there's a surprising shortage of simple, high-quality Mexican food. Apparently Ixtapa restaurateurs think American tourists shy away from local cuisine. To an extent they're right. Even in the best hotel dining rooms, some cautious patrons avoid red meat and chicken, shun any water but the bottled kind (despite the management's insistence that the water is *purificado*), and watch



**"Club Med [left] is always fun and has a special all-day miniclub for kids. For budget accommodations, I liked Dorado Pacifico: small but clean rooms, a great pool, and a central location. For something one notch up, there's the Krystal, just next door."**



# CLIENT CLIPSHEET

**When to Go:** Because the resort is close to Mexico City, it does cater to Mexicans (much more so than Cancún). This should be taken into account during Holy Week (the week before Easter) and other Mexican holidays, when local tourism could make a difference in the availability of hotel rooms and restaurant tables.

**Climate:** Ixtapa–Zihuatanejo is usually sunny and warm, with an average yearly temperature of 78 (96 maximum to 50 minimum). A light sweater is the warmest wrap needed.

**Packing:** Suggest “resort casual,” though restaurants like Bogart’s are dressy. Men don’t need jackets, but women should pack one nice dress. Comfortable walking shoes are smart, since Z’s cobblestone streets are picturesque but difficult to negotiate in high heels or sandals. The electrical current is the same as in the U.S.

**Local Time:** Prepare clients for the Mexican *mañana* (“I’ll-get-around-to-that-tomorrow”) attitude, which results in leisurely service in restaurants, slow taxis, and other, sometimes charming, sometimes infuriating, inefficiencies.

**Health:** Forewarn travelers, also, of Montezuma’s revenge, the intestinal discomfort Mexico is famous for. Most cases are mild and won’t spoil a good time. Nonetheless, visitors should bring the diarrhea medicine of their choice. Although better hotels serve purified water in their restaurants and even have it in their taps, cautious travelers still drink nothing but bottled water, even brushing their teeth with it.

**Citizenship:** Your clients will need to provide proof of citizenship; a valid passport or a birth certificate will do. There’s a \$10 departure tax to be paid at the Zihuatanejo airport.

**Exchange:** No currency conversion is available at the airport, and banks are open only from 9 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. But exchange places (some in hotels) are open in the afternoon.

**Telephone:** It’s wise to reverse charges on phone calls to the U.S.; there is a stiff tax on all foreign calls.

**Cars:** Renting a car is expensive, and additional insurance is a must. Although all major rental companies have offices in Ixtapa or Zihuatanejo, it’s just as easy to get around without a car.

their intake of fresh fruits and vegetables.

The best bet—for quality, value, safety, and taste—is to stick with fresh seafood. The **Dolphin**, a seafood restaurant on Ixtapa Island (a favorite day-trip by boat), serves some of the best red snapper and garlic shrimp anywhere. And if you linger awhile, assistant manager Constantino Ramos will tell stories about when the island was a pirate’s den. But the Dolphin is a lunch place.

For dinner, one of the most popular showy restaurants is **Bogart’s**, as in Humphrey. The cuisine is Continental, the atmosphere *Casablanca* kitsch. For tourists who can get past the comical notion of Mexican waiters wearing North African turbans and serving Caesar salads, it may be the most glamorous spot in Ixtapa. The mosquelike backdrops are ethereal, and the pool in the middle of the restaurant enhances the candlelight. The food is okay, the service earnest if not always on the mark, and it’s fun to dress up and go there.

**Villa de la Selva** is situated in one of the best spots in town—up a cobblestone lane past the Camino Real. Unfortunately, the service can be slow (even for Mexico), and the food is not at all worth the wait. Best for clients who want only atmosphere, the Villa de la Selva excels with its tucked-away-in-the-jungle setting, complete with exotic night sounds and a dramatically lighted view of the surf below.

Another foreign presence—this time French—on Ixtapa’s strip is **Montmartre**. Sporting delightful second-story balconies that, with some imagination, could overlook the Boulevard St. Germain, Montmartre serves tasty lobsters and snails and delicious *pommes frites* (French fries).

Glimmers of true local color do exist in the Ixtapa–Zihuatanejo culinary scene, however. The **El Presidente Hotel**’s main restaurant features a “nouvelle Mexican” menu: stuffed banana with deviled shrimp, oysters with pumpkin flowers, and chicken breast with nuts in mole sauce.

El Presidente also has the best Mexican fiesta in town. Every Monday night, guests are treated to all the Mexican food they can eat, all the tequila they can drink, and all the renditions of “La Bamba” they can stand. “You’re 100 percent sure to enjoy it,” says Fermin Ramirez, a local tour guide. “And after much tequila you’ll speak Spanish very well.”

**El Castillo**, a small restaurant in Z, serves European dishes with Mexican touches. Prices are reasonable, and Florian Thiesen, the gregarious owner, sees to it that the just-caught fish his patrons bring him are lovingly prepared and served. If there’s any left over, other restaurant-goers are invited to sample.

**W** hat about after dark? **Christine** gets going about midnight,

when the popular disco’s smoke-and-light show begins. **Joy Disco**, next to the Montmartre restaurant, is another favorite spot. Dancing is also lively at the **Camino Real**, the **Holiday Inn**, and at **Ibiza**, a disco up the hill near the Hotel Irma in Zihuatanejo. Across the street, **Kon Tiki** provides an open-air, bay-view terrace with American television and a comfortable captain’s quarters feel, cozy for drinks.

But perhaps the finest nightcap is a stroll along Ixtapa’s main beach. Hotel spotlights illuminate the surf after dusk—a cool, pleasant way to end the day.

Clearly, visitors can have a wonderful time without ever leaving Ixtapa and Zihuatanejo, but for those who want to venture further, suggest these jaunts:

A good day-trip (reachable by taxi or rented jeep) is a visit to the **beaches north of Ixtapa**. On the way there clients can see the Mexican president’s vacation house on a promontory overlooking the sea. Farthest out is Playa Linda, a long, straight stretch of sand. Las Cuatas is a small, lovely beach with an open-air restaurant and bar. Next door is Playa Quieta, home of Club Med—a good place to swim because Ixtapa Island breaks the waves.

Playa Quieta is also where travelers can get boats out to **Ixtapa Island**, 10 miles offshore. They can also purchase a package tour that supplies transportation to the island, a seafood lunch, and snorkeling gear. Ixtapa Island is teeming with parrots, armadillos, lizards, and an occasional large iguana. Visitors who bring their walking shoes can hike.

**Las Gatas Beach** is another place that is accessible only by boat, even though it’s part of the mainland. Located on the far side of Zihuatanejo Bay, Las Gatas is the most “Mexican” of the beaches, with the same kind of open-air seafood places found on Ixtapa Island (including one that boasts the best sushi in Mexico). The beach has a laid-back, perpetual holiday feel; a few hawkers sell their wares. Las Gatas features a coral reef just offshore, which makes the water great for snorkeling and swimming. It’s also fun to comb the beach for bleached and twisted driftwood, pieces of white coral, and shells. Again, clients can join an organized day-trip tour here, but it’s just as easy to take the local boat from the Zihuatanejo pier.

For those who really want to get away from it all there’s **Barra de Potosi**, a lazy





**"Zihuatanejo, just 10 minutes from Ixtapa by car yet worlds apart in atmosphere, adds a nice dimension to the resort—a more Mexican feel than you find in Cancún. At the *mercado* [left], you can bargain for baskets and other handicrafts. In Ixtapa, there's a completely different type of shopping—loads of elegant, expensive boutiques where you can't bargain at all."**

lagoon rich with waterfowl, more informal seafood restaurants, and idyllic views. In the fading light of late afternoon, fishermen mend and fold their nets, and pelicans dive-bomb for their dinner. Nearby is an archaeological site with two partially excavated pyramids not yet ready for public viewing. (Or, as one local tour operator said, "We don't have any ruins yet, but we're building some!") Barra de Potosi is not easy to reach: The dirt road that leads there is rutted and nearly impassable if it rains. But the hourlong trip is well worth the effort. For a price, even taxis will take visitors there and back.

For some, Mexico just isn't Mexico without a bullfight. Neither Ixtapa nor Zihuatanejo has a bullring, so the best way to take in this national pastime is with a Sunday trip to **Acapulco**, 150 miles away. Sightseeing day-trips are offered during the week too, for those who faint at the sight of blood. Club Med also offers a convenient outing to Acapulco on its private plane, a quick 45-minute journey. Some people say Zihuatanejo today resembles the Acapulco of 30 years ago.

And that's what makes Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo a refreshing choice *now*. Here your clients can find the same comfort and civilization that's made other Mexican resorts famous, but with quieter beaches and a national flavor that's not overly commercialized. Yet. ♦

*Travel writer ANNE CASSIDY has been an editor of European Travel and Life, McCall's, and Bluegrass Magazine.*



**"Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo is best for four- or five-night trips. Unless clients *really* want to relax, a full week might be long, because there's not much sightseeing. Ixtapa Island and Barra de Potosi [left] make scenic day-trips. At night there are lots of discos, which makes this a great place for singles."**



**"Just tell clients, 'You're in Mexico now. A one-hour dinner will take two hours.' That way they won't be frustrated, especially on the first night. I find it invaluable to check out destinations for myself [left]. Once your clients see how excited you are about a place, if they have any inkling of going there, they will."**