

An aerial photograph of a resort pool deck. The pool is a light blue color with a curved edge. Along the pool's edge is a white deck with several red lounge chairs and black patio umbrellas. A black metal railing separates the deck from the ocean. The ocean is a deep teal color with white foam from waves breaking against the shore. In the upper right, there is a wooden pier or dock structure extending into the water. The text "VIVA ACAPULCO" is overlaid in large, bold, orange letters at the bottom of the image.

VIVA  
ACAPULCO



An aerial photograph of a large, bean-shaped swimming pool with vibrant blue water. The pool is surrounded by a light-colored concrete deck. In the foreground, there are two lounge chairs with white cushions and a large black patio umbrella. To the left, a palm tree stands near a small garden bed. In the background, a thatched-roof building is visible, and a person in white clothing is walking on the deck to the right of the pool. The overall scene is bright and sunny, with shadows cast on the deck.

SIXTY YEARS ON, A SECOND GENERATION IS  
REVITALIZING THE HOTELS, RESTAURANTS, AND  
BEACHES THAT FIRST ENTICED THE HOLLYWOOD AND  
MEXICAN ELITE. WELCOME TO THE NEW ACAPULCO.

BY MICHAEL GROSS

PHOTOGRAPHED BY TRUJILLO PAUMIER

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The bean-shaped pool at the retro-chic Hotel Boca Chica, a recently revamped property in the Traditional Zone.









COMO ACAPULCO NO HAY DOS. “THERE’S NOTHING LIKE ACAPULCO,” the local saying goes. Or, to translate literally, there is only one.

For decades, this was true. Today, there are not one, not even two, but three vastly different Acapulcos, all wrapped around two sheltering bays on the Pacific coast of south-central Mexico. The First Acapulco is the one beside the famous bay Frank Sinatra sang about in “Come Fly With Me,” which is actually called Santa Lucía, but never mind that. This is the Acapulco of legend, the protected harbor planted firmly on the trade map by the conquistador Hernán Cortés in the 16th century, then rediscovered in the 1930’s by Mexico City’s elite, who traveled for a week on torturous roads to reach an untainted stretch of coast with lush forests, secret lagoons, and mythical beaches. Hollywood royalty soon followed, arriving on splendid yachts, along with a handful of Europeans escaping the Nazis. Together, they transformed a humble fishing village of 6,000 souls into a bolt-hole for the international jet set, a louche and enchanted destination populated by a raffish crew of playa pioneers.

The Second Acapulco, which came to be known as the Golden Zone, arose decades later, after the Costera Miguel Alemán extended around the bay, connecting the fashionable fishing village with the lush gated community of Las Brisas and, down the coast, the lesser-known bay of Puerto Marqués. Starting in 1955, with the inauguration of international flights, local and foreign holidaymakers descended upon the airport, then sauntered off to bathe in the warm blue waters of the Golden Zone’s palapa-strewn strip and marvel at the cloudless skies. The eighties’ commencement of a modern highway to the capital enhanced the coastal city’s appeal, and before long, Acapulco Gold was on the Spring Breaker’s hot list, with its towering tourist hotels and neon-lit clubs and restaurants, among them the local institutions Acapulco Charlie’s and Baby’O, the top dance club for a generation. They’re what most Americans think of now—if they think about Acapulco at all.

But in an all-too-familiar trajectory, the town’s spectacular success in the fifties and sixties—when the Rat Pack, John Wayne, the Kennedys, and young stars like George Hamilton

were regulars—attracted the heaving crowds of the seventies and, inevitably, the overbuilding in the eighties. A severe recession stopped development cold, and Acapulco went into a kind of shocked paralysis in the nineties. What remained of the international set decamped for “newer” places such as Cabo San Lucas and St. Bart’s. The Mexican Riviera town’s future looked bleak—although that unintentional pause did keep today’s Acapulco (population about 780,000) from being further Cancún-ized into a completely generic resort.


But never mind that. What matters is what’s happening now in the city that encircles Santa Lucía and Puerto Marqués. What matters is the Third Acapulco.

JUST SOUTH OF THE GRAND HOTEL ACAPULCO, THE COSTERA Alemán becomes the Escénica, a corniche with sweeping vistas of the Pacific and the emerald hills above, and the Third Acapulco begins. Once known only for the iconic pink-and-white Las Brisas—a hotel built in large part to stash the mistresses of wealthy, married Mexican bankers—and its exclusive beach club, the area now called Acapulco Diamante is bringing new glitter to the 11-mile stretch from Acapulco Gold to the airport.

Real life in Acapulco Diamante looks like a Slim Aarons photo, with gated villas occupied by affluent Mexicans and their children, who prefer beachside lock-and-leave condos to brand-name resorts. Despite witnessing a building lull, this stalwart, worldly community has kept the heart of the city beating; Mexican regulars have always known that, apparent decline aside, the essential elements of Acapulco’s appeal remained: astonishing physical beauty, a deep vein of history, and weather as predictably excellent as anywhere in the world. Until hotel developers and restaurateurs began to think about Acapulco again in the last decade, Mexican jet-setters pretty much had the town to themselves. But with the necessary elements—investment, infrastructure, and cutting-edge design—finally in place, a renaissance is surely on the horizon. It’s Acapulco’s turn to shine again.

“ACAPULCO IN THE 1930’S WAS TRANSFORMED FROM A HUMBLE FISHING VILLAGE INTO A LOUCHE AND ENCHANTED DESTINATION POPULATED BY A RAFFISH CREW OF PLAYA PIONEERS.”





LEAVING THE PENINSULA  
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The first signs of this new Acapulco were a series of extravagant restaurants along the Escénica that began serving guests some five years ago. Their deceptively tiny roadside entrances open onto massive dining terraces that cascade down cliffs above Santa Lucía and Puerto Marqués bays. Gasp-inducing views stretch out to the old Acapulco of the 1930's, which, late at night, looks like a vast curve of pavé diamonds. This Acapulco is certainly shiny and new, but at its finest, it is also distinctly rooted in the resort's glorious past. Zibu, one of the best of the new restaurants on the Escénica, was built by Eduardo Wichtendahl, whose mother once worked for Teddy Stauffer—the legendary Swiss bandleader and front man at La Perla nightclub in “old” Acapulco's Hotel El Mirador. In the resort's heyday, Stauffer hired young daredevils to plunge from high cliffs outside his club's windows into La Quebrada, one of a series of narrow, shallow coves on the Pacific coast. The divers at La Quebrada became world-renowned—even more so when one of them appeared as a double for Elvis Presley in his 1963 film *Fun in Acapulco*. That entertaining spirit is alive at Zibu, which is as playful as its food is delicious. Its décor—a huge palapa with three mosaic-floored rooms and decks built around mango and papaya trees and jutting rocks—was inspired by the galleons that first brought silk, spices, ivory, and other valuables from Manila and China, catching the trade winds on their return to the West. The menu, too, takes cues from Asia, mixed with the cuisine of the state of Guerrero, where Acapulco is located.

Wichtendahl went to school with Rolly Pavia, the son of a Zihuatanejo restaurateur, who opened Becco al Mare with his family just up the road from Zibu a few months after. The restaurant's wood-and-glass-cube entrance at road level leads to a minimalist room as magnificent as a Panavision stage set, only here it's all white, letting the fashionable young customers descending its make-an-entrance staircase be the stars of the show—with that bay-and-twinkling-diamond view as the backdrop. It's almost enough to distract from the food, but fresh pasta with sea urchin and the most extensive wine list in Acapulco will eventually get your attention.

One after another, more cliff-dwelling restaurants have opened—or reopened—since. “There's always room at the top,” Wichtendahl jokes. True enough: the celebrity chef Richard Sandoval inherited Acapulco mainstay Madeiras from his father; he renamed it Pámpano, and, backed by Plácido Domingo, a local homeowner, remade it into a contemporary Mexican restaurant in 2008. Packed every night, but not running on all cylinders until the peak dining hour of 11 p.m., Pámpano (which is currently “redefining its concept,” according to Sandoval) is expensive by local standards. Still, Pámpano and all of its neighboring restaurants in the new



Diamante seem like bargains when the quality of the entertainment—the rooms, the views, the excellent food, the crowd—is added into the equation.

Esteban Matiz, the fashion designer and, not too long ago, the only fashion-designer-in-residence in Acapulco, has become a sort of cheerleader for the town, where his mother ran an art gallery for half a century. Esteban (he is known by only one name) can recall the days when most of the land between Las Brisas and the airport was owned by tycoons such as J. Paul Getty, Loel Guinness, Warren Avis, and Daniel Ludwig, who put up the distinctive Diamante hotel, the Fairmont Acapulco Princess, which is shaped like an Aztec pyramid, in 1971. Billionaire recluse Howard Hughes spent his last days in its penthouse. Getty's nearby hideaway became the Fairmont Pierre Marqués. Now they're just part of the crowd in this still-evolving district, which also includes Mundo Imperial, a \$300 million complex complete with a forum-style theater, and, by 2012, a shopping plaza, a convention hall, and a luxury hotel. Add in the high-end La Isla shopping center next door, and Acapulco Diamante is basically a Mexican version of the South Beach lifestyle at a fraction of the price. By the quantity and caliber of today's merchandise, Esteban seems a little surprised. “You could never get any of this before,” he says. “Five years ago, there was nothing here. It's not faded glory anymore.”

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## Acapulco

(Continued from page 115)

**I**N THE PAST YEAR, SEVERAL EQUALLY ambitious hotels have joined the new Diamond Zone restaurants and shops, and like them, they demonstrate the international scope of the new Acapulco's ambitions. Past two guarded gates and down a road that runs the length of Punta Diamante, the almost-empty peninsula on the south side of Puerto Marqués, sits the Banyan Tree Cabo Marqués. Like Zibu, the resort is an Asian-style fantasy inspired by the seafaring story of Acapulco—it has a Thai restaurant, called Saffron—that takes guests out of time, out of place. With three restaurants, a world-class spa, infinity pools in every villa, and those ever-present infinite views, the Banyan Tree's all-inclusiveness may be its chief drawback. You'll never want to leave—and getting off the peninsula it occupies takes some effort. But anyone who wants to find himself a little lost will have his wish fulfilled there.

On the opposite shore of Acapulco's smaller bay of Puerto Marqués you'll find Hotel Encanto. Designed and built over the course of a decade by architect Miguel Ángel Aragonés, the 44-room property is an all-white, all-geometric ode to the sea, a symphony of planes, frames, portholes, and glass walls that offer both fleeting glimpses of and lingering looks at the hypnotic Pacific. Though the building and the rooms can be lit in different colors, which some may consider a touch too much, at night the pool deck and bar are illuminated by candles to emphasize the starry panorama. And here, everything is Mexican, from the marble walls and floors to the pillow covers from Chiapas. Encanto's cool chic plays nicely against Acapulco's sultry heat.

Banyan Tree and Encanto are a long way—both physically and psychologically—from the Acapulco that Errol Flynn first encountered on a fishing trip with Teddy Stauffer in 1943, though the updated and refreshed Hotel Boca Chica, in old Acapulco, puts guests right in its center. In the Rat Pack era, Boca Chica and its beach club, which opened in 1953, was the place to be by day on the Peninsula »

# Acapulco

de las Playas—an Acapulco version of St. Tropez's Club 55, with yachts moored off its waterfront restaurant at the entrance to Santa Lucía Bay. There, Rita Hayworth, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Tony Curtis, and John and Jackie Kennedy drank and dined.

Off the radar for decades as Acapulco's center of gravity moved southeast and its Traditional Zone decayed, the Boca Chica was bought in 2007 and refurbished by the Grupo Habita of ultrahip design hotels in partnership with a son-in-law of Mexican billionaire (and world's richest man) Carlos Slim. Despite that provenance, it is inexpensive and comparatively bare-bones, but its 36 haute-motel rooms and suites are nonetheless chic and well-equipped. Carlos Couturier, one of Habita's partners, along with architects Frida Escobedo and José Rojas, combined sixties furniture and

Pop-tropical details with such flourishes as a shower with a circular curtain in the bedroom. Unlike Acapulco's other new hotels, Boca Chica has a direct relationship with the water: it has its own swimming cove and dock, and a boat and captain are on call. Even when the sea is too choppy for a snorkeling expedition to nearby Roqueta Island, the Boca Chica skiff allows guests to indulge in coastal voyeurism, cruising from Acapulco's huge yacht club to La Quebrada, where it's hard not to wonder who owns the mansions high on the cliffs, many with their own funiculars running down to private docks.

Boca Chica's new owners aim to evoke "the feeling of Mexico and Acapulco as it used to be," Couturier says. He is sitting beneath the palapa at the hotel's sushi restaurant, while steps away on the sundeck, chef Keisuke Harada is fishing. The old part of town, Couturier says, "all faded away when Acapulco became a small city," but recently a young crowd has rediscovered

it. "It's no secret why it all started here," he says, gesturing over the water. "The views, the cliffs, the sea. The Traditional Zone was the best part of Acapulco, and we're going to take it back and make it happen again."

The new Boca Chica is just the beginning. Couturier says other hotels in the Traditional Zone—including the legendary Casablanca, where Stauffer opened a rooftop club with 360-degree views in 1945—have just been purchased by mysterious investors. The hope is that they will continue what the Habita partners and second-generation residents have started.

But thankfully, right next door to Boca Chica, little has changed at La Cabaña de Caleta, an unpretentious old-school joint on Caleta Beach where piña coladas, ceviche in tall cocktail glasses, and baby-shark quesadillas are still served on the sand. Just a few yards away, rickety tables are piled high with fresh shellfish, ready for local bathers to buy for their lunch, shucked on the spot. »

## GUIDE TO ACAPULCO

### GETTING THERE

Continental Airlines offers direct flights from Newark and Houston; American Airlines has nonstop departures from Chicago and Dallas-Fort Worth. U.S. Airways has direct flights from Phoenix. Many airlines have connecting flights through Mexico City.

### STAY

Banyan Tree Cabo Marqués Eastern-style resort on Punta Diamante. Excellent Thai food at Saffron restaurant. Blvd. Cabo Marqués; 800/591-0439 or 52-744/434-0100; banyantree.com; doubles from \$470.

### GREAT VALUE

Hotel Boca Chica An updated 1950's hotel and beach club with a sushi restaurant, in the Traditional Zone. Playa Caletilla, Fracc. Las

Playas; 800/337-4685 or 52-744/482-7879; hotel-bocachica.com; doubles from \$95.

Hotel Encanto New property with all-white walls and lots of glass in Brisas Marqués. Excellent bar and restaurant. 51 Jacques Cousteau; 877/337-1260 or 52-744/446-7101; hotelencanto.com.mx; doubles from \$375.

Las Brisas The historic hillside pink pleasure palace of Las Brisas. 5255 Crta. Escénica; 866/427-2779 or 52-744/469-6900; brisas.com.mx; doubles from \$290, including breakfast.

### EAT

Becco al Mare Italian food and fine wines with superb views of Acapulco Bay. 14 Crta. Escénica; 52-744/446-7402; dinner for two \$90.

Beto Godoy Outdoor dining on fresh seafood by the ocean. Km 32, Crta. Acapulco-Pinotepa; 52-744/444-6101; lunch for two \$50.

Hotel Los Flamings Pozole every Thursday in the Traditional Zone. Avda. Adolfo López Mateos, Fracc. Las Playas; 52-744/482-0690; dinner for two \$15.

Kookaburra Restaurant Excellent seafood near Las Brisas. Crta. Escénica, 3 Fracc. Marina Las Brisas; 52-744/446-6020; dinner for two \$120.

La Cabaña de Caleta Feet-in-the-sand lunches on bustling Caleta Beach. Playa Caleta lado Oriente, Fracc. Las Playas; 52-744/482-5007; lunch for two \$35.

Zibu Mex-Thai fusion overlooking the Bay



of Puerto Marqués.

Avda. Escénica, Fracc. Glomar; 52-744/433-3058; dinner for two \$65.

### SHOP

La Isla Shopping Village Nautica, Hugo Boss, and Mexican fashions and restaurants in a modern open-air mall setting. Blvd. de las Naciones, Acapulco Diamante.

### SEE AND DO

Coyuca and Tres Palos Lagoons Untouched, otherworldly natural wonders—a trip into Acapulco's past.

Dolores Olmedo Patino House A private residence with a 1955 mosaic mural by Diego Rivera, who once lived there. 6 Calle Inalámbrica, Cerro de la Pinzona.

### A NOTE ON SAFETY

In recent months, there have been several isolated but publicized incidents of drug-cartel-related violence in and around Acapulco. According to the State Department, this violence is not targeted at tourists, but some of it has occurred in areas they frequent. Check travel.state.gov for updates.



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# Acapulco

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Acapulco's establishment watches all of this hopefully, despite recent news of drug-related violence. Even though they live behind well-guarded gates, they want to open their city to the world again. "There's more to Acapulco than beaches," says Paty Molina, a leader of local society, at a small lunch in an opulent villa behind the gates of Las Brisas. The event is being hosted by her mother, Lupita, the ex-wife of the Mexico Pepsi distributor who sold his company for \$1.5 billion. A philanthropist, she has invited local business and government leaders over to raise money for the Fort of San Diego, which once fought off pirates, but now welcomes all comers with museum exhibitions dedicated to the history of Acapulco and, especially, its roots in that triangle trade with the Philippines and the Far East. "I do whatever I can because I love Acapulco," Lupita says, as her friends finish lunch at 5 p.m.

Esteban, one of the guests at Lupita's luncheon, suggests that no visit to Acapulco is complete without a meal at Barra Vieja and a trip into Tres Palos, one of the two huge lagoons that bookend the city and are, Baby'O notwithstanding, the town's greatest attraction. Down the coastal road to Oaxaca, open-air restaurants serve *pescado ala talla y mariscos* (spicy grilled fish and seafood) on picnic tables set below *palapas*. At Beto Godoy, one of the largest, sunbathers in swimsuits pick their own fish from a sink in a shack; it's weighed, whisked away, then returned, cooked to perfection. Rental boats stand ready to take visitors on a voyage into the lagoon, where the only company is red crabs, storks, egrets, and nighthawks.

Tres Palos is a far cry from the discos and fast-food restaurants of Acapulco Gold, and even older than the fishing village that first attracted Errol Flynn and John Wayne. It's yet another Acapulco, perhaps the most extraordinary of all. ✚

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Michael Gross, a T+L contributing editor, has just finished his latest book, *Unreal Estate*, about the mansions of Los Angeles and the people who live in them.