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FALL 2010

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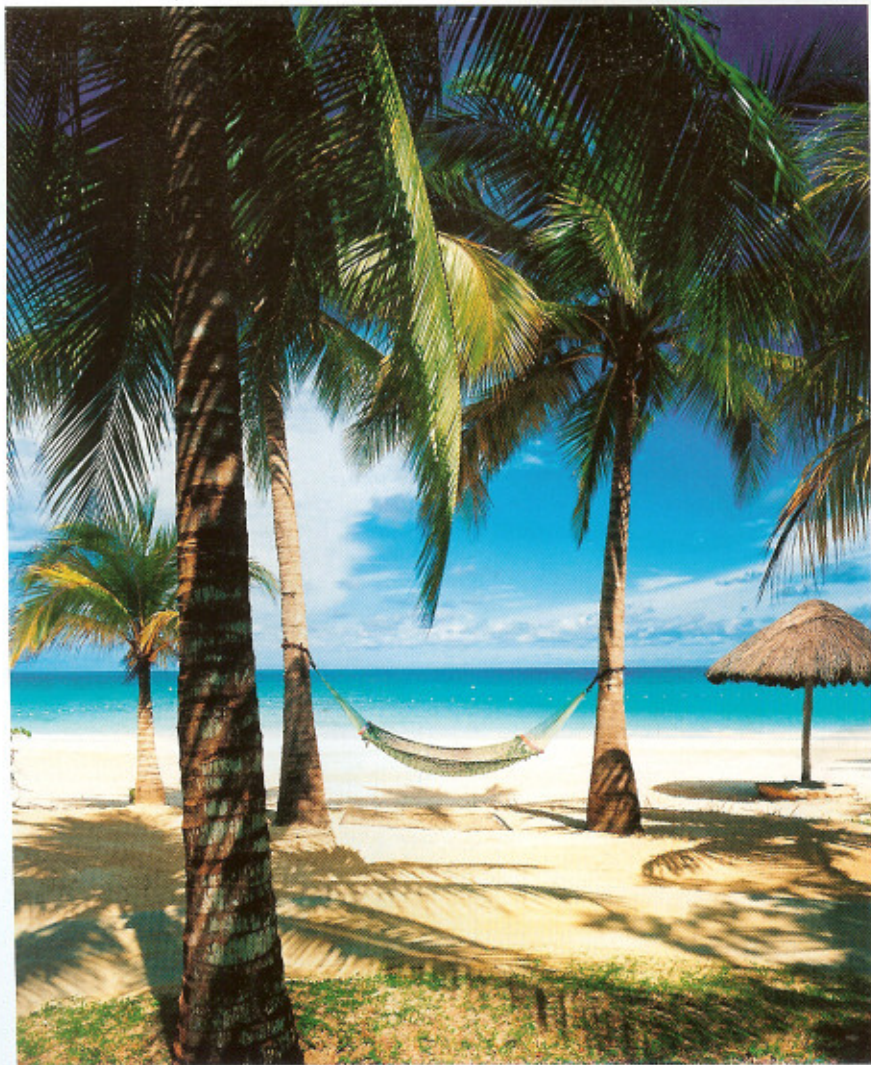


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A photograph of a tropical hideaway. In the center, a thatched-roof hut with wooden pillars stands on a wooden deck. To the left, a wooden table holds a bowl of fruit. The scene is surrounded by dense, lush green tropical foliage, with sunlight filtering through the leaves, creating a warm and romantic atmosphere.

MEXICO'S ROMANTIC HIDEAWAYS

IF MEGARESORTS AREN'T YOUR THING, RETREAT HERE. BY MARYANN HAMMERS



With its sunny weather, warm ocean breezes, soft sands and good values, Mexico is an obvious honeymoon destination. We scouted out some of Mexico's most romantic retreats, in the mountains, at sea, and in the city. Far from crowded hotel strips, these resorts are made for lovers.

ESPERANZA, BAJA PENINSULA

This tranquil resort at the southernmost end of the Baja Peninsula is a favorite of celebrities. It's easy to see the appeal. At **Esperanza** (esperanzasort.com), winding stone pathways circle palapa-roofed casitas, flowering vines climb up palm trees, and a cobalt-blue sea with frothy white-caps dance over rocks.

SUITE DREAMS Each large, airy guestroom has a deep soaking tub (complete with a view of the sea), a king-size feather bed and a glass wall with a door that opens onto a large private terrace, which is furnished with a colorful hammock and a hot tub. Also on the terrace: a pair of binoculars, perfect for watching the whales when they pass by the hotel during the months of December to May.

ESCAPE THE ORDINARY Explore secluded coves; hunt for shells on the pristine beach; hold hands by the infinity pool; or wander over to the resort's pretty garden spa. The tequila-tasting class, held twice weekly, is always fun.

ISNT IT ROMANTIC? Beach cabanas for two have full-size beds, as well

as butler and food-and-beverage service. Throw open the cabana's curtains to watch the sea; or close them for sheer privacy.

HACIENDA SAN ANGEL, PUERTO VALLARTA

It could be a bit of a challenge to find the popular **Hacienda San Angel** (haciendasanangel.com). Nestled atop a steep hill on a narrow cobblestone street, the tile-roofed villas blend perfectly with the surrounding homes. But then you spot the small sign, pull the bell rope, walk through the heavy wood doors—and find yourself in an enchanting world of winding paths, lush tropical gardens, fountain courtyards, and secret nooks and crannies—every inch filled with Mexican colonial sculpture and artwork.

SUITE DREAMS Each of the hotel's suites is completely distinct but equally charming, including one with a hand-painted domed ceiling and another with wrap-around windows offering up vistas of the mountains, city, and sea.

ESCAPE THE ORDINARY Explore the city on foot. The resort is within walking distance of Puerto Vallarta's historic downtown, called El Centro. Also don't miss the mile-long El Malecon, the seaside walkway, and the vibrant Zona Romantica where you'll find bustling bistros, restaurants and galleries.

ISNT IT ROMANTIC? After a night of slumbering on fine Egyptian



linens, wake to a beautiful view of the Bay of Banderas and a special Mexican breakfast served on your terrace. Go ahead! Enjoy a casserole of tortillas and eggs and sit back to enjoy the views.

THE TIDES, RIVIERA MAYA

Carved in the rainforest on the white sands of Mexico's Riviera Maya, **The Tides** (tidesrivieramaya.com) is a seaside refuge and just minutes away from ancient ruins and the quaint town of Playa del Carmen.

SUITE DREAMS Each of the resort's ultra-private villas boasts a private, palapa-roofed patio, shrouded in dense tropical flora, with heated plunge pool, hammocks and comfy white lounges with colorful pillows. Interiors are spacious, but spare and Zen-like, with furnishings consisting of little more than a king-sized bed, small table, and well-stocked refrigerator. A big plus: private garden showers.

ESCAPE THE ORDINARY For a journey you'll never forget, visit the village of Pac Chen, where life goes on as it has for many centuries. There is no electricity, and many of the inhabitants speak only Mayan. While there, you can search tree branches for monkeys and toucans, canoe along a peaceful lagoon; whiz on ziplines over a crystal blue lake; or rappel 45 feet down into the cold, fresh waters of ancient, underground swimming holes called cenotes (pronounced say-KNOW-tays).

ISN'T IT ROMANTIC? Rise and shine! Fling open the gauzy netting draping your bed, and greet the day with freshly baked croissants, muffins and pan dulce (Mexican sweet rolls) on your patio. Later, go skinny-dipping in your private plunge pool.

SIERRA LAGO RESORT & SPA, MASCOTA

A former horse ranch, **Sierra Lago Resort & Spa** (villagroupresorts.com) is set high in Mexico's Sierra Madre Mountains, amid the lush peaks that surround Juanacatlán, a large lagoon within an ancient volcanic crater. Though it's no longer a working ranch, horses still graze here, and the feeling of a calmer, simpler time is very much intact.

SUITE DREAMS With stone fireplaces, brick walls, in-suite Jacuzzis, and fluffy comforters, the resort's cabins have all the feel of a first-rate

Colorado ski lodge. But the punched-tin mirrors, copper sconces, hanging lanterns, leather barrel chairs, rustic tables let you know that you could only be in Mexico.

ESCAPE THE ORDINARY Enjoy the great outdoors. Kayaks and paddleboats are lined up along the lakeshore. On land, mountain bikes are yours for the taking, and well-marked hiking trails lead into the surrounding woodlands. Later soothe those muscles with a relaxing massage at the spa.

ISN'T IT ROMANTIC? Have dinner early and return to your cabin for a relaxing evening. At nightfall, firewood is delivered to each cabin, and the quiet will be punctuated only by the crackling fire in your stone fireplace. Come morning the only sounds you will hear are bird songs and ducks splashing in the lake.

EL CAREYES BEACH RESORT, JALISCO

Everyone who visits **El Careyes Beach Resort** (elcareyesresort.com) will want to return someday. This boutique hotel is in the tiny village of Barra de Navidad on the Costa Alegre. Its terra-cotta walls are painted in a rainbow of colors. Nature contributes to the palette with a visual feast of rolling green hills, pure white sand, glistening turquoise ocean, and clear blue skies.

SUITE DREAMS Guestrooms are a colorful blend of Mexican and Italian architecture, bright and welcoming, with outdoor living areas and floor-to-ceiling windows that open to picture-perfect ocean views and cool sea breezes.

ESCAPE THE ORDINARY Snorkel, ride horseback on the sand, take polo lessons, or swim in the serpentine pool that winds its way through the property. From July to November, do your part to save baby sea turtles: Each summer the resort seeks volunteers to help collect eggs on private Teopa Beach. More than fifty thousand turtles have been released into their natural habitat.

ISN'T IT ROMANTIC? Soak together in the private plunge pool on your balcony as you watch the sea and sailboats on the horizon. Or, if you prefer, book a massage for two on the beach. ♦