

The Via Yoga Experience
Yoga and Surfing in Mexico and Beyond
By Joe Sweeney

To visit a Mexican fishing village in its old world glory is an unforgettable and very special experience. Fishermen mending their nets amid colorful fishing boats, flanked by children, pets and palm trees, with seagulls circling overhead: This is a window not only into Mexico's past but into the Mexican peoples' ancient connection to the sea.

On Mexico's mid-western Pacific Nayarit Coast is the picturesque seaside fishing village of Sayulita, where the black and white sand beaches form a winding border between the sea and the jungle. Years ago, Sayulita served as a *hacienda* for harvesting small ping-pong-ball-sized coconuts used in the production of coconut oil. The mild Pacific coastal environment supports a variety of other fruits and nuts including mangos, papayas and varieties of coconuts.

With its dusty streets and idyllic seaside environment, Sayulita is far off from the likes of Puerto Vallarta, an hour south in Jalisco. Sayulita retains an old world charm while still providing a range of modern amenities and gourmet restaurants. There are small shops with traditional regional Mexican wares and sweet boutiques with clothing, surf gear and jewelry adorned with Tahitian black pearls. A specialty of Sayulita is the prominently displayed traditional ceramic tableware.

Colorful birds and lounging iguanas look down from the treetops as children playfully crisscross the streets. There is plenty to keep a visitor busy from baseball games, *fútbol* matches, open-air markets, festivals, surfing, bicycling, kayaking and live music, yet it is not difficult to find seclusion and retreat.

Clear blue waves sweep across the coves, breaking elegantly onto exquisite white and black sand beaches. There are enough beaches peppering Sayulita's coastlines to keep a visitor traveling by foot, bicycle, horse or sea kayak at a different and unique beach every day.

My personal connection to the ocean and to surfing attracted me to Sayulita. Having the wonderful opportunity of growing up by the Atlantic Ocean, learning to surf at an early age and working at sea navigating small ships have all deepened my connection to the sea and it is a comforting and familiar place to return to, no matter what coast or ocean I visit.

The chance to escape the landlocked confines of the city and to embark on a healthy surfing adventure combined with the added bonus of going with my girlfriend and our dear friend from Seattle made the trip sound irresistible. The two were making the trip to attend a Via Yoga retreat, which featured a Seattle-based guest yoga instructor, Troy Lucero, with whom our friend was familiar. Troy, an effervescent and experienced Ashtanga teacher, also founded a successful after-school surf program in California for children.

Via Yoga, a Seattle-based company founded by Michelle King and Kelly Kemp, offers yoga and surfing retreats in Mexico. The environment of Sayulita catered perfectly to an experience such as this, and classes were held in a beautiful palapa, a semi-outdoor space with a gentle breeze blowing, a view of the majestic Pacific, and curling hot-pink bougainvillea growing down the walls. Bringing together a variety of unique yoga teachers, surfing instructors and massage therapists, among others, Via Yoga currently offers many retreats throughout the year where participants not only experience high-level yoga instruction but are offered the chance to learn to surf in a location which is known as a great place for beginners.

The yoga retreat was filled with enthusiastic yoga practitioners who complimented the classes with a wide range of different experience levels. They were a magnetic group that radiated a positive vibe, proof of which by the residents of Sayulita that joined the group in the yoga classes.

Kemp and King have chosen a lovely location in Sayulita, Mexico, with its fresh sea air gently blowing in from the Pacific, lush vegetation, wonderful accommodations and breathtaking views. It is a prime location to purify one's mind, body and soul.

Via Yoga History

The inception of Via Yoga occurred when Kelly Kemp, one of Michelle King's yoga students, suggested starting a business partnership based on their mutual love for yoga and exploring higher levels of yoga through practice in healthy environments. Since then the pair has been constantly developing and refining their vision which has blossomed into an annual series of rejuvenating weeklong yoga surfing retreats.

Michelle King, originally from Wisconsin, has been a Seattle resident for the past 12 years and a licensed a massage therapist for 11 years. Michelle, a dedicated yoga practitioner for over 10 years, practicing at least five times a week, has been teaching yoga for six years. She is not only a creative businesswoman but also an inspiring and excellent yoga teacher.

Trip Specifics

The breakdown of the trip consists of six days of high-level yoga instruction with a host of highly skilled, internationally known teachers at a beautiful ocean-front resort. Included are daily breakfasts, three group dinners at Villa Amor, a one-hour in-room private massage, a surfing and snorkeling excursion to Punta Mita with lunch, and round trip transportation from the airport to Villa Amor.

King and Kemp keep the groups small--usually no more than 22 people for yoga-only retreats and 15 people for the yoga & surfing retreats. The smaller group sizes provide a number of benefits. King comments, *"We like to keep our retreats smaller and more intimate so every student has access to the teacher and doesn't get lost in a big crowd of*

students.” The smaller groups also allow for special dietary needs to be addressed more attentively and create a community where everyone has time to connect and become comfortable with each other. The subsequent comfort level loosens people up enhancing the yoga experience.

The region contains a priceless natural wonder in its rich biodiversity from the rainforest to the wealth of marine life. Everywhere you look, Sayulita teems with life, from the tropical birds, monkeys, butterflies and dolphins to the warm, welcoming people.

Included is a day trip to Punta Mita. A boat takes you to the Marietas Islands, a marine sanctuary, where visitors can see the rare blue-footed booby, snorkel with sea turtles and frequently spot dolphins leaping out of the ocean. Punta Mita’s wave break is enjoyed by novice and experienced surfers alike.

Yoga

The yoga portion of the trip is designed as a well-balanced mix of vigorous workouts with ample recovery time with two 90-minute classes per day. The classes are scheduled at perfect times in the day with the first class beginning at 8:00 AM, early enough to start one’s day with a centering yoga class but not uncomfortably early. As Michelle succinctly put it, “*You are on vacation, after all.*” The afternoon class at 4:00 PM catches you right after your siesta, beach time or whatever adventures you chose for that given day. The late afternoon class is well timed because in most cases lunch has been fully digested and you are able to fully benefit from the practice.

Deep levels of relaxation are achieved through the healing effects of the ocean, the invigorating yoga and the extremely beautiful environment. The Via Yoga retreats attract a diverse group of teachers that bring not only high-level yoga instruction but a host of other skills like surfing expertise and meditation techniques. Usually the instructors have a specialty and Ashtanga, Vinyasa, Jivamukti, Hatha and Ananda styles, plus Pranayama and Tibetan Buddhist meditation will be taught at upcoming retreats.

Surfing

The environment in Sayulita is great for beginner surfers as well as for experts. There is the break that forms a good distance off shore and takes shape as it moves over the coral reef. There is another smaller, shorter break that forms off to the side and out of the way of the big Kahunas that breaks on a soft sandy bottom, which is the perfect spot for those just learning how to surf.

Villa Amor and Via Yoga provide a nice variety of complimentary long, short and soft-top surfboards. There are also private surf lessons available from instructors provided by Via Yoga and by instructors just down the beach.

Andrea Arriaga, an incredibly talented surfer and experienced yoga teacher from Ventura, California, is currently residing full time in Sayulita and is just one of the highly skilled Via Yoga surf instructors. Cash Struxness and Tonia Appledorn are also Via Yoga

surf instructors. Also available are the crew from Tigre surf school just down the beach from Villa Amor.

Villa Amor

Villa Amor employs local artists and fine craftsmen to construct and maintain the 26 open-air spacious villas built into a lush mountainside with breathtaking views of the ocean and surrounding mountains. All villas are very comfortable and are beautifully furnished with private patios. *Outside Traveler* and *GQ* magazines rated Villa Amor as one of the top destinations. In spite of the press, Villa Amor maintained its integrity as a quiet, out of the way, relaxing paradise.

Included in the fee for the retreat are truly incredible accommodations where guests have the option of an absolutely stunning, large open-air room or a more traditional room with louver doors opening to a porch overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Most villas are equipped with a kitchenette, and in every room there are refrigerators, private bathrooms, ceiling fans, coffee makers with fresh locally grown coffee and drinking water.

Food

A typical day starts out with an outdoor breakfast buffet at a spot nestled in a hillside overlooking Sayulita Bay which opens up to the Pacific Ocean. Breakfast consists of fresh fruits, yogurt, granola and a rotating menu of different traditional Mexican egg dishes. With the generous breakfast, included lunch and dinners it is tough to find the appetite to fit in lunch at the truly amazing selection of restaurants in Sayulita. Vegan and vegetarian options are available for all meals at Villa Amor and at most restaurants. There are also kitchenettes in the rooms if you wish to create something from the abundant local produce. The three excellent dinners provided in the price of the trip are prepared and served by the expert wait staff and gourmet chefs at Villa Amor.

Sayulita

The town of Sayulita is a charming small town that maintains its cultural and native heritage and traditions while catering to visitors with a host of excellent restaurants from high-end Mexican, Thai and Italian cuisine to traditional regional Mexican cuisine from upscale establishments to local spots with shockingly low prices. One week is truly not enough time to even fully explore the rich and wonderful restaurants that Sayulita has to offer, especially with the incredible daily breakfast at Villa Amor and the four included meals that are absolutely top shelf. Via Yoga works closely with the gourmet chefs to accommodate every dietary need. The town offers a host of amenities like Internet cafes while still maintaining the integrity of a small quaint Mexican seaside village. There is also a weekly open-air market where traditional clothing, pottery and jewelry are sold by local artisans.

Individual Activities

The accommodating folks at Villa Amor provide sea kayaks, snorkeling equipment, bicycles and bike maps for those who wish to explore the surrounding coastline. Horseback riding can also be arranged at a reasonable \$20 per hour. There are also great opportunities for hiking in the nearby rainforests. Day trips can also be arranged to

nearby towns including Puerto Vallarta, with public bus transportation going back and forth from Puerto Vallarta to Sayulita several times a day. Tennis, golf, Spanish lessons and spa services are also available

Sayulita offers great opportunities for naturalists, with an abundance of wildlife for the ornithologist, entomologists, botanists, ichthyologists and marine biologists. On the beach in the evenings, Mother Nature provides a great show for anyone interested in astronomy with a truly incredibly clear view of our solar system.

This was a trip that I will never forget because it gave so much back, and I am sure I will return many times throughout my life. Nothing can match the wonderful life force that is awakened in this environment fueled by one's reconnection with the earth, the sea and the natural world. At night the stars fill the sky, and one is drawn out to the deepest regions of the cosmos only to return more grounded and centered than before. Yoga students who are lucky enough to experience this truly spiritual yoga retreat open themselves up to an external exploration that is only matched by the internal levels of self-exploration that can be achieved through such personal expert yogic guidance in one of the healthiest and ideal settings one can imagine.

In 2006 Via Yoga hosted 11 retreats at Villa Amor and will probably host 12 in 2007. Via Yoga also added a second ultra-luxury location, Las Alamandas, in Jalisco, Mexico. King comments, *"Ultimately we would like to do up to 20 vacations a year, but not all in Mexico. We are currently looking for new locations in Mexico but also in Europe and Southeast Asia."*

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