

ZIHUA SPLASH!

Above: Ali back-rolls off the dive-boat.

Below: The spotted pattern of a guineafowl puffer against a watery-green backdrop.



ALI POSTMA spent a week on Mexico's southern Pacific coast – less of a megafauna destination than the north but distinctive in its own right. Here's a day in the life at Zihua – additional photography by **JOEY POSTMA**

stayed true to its maritime traditions.

With its beachy-keen atmosphere and fresh-off-the-boat seafood cuisine, this west coast haven lives and breathes the ocean. It's a refreshing change from quintessential touristic spots, and even more so for a diver.

Fewer than 24 hours after touching down at the quaint Ixtapa / Zihuatanejo international airport, my husband Joey and I were on a dive-boat heading out into the topsy-turvy Pacific ocean.

We had come to Zihua for some diving and, by golly, we wouldn't waste a second.

As we puttered out from the harbour past colourful fishing-boats anchored on floating buoys, I was able to take in my exotic new surroundings.

The crescent-shaped landscape of Zihua and its environs consisted of leafy trees and green hilly jungle, dotted with elaborately constructed properties.

I F YOU ASKED MR TO PINPOINT

Mexico's famous diving locations on a map, I could do it in a heartbeat. As an avid scuba-diver, hot commodity destinations such as Cozumel island and the Baja Peninsula are very familiar territory.

The small municipality of Zihuatanejo on the other hand – that is a whole different story.

It's nestled on the ocean-front, along the unstable coast of Guerrero, and few travellers arrive there by chance.

For most of its existence, the quiet fishing town of Zihua, as it's known, has





Clockwise from above: Silvery grunt swimming in unison; a coral hawkfish; a blenny burrowed into the coral; jewel moray eel in its rock crevice.

Below from left: Camouflaged scorpionfish on the seabed; *Tambja abdere* nudibranch; black-nosed butterflyfish.



The buildings cascaded down along the rugged mountainside, framed by a series of golden-sand beaches that were just as I had seen described online - peaceful, protected and brimming with blue water.

But my picture-perfect moment was short-lived. As we exited the shelter of Zihua's protected bay, my aspirations for postcard-worthy water as found on the Caribbean coast, was shattered.

Here, white-capped rollers rocked our boat in a disturbing manner and the water looked so dense with plankton that it showed in hues of emerald-green and brown.

It had me seriously questioning how good our diving experience would be.

AFTER THE BUMPY ride to the dive-site Morros de Chato, the captain positioned the boat in a relatively sheltered location before signalling us to complete our preparations.

I back-rolled in as Joey, seated across the boat, did the same. The divemaster gave our group of five the OK sign and we slipped beneath the waves.

I had trouble getting my bearings. Up, down, swoosh! Up, down, swoosh! I had hoped to leave the choppy swell at the

surface but the ocean had other plans.

It was as if we had landed in a rhythmically pounding washing-machine.

It was a process, adapting from recent diving excursions in Bonaire to the savage and unpredictable Pacific.

Then again, Bonaire has a reputation for some of the easiest and calmest diving conditions in the Caribbean.

My body felt clunky and awkward, between the camera gear strapped across my chest and the tank on my back, and I found myself constantly fidgeting with my buoyancy in an effort to avoid bashing into fellow-divers before we distanced ourselves towards the back of the group.

As we sank deeper along the rocky escarpment of Morros de Chato the pounding wave action lessened and relieved my exasperated mood. I had been too distracted to take in the fact that the water was vibrant with life.

The temptation to start shooting was great, but if there's one thing I've learned about diving in new environments, it's that sometimes it's best to sit back and let Nature unfold before your eyes.

Black-nosed butterflyfish swirled before my mask, their zesty yellow coloration a nice contrast against the green water.

They fluttered from one rock to the next, picking away at the algae.

There were countless grunt, chromis and even the occasional jack.

My favourites, however, were the guineafowl puffers, with their navy-blue colouring and intricate white-spotted patterns. It made me chuckle to watch their pudgy bodies as they appeared to bounce around in the current.

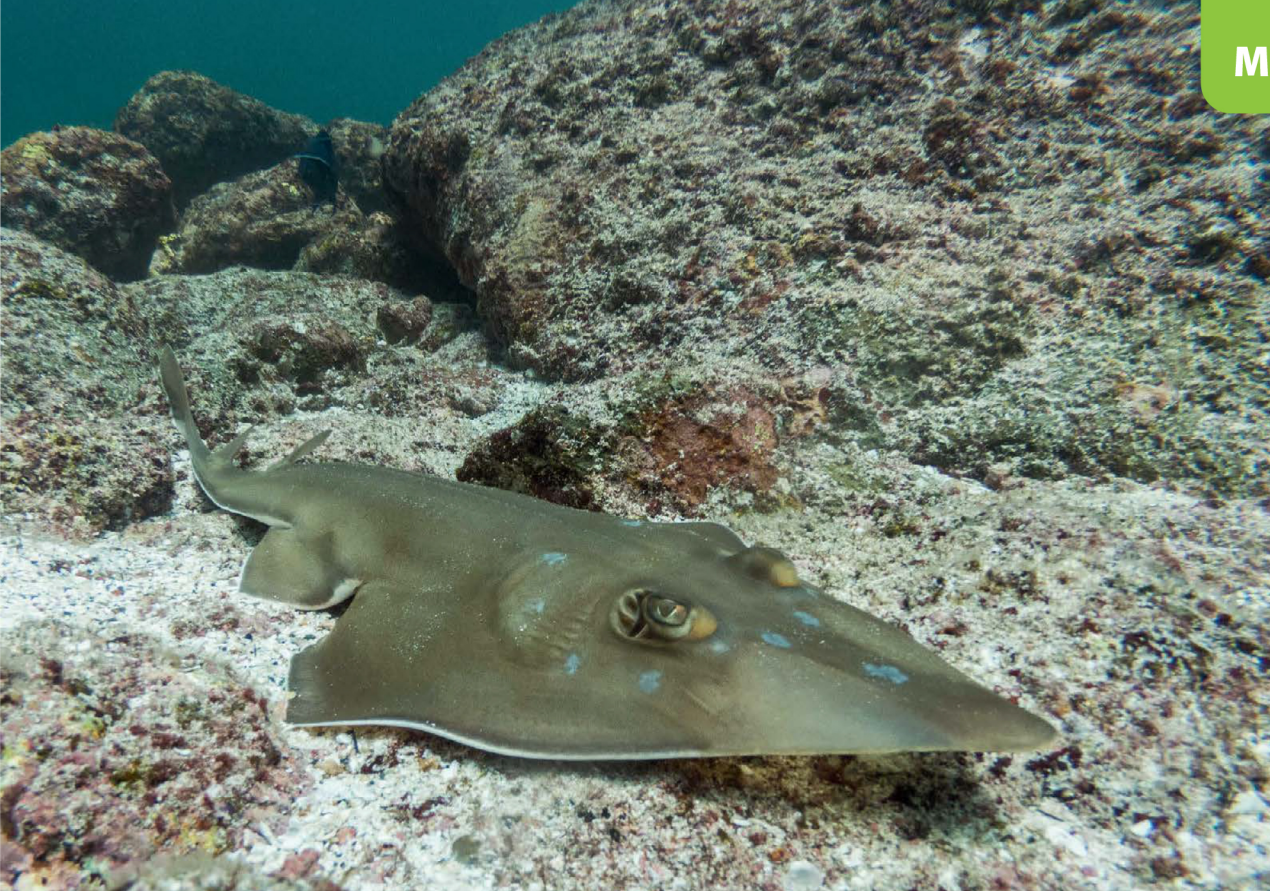
As I enjoyed the fish-filled spectacle a slither of movement caught my eye as a moray eel disappeared behind a rock.

I turned my attention to what I had thought to be a barren rocky bottom only to discover that it too teemed with things to see. Beautiful constellations of seastars, unlike any species I had ever seen, littered the seafloor.

A camouflaged scorpionfish was another bottom-dweller that was a delight to find. Convinced that they are masters of disguise, they have no fear of divers, so I was able to get close to capture a shot of its white and pink fringes and pouty lips.

What had begun as a formidable adventure in rough water had turned into one of the more species-rich dives I had experienced. I was a little crestfallen when it was time to ascend.





On our second dive at Solitary Rock many of the species we had seen on the previous dive met us at the bottom.

Silly deflated pufferfish, serious-looking snapper and bashful Moorish idols – the ocean seemed to have an intelligence of its own and the fish were plentiful.

Halfway through the dive I spied something glittering in the distance. Was it the sun reflecting oddly on the surface of the water? We followed Solitary Rock's craggy escarpment to investigate further.

Finning closer to the shining, a large school of chere-chere grunt materialised, almost as if dancing in the swell.

The ball of several hundred fish moved over the uneven seabed and across the dive-site's rocky wall. Where

the shimmering fish-wall moved, the rest of the landscape just seemed to disappear.

Out of the blue the movement in unison of the chere-chere grunt was interrupted by the graceful flapping of a spotted eagle ray. With its unexpected arrival the grunt began swimming in disarray while attempting to flock together for protection. It was scaly chaos.

AS IF THE DIVE wasn't exciting enough in the shallows two strange-looking elasmobranchs revealed themselves. I had never laid eyes on a guitarfish before, an animal that looks to have the body of a shark and the flattened head of a sting ray.

Watching as they rested on the bottom, we enjoyed several

minutes close to these strange-looking creatures. But they dispersed like bullets when they realised that intruders had approached.

Speeding back to the harbour we caught glimpses of water-spouts in the distance. Humpback-whale season was just coming to an end in Zihua.

We were fortunate enough to catch sight of a few stragglers returning north to the cold waters of Alaska for the summer.

Perhaps on my next visit to the Pacific coast of Mexico, I'll get lucky and catch a glimpse of one under water, but for now Zihuatanejo has given me everything I could want in a dive destination; photogenic macro life, new underwater sightings and a longing to return soon. **█**

FACTFILE

GETTING THERE ▶▶ Flights to Ixtapa / Zihuatanejo international airport.

DIVING ▶▶ : Dive Zihuatanejo, divezihuatanejo.com. All diving is by boat.

ACCOMMODATION ▶▶ Zihua offers a range of hotels, villas, resorts and Airbnbs depending on budget.

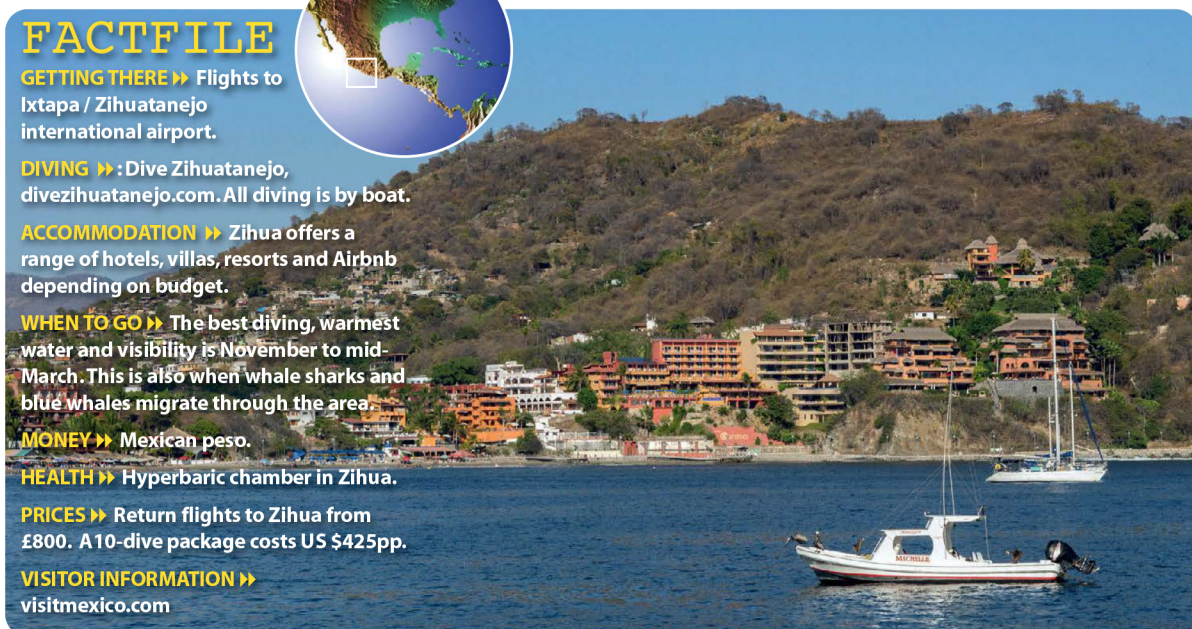
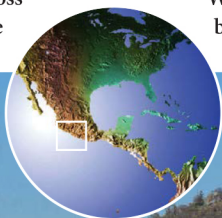
WHEN TO GO ▶▶ The best diving, warmest water and visibility is November to mid-March. This is also when whale sharks and blue whales migrate through the area.

MONEY ▶▶ Mexican peso.

HEALTH ▶▶ Hyperbaric chamber in Zihua.

PRICES ▶▶ Return flights to Zihua from £800. A 10-dive package costs US \$425pp.

VISITOR INFORMATION ▶▶ visitmexico.com



Above left: A speckled guitarfish rests on the seabed.

Left: A fishing boat moored in the protected bay of Zihuatanejo.

Below: Joey hangs off the boat post-dive.

