Tecolutla: Mexico's By-passed "Acapulco East"

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When one thinks of tropical Mexican beaches, especially during the cold months of winter, the names Acapulco, Cancun, Puerto Vallarta, Manzanillo, and perhaps Mazatlan come to mind. These international resort enclaves—collectively dubbed "Club Mex" by Luis Casagrande in a 1987 article in FOCUS—include the resort complexes of Ixtapa, La Paz, and Puerto Escondido. The beach resorts are popular tourist destinations not only for international tourists—mostly North American and European winter migrants—but also for middle- and upper-class Mexicans who flock to the beaches during summer holidays (mostly August), Christmas, and especially Holy Week (Semana Santa), the week preceding Easter.

Conspicuously absent from most discussions of Mexican seaside resorts are beaches lining the Gulf of Mexico. International tourists and Mexicans alike overwhelmingly prefer the Pacific and Caribbean resorts. A 1986 survey of Mexican students enrolled at Louisiana State University indicated that the Pacific Coast is preferred for beach vacations by nine out of ten respondents, of which 75% specifically cited Acapulco as the main resort to visit. When the Mexican government commissioned a study on the feasibility of an East Coast resort to counterbalance the West Coast tourist industry, the resultant 1968 Banco de Mexico report found the beaches along the Gulf of Mexico to be "physically unsuitable for major tourism development" because of a combination of climatic, water quality, and beach quality factors.

Although the Mexican Gulf Coast presently ranks low among the status-conscious international jet set and tourism developers, historically this was not the case. One locale in particular—Tecolutla in the state of Veracruz—was once projected to be an East Coast equivalent of Acapulco. Yet despite substantial infrastructural development in the 1940s, Tecolutla has not evolved into an international resort like its Pacific counterpart. The art deco beach hotel architecture and the family orientation convey an image of a resort frozen in time. In spite of little apparent change since initial development, Tecolutla nonetheless represents the core of a significant—and increasingly popular—locus of domestic seaside recreation on the Mexican Gulf Coast.

The art deco architectural styles, ultra-modern at the time, seem to have been adopted from styles prevalent in Florida during the period.

Seaside tourism, past and present

The evolution and diffusion of beach resorts is a classic study in cultural geography. Often traced to the hydrotherapeutic and thalassotherapeutic pursuits of the ancient Greeks and Romans, the
modern origins of sea bathing lie in the spa tradition of post-Middle Ages England. Dozens of spa towns (including Bath) dotted 16th and 17th century England, and at one of these — Scarborough — natural springs emptied onto the beach at the base of a cliff. By the early 1700s, the spa experience had become augmented by sea bathing at Scarborough, and a new era was born. Dozens of seaside resorts were established in Great Britain beginning in the mid-1700s, and the introduction of rail travel in the early 1800s accelerated the process. The seaside resort phenomenon soon diffused to Europe, the Americas, and much of the rest of the world. The popularity of 19th and 20th century beach recreation can be correlated with periods of economic prosperity, including the Gay Nineties (1890s), Roaring Twenties, 1950s and 1980s. Demand for beach recreation was high during these prosperous periods, each of which was characterized by distinctive fads and fashions among both tourists and resorts. From the rolling bathhouses, Victorian swimwear, and grand hotels of the 1890s ... to the introduction of sunbathing in the 1920s ... to the sprawling beach subdivisions of the 1950s ... to the drive-in daiquiri stands and self-contained highrise condominium complexes of the 1980s, both tourists and tourist destinations have undergone many changes. (Several recent ...
articles in FOCUS examine tourism and tourist destinations.) Since popular trends in beach recreation ultimately became expressed upon the cultural landscape, visits to seaside resorts often reveal vestiges of previous styles of material culture.

**Origins of the seaside tradition in Mexico**

Coastal recreational development in Mexico has historically been related to three major factors: 1) national and/or international economic prosperity, 2) international trends in resort development, and 3) infrastructural development. Construction of a railroad to Progreso, Yucatan in the 1880s facilitated not only the export of henequen fiber but also the mobility of residents of Merida to frequent the beach. The Yucatan elite soon developed a beachfront landscape of ornate summer homes, somewhat similar to patterns newly established in places such as the New Jersey Shore and the French Riviera. Most of Mexico’s beaches were far removed from the major population centers, however, and Gilded Age seaside recreation remained relatively insignificant.

The first major stimulus for the popularization of sea bathing and resort development came in the post-Revolution Roaring Twenties. Fishing towns and commercial ports such as Ensenada, Puerto Vallarta, and Acapulco received increasing numbers of visitors, and small but elaborate beach hotels were built to accommodate them. Acapulco, the main Pacific port since early colonial days, was connected to the capital by a primitive wagon road which was graded into a highway in 1927. Although the 400 km (250 mi) trip took 24 hours in a private automobile, the sleepy colonial port enjoyed its first tourism boom. Entrepreneurs quickly recognized the profits that the coastal tourism industry offered, and attentions shifted to the Gulf of Mexico coast.

The port of Veracruz has been the Atlantic gateway to Mexico since Cortez landed there in 1519, and in 1827 Mexico’s first railway linked the port with Mexico City. However, the steamy malarial setting within Mexico’s humid eastern lowlands prevented the city from being any more than an entrepot port city until the popularization of sea-bathing in the 1920s. Traditionally, the Veracruz elite seasonally fled to cool “hill stations” in the Sierra Madre (such as Jalapa, the capital of the state of Veracruz), where they were often joined by the vacationing elite of Mexico City. Following the 1927 boom in Acapulco, the first major resort hotel along the Gulf Coast — the Hotel Mocambo — was built a few miles south of Veracruz City at what has now become the recreation center of Mocambo Beach.

Following initial successes in establishing small but expanding coastal tourism industries at Acapulco and Playa Mocambo, entrepreneurs scouted out other potential sites for development. For a number of reasons — including attractive physical setting, proximity to the recreational hinterland of Mexico City, and rapidly improving transportation links — the small fishing port of Tecolutla was earmarked for tourism development, and on a scale to rival Acapulco.

**Recreational development of Tecolutla**

Tecolutla, a Nahua tl toponym meaning “settlement where owls are found”, has a long history as a fishing village. Located on a series of old beach ridges immediately north (updrift) of the mouth of the Rio Tecolutla, the settlement was within the territory of the Totonac civilization. The Totonacs, whose capital was at El Tajin (today the most extensive and touristically popular archeological site along the Mexican Gulf Coast), derived much of their seafood and salt from Tecolutla. Based on archeological evidence from coastal plain sites just inland from Tecolutla, the establishment of the fishing outpost is dated at between the sixth and ninth centuries A.D.

The primary role of seafood supplier was maintained throughout the colonial period and into the present century as well. A secondary function as a port developed in response to the introduction of commercial agriculture in the adjacent fertile coastal plain. At the turn of the century, coconuts were introduced as viable commercial crops that could grow upon the sandy beach ridges. Fishing remained the prime industry however, and in the 1930s Tecolutla’s economy was stimulated by a jumbo shrimp boom, felt across the entire Gulf of Mexico. To accommodate international fishermen (mostly Cubans) who came to the area during the shrimp boom, the first hotel in town — the Hotel Roma — was built on the central plaza. The building still stands as a private residence.

Recreational development at Tecolutla was stimulated in large part by improved transportation links with the rest of Mexico. In 1924, a graded road opened between Papan­tla and Tecolutla, from whence ferry connections could be made to the
coastal settlements as far south as Nautla and on up the Rio Nautla to Martinez de la Torre. In the early 1940s, the ferry routes were replaced by highways, and a motor road connecting the oil boom town of Poza Rica with the interior highlands was opened. By 1944, Tecolutla was not only an important ferry crossing site at Gutierrez Zamora — rather than through the more optimal road crossing site at Gutierrez Zamora — was actually contingent upon construction of beach hotels.

**The most intense levels of recreational beach usage occur during Holy Week.**

With new highways in place, recreational development along the Tecolutla beachfront proceeded. Most of this development was in the form of three large hotels (Hotel Tecolutla with 72 rooms, Hotel Marisol with 52, and Hotel Playa with 24), all of which were completed by 1948. The art deco architectural styles, ultra-modern at the time, seem to have been adapted from styles prevalent in Florida during the period. Virtually overnight, Tecolutla was transformed into the major resort along Mexico’s Gulf Coast. In addition to the three major hotels, limited summer home construction began. The oldest summer homes in Tecolutla date to the late 1940s, and all were beachfront-oriented, flanking the hotel zone. In 1950, a fraccionamiento (beach subdivision) was platted northwest of the town, partly within a former cocal (coconut grove). A sand road network was laid out, and the earliest air photos of Tecolutla (1951) show a few houses constructed, several within the shady cocal and several seaward of it. A short stretch of beachfront road was designated for commercial development.

In spite of the extensive recreational development, the anticipated boom at Tecolutla never materialized. This is attributed to a variety of reasons, including unreliable climate, improved access to more desirable Acapulco, economic downswings, and replacement of the Tecolutla ferry with a bridge at Gutierrez Zamora. In spite of much advertising in Mexico City (the Hotel Tecolutla’s logo is still “la playa de la capital”), few tourists came to the Gulf Coast beaches. Although seafood and nice beaches remained attractions, prevailing summer thundershowers, threats of tropical storms, and high frequency of nortes (blasts of cold Arctic air) from late fall until early spring were deterrents to the popularization of Tecolutla. The premature overbuilding of hotel rooms quickly became apparent, and several investors sold out their shares in the hotels. In 1952, a devaluation of the Mexican peso put Tecolutla into further hibernation. At about the same time, the developer of the fraccionamiento died and promotion of lots was halted. While Tecolutla was stagnating in the mid-1950s, so soon after its initial infrastructural development, Acapulco was entering its second major boom phase, stimulated by construction of a new paved highway which cut travel time to five or six hours. Tecolutla was the setting for an early Brigitte Bardot film in the late 1950s, but even then that publicity did not offset the generally low appeal of the resort.

Tecolutla’s location on the coastal highway and its role as point of ferry crossing insured at least a captive highway clientele during the 1950s and 1960s. At the point of ferry embarkation, a cluster of small seafood restaurants sprang up to serve travelers waiting for the ferry. This source of tourists was perhaps more important than beach recreationists during this period, although occupancy rates at the main beach hotels did increase. In 1962, the coastal highway southward from Tecolutla was extended to the city of Veracruz, and automobile traffic and recreationists increased. By the mid-1960s, it became evident that a bridge across the Rio Tecolutla was needed, and the city of Gutierrez Zamora 10 km (6 mi) upriver from Tecolutla was selected as the crossing site. Business interests in Tecolutla did not enjoy the prospect of seeing the fledgling resort decline further, and allegedly bribes were paid to delay completion and opening of the new bridge. When an overloaded ferry sank at Tecolutla in 1970, the bridge was hastily opened, however, and Tecolutla returned to its former status as an end-of-the-road backwater.

**Resort morphology: the shape of a tourist destination**

Comparison of Tecolutla’s urban morphology at the onset of tourism development with the present reveals that except for limited expansion and urban infilling, few changes have taken place. Infrastructural tourism development in the late 1940s and early 1950s stimulated outward expansion from a plaza-centered settlement core area toward the beachfront and laterally along the beachfront toward the cocal, toward the river, and along the highway.

The pre-tourism cultural landscape at the mouth of the Rio Tecolutla consisted of a small, compact fishing village nestled in the higher beach ridges equidistant from river and beach. Although the beach was utilized for surfing fishing, the focus of the village was toward the river where docking facilities housed a small fishing fleet that exploited local fish and shellfish resources. The river focus became strengthened, first by the jumbo shrimp boom in the 1930s which brought foreign shrimpers, and then by the 1944 coastal highway opening which made Tecolutla a ferry crossing point. Vendors and small restauranteurs specializing in seafood created a minor commercial district catering to highway travellers and the few tourists who came to Tecolutla as a specific destination. Although the ferry has not operated since 1970, a landscaped boulevard runs to the river’s edge from the core of the town. At the road terminus, a bustling commercial area of seafood restaurants caters to tourists. Contemporaneous with the provision of highway access was the hotel boom that focused attention upon the beachfront. The three hotels, plus a sprinkling of summer homes, were built close to the core of the town and up to the vegetation line fronting the beach, including out to the spit. This created a second focus for tourists, as a small recreational business district (RBD) — comprising restaurants, bars, and beach supply

4 Focus
Settlement evolution of Tecolutla, from pre-1940 days to the mid-1980s.

A secondary beachfront zone was the summer home subdivision that occupies a former "cocal" northwest of town. This vacation home colony, with separate road access, was originally envisioned as a quiet beach gateway, separate from the town of Tecolutla. In spite of initial platting in 1950, however, not until the 1970s did summer home construction increase significantly. By that time, road links with Tecolutla along the beachfront had been established, and the community was expanding in the direction of the "fraccionamiento." That zone between the town and the beach subdivision is presently being filled in, and home owners are a mixture of the more affluent local residents plus seasonal recreationists, mainly from Mexico City. Interestingly, local residents prefer to be shielded from direct exposure to the beach while recreationists prefer the sensory linkages to the sea. The "fraccionamiento" has today become a distal residential zone of Tecolutla. A secondary RBD, composed of several seafood restaurants and bathhouses, has developed along its beachfront, and modest overnight accommodations are now available in this zone as well.

The combination of tourism and local population growth accounts for the evolution of the present settlement morphology of Tecolutla. Tecolutla's beachfront expansion has resulted largely from emplacement of tourism infrastructure, e.g. the hotels and the "fraccionamiento," and subsequent urban filling. The secondary recreational focus upon the riverfront, site of the small port facility and base of the fishing fleet, developed during the ferry crossing period of 1944 to 1970. With increased tourism came increased opportunity for employment in the hotel, service, and fishing sectors. Much of the settlement's growth, especially toward the river, is attributed to growth in permanent population. Growth related directly to tourism includes the commercial and summer home development situated primarily along the beachfront.

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Unlike many seaside resorts, Tecolutla has not yet experienced any landuse intensification in the form of replacement of low-density construction with high-density construction. Recreational development is still centered around the three original beachfront hotels and associated resort infrastructure (restaurants, bars, changing quarters, etc.), and vacation housing consists of single-family dwellings located mostly in the subdivision northwest of town. Although the core of Tecolutla's resort landscape is now over forty years old, the hotels are relatively well maintained, and no plans for major new development or redevelopment exist at present. Sufficient space is available for areal expansion of existing landuse without intensification or encroachment into back-barrier wetlands.
Although Tecolutla is the most developed resort along this portion of the Veracruz coast, newer beachfront construction is taking place along the stretch of coast between La Guadalupé and Casitas, where the main highway parallels the shoreline. This coastal strip is characterized by large private summer estates, camping facilities, and hotels. Accommodations are available in all but one of the small towns within this strip, and large, modern hotels are found in El Palmar, La Vigüeta, Playa Paraiso, and Playa Oriente.

The Semana Santa phenomenon

In Mexico, the seasons for beach visitation coincide with the major vacation periods. Late summer is the most prolonged period of seaside recreation, and Christmas holidays are often spent at the beach by students and families. The most intense levels of recreational beach usage occur during Holy Week, when most Mexican workers generally receive half, if not all, of the week as paid national holidays. A tradition of Easter at the beach is traced back at least to the late 1920s in Mexico.

In a poll of Mexican students at LSU, a question asked whether there existed a south-of-the-border equivalent of the Spring Break phenomenon. Two-thirds responded affirmatively and half of those cited Semana Santa. But, unlike in the United States, where Spring Break is oriented dominantly to college students, the Semana Santa phenomenon is geared toward entire families. In a pattern somewhat reminiscent of North American beach recreation during the 1950s, Mexicans (especially from the national core in the interior) pack the family sedan and head off to the coast for a week of shallow-water bathing, excessive consumption of seafood and alcohol, and general socializing and partying well into the night. Lodging facilities are booked full, and tent-camping is quite popular — both at developed resorts and at relatively isolated beaches.

With the high inflation rates currently plaging middle class Mexicans, the Gulf Coast resorts such as Tecolutla are increasingly frequented by Mexicans disenchanted with the over-developed and over-priced Pacific Coast resorts. During the Semana Santa holidays, places such as Tecolutla become filled to capacity, and estimates range upwards of 100,000 visitors. In response to this recent upsurge in popularity, several new lodging facilities were opened. By the latter 1980s, 300 new hotel rooms had been added to the original 150, mostly in modest hotels and pensiones which achieve maximum occupancy only during major holidays. Also, in spite of a permanent population of about 5,000, Tecolutla boasts of nearly fifty eating establishments.

Finally a popular destination

Prior to the modern pattern of tourism development in Mexico, in which a Club Mex enclave such as Cancun or Zihuatanejo is created in large part through direct government investment (mostly through FONATUR, the official federal tourism development agency), resort development lay in the hands of private entrepreneurs. When the fishing village of Tecolutla was foreseen as being the closest beach to Mexico’s primate city and national capital in terms of both distance and travel time, investors felt a viable rival to Acapulco could be created. Unfortunately for the investors, the visions of “Acapulco East” were not realized. With improvements to the highway from Mexico City to the Pacific Coast, the proverbial nails were driven into Tecolutla’s tourism coffin, and the resort remained standing — as it still does today — as a landscape vestige of an earlier era of seaside recreation.

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Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Pacific and Caribbean coasts have been most affected by both domestic as well as international tourism, but even the climatically less amenable and aesthetically less attractive Gulf Coast is not immune to recreational pressures. As middle-class Mexicans feel the effects of a less stable economy through a lowered buying power of their pesos, it is quite likely that the Gulf Coast will become the destination of an increasing proportion of national tourists. The resort of Tecolutla, bypassed by previous tourism booms, is finally becoming a popular beach destination, mostly as a result of increased domestic tourism. Fluctuations in the world price of oil and in the stability of the Mexican peso may well influence tourism growth rates along the Gulf Coast. Even assuming steady increases in tourist arrivals, Tecolutla will still remain a minor seaside resort in comparison to Cancun or the Pacific Coast resorts.

Further Readings


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