

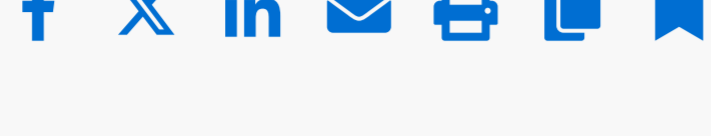
TRAVEL

# Rustic boating is mainly for the birds in La Tovara National Park

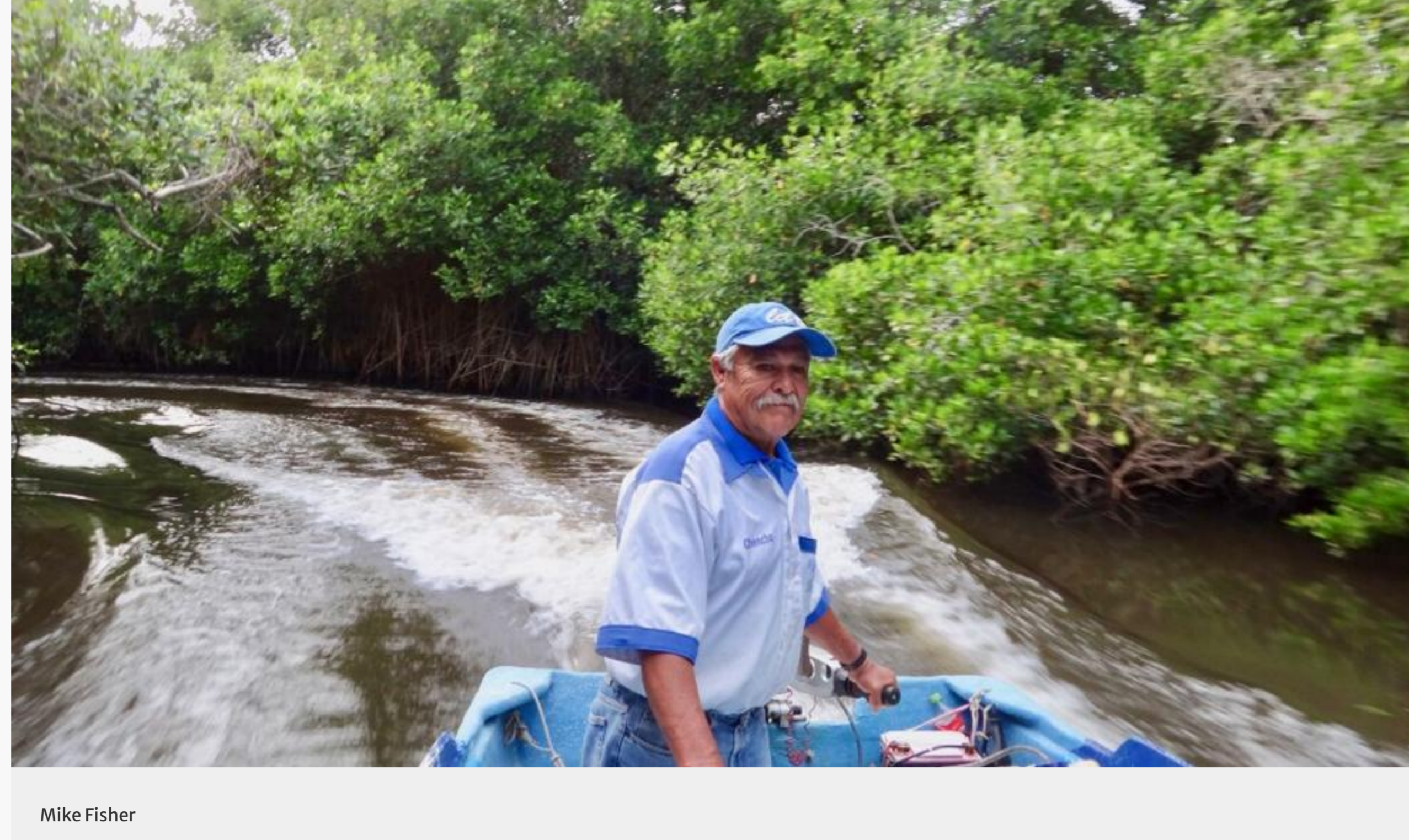
Explore the wildlife and try not to get eaten alive along the Riviera Nayarit stretch of Mexico's Pacific coastline.

By Mike Fisher Special to the Star

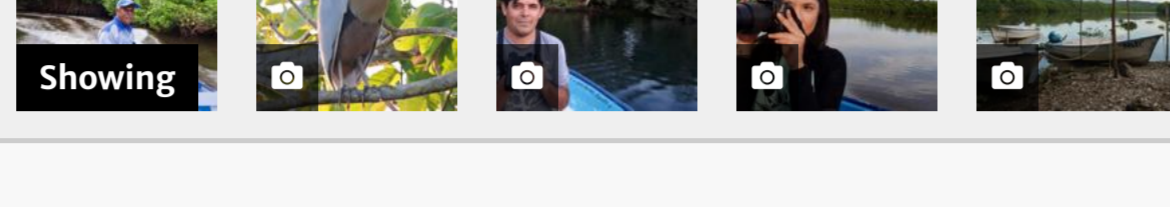
Friday, January 5, 2018 | 4 min to read



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Mike Fisher  
Boat captain Jose Inocencio Banuelos, nickname Chencho, has been piloting tourists on wildlife safaris along the waterways of La Tovara National Park near San Blas, Mexico for years.



SAN BLAS, MEXICO—"Look, do you see it?" says our wildlife guide at La Tovara National Park, pointing up and into the lattice-work of mangrove branches. We can't — until suddenly, we can. It's a boat-billed heron peering down peevishly at us, a small ruff of orange feathers tucked like a dinner napkin above its ample belly.

Maybe we've interrupted its meal — it cocks its black and white head and regards us, not happily, making a clacking noise. We all spring from our seats with our cameras pointed upward. I start to fall, windmilling for balance, then catch myself from toppling out of the low-slung boat, smashing my elbow into the guy beside me.

Hungry crocodiles prowl these waters and I'd make a tasty snack. Who says birding is for wussies? Getting the right shot can be a contact sport.

ARTICLE CONTINUES BELOW

"In the winter time the boat-billed heron is hard to see," says Francisco Garcia of [Safaris San Blas](#), who guides hundreds of birders annually along the serpentine water channels that slice through thickets of mangroves in the protected 650-hectare park. "Birders from around the world come for it and the other 250 species of birds that are native to this area."

We're a five-minute drive outside the colonial town of San Blas, 160 kilometres north of Puerto Vallarta. It's just one of the alluring towns and villages along the stunning 320-km stretch of coastline called Riviera Nayarit.

The park is considered the top spot for birding in Mexico. Fresh water from the mountains mixes with salt water to form an estuary that is home to thousands of species of flora and fauna. It's the perfect feeding ground for birds that teem among the mangroves below a popular migratory flight path.

"A lot of people tell me, man, this is like Disneyland," says Garcia, and right then someone in our 4.3-metre-long boat — it's called a panga — shouts and points. A crocodile submerges, its armoured head and body slipping into darkness like a sleepy razor-toothed submarine.

Our boat hull slaps on the water as we nose toward the mangroves and then skitters to a hull as we glide, seven of us sitting in silence, cameras poised. The crocodile is gone, but a wood stork flies like a white arrow across the bow and sweeps upstream with its wide wings until it can't be seen.

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We can smell the slight stink of organic matter decomposing as the mangroves shed their leaves, feeding a food chain that includes mangrove oysters that cling to the branch bottoms, looking like clusters of fat white and green butterflies.

"Hey, is that a hawk?" asks one of the birders, her camera tracking the bird swooping overhead.

"No, it's a turkey vulture," says Garcia, who begins to list the kind of birds we've been spotting — herons, great kiskadees, aningas, tropical cormorants and, yes, common black hawks, among them.

Expect to see anywhere from 50 to 100 birds on this three-hour tour, which covers a 24-km loop. Garcia, who has been leading these excursions for eight years, said he holds a record in the "Big Day" Christmastime 24-hour birding competition in Mexico, when he and his team saw and recorded 274 species.

The low thrum of the outboard motor underscores every piercing bird sound except for when the captain, Jose Inocencio Banuelos — who is otherwise known by his nickname, Chencho — cuts the engine. Then Garcia begins to whistle, a series of high staccato notes at the same urgent pitch you might use to hail a taxi.

"Listen, that's a limpkin calling," says Garcia, whose whistle is intended to mimic an owl, which prompts the birds to speak, each with its own tone and rhythm. The limpkin is plaintive and loud. The great kiskadee sounds like an irate squeeze toy. While the avian chatter is lively as the sun begins to sink, in the boat, we're as respectful and wondrous as first-time churchgoers.

Minutes before we end the tour, brilliant white cattle egrets flutter in a stand of trees. It's like the final flourish of a fireworks show. They swoop and jump, alighting at the tree tops to show their silhouettes against a rusting sky.

The curving path through mangrove thickets and the unfurling walls of the boat's wake fall away as we climb onto the dock and away from the wilderness, leaving the birds and turtles and crocodiles and insects to reclaim it, for a while, when we're gone.

*Mike Fisher was hosted by the Riviera Nayarit Convention and Visitors Bureau, which didn't review or approve this story.*

**When you go:**

**Get there:** Air Canada, WestJet and charters fly from Toronto to Puerto Vallarta, which for most people is the starting point to explore the Pacific coastal stretch called Riviera Nayarit. Puerto Vallarta is a busy but comfortable tourist destination with a wide range of accommodations and driving services.

**Stay:**

While Riviera Nayarit is known for its blend of luxury and nature, it has a wide range of accommodations in a handful of charming towns and villages. After landing in Puerto Vallarta, I stayed at the [Grand Sirenis Matlali Hills Resort and Spa](#), a great all-inclusive property with a hillside setting overlooking jungle and Banderas Bay. In San Blas, the cosy, family-operated [Hotel Garza Canela](#) is the usual starting point for birders. The new [W Punta de Mita](#) (at Punta de Mita) is a stunning, modern property that incorporates Indigenous Huichol people's art into its decor and features a gorgeous beach.

**Eat:**

- Los Xitomates at Punta de Mita uses mainly homegrown and local organically grown crops, as well as grass-fed beef, for inventive dishes by chef Luis Jesús Fitch Gómez. Try the house branded mezal, Vas que Vuelas, which was served with dried grasshoppers and worms.
- In the surfer town of Sayulita, Don Pedros has a great deck overlooking the beach, where you can eat lunchtime dishes including the grilled fish sandwich (I had it with fries and loved it) while watching surfers ride the waves.
- Hotel Garza Canela in San Blas is home to El Delfin restaurant, headed by chef Betty Vasquez, who is a judge with *MasterChef Mexico*. Try the shrimp omelette with peanut mole for breakfast, among many outstanding dishes that I enjoyed.

**Do your research:** [rivierianayarit.com](#)

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