This week’s dream: The surreal beauty of Mexico’s Costa Alegre

I can easily understand why French poet André Breton once called Mexico “the most surreal country in the world,” said Julia Chaplin in Travel + Leisure. On the Costa Alegre, a “blissfully underdeveloped” stretch of Pacific coastline, every day seems to freely blend decadence, whimsy, and bold, dreamy visuals of a kind you’d expect in a Frida Kahlo painting. For decades now, the area from Puerto Vallarta south to Manzanillo has been a magnet for artists, naturalists, surfers, and various other dreamers who’ve been easily folded into the tolerant local culture. Among their rewards: “night air that feels like silk” and “a climate so perfect that many houses are built without walls.”

My first destination was a luxury eco-resort so off the beaten path that I had cacus scratches on my rental car by the time I found it. Cold-eyed armed guards met me at the gate, but the vibe inside the Hotelito Desconocido property was more “Fellini meets Robinson Crusoe,” with thatched-roof guest huts perched on stilts at the shoreline and staffs bustling about the psychedelic surrounding gardens. At sunset, I panicked when I realized that the huts don’t have electricity, but hundreds of torches and candles soon cast the entire resort in an exotic glow.

Getting the flavor of...

Virginia’s space rockets

Witnessing a rocket launch turns out to be a “bizarrely emotional” experience, said Melanie D.G. Kaplan in The Washington Post. That was the rediscovery a few fellow space nuts and I shared last month when we stood a couple miles from Virginia’s Wallops Flight Facility and watched a 13-story rocket blast off for a rendezvous with the International Space Station. If you’re keeping such a moment on your own bucket list, checking it off “just got a lot easier.” Wallops Island is located less than two hours from Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., and recent upgrades have allowed it to line up several launches a year by the private firms now helping NASA run space missions. As Jan. 9’s countdown began, I didn’t know how I’d respond. But 10 seconds after the rocket lifted silently from its pad, the sound “hit me square in the chest.” Looking skyward as the rocket raced upward, I felt my eyes watering. “It wasn’t because of the wind.”

Greenville’s comeback

Greenville, S.C., is becoming “a beacon of change for the new South,” said Joseph Hooper in Men’s Journal. Left for dead in the 1960s after its textile mills closed, this city of 60,000 owes much of its resurgence to the decision of Michelin and BMW to locate factories here, yet the “once-blighted” downtown is now an attraction in itself.”

Restaurants are the big draw, but you want to poke around the 19th-century Mast General Store and follow the river walkway to the bridge that spans Reedy River Falls. The nearby Blue Ridge Mountains and “rolling Piedmont hills” have helped make Greenville a mecca for outdoor sports, while the Baptist school Bob Jones University gives the city a significant claim to fame in art circles. The Bob Jones University Museum & Gallery, which holds important works by Rubens and Van Dyck, purports to harbor the largest collection of religious art outside the Vatican.

Last-minute travel deals

Costa Rican eco-retreat
Rejuvenate during an eight-day retreat at the Villa Blanca Cloud Forest Hotel and save $700 by booking before Feb. 16. The $1,895 package is available for stays starting April 20 or June 21 and includes meals, yoga classes, and a rain-forest tour. learningjourneys.com

Cooking in Umbria
Through April 30, save 45 percent on three-night stays at the ancient and picturesque Tenuta di Canonica estate in central Italy’s Umbrian hills. The $647 package includes cooking classes, two dinners for two, and a wine tasting. tenutadicanonica.com

The ‘Best of Turkey’
Explore Turkey’s colorful bazaars, ornate mosques, and Mediterranean beaches during a two-week, multicity tour starting at $2,199 a person. Airfare from New York City is included. Book by Feb. 25 for tours starting in April. friendlyplanet.com

Hotel of the week

Lima for art lovers

Arts Boutique Hotel B
Lima, Peru

This 17-room boutique property feels less like a hotel than “the mansion of a rich, eccentric art collector,” said Danielle Pegram in The New York Times. A converted 1914 manor house that’s surrounded by similar architectural marvels, Hotel B adorns virtually all of its rooms with oil paintings or photographs that are “clearly meant to stop you in your tracks.” Choose a unit in the historic wing and ask for a claw-foot tub; the staff will draw a bubble bath on request. All meals can be had downstairs, but just outside are the Pacific and one of Lima’s best neighborhood taquerias, romantic Barranco.
thotelb.pe; doubles from $270