



*Young surfers
strolling on
Máncora Beach,
in Peru.*

RIDING THE WAVE

On the fringes of Peru's northern coast, the burgeoning surfer's paradise of Máncora courts travelers with pristine beaches and a laid-back, bohemian vibe.

MARTA TUCCI catches a break.

STANDING ON THE TARMAC of Talara, a no-frills regional airport in northwestern Peru that sees just eight flights per day, I began to think I had made a mistake. Though I was destined for Máncora, a coastal town in the Piura province, I found myself surrounded by nothing but desert.

"You're in the right place!" a fellow passenger called. I turned to find a Matthew McConaughey doppelgänger with salty locks and a giddy grin. After chatting for 15 minutes, I learned he visited Máncora regularly and often encountered confused first-timers. Headed in the same direction, he offered me a ride and helped load my tattered longboard onto his dusty 4 x 4 Suzuki. "Everyone has the same reaction," he said with a chuckle, making zero effort to avoid the road's frequent potholes. "Give it a few days, and you won't want to leave."



After a bumpy hour-long drive, the road dipped down, revealing a row of bright bougainvillea-covered villas, and the ocean began to peek out from behind the dunes. When I laid eyes on Máncora's legendary north swell, I could understand why surfers and artists began to settle in this isolated slice of paradise in the 1970s.

Over the past few years, the combination of near-perfect sunshine and reliable waves has captivated jet-setting hippies, whose arrival helped usher in a wave of stylish new businesses. One notable example is **Kichic** (kichic.com; doubles from \$280), a private residence turned nine-room barefoot luxury hotel on the windswept beach of Las Pocitas. Owner Cristina "Kiki" Gallo, a Lima native, made Máncora her home more than three decades ago when it was little more than a roadside oasis. "There was no electricity, our fridge ran on kerosene, and the nearest house was more than two miles away," she told me after I checked in. It was hard to imagine that spartan scene while sitting in a beautiful living room dotted with artifacts Gallo brought back from trips to India and Guatemala.

Gallo explained that she was inspired to leave the comforts of cosmopolitan life behind by the exploits of her adventurous grandfather, Count Zygmunt Broel-Plater. He moved to Peru

▲ Clockwise from left: An open-air living room at the boutique hotel Kichic; Carlos Valdiviezo, an instructor at Surf Point; tuna tartare at La Sirena d'Juan.



from Poland after World War II and worked at the famed Fishing Club resort in nearby Cabo Blanco, a town that attracted the likes of Ernest Hemingway and Marilyn Monroe. "It was the golden age," Gallo said. The tony hotel fell into disrepair and closed in the 1970s, and the celebrities are long gone. But now Máncora seems to have entered a golden age of its own.

The next morning, I grabbed my board and hitched another ride—this time on a horse with one of the local cowboys who often trot along the shore, ferrying travelers for a bit of extra cash. I hopped off on the beach at Del Wawa, where local reggae music filled the air. It's home to **Surf Point** (fb.com/alan.valdiviezopena), a surf and kiteboarding school run by Alan Valdiviezo.

As a casual enthusiast, I couldn't help feeling slightly intimidated by his bronzed, chiseled



ILLUSTRATION BY MAY PARSEY

crew, but their friendliness made my nerves evaporate. While Máncora and its good-looking denizens might initially draw comparisons to Montauk or Malibu, the whole scene is missing the pretentiousness that can cause visitors to feel like outsiders.

Nose daubed in sunscreen, I paddled with Carlos, Alan's brother and my surf pro for the day. As we patiently waited for the first set to come in, tiny salt crystals on my cheeks began to crackle in the warmth of the equatorial sun. "¡Ey! ¡Ya llegan!" he cheered excitedly, alerting me that the waves were fast approaching.

When the barrel drew me forward, I pushed myself up and cut left into a pristine curl. The break on Máncora's main beach was gentle and inviting, creating a great environment for a beginner like me to get comfortable with the basics. To get a real taste of the Peruvian Pipeline, Carlos told me, we'd need to venture south to towns like Lobitos and Vichayito. I mentally bookmarked both for a future trip.

Later, in the dwindling light of dusk, I walked to Avenida Piura, the town's main drag, in search of ceviche. In most parts of Peru, the dish is eaten in the mornings, when the star ingredient—often tuna or mahi-mahi—is straight from the sea. But Máncora's thriving fishing trade means fresh catches come in around the clock. Behind a cloud of dust stirred up by zooming motorbikes, I found **La Sirena d'Juan** (fb.com/lasirenadejuan; entrées \$10–\$11), a candlelit restaurant packed with both locals and out-of-towners.

After starting my meal with a few plates of *tiradito*, or Peruvian-style sashimi, I was joined by Juan Seminario Garay, the owner and Cordon Bleu-trained chef behind La Sirena and **Yuka** (51-73-794-189; prix fixe \$10), a Japanese-Peruvian bar just down the road. As I sipped my pisco sour, Seminario Garay reflected on his hometown and how it continues to defy people's expectations. "They come here for the surf, but they return for the food," he asserted proudly.

On my final day, I decided to go for one last dip in the Pacific. The breeze was already warm as I ventured out just after dawn. My arms moved in ritualistic rhythm, ripples dispersing around me and reflecting the glimmer of the rising sun.

The loud, long exhale of a distant whale jolted me out of my reverie—a reminder that humpbacks make their annual migration through the area between July and October. Gazing far into the blush-tinted horizon, I spotted the gentle giant's tail poking out of the water. I have a feeling I'll return to Máncora every year, too. 🐋

▲ An auto-rickshaw dashes down Avenida Piura, Máncora's main street.

