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## [Will work for food \(and flights\) in Baja Flying Doctors reward volunteers with beach time](#)

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### **(08-13) 04:00 PDT Punta San Francisquito,**

**Mexico** -- By middle-of-Baja standards, the runway was a good one: dirt, with no bushes. The pilot made a butter-smooth landing, and we were in Punta San Francisquito.

Some time later, (time is a small thing in Baja) I was gliding along in a purple plastic kayak around the bay. As I peered through the water at dozens of skates waving over the bottom sand, it occurred to me that I was getting quite a vacation for less than \$400. And I had the deep satisfaction that volunteer work brings as well.

I was on a team put together by a group of more than 200 folks called Los Medicos Voladores, ("The flying doctors"). The nonprofit group makes monthly trips to remote parts of Mexico to hold weekend clinics. Our team included a pilot, dermatologist, nurse and two volunteers, including me.

I'd first become interested in Los Medicos Voladores (LMV) because it was affordable, both money and time-wise. Most volunteer vacations require at least a week's commitment, and a sizable check. A week's trip to Mexico with Global Volunteers, which has programs in Dolores Hidalgo and Queretaro, costs \$1,795, excluding airfare. And the cheapest flight I could find to Queretaro was \$716. My check to LMV was \$200, for plane fuel; for the rest of the four-day trip I paid my own expenses, totaling less than \$200.

We left the Bay Area Thursday morning from San Rafael in a six-seat Piper Aerostar, stopping in Mexicali for customs, lunch and gas, then on to the town of San Ignacio, about halfway down the Baja peninsula.

Surrounded by the rough, arid Baja landscape, San Ignacio is a surprise. It's an oasis, with citrus trees and towering date palms. It's also the closest town if you want to visit the Sierra de San Francisco cave paintings or San Ignacio Lagoon, a breeding and nursery area for the Pacific gray whale.

We opened the clinic Friday morning, and patients streamed in. While one volunteer checked them in, my job was to jot down their symptoms. With my limited Spanish, this was a challenge, but at the end of the day my ease with the language had taken a giant step forward. Spanish, while not required to work with LMV, definitely adds to the experience.

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The patients' problems were pretty much the same ones the doctor encountered at home: acne, psoriasis and eczema were common. But most of their complaints had been untreated for years, if ever. Whenever possible, the doctor was wonderfully inventive with simple, inexpensive cures. I was surprised to learn, for example, that repeated applications of duct tape can remove warts.

We closed the clinic in the late afternoon, then strolled around San Ignacio. It's a comfortable, restful town, with welcome shade everywhere. Friendly shops provide sunscreen, hats, ice cream and other necessities for travelers. A couple of restaurants serve standard Mexican fare and, if you're lucky, you can watch soap operas while you eat.

The sight to see in San Ignacio is the magnificent church of San Ignacio de Loyola, built from 4-foot-wide blocks of volcanic rock taken from the nearby volcanoes, Las Virgenes. Inside are a massive altar of carved wood and an impressive sampling of religious art from the 17th century.

Saturday morning, we opened the clinic again and saw patients until noon, when it was time to head for Punta San Francisquito. Though sometimes teams work through the weekend, LMV tries to follow a schedule of a day and a half of clinic work, followed by leisure time.

There are no real roads to Punta San Francisquito; it's only reachable by plane or boat. The beach is proof of that -- it's the cleanest stretch of sand and water I've ever seen. On the curve of a small bay are a few houses, a restaurant and several palapas, beach houses with cement floors, doors of heavy canvas and eight cots each.

I chose a cot, took off my backpack and tossed my watch onto a pile of dirty clothes. Outside was brilliant sun and turquoise water. I'd brought a book, but reading seemed much too strenuous. I swam, lazed on the hot sand and paddled my purple kayak.

Dinner at the restaurant was fish caught that afternoon. As with all my meals on the trip, it was simply prepared and portions were more than ample. Entertainment was watching the pelicans dive and, when it got too dark for that, stories around the fire.

My cot was clean and well padded. I fell asleep to the sound of the waves.

After breakfast and a long walk on the beach, it was time to leave. We flew back to the States and I said goodbye reluctantly to the rest of the team. After four days of working and playing together, I felt as if I were leaving old friends. But I knew I could afford to see them again in Baja before too long.

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## IF YOU GO

Los Medicos Voladores, (800) 585-4568, [www.flyingdocs.org](http://www.flyingdocs.org). Pilots, doctors, nurses, interpreters and unskilled volunteers are welcome on regular volunteer trips to Central America and Mexico. Flights to Mexico are on planes that seat four to six. The flight-sharing cost for a four-day Baja trip is now \$350 (tax deductible), with \$150 reimbursement for expenses while in

Mexico -- keeping the price about the same as that in the story. Some knowledge of Spanish is helpful but not required.

#### Where to stay

Lodging is arranged by Los Medicos Voladores and their contacts in Mexico. Some villages pay for lodging for the team. Otherwise, prices are about \$25 to \$50 a night. Rooms are often shared.

#### Where to eat

Restaurant meals are home-style and cost about \$5-\$10. Local people usually provide the team with at least one meal and sometimes all.

#### What to do

In addition to clinic work, Baja trips have included fishing, whale-watching and excursions to see cave paintings.

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