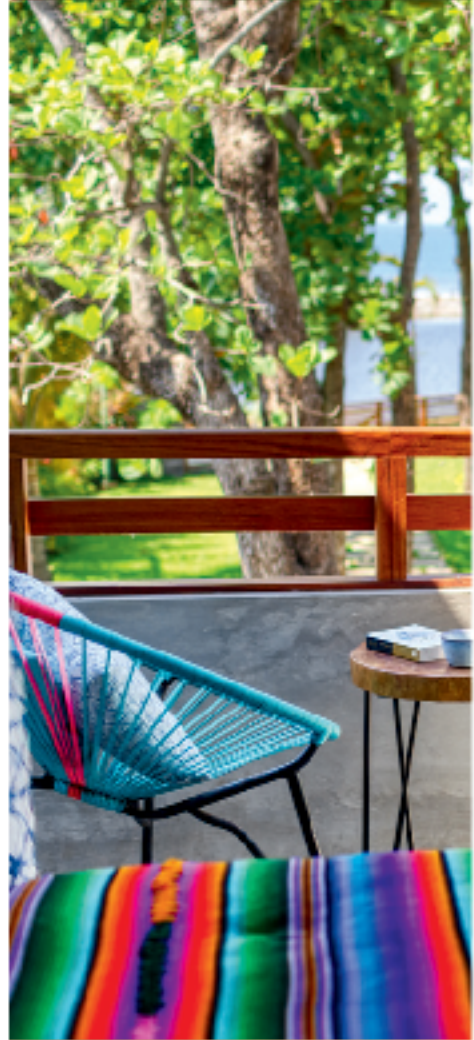




## THE ALT SURF SCENE EL SALVADOR

### A CENTRAL AMERICAN TOWN LETS RIP

Ever since appearing in cult film *Big Wednesday* at the end of the 1970s, El Salvador's world-class breaks have stirred the spirits of adventurous surfers. But a civil war from 1979 to 1992 kept them away and wave seekers swept along the nearby Nicaraguan and Costa Rican coasts. Yet El Salvador's dramatic south-facing shores pick up the best of the big Pacific swells, and once-sleepy fishing villages backed by mango trees and black-sand beaches are now evolving into vibey hangouts. 'We're so lucky – the mountains drop right down into the ocean, creating thousands of incredible surf spots,' says former pro José 'Bamba' Diaz, before pointing out the four different waves that make his hometown of El Tunco such a playground. The reputation of this stretch was due to be cemented this month when the World Surf Games were to take place in the tiny country, the winners qualifying for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, where the sport was making its debut. Those plans have now been delayed. But surfers will doubtless be the first ones back out. Early mornings are sacred here, when slack winds mean glassy conditions and wave riders hop over volcanic rocks and into the white water. Smoothie bars and coconut sellers line El Tunco's main street, where post-sea pick-me-ups include *mariscada*, a shrimp soup, and ubiquitous *pupusa* flatbreads, served with zingy coleslaw. Away from the crowds, waterfront yoga retreat Balancé is a smart alternative to traditionally rough-and-ready backpackers' digs. Come late afternoon, beers are cracked at La Bonita beach club as showboating boarders compete with the sunsets. Surfers have long been pioneers, carving out cool scenes where other travellers follow, and this is where the next set are charting a course. BEN OLSEN



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