

Text And Photos By Steve Larese

at rest, at play

Have it your way in Puerto Vallarta, still a Mexican hotspot after all these years.



ABOVE: Los Arcos Amphitheater is a popular gathering spot on the Malecón's central plaza. LEFT: Dancers portray Aztec warriors. While the Aztecs' influence on much of present-day Mexico is significant, Puerto Vallarta is best known for its colorful Huichol culture.

Lulled by the lapping of the Pacific in front of me, shaded from the muscle-melting Mexican sun by a palm-frond umbrella, and sipping a Corona with my wife, Kat, I almost wish I had my BlackBerry. So I could fling it into the ocean, just like in the commercial.

We're loving life in Puerto Vallarta, where every second is a caressing reminder that our only responsibility is to relax. Actually, we're in Nuevo Vallarta, a newer section just north of Puerto Vallarta, known for its beaches and resorts on the Bay of Banderas. With perfectly appointed accommodations, fine dining, lounges, spas, swimming pools, deep-sea fishing, golf, shopping, and miles of beach and surf, it'd be perfectly forgivable if we never left our resort. But as tempting as this is, we'd be missing the history, color, excitement, and people of Puerto Vallarta.

Cortés, Warriors, And Liz Taylor

Puerto Vallarta sits along a 40-mile-long crescent bay that faces west, sandwiched by sun-soaked beaches and the lush Sierra Madre Occidental range, immediately to its east. What is today Puerto Vallarta came to the attention of the Spanish in 1524, when ships commanded by explorer and Hernan Cortés' nephew, Francisco Cortés de San Buenaventura, first entered the bay. His landing party was met by less-than-welcoming Indian warriors. Both sides eventually backed off without violence, and the feathered poles the warriors carried gave name to the Bahía de Banderas (Bay of Flags).

In the 1600s, the area served primarily as a safe harbor for ships escaping



LEFT: An artist puts the finishing touches on a sand sculpture. RIGHT: Diners enjoy a round of drinks at the Cheeky Monkey, a second-story restaurant and bar overlooking the Bay of Banderas.



pirates and as a whaling center (humpbacks calve here in the winter and are now watched, not killed). A town slowly took shape in the 1900s, as banana harvesting and other agrarian industries developed in the fertile area. In 1918, the town was named in honor of Jalisco Governor Ignacio L. Vallarta, who helped draft the Mexican constitution.

Tourists began discovering Puerto Vallarta in the 1930s, and PV (as it's called) fully caught the romantic minds of travelers in 1963 when Richard Burton, who was there filming Tennessee Williams' *The Night of the Iguana*, carried on a very public and steamy affair with Elizabeth Taylor. Accounts vary, but it seems that Burton rented a casita during the filming. After the two married, he purchased the property for Taylor as a 32nd birthday present; eventually he bought one across the street as well. A pink bridge was built to connect the two buildings at the west end of Calle Zaragoza. After Taylor sold the property, known as Casa Kimberley, it became a bed and breakfast.

Out And About

Adding the bridge to our list of sites to see, Kat and I decide to take the local bus, the ATM, into town. It costs just \$1.20, and we're let off at a visitor's center (at Avenue Mexico and Jesús Langarica), where we pick up a city

map and a few recommendations from the friendly staffer. Our first stop, the must-see Malecón, is a palm-lined walkway along the seawall, hedged with restaurants, cafes, bars, shops, and vendors. Along the mile stretch, you'll encounter a series of bronzes by the renowned Alejandro Colunga. These fanciful sculptures have become a symbol of PV, especially the seahorse near Calle Mina, *Caballito de Mar*. The Malecón itself is the soul of Puerto Vallarta, where friends meet, lovers stroll, and families play. There are usually large and wonderfully detailed sand sculptures being built on the beach below, with plastic buckets set out for tips for the artists.

Dominating the city, on Calle Hidalgo, two blocks east of the Malecón, is the church of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe. Topped with its iconic crown modeled after the one worn by Emperor Maximilian's wife, Carlota, it serves as a reminder of when France occupied Mexico in the 1860s. Inside, with its gilded altar and soaring ceiling, the faithful pray while visitors respectfully admire its ornate art.



The cathedral of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, topped with its crown modeled after that of Emperor Maximilian's wife, Carlota, is a Puerto Vallarta icon.

On the Malecón, between Calle Mina and Calle Zaragoza, you'll see another Puerto Vallarta landmark, Los Arcos Amphitheater. This four-arch, neo-classical sculpture becomes an outdoor bandstand on Sunday nights. Kat and I catch Daskandonga, a jazz-fusion group that has us on our feet by the end of its first set. As if the evening

were unfounded. Even better, we drink in the ocean view and nightlights from the balcony, its cozy tables surrounded by locals and tourists alike.

Art And Artifacts

The next day, we hit the shops and galleries of Puerto Vallarta. At 176 Corona, Galería de Ollas sells exquisite



couldn't get more magical, fireworks streak across the sky, reflecting on the water. Looking out, we see they're coming from the *Marigalante* pirate ship, fending off mock marauders during its nightly Pirates of the Bay dinner show. Flashes from onboard cameras look like musket fire. Outlined in lights, the *Marigalante* cuts a beautiful, ghostly wake across the bay, with its fireworks for all to enjoy launching around 9 p.m., give or take pirate time.

Thinking about dinner ourselves, we grab a bite on the Cheeky Monkey's second-story balcony overlooking the bay, and we're happy to discover their beers and margaritas are always \$1. Free jazz and fireworks, cheap drinks — our fears of paying a tourist tax here

Mata Ortiz pottery. Staring at the impossibly fine, hand-painted, hand-coiled pots, I begin to think how we'd get one home. Fortunately for us (but not our checking account), the gallery expertly packs and ships.

Back out wandering the cobblestone streets, we're intoxicated by Mexican artists whose styles range from photorealism to surrealism. Sergio Bustamante's gallery showcases his boundless imagination, with his sculptures of peaceful human faces on lion bodies and triangular pillow heads on whimsical figures. You'll recognize his style in his large bronze ladder sculpture, *In Search of Reason*, on the Malecón, near Calle Corona. From late October through May, PV

hosts the Viejo Vallarta Art Walk. Every Wednesday from 6 to 10 p.m., participating galleries offer hors d'oeuvres and a chance to meet their artists.

Our heads spinning with images of cutting-edge, modern art juxtaposed with PV's colonial color, we duck into the Puerto Vallarta Hard Rock Café and see Keith Moon's jacket, Carlos Santana's guitar, and other rock treasures. We also pass the famous Señor Frog's, a favorite college

On the Isla Río Cuale, an open-air *mercado* sells arts and crafts made by the Huichol and other indigenous people.

watering hole and part of PV's throbbing nightlife. If you're looking for souvenirs for kids at home, T-shirts from either place will be appreciated. But if it's authentic Mexico you're looking for, then head for the markets.

On the Isla Río Cuale, a narrow island in the Cuale River reached by suspended walkways, an open-air *mercado* sells arts and crafts made by the Huichol and other indigenous people. Several restaurants dot the island, and a small archeology museum displays art and replicas from the area's pre-Columbian past. Toward the east end (upstream) there's a statue of American director and one-time resident John Huston, honoring him for helping put PV on the map with *The Night of the Iguana*.



Olive Ridley sea turtle hatchlings scramble to the ocean with help from visitors at the AMA Mexico sea turtle sanctuary in Nuevo Vallarta.

On The Nature Tip

We spend the rest of the day trying to get lost in PV's steep, flower-trimmed side streets. With the mountains, ocean, and crown of the church as landmarks, it's hard for even me to get turned around. Eager to explore the lush peaks above us, we book a mountain bike tour for the next day with Bike Mex Adventures (we tackle the Killer Donkey trail). There's also snorkeling, parasailing, whale-watching, canopy tours, swimming with dolphins, sailing, horseback riding, and a menu of other eco-educational adventures to consider from the likes of Ecotours de Mexico and Vallarta Adventures. Deciding the bike tour will be strenuous enough, we make our way back to the resort for some quality beach time and entertainment.

Later, cocktails in hand, we're mesmerized by a performance of Aztec dancers, complete with haunting blows of conch shells and the thunderous, hypnotic pounding of drums.

Many Mexicans here speak English, but appreciate foreigners trying their Spanish. In chatting with our waiter during dinner, he tells us that just down the beach from our resort is a turtle sanctuary, AMA Mexico, where endangered Olive Ridley sea turtle eggs are relocated, hatched, and released into the ocean. The beaches of Bahía de Banderas are an important nesting region for these threatened reptiles.



A short walk later, we see a roped-off square of beach with neat rows of dated popsicle sticks. These are nests that have been relocated to the safety of the center. At the small office, there is a blue plastic kiddie pool with about 100 hatchlings scrambling about. We're told that it takes about 60 days for eggs to hatch, and that the center releases the hatchlings at night for their safety. After just one short crawl across the sand into the ocean, the females somehow remember the beach and return years later within 2 miles to lay their own eggs. The turtles find their ways to the water by following starlight, but increased artificial light on shore makes that more difficult. Extra hands are needed to guide the turtles in the right direction, and we're thrilled to volunteer.

After a glorious sunset, we stroll down to the beach, and a line is drawn in the sand where the nest would be, a few yards from the surf. Four hatchlings are placed in my cupped hands, and at the signal we all place them at the starting line. They sit there for a second, perhaps taking in the horizon for the first time, then in a stilted dash, break for the water in a tropical turtle race. A wave laps over them and they're gone, discovering that their flippers make graceful wings in the water.

Wandering back along the starlit surf arm in arm, Kat and I dreamily reflect on all we've done so far as we end another day in paradise, and can't wait for the next to begin. ■

Albuquerque-based writer and photographer Steve Larese would never really throw a BlackBerry or anything else into the ocean. He wrote about Sedona in the Spring 2008 issue of *Interval World*.

fastFACTS

RESORT DIRECTORY: IntervalWorld.com or pages 296 to 300 and 309

CLIMATE: Throughout the year, the average monthly high temperature is between 80° and 90°F, and the average monthly low is 65°F. The rainy season is from June to September.

DON'T MISS: The Puerto Vallarta Botanical Gardens, just 12 miles south of PV. Situated on 20 acres 1,300 feet above sea level, the gardens feature more than 3,000 species of plants. Admission is just \$3.

CURRENCY: Mexican peso

TIPPING: Restaurants sometimes add a 10 to 15% service charge to the bill. Leaving a few extra pesos behind — no more than 10% — is appreciated. Taxi drivers do not expect a tip.

INTERVAL TRAVEL: IntervalWorld.com

RENTAL CAR: Not recommended. Buses run frequently, and taxis are ubiquitous.

CONTACT: Casa Kimberley, casakimberley.com, Pirates of the Bay, marigalante.com.mx; Cheeky Monkey, cheekymonkeypvp.com; Galería de Ollas, galeriadeollas.com; Sergio Bustamante Gallery, sergiobustamante.com.mx; Viejo Vallarta Art Walk, vallartaartwalk.com; Ecotours de Mexico, ecotoursvallarta.com; Vallarta Adventures, vallarta-adventures.com; AMA Mexico, amamexico.org; Puerto Vallarta Botanical Gardens, vallartabotanicalgardensac.org

VISITOR INFORMATION:

Puerto Vallarta Convention and Visitors Bureau
888.384.6822 (U.S.)

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