

TRAVEL

Experience the 'real' Mexico in Puerto Vallarta

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If you want to experience "real" Mexico take a trip to Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. This is the land of the majestic Sierra Madre Mountains, Charros, the Mexican equivalent of the cowboy, and Mariachi bands wearing large floppy Sombreros. Let's not forget the very popular drink made from the agave plant — Tequila!

Glitter Gulch

Richard Burton and Ava Gardner made Puerto Vallarta a star after filming the *Night of the Iguana* in 1953. The real story was Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton's romance while she was married to Eddie Fisher. Some of the people still mention the famous affair and the house just south of town that was their rumored love nest.

There is also an area known as "glitter gulch" that has many houses and condos of the rich and famous. The homes sit high above the town up narrow cobbled streets with wonderful views of the bay. Many of these can be rented for your family's personal use.

I Love A Parade

If you plan on going in September, then plan on taking in a big celebration. Sept. 16 is the anniversary of the day in 1810 when Father Miguel Hidalgo delivered the *El Grito de Dolores*, or the speech from Dolores. This became the battle cry of the 11-year war against Spain. As the legend has it, Father Hidalgo rang the church bell to call the townspeople together. Today, all cities across Mexico pause at the same time while a church bell is rung, then they all cry out, "Viva Mexico" and "Viva la independencia!"

The cab driver took me to a perfect spot to watch the parade. He drove through the town, past everyone lined up along the streets for hours and delivered me to the front row facing the mayor's platform across the

If you are going

Where to stay

They have casitas (or cottages), many nice hotels, condominiums and villas for rent. All of these come with choices such as simple hotel rooms, all-inclusive or villas. It is best to do your research with your travel agent and look for what is best for you and your family.

Fiesta

If you haven't been to a Mexican fiesta, the Krystal Hotel offers a fun time twice a week in an enormous setting of about a thousand people. For about \$40-\$5 per person it includes a delicious Mexican buffet, Mariachi bands, fire show, singers, folk dancers and, of course — all the Tequila you can drink. They give you a little pottery vessel on a cord around your neck. The waiters wander the crowd and refill the tequila as many times as you permit.

Other Fun things

How about taking a quiet Champagne Balloon flight over the bay area? Or another idea is a Sierra Madre expedition into remote areas via an open-air Mercedes all-terrain vehicle or on horseback. Or you could fly to San Sebastian, a quaint little village dating back to 1605 that is not accessible by car, only by foot or donkey. Other possibilities are snorkeling, kayaking or Sunset cruises.

Money, money

The current exchange rate is one U.S. dollar to 9.2 pesos. Check the rate right before you go and try to memorize or write down the equivalents of common denominations like \$5, \$10, \$20 and \$50. I have talked to many angry people that have visited Mexico and felt they were deceived. If you don't understand the exchange rates and you don't know how much change you should receive you will be ripe for con artists. That is true anywhere, not just Mexico.

Getting around

Unless you are very brave, driving isn't recommended. There are windy, narrow and steep cobblestone streets with little or no Spanish signs. Buses are very inexpensive and plentiful. They may not run as Americans think they should, but hey, you are on vacation. I was impressed by the wonderful manners of the school children on the public buses.

Taxis are plentiful and reasonable. Many drivers will help you find something you are looking for or provide interesting dialogue along the way. Others will speak very little English. Learn a few basic words and it will be easier and friendlier to communicate.

street. Nobody seemed to mind so I just pretended I was supposed to be there.

The parade included a good portion of the Puerto Vallarta families. There were mounted Charros dressed in their traditional short jackets, sombreros and lots of silver on their costume and horses. Some of the Charros had their horses perform while they trotted along. There were many *senoritas*

dressed in full-lace trimmed skirts twirling to the band music.

The serious and severe faced military paraded with their guns and jeeps in precision for a show of strength. Every public vehicle was cleaned up and shown for the parade, even the local garbage truck.

The best part was the children. Every grade and class (it seemed) marched in rows all

dressed to show their grade achievement. You could tell which teachers were strict and had trained the children the longest by the tight lines, tucked in shirts and marching precision. The other groups were in various stages of happy children marching down the street.

The parade lasted for hours. I watched the end of it from a balcony at a bar with a cold margarita. Well, it was hot and I was thirsty.

Chico's Paradise

This Restaurant was built to utilize the natural surroundings, bring tourists to this out-of-the-way place and to provide jobs for the community. It looks out over a river strewn with huge boulders. The building is made out of wood supported by stone and wood columns with a sloping thatched style roof. It sits on some of the boulders from the site. The setting could be any exotic city like Hawaii or Tahiti.

The menu includes such taste treats as drunken shrimp, barbecued pork ribs in sweet and sour sauce, marinated fish in lemon and coconut milk, stuffed crab, oysters paradise and of course — fresh local lobster or jumbo shrimp fixed as you like it. Don't forget the coconut pie, lemon pie or the caramel custard for dessert.

Shiny Silver

Shopping in town is an experience. There is everything from tacky souvenir shops to wonderful sophisticated art galleries. Everywhere there is silver jewelry. You will see merchants on the beach selling armloads of bracelets. A word of caution — Mexican law states that all sterling silver have a "925" stamp on it. This stands for sterling silver terminology, which states it must be at least 92.5 percent silver. Watch for the stamp and look at the quality of the piece. Silver is so inexpensive in Mexico that it is difficult to determine what is sterling.

Other items to look for in Puerto Vallarta are Talavera



Open doors: Chico's Paradise Restaurant serves a mighty view along with its Mexican cuisine.

pottery and tiles, fanciful and colorful hand carvings and hand-sewn linens and lace.

The beach by the hotel was a nice expanse of fine sand littered with some boulders. One night there was a terrible rainstorm with high winds. The next morning when I looked out of the hotel room window something looked different. It took me a moment to figure out what it was. The storm had removed much of the beach!

The beach ended up about six to eight feet lower than it was before. The stairs to the beach hung in the air and many huge boulders were visible that had not been before. The hotel staff said not to worry, this happens every year and it will come back. In about three days, gradually

the beach returned to normal.

The weather is great in Puerto Vallarta — 300 sunny days a year, with an average temperature of 82°F. The people are friendly. The food is good and plentiful and the rates are reasonable. What more could you want?

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