

TRAVEL



Photos by STEVE HAGGERTY Tribune News Service

Nature unspoiled, where the sea meets the mountains, at Villa Del Palmar on the coast of Baja California South in Mexico.

The perfect place to do nothing

Villa del Palmar resort is a magical mystery on the Sea of Cortez

BY ANNE Z. COOKE
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LORETO, MEXICO — What are people doing today and tomorrow at the Villa del Palmar, the mystery resort you've never heard of, south of Loreto, on Mexico's Gulf of California? For some, the answer is "nothing."

When I asked the man digging clams on the beach what was up, he answered, "Not much, just relaxing, looking at the scenery." I asked the woman perched on the pool deck near me and she said the same thing. "Oh, nothing, really. I'm just enjoying the solitude." Splashing in the bay, I exchanged smiles with a snorkeler who popped up nearby and all I got were bubbles and a far-away look, as if words were superfluous.

Some say it's the rugged Sierra de la Giganta mountains that make the magic, rising behind the resort to leave guests gasping for adjectives. Others say it's the divine Mexican cuisine, the best they've ever tasted. Or it's the sports and recreation that do the trick: kayaking and paddleboarding, deluxe spa treatments, the tennis courts and the sunrise hikes. But a recent investigation — by yours truly — found the answer.

The enchantment here is the 4,447-acre site on an alluring blue bay framed by red-rock cliffs and access to five offshore islets within the Loreto Bay National Marine Park, now with additional protection as a World Heritage site. Colorful, dramatic and secluded, it compels just-arrived guests to stand and gape, amazed and speechless. Even when most of 181 multibedroom units are occupied — as happens over a holiday — the place is gloriously subdued.

Our neighbor Elaine, a new friend in the adjacent one-bedroom unit, provided the proof. "Oh, no, we're not newcomers to Mexico," she said. "We've been coming down to Cabo San Lucas forever. But we transferred our timeshare over to this property this year because Cabo is so crowded it doesn't feel like Cabo used to. Traffic, nightclubs, fast-food joints, it's a mess. We had to pay more to make the exchange, but this feels like Mexico did 20 years ago."

Eventually, it was obvious why the resort felt empty during the day. People were busy, walking on the trail above the coast; sport fishing for dorado, yellowfin tuna and sailfish; kayaking around the bay, paddleboarding from the beach or shopping in Loreto.

Snorkel and scuba diving excursions headed for the marine park almost daily, taking snorkelers and scuba divers into the heart of the "world's aquarium," as marine conservationist and diver Jacques Cousteau tagged it. The first to explore this undersea world, Cousteau became the catalyst behind the campaign to preserve what he called the "North American Galapagos."

Most outings cruise around one or two of the five nearest islands — Coronado, Carmen, Danzante, Monserrat and Santa Catalina — each known for rocky coves, powdery white sand and emerald water. I joined the Isla Coronado adventure and was rewarded with a couple hours of snorkeling in sunlit, glass-clear water, where our guide Manuel estimated the visibility at 25-50 feet. The fish were abundant and easy to see, and our group spotted seals and dolphins before heading to a white sand beach for a picnic.

Each evening, as people slowly gathered for dinner, the adults wandering through the gardens to watch the last light fade behind the mountains and kids chasing each other across the plaza, I realized that the resort was actually very full.

Prompted by waiters taking bar orders and by the tantalizing smells of warm tortillas, roast vegetables and grilled pork and chicken drifting from the kitchen, people headed in to eat, choosing the more casual Market cafe or El Danzante, the resort's upscale restaurant.

Accompanied by candlelight and guitar music, the spirit of fiesta took hold, amplified by laughing and talking and plates of food, delivered from the kitchen. And at 9 o'clock, a folk-dance group filed out onto an impromptu stage to announce the evening's entertainment, a show of regional dances and slapstick comedy.

Recognizing their favorite employees as part of the 10-member cast — "that's Clara, in the red and white skirt," and "that's Jorge, our guide," — the audience clapped appreciatively. Transformed by show-biz makeup and embroidered costumes, the group smiled, bowed and put on a good enough performance to suggest that they must have practiced often. I couldn't help hoping that management gave them time off from their jobs to work on their routines. Dancing nonstop for 90 minutes after spending a day chopping vegetables or making beds would have been too much.

Like all resorts in their first year or two — Villa del Palmar opened in the spring of 2011 — some problems surfaced. I heard about misplaced

ABOUT THE RESORT

The property's 181 units, available as hotel rooms or for sale as a timeshare, include air-conditioned, furnished studios; one, two and three-bedroom villas; and suites, all with fully equipped kitchens. Some have balconies. The resort has three restaurants, five swimming pools, a deluxe spa, a workout room, water sports equipment, tennis courts, a kids club, a small market, beach chairs and umbrellas.

The Loreto area is never cold. Summer days can be excessively hot; typical winter days are warm with cool nights, and variable water temperatures, partly dependent on Sea of Cortez currents.

Room rates in a double start at \$288 per night. All-inclusive rates include meals and most bar and pool drinks, or you can pay for items individually. The closest other restaurants and shopping are in the historic town of Loreto, about 30 minutes away by shuttle bus or taxi. For more information, visit villadelpalmarloreto.com.

reservations, errors in bar charges and guests who had paid in advance for the all-inclusive option but were repeatedly asked to sign bar chits anyway. Computer glitches were

blamed for losing room requests and timeshare owners' names.

The shuttle service between the airport in Loreto and the resort was slower than expected and

didn't run as often as expected. The daily shopping shuttles to Loreto were also off schedule. Continuing roadwork on the adjacent highway — in progress at the time — created irregular closures that stopped traffic. Construction on the Rees Jones golf course has dragged on, with completion now pushed into 2015.

But these pinpricks didn't seem to hurt. The guests I talked to were happy, delighted with the lodging and thrilled with the friendly staff, citing their favorite waiter, bartender, guide or housekeeper as the reason they'd had such a good time. Making personal connections made these travelers feel at home.



Showoffs of the sea, dolphins jump and dive, a common sight in the Loreto Bay National Marine Park off Baja California Sur in Mexico.

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