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PUERTO VALLARTA -- FAMILY FUN DOWN MEXICO WAY

By Anne Z. Cooke, Tribune Media Services,
[World's Fare](#)

PUERTO VALLARTA -- It's an artist's haven, and an international playground. But beyond Puerto Vallarta's cruise port and its two-mile-long row of multi-story hotels, the spirit of Mexico lives on in Old Town, at the Playa Los Arcos Hotel.

At the entrance, youthful bellboys wearing "charro" shirts, with striped pants and matching red sashes, wait to carry your luggage. Gold horse-head buckles gleam on the white dresses of the soft-spoken desk clerks. Hand-painted furniture made in Michoacan stands against the walls and woven straw wreaths announce an upcoming fiesta. Red bougainvillea spill over the porticoes and the glossy leaves of a breadfruit tree shade the courtyard.

But it's the children you notice first -- splashing in the pool, snapping photos of the resident iguana that climbs down out of a tree to bask on the pool deck, learning to swim, sunning on Los Muertos Beach, and bodysurfing in the waves. Taking it all in stride, Ramon Tapia, the sales manager, stands at a photo board, calmly pinning up snapshots of smiling families. The Playa Los Arcos, it seems, caters to families.

"Most of these are return guests," says Tapia, pointing to faded photos of smiling couples in the dining room and children posing in embroidered sombreros. More recent prints show dads with their kids, siblings sitting on the edge of the pool and a group shot with grandmas and babies.

"Some of these people have come here since they were children," he says. "Now they've grown up and bringing their own kids. Holidays with us are a family tradition."

But what about the "to do" list in Puerto Vallarta's latest Free Map and Guide, I ask, the one that urges visitors to "hit the bars," "buy a bikini" and "fall in love"? Is the resort town famous for pink sunsets and candlelit romance losing its mojo?

Our first memories of Puerto Vallarta date from an accidental encounter in the late 1970s. We were cruise passengers then, and in port just long enough to grab a cab

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into town, buy souvenir T-shirts, share a pitcher of margaritas at Senor Frog's and nip back to the ship before it sailed.

On our second visit, we stayed in an American-style hotel in the hotel zone north of town, traveling on a package that included a sightseeing cruise on Banderas Bay. The trip stopped at Quimixto, a rural village accessible only by water, memorable for its juicy fish tacos and the hot, dusty horseback ride to an over-visited waterfall.

On the next trip, we brought the kids, taking them on the signature bus tour to Mismaloya Beach, where director John Huston filmed the "Night of the Iguana," with a return stop at Gringo Gulch to look at the two connecting "love nests" made famous by actors Richard Burton and Liz Taylor. We stayed in Old Town for the first time, around the corner from PV's art galleries, crafts shops, jewelry stores and its best restaurants.

The central location couldn't be more convenient -- or more entertaining -- and everything is close together. You can walk to restaurants, sidewalk cafes, Internet coffee shops, the historic cathedral, the park, grocery stores, pharmacies and craft stores. The art district is there, too, with galleries, antique stores, and shops specializing in blown glass, silver jewelry and handmade ceramics. If you'd rather ride, taxi fares for four, within the area and to the perimeter, cost about \$6.

For younger kids, the beach is the biggest attraction, followed by your hotel's swimming pool. As the kids get older, they can try snorkeling, horseback rides, whale watching and jungle-by-jeep safaris. By the time they're teenagers, kids can play golf, go parasailing and take historic tours.

As it happens, most Mexicans love children and expect to include them. Hotel staff and cab drivers invariably tried to teach the kids words in Spanish, and at most restaurants, the waiters offered to let our kids taste prospective menu items before they ordered them. One of the waiters, Antonio, actually served the children two desserts. No charge.

What didn't work? The half-day day cruise on the "Sarape," a coastal tour boat that picks passengers up at the pier for a coastal cruise with sightseeing, snorkeling, all the beer you can drink and lunch on an isolated beach. Some of these tour boats are new. But the Sarape, which must have been the oldest, rustiest boat within 200 miles, rolled and pitched and before long, half the kids were green around the gills. The crew, a half-dozen hard-working young people, tried their best. But the trip was too long, the rock music was ear splitting, the sun too hot and the ocean swells too big.

What made the A-list? The visit to the balloon man on the plaza near the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe. A modern-day Pied Piper clutching an enormous bouquet of inflated red hearts, silver ovals and shiny whale shapes, kids and adults mobbed him. Dillon selected a curvaceous blue dolphin; tied to our balcony, it bobbed in the wind for a couple of days before breaking free and floating away.

The Malecon beach walk was a great success. We looked in at the shops, selling hand-made toys, puppets on strings, jewelry stores, hand-blown glassware, Huichol Indian wool-on-wax pictures, ceramics from Puebla and Tonalá and lacquered wood boxes, while the kids climbed on the statues.

Another highlight was Woolworth's, a three-story hanger packed with floor-to-ceiling shelves and every kind of board game or toy you could think of. Wagons, bicycles and skateboards hung from the ceiling, all at budget prices.

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Despite my doubts, everyone loved the 90-minute dolphin encounter at the Dolphin Center, in Nuevo Vallarta north of town. Aside from the ethics of using captive dolphins to entertain people, the size and cleanliness of the pools and facility looked better than those we've seen elsewhere.

The program began with 20-minute introduction, after which we showered, donned life jackets and jumped into the pool. For the next hour we took turns stroking the creatures' velvety-smooth skin, posing for so-called "kisses" and riding stomach-to-stomach around the perimeter. Just before climbing out, the dolphins ran through a final acrobatic routine.

When Dillon, the youngest in our clan, got into the pool and saw how big the dolphins really are -- 600 to 1,000 pounds of rock-hard muscle -- he panicked. Eventually he was persuaded to pat their silky skin, and he relaxed enough to have his photo taken. We left one, of Dillon and the dolphin, on the photo board at the Los Arcos Hotel. Look for it the next time you're in Old Town.

IF YOU GO:

GETTING THERE: Aeromexico, American, Continental, America West, Alaska Airlines, Delta and many charter flights fly direct or connect to Puerto Vallarta through most major U.S. cities.

STAYING THERE: The Playa Los Arco, with 171 rooms and suites, is not an American-style hotel. The decor is Spanish colonial; room sizes vary, and include hair dryers, air conditioning, electronic safe, cable TV and telephone. Bathrooms are tiled. Suites have kitchenettes. Always inspect your room before accepting it. The hotel has two pools and a bar. The restaurant has fiesta entertainment three nights a week.

Room rates are usually priced below published rack rates. Doubles run about \$75 per night; kids stay free. All-inclusive meal plans are popular. Call 800-648-2403, or 888-729-9590 in Canada. Email [hotels\(at\)playalosarcos.com](mailto:hotels(at)playalosarcos.com). Or visit www.playalosarcos.com.

USEFUL WEBSITES: See www.visitpuertovallarta.com. For the Dolphin Adventure, visit www.vallarta-adventures.com. For hands-on airport pickup, specialty tours, golf packages, cruises, wedding planning and car rentals visit www.tour-vallarta.com.

TRAVEL TIPS:

-- Almost all Mexican restaurants welcome children. Try these child-friendly establishments: Bianco, next to the Insurgentes Bridge; Kaiser Maximilian, on Olas Altas next to the Playa Los Arcos Hotel; La Palapa, on Los Muertos Beach; Majahuitas, on Basilia Badillo. The best Mexican food is served at mom-and-pop cafes.

-- Puerto Vallarta sets taxi rates by the zone, but many drivers quote a higher price. Check the price and bargain before getting into the cab.

-- Bring your own snorkel gear.

-- Sports sandals are handy for water sports and beachwear.

-- Clean water: Puerto Vallarta purifies and bottles its water, offering Mexico's most reliable supply. Restaurants use it for cooking and washing food; ice cubes are supposed to come from the purification plant (look for cubes with holes).

-- For shampoo, bathing suits and sundries, try Woolworth's, on Calle Juarez.

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(Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty explore the world from Venice, Calif.)

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