

THISWEEK - German Village edition

May 2013

Puerto Vallarta has Sol

Vacationing along the Mexican Riviera



Travel writer Aaron Leventhal on a snorkeling cruise to Puerto Vallarta's underwater national park.

Most Central Ohioans head to Fort Lauderdale, Key West or the Caribbean for their annual winter holiday. Here's a new option--fly a few hours further south to tropical Puerto Vallarta, along the Central Pacific coastline known as the Mexican Riviera. You can be assured of warm sunny days, deep blue skies, world-class beaches, excellent dining and friendly locals.

Puerto Vallarta has a laid back, beach town ambiance, spectacular natural beauty and a cosmopolitan cultural scene, yet retains a surprising amount of the character of the small fishing village it once was. It is situated along the clear, blue waters of the Bay of Banderas and surrounded by a lush, emerald green jungle at the edge of the Sierra Madre Mountains.

Vallarta, as the locals call it, was discovered by the rich and adventurous when, in 1963, John Huston chose it as the location to film Tennessee Williams' "Night of the Iguana." The sensationalized romance of the film's co-stars, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, brought the paparazzi in droves and Vallarta was never the same again. It wasn't long until luxury hotels, resorts and shopping centers sprung up everywhere.

Fortunately, the Old Town area, which includes El Centro (the city center) and the adjacent Zona Romantica (Romantic Zone), has been preserved and enchants visitors with the colonial charm of its red tile roofs, white facades, crooked cobblestone streets, small shops and lush tropical gardens

WHERE TO STAY: My wife Beth and I stayed at the **Villa Premiere Hotel & Spa** (premiereonline.com.mx), an adults-only, gay-friendly, 83-room boutique inn located downtown along a golden, sandy beach. The 4 1/2-star resort is tucked away from the bustling street life, yet only a short walk from the iconic malecon. Its bright, spacious guest rooms all have private, ocean-view balconies.

For eight days, we relaxed in this tranquil setting enjoying a friendly and helpful staff, three bars, two swimming pools, fully equipped gym, complimentary morning yoga on the beach (Beth loved this), a fabulous spa and an in-house travel agency that expertly assists with organizing tours. The hotel has three restaurants--all under the direction of celebrated, 25-year-old Mexican executive chef, Antonio Martinez, who is noted for fusing regional dishes with international specialties;

WHAT TO DO: There is a myriad of activities to keep visitors engaged for weeks--even months. In the hotel lobby, representatives from **North American Travel** (northamericantravel.net) book expertly organized and staffed experiences. We chose three during our stay.

To orient ourselves, we took a **City Tour** of the major landmarks including Our Lady of Guadalupe Cathedral; Old Town dining, shopping and entertainment; the Botanical Garden; and beaches north and south of town. Then we signed on for an all-day **Snorkel Cruise**, which included a coastline boat ride; snorkeling at Los Arcos, the famous underwater national park; and lunch at a secluded beach. **Sail with the Whales** took us on a luxury sailboat staffed by knowledgeable marine naturalists and a hospitable crew. They pointed out humpbacks, giant manta rays and sea turtles in the clear waters.

Other popular activities include kayaking, horseback riding, swimming with dolphins, sea lion encounters, jungle ziplining and off-road drives in 4x4 vehicles through remote villages and outback.

Every Wednesday evening through the winter, downtown galleries hold the Centro Historico Art Walk (similar to our Short North Gallery Hop), which features the works of some of Mexico's finest artists and crafts persons. Throughout downtown and the Zona Romantica (Romantic District), there are hundreds of small specialty shops and jewelry stores. (Don't be apprehensive about bargaining--it's part of the culture.) Dozens of nightclubs, bars and restaurants feature live entertainment and music, many rocking until 2:30 a.m..

WHERE TO DINE: Vallarta has attracted acclaimed international chefs who have opened a diverse assortment of restaurants, cafes and bistros. We especially enjoyed meals at our hotel restaurants--**La Corona**, with creative, international fusion dishes; and **Morales** for fine, contemporary Mexican cuisine. Other favorites include:

- Famed chef Thierry Blouet's **Cafe Des Artistes**, noted for gourmet, French cuisine and dining in an open-air, tropical arboretum.
- **La Langosta Feliz** (The Happy Lobster), a family owned and operated restaurant renowned for large platters filled with lobster, sea bass, shrimp and crayfish and its lively mariachi bands.
- **La Palapa**, on the popular Los Muertos beach, specializing in Mexican fare and seafood.
- The **Vista Grill**, high on a hillside and noted for its spectacular views of the sea and city below and elegant al fresco dining on specialties such as red snapper, slow-cooked salmon in chili sauce, shrimp potstickers and braised boneless shortribs.
- **Barcelona Tapas**, serving Spanish specialties from chef-owner William Carvello.



View from the balcony of Villa Premiere Hotel & Spa overlooking the Bay of Banderas.

IF YOU GO: Forget about a rental car; downtown is compact and easy to explore on foot. And taxis are plentiful and reasonable. Pack light, dress is ultra casual.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: In the U.S., contact the Puerto Vallarta Tourism Board at visitpuertovallarta.com or 888-384-6822. In Vallarta visit the Municipal Tourist Board on the main plaza at Independencia 123 or call 322-223-2500.

Photos by Beth Ervin Leventhal

2014 WINTER GETAWAY TO PUERTA VALLARTA

Columbus-based travel writer Aaron Leventhal is also a small group tour director. He has organized a nine-day resort vacation at the Villa Premiere Hotel & Spa, March 8-16, 2014. For more information, go to leventhaltravel.com or call Aaron at 614-506-9666.

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