

## **PUERTO VALLARTA TRAVEL GUIDE**

### **Pros**

- Lively and colorful city full of local charm
- Coast is lined with lovely beaches, both in town and further afield, offering stunning sunset views
- Plenty of opportunities for water sports, including kayaking, jet skiing, and snorkeling
- Quaint old town with cobblestone streets is easy to explore on foot
- Tons of restaurants and bars in a small area, plus great shopping and lots of hotels
- Affordable food vendors and taco stands carry on Mexico's tradition of delicious street food
- A thriving LGBT nightlife and hotel scene; often called the gay capital of Mexico
- Scenic Malecon oceanfront promenade is full of modern art statues and evening food stands
- Plenty of art galleries and craft stalls selling handcrafted local goods and unique souvenirs
- Taxis are in high supply and roads are in good condition
- Town is very safe, residents are generally friendly, and many people speak English
- Cost of eating, drinking, and lodging is low by North American and European standards
- Feels more authentic than many other popular Mexican vacation destinations

### **Cons**

- Weather is humid and hot, especially in summer months
- Water can be rough and/or murky depending on the season
- Parking in old town can be very hard to find
- Not a lot of direct flights from many parts of North America or Europe
- Center of town can feel very touristy, with large crowds during peak season
- Lots of vendors on the beaches pushing souvenirs

### **What It's Like**

Puerto Vallarta, or simply Vallarta, as the locals call it, is one of Mexico's most beautiful and underrated beach vacation destinations. Once a sleepy fishing village, the town found its way into the international spotlight in the 1960s, when Richard Burton came to film "Night of the Iguana" and his scandalous love affair with Elizabeth Taylor became public. After the world was exposed to its beautiful beaches and the lush green landscape of the surrounding Sierra Madre Mountains, the town gained a permanent spot of the list of Mexican vacation hot spots.

Perhaps because there are fewer direct flights to Vallarta than to some of its more popular counterparts like Cancun or Cabo, the city has managed to retain much of its authentic charm rather than being overrun by spring breakers and American restaurant chains (though there are still plenty of both). The cobblestone streets of Puerto Vallarta's old town are packed with restaurants, bars, and local shops waiting to be discovered. Simply put, Vallarta feels like a real Mexican town. It just happens to have plenty of gorgeous beaches to boot.

Hugging the blue waters of the Bay of Banderas on Mexico's Pacific coast, with a backdrop of the lush Sierra Madre Mountains to the east, Puerto Vallarta offers a unique blend of city life and natural beauty. Historic hacienda-style buildings line cobblestone streets as colorful paper flags flap in the breeze overhead. The best way to soak up the charm of the old town is to explore it on foot -- in fact, finding parking in the old town can be next to impossible and taxis are plentiful, so many visitors don't bother with cars at all. While it's technically made up of different neighborhoods like Olas Altas and the Zona Romantica, each quickly blends into the next, and the entire cobblestoned area is typically referred to as Old Vallarta, the old town, or simply El Centro. The Zona Romantica sits at the southern end of the old town and is home to a lively gay nightlife scene, which has helped to put Puerto Vallarta on the map as Mexico's gay vacation capital. It's hard to walk far without stumbling across margaritas, cerveza, and buzzing nightclubs.

No visit to Puerto Vallarta would be complete without a stroll up El Malecon, the pedestrian promenade that runs along the ocean for nearly the entire length of the city. Starting as a planked sidewalk on Playa Los Muertos, one of the city's most popular public beaches, it stretches north for over a mile, growing into a wide, paved boardwalk full of shops and restaurants. One of the liveliest parts of the city, it's also one of the most touristy, but the sights are worth it. The northern end of El Malecon is dotted with contemporary sculptures and evening food vendors, where locals mingle with visitors to line the shore and take in the city's breathtaking sunsets. The nearby Parish of Our Lady of Guadalupe church is one of the city's landmarks and worth a visit.

And, of course, there's the food. Mexico's street food culture is a live and well in Puerto Vallarta, with taco stands dominating the scene. Every local seems to have his or her favorite, and there are some permanent taco joints that see visitors waiting in lines around the block. Seafood is also in high supply here, caught fresh daily and delivered straight to the city's many restaurants. Be sure to wash it all down with some Mexico's famous tequila -- there's always plenty on hand.

The waters of the Bay of Banderas are popular for various water sports and snorkeling. A particularly great spot for the latter is Los Arcos national park to the south of the center. For those who prefer a dose of retail therapy, Isla Río Cuale, set on a small island in the middle of the city, is a great place to pick up local handicrafts and one-of-a-kind souvenirs. There are also a number of art galleries selling beautiful and unique pieces (just browsing is also fun). As with most beach

destinations, there are always plenty of vendors pushing their wares along the shore.

While Mexico has seen some increasingly bad press and more travel warnings in recent times, Puerto Vallarta remains one of the safest parts of the country. Travelers should exercise common sense as they would anywhere else in the world, but visitors to Vallarta typically see little in the way of crime. Locals tend to be very friendly and helpful, and most of them speak English. As an added bonus, the cost of lodging, eating, and drinking tend to be rather low by North American and European standards. With a little street sense, a Vallarta vacation should be one of happy memories.

### **Where to Stay**

For a relatively small area, Puerto Vallarta offers a wide variety of lodging types, ranging from budget hotels to luxury resorts. While the town itself is rather contained, hotels extend far to both the north and the south along the Pacific coast. Guests who want to be in walking distance of all the top sights might prefer mid-range boutique hotels in the center of the old town, like Villa Mercedes Petit Hotel. Most of the hotels in the center are not directly on the beach. One exception is in the Zona Romantica, which is home to several beachfront properties that cater to LGBT clientele, like the mid-range Blue Chairs by the Sea Resort and the more upscale Almar Resort Luxury LGBT Beach Front Experience, both of which feature private beach clubs.

Guests who want the full beachfront resort experience while still being a short drive from downtown might want to look to the Hotel Zone just north of downtown, which offers easy access to the airport and features retail mega-chains like Sam's Club and Walmart. More beachfront properties are located a 10- to 15-minute drive south of downtown. Here guests will find plenty of upscale options, from beautiful and unique boutique hotels like Casa Karma or Quinta Maria Cortez, to all-inclusive mega-resorts like the Grand Fiesta Americana Puerto Vallarta. This southern area is known for memorable snorkeling at Los Arcos national park and is a great spot for seasonal whale watching.

Another popular area for mega-resorts is Nuevo Vallarta. Not technically part of the city, Nuevo Vallarta is dominated almost entirely by resort properties, many owned by the Vidanta resort group, like the Grand Mayan Nuevo Vallarta Resort. While Nuevo Vallarta offers plenty of space to build all-inclusive resorts with massive pool complexes, huge stretches of beach, and numerous restaurants, its biggest drawback is that it's a 30- to 45-minute drive from downtown and the city's top sights. It also offers a lot less in the way of authentic local charm than the various areas of Puerto Vallarta -- there's not a lot to do or see outside of the resorts themselves. The airport is about 15 minutes away by car, which is a plus. A handful of similar resort properties can be found in the Marina Vallarta area, which is just a few minutes from the airport and a short drive from downtown.