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A VERY VALLARTA ADVENTURE

The Authentic Mexico Experience

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22 FEB 2017: Chef Mikel Alonso is sporting a criss-cross yellow safety harness, as we all are. A crane lifts the entire table: chef, assistant, servers and twenty-two diners, 45 meters into the air, above

the golf course at Casa Velas Boutique Hotel in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. The occasion is Gala Vallarta, the annual tourism get-together, and this evening's event is Dinner in the Sky.



Before lift-off, the ground crew checked our safety belts and straps for a 3rd time because once airborne, there would be nothing beneath our feet but the fairway of the 10th green, 150 feet below, as we sipped tequila amongst the twinkling stars of the night sky, above.

But two stars stood out that night. One star was the award-winning chef of Mexico City's Biko restaurant, who had been brought to Puerto Vallarta for the occasion. The other star was unquestionably the city of Puerto Vallarta (PV) with its simple but captivating theme of authentic, friendly Mexico.

Chef Alonso told us that "Saliva is the boss" when it comes to making someone happy. "A person that lives in Mexico City does not have as much saliva as one who lives in Puerto Vallarta where electricity charges the mind and produces endorphins that are the drugs of happiness and trust"

And the descriptive expression "Very Vallarta" was explained to me by none other than Mayor of Puerto Vallarta himself, Arturo Davalos Peña, who listed the city's bounties and benefits as: the mountains, ocean, beaches, river, weather, real

Mexican food, romance, dedicated tourism infrastructure, connectivity to Canadian, American and International cities (the direct flight from Helsinki to PV is the latest), the fact that most Vallartanese speak English, and the safety of the destination. Peña noted that the city offers truly authentic Mexican experiences and that even more important, “Very Vallarta” equates to “friendly people who smile in your face”.

Augustin Alvarez Valdivia, the director of the Tourism Board talked about the local phrase, “Are you Vallartanese or are you just living in Vallarta?” The rhetorical question refers to an innate sensitivity toward tourism that “is in the blood and in the blood of several generations”. It relates to the fact that Puerto Vallarta was not created to be a tourism destination (as Cancun was) but evolved from accommodating the needs of the shipping, agriculture and mining industries. “Vallartanese already had the mentality of service” Valdivia said, and today this is reinforced by the fact that 98.3% of the economy relates to tourism.

Even a short stay at the destination shows off PV’s true colours. We stayed at the Villa Premiere, a Four Star, adult-only, ultra-friendly boutique hotel where General Manager Alessandro Stifani described the guiding principle of customer retention as “finding out the needs of our guests and acknowledging them as VIPs”. He related how one guest Tweeted that it was his birthday and the staff surprised the man by bringing a birthday cake down to the beach. The hotel is about half-way between the Port and the city, along the curve of Banderas Bay and only a 15 minute walk to the Malecon (the ocean-front boardwalk in the city) where both the day-life and night life are energetic and exciting.

Using the iconic Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the centre of town as the focal point to get our bearings, we explored the old city, the Romantic Zone, the busy pier and beach at Los Muertos and a few amazing restaurants. At La Cerveceria Union, the tacos de pescado--red snapper fried in a light tempura batter—is really tasty, and afterward at Los Muertos Brewing, we sampled all seven of their artisanal beers. Then it was a brief stop at Gringo Gulch to check out the house where Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton lived during the filming of “Night of the Iguana” in 1964. The story goes that Liz wanted to keep an eye on Burton and his co-star Ava Gardner.

On another day we visited Kevin Simpson from Thornhill, Ontario, one of the 20,000 expats who live in PV. Kevin owns Colectika, along with two other stores that showcase the indigenous artistry of the Wixarika (also known as the Huichol) and thereby help to preserve their traditional way of living, allow for better access to medical care, and provide the opportunity for tourists to take a piece of Mexico home with them. It’s all about facilitating a connection between the visitor and the destination.

A cruise on Bandaras Bay is an exercise in relaxation and fascination. Mike’s Charters and Tours offers a day trip that passes by the cruise terminal, follows the coast past the city and then south toward Los Arcos, the massive rocks that attract colourful fish, sea birds and snorkelers. The yacht continues down to Boca de Tomatlan, a secluded small beach and then on to Playa Las Animas. Here at Mike’s Beach Club we enjoyed an incredible lunch that featured the local version of Aguachile (shrimp ceviche with cucumber and

serrano pepper) and the specialty of the house, Zarendeado ('beat-up fish'): Red Snapper that's been fire-grilled with Achiote, the lipstick plant. As our server Oscar suggested, "you can feel the flavour; before you taste it".

There are a ton of special interests that can be explored in the PV area. One morning I joined the Vallarta Birders at the Botanical Gardens where, in two hours' time, we saw 20 different species. Afterward we toured the beautiful Gardens themselves. Other niche interests include adventure, shopping, history, culture, photography, music, the art scene, the LGBT community (the Gay Games take place in PV in 2022), beach and water activities, as well as one of the most renowned gastronomic enclaves in the country that features tantalizing cuisine, world-class chefs, craft beer, Mexican wine (try the Malbec), along with tequila and raicilla.

In keeping with the momentum of growth, exciting changes are in store for Puerto Vallarta next year.

The new Port Terminal (Puerto Magico), resembling a Hacienda Tequila, will be completed in March 2018, offering the public as well as cruise-bound tourists a number of experiences including mining, tequila-making, artisanal beers and shopping.

Two months later, the largest Aquarium in Latin America is scheduled to open.

And in late 2018, a new Highway will allow PV visitors to access the towns of Guadalajara and Tequila in a matter of 1 ½-2 hours, as opposed to the current 5-6 hour drive. These "Magic Towns" (there are 7 in Jalisco State; 120 in all of Mexico)

reinforce the 3 state icons: Tequila (the national drink), Charro (traditional horsemen) and Mariachi (the musical culture of Western Mexico), and allow PV visitors to enhance their overall experience in Western Mexico.

Above the kitchen at Tintoque, the restaurant where Chef Joel Ornelas creates his own magic with fusion-inspired dishes of old Mexico, a saying, painted on the wall, translates as “The best dreams are those that don’t let you sleep”; meaning, they excite you, get you thinking and stir up those endorphins that lead to happiness.

And that’s what we experienced every day in Puerto Vallarta!



Puerto Valarta