

Cross currents of Puerto Vallarta

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By Nancy Lazarus

On the taxi ride into Puerto Vallarta, the road surface quickly changed from smooth pavement to bumpy cobblestones as we passed from the Hotel Zone into the center of Old Town. We soon discovered that the steady sea breeze blowing across the Bay of Banderas was one of the only constants in this popular Mexican resort. Nicknamed "PV," it has long been a magnet for tourists, a haven for artists and American expatriates, and more recently is evolving into a meeting, incentive and luxury destination.

Puerto Vallarta's small-town yet festive atmosphere draws Mexican and international travelers to its Pacific-coast location. The city has preserved much of its colonial and artistic heritage in its older Viejo Vallarta district, while the newer Marina Vallarta development close to the airport contains high rise hotels and condos. A convention center is now being built nearby that will include extensive conference and exhibit space, a theatre, garden and outdoor area.

Villa Premiere Hotel & Spa, with a secluded setting not far from the lively downtown, allows guests to enjoy the best of both places. We stayed in one of the 83 oceanfront units furnished with contemporary Mexican décor. Situated on a broad stretch of beach with cabanas, the hotel's other amenities include three restaurants, two outdoor pools, a spa and gym. While Villa Premiere caters to adults only, it shares facilities with neighboring Buenaventura Grand Hotel, a 236 room property with more family oriented activities.

El Malecon, the bustling seaside promenade that runs through Old Town past shops, restaurants and hotels, is a few blocks south. Along the way are a series of bronze statues facing the water and sand sculptures that are candlelit at night. Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, with its distinctive crown, is the central landmark and is clearly visible on the skyline. Another unique locale is Rio Cuale, a narrow island bordered on both sides by a river. We wandered around its well-shaded outdoor market and visited the small archeological museum.

The Romantic Zone is just over the island's bridge, and there we found quaint streets filled with local boutiques selling handicrafts and jewelry, such as Lucy's Cu Cu Cabana. Playa Los Muertos, or "Beach of the Dead," is this area's main attraction. Despite its ominous name, it is quite alive with outdoor bars,

shacks, souvenir shops and vendors soliciting tourists, aka "amigos." Even the signs are designed to prompt a reaction, such as "Bar Los Burros: We dare you to come in."

While we did not dare venture into that bar, we did participate in the weekly Art Walk. This event takes place every Wednesday evening in Old Town and reinforces Puerto Vallarta's reputation as an artistic community. Sixteen galleries are open late and offer wine to passers-by. We strolled from one gallery to another and chatted with the gallery owners and exhibitors about their paintings and sculptures.

Puerto Vallarta's multitude of gourmet restaurants is another compelling reason to visit, and they serve not only traditional Mexican fare but also Mediterranean and Asian cuisines. A few of the restaurants we sampled during our weeklong stay have been around for decades, and all are highly recommended for their food quality, gracious service and colorful décor.

Outside Xitomates, the restaurant's guitarist lured us in to try the Mexican dishes and the "two for one" margaritas. We sat on the balcony overlooking the bay while we enjoyed the local red snapper "sarandeado" style. Trio Restaurant offers Mediterranean and Mexican inspired food in an elegant townhouse with fresh flowers and stained glass fixtures. There we ate flavorful salads and the trio of fish and seafood specialties.

Archie's Wok features colonial decor with Oriental style accents and has a garden with a fountain in back. Its appetizing Asian selections included Thai shrimp with pineapples, sweet and sour sauce. Daiquiri Dick's, with its casual atmosphere, has a patio bordering Los Muertos beach. This eatery serves fusion cuisine blending Mediterranean, Mexican and Asian ingredients along with its signature daiquiris and sangria.

Among all our dining experiences, Hacienda San Angel left the most indelible impression. Our evening adventure started with a rickety cab ride up the steep, narrow cobblestone streets in the Gringo Gulch neighborhood where American expatriates live. At first we found ourselves locked out, but nothing about the simple facade prepared us for what awaited us inside when the hostess eventually arrived. We had the feeling we had stepped onto a movie set from the colonial era.

This venue did have a Hollywood celebrity connection. Formerly known as Villa Bursus, it was named for its former residents, actor Richard Burton and his wife Susan. Now a deluxe retreat, its lodgings are comprised of five villas and ten suites. Here guests are given the utmost privacy while they enjoy luxurious surroundings filled with antiques, decorative tiles, statues and reflecting pools.

Hacienda's upstairs restaurant, now open to non-guests, is ideal for couples or small private parties. From its elevated location, it features a terraced outdoor pool and panoramic view of the city's lights twinkling below. Classic Mexican and international cuisine was served along with memorable music. On the night we dined there, a local Mariachi band serenaded us with group and solo performances, and it was a fitting finale to our trip.