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THE DRAW

- Charming colonial resort town on one of Mexico's largest bays
- Active art scene and above-average dining
- Activities ranging from snorkeling to soaring through the jungle canopy



THE SCENE

Film director John Huston and the attendant circus of *Night of the Iguana* put Puerto Vallarta on the map. The charm of the hillside, cobblestoned streets has attracted ex-pats for years. But Puerto Vallarta is also a popular vacation spot for sophisticates from Mexico City and Guadalajara, and it's one of the four or five best

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MEXICO CITY and Guadalajara, and it's one of the four or five best places in Mexico to acquire contemporary Mexican art. There are half a dozen top-flight restaurants to choose from, jazz bars and an upscale nightclub or two. These days Vallarta has crept both north and south along the Bay of Banderas (Bay of Flags), which is so large that the northern end is in a different state and time zone. The dry north is anchored by the exclusive Punta Mita (Four Seasons, private villas and more upscale resorts to come), and the cornice along the south ends in lush tropical forest, where the exclusive resorts of the Costalegre begin.

TO BE SEEN

- **Gringo Gulch**, the steep, narrow, cobblestoned streets on the hill behind town, where Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton blazed a trail for all future ex-pats. In fact, their old abode is now a B&B called Casa Kimberley. (www.casakimberley.com)
- **The Marianas**. Ecotour operators run day trips to these protected islands in the bay, where nesting blue-footed boobies and fantastic views of whales and dolphins are practically guaranteed.
- **Yelapa**. This small resort community-cum-oasis of peace is accessible only by boat. To get there, you must first drive along the cornice on Vallarta's lush south side, then hop a water taxi to Yelapa's shores. It's heaven, once the day trippers leave. Go for at least an overnight in one of the breezy ecohotels.

FOR THE VIP

- Vallarta Adventures (www.vallarta-adventures.com) operates charter flights to the once-only-reachable-by-car resorts to the south, including Isabel Goldsmith's Las Alamandas, Playa Rosa at Careyes and Cuixmala, the former estate of British industrialist Jimmy Goldsmith.
- Spend a day on the Four Seasons Punta Mita's private yacht, plying the waters of the bay amid whales and dolphins. You don't have to be a guest to go for a sail. (www.fourseasons.com)
- Take a day trip by air to Guadalajara for insanely good shopping, especially in Tlaquepaque.

OVERRATED

Downtown beaches. Surprisingly, Puerto Vallarta proper is hardly a good beach destination -- many of the area beaches are at the bay's center, aka the overdeveloped Hotel Zone. Most are brown, crowded and unappetizing, so those in the know stay at resorts or rent villas on either the northern or southern end.

UNDERRATED

Staying in town! Between the art galleries, restaurants and shopping, there's plenty to do if you're not totally fixated on being at the beach. At the antique-strewn 14-room Hacienda San Angel, high on Gringo Gulch, there are three swimming pools to choose from, and fabulous views of the bay that also include the distinctive bell tower of the main cathedral.

DON'T MISS

Monthly art gallery crawls. Every Wednesday night, October through April, some 20 of the city's top galleries are open in the evenings; many serve drinks to art-lovers. Most are run by ex-

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WHEN TO GO

Even die-hard Vallartans evacuate in the hot, humid and very rainy summer months. The best time to visit is October through May; the midwinter months are ideal, with warm days and cool evenings.

MEXICO DELUXE GUIDE »

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