

Puerto Vallarta



Set against a backdrop of verdant coastal mountains, Puerto Vallarta hugs a vast, glistening shoreline along the crescent-shaped Bahía de Banderas (Bay of Flags), one of the largest bays in the world. Millions of visitors come here each year to laze around on alluring sandy beaches, dine at slick waterfront restaurants and indulge in margarita-soaked revelry.

And with some of the best scuba-diving sites along the Pacific coast, dense jungles with cascading waterfalls, and remote beach villages only accessible by boat, it's perfectly understandable if you forget what your hotel room looks like.

Most of the action centers on the cobblestone streets of the historic center, where the Río Cuale (Cuale River) dramatically splits the town, known simply as 'Vallarta' or 'PV,' in two. There you can browse through contemporary galleries, take sunset strolls along the *molecón* (boardwalk) and shake your booty to electronica and pop tunes in rip-roaring discos.

Exploring beyond Vallarta's city limits pays big rewards. To the southwest are the aforementioned coastal villages, and in the opposite direction awaits Bucerías, with a surprising offering of international cuisine and cozy hotels. Further north you'll find quality R&R in the tranquil fishing village of La Cruz de Huanacaxtle, a town so chill it makes Bucerías look like a boomtown. On the northern peninsula, surfers flock to Punta de Mita to savor long breaks and easy living.

Outdoor activities abound in Vallarta: whale-watching excursions, horseback riding, sport-fishing, golf and scenic booze cruises – it's all here. Boredom is simply not an option.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Going primitive on the restful beach cove of **Playa Majahuitas** (p99)
- Catching a water taxi and chilling on the soft sands of **Yelapa** (p98) and **Quimixto** (p98), remote beaches only accessible by boat
- Dining and cherishing the diverse flavors of the charismatic **Zona Romántica** (p76)
- Rolling with the tranquil vibe and living the good life in **Bucerías** (p87)
- Plunging into the clear waters of **Los Arcos** (p65) and **La Corbeteña** (p65) and exploring a colorful underwater world at two of Vallarta's premier scuba-diving sites



■ AVERAGE JANUARY DAILY HIGH: 26°C | 78°F

■ AVERAGE JULY DAILY HIGH: 33°C | 91°F

■ TELEPHONE CODE: 322 / POPULATION: 220,000

HISTORY

Present-day Puerto Vallarta once belonged to pre-Hispanic Aztatlán, a term that refers to similar cultures that inhabited the region extending from Colima to Sinaloa. Archaeological evidence indicates that indigenous peoples had sophisticated agricultural techniques and were skilled ceramists. Historians know that Aztatlán flourished from around 900 to 1200, but little is known about its downfall.

Later came the so-called 'Banderas' (flags) era. Legend has it that in 1524 a contingent of 100 Spaniards led by Spanish conquistador Francisco Cortés de Buenaventura, the nephew of Hernán Cortés, found themselves in a standoff with about 20,000 Indians brandishing standards adorned with colorful plumage. The Spaniards were carrying a banner of their own bearing the image of the Holy Virgin. As the story goes, a ray of light miraculously struck the banner, casting a resplendent glow. Purportedly the natives were in such awe that they laid down their arms. At that point the area was christened the Bahía de Banderas (Bay of Flags).

In 1918 the settlement was named Vallarta, in honor of Ignacio Luis Vallarta, a former governor of the state of Jalisco.

Tourists started to trickle into Puerto Vallarta back in 1954 when Mexicana airlines started a promotional campaign and initiated the first flights here, landing on a dirt airstrip in Emiliano Zapata, an area that is now the center of Vallarta. A decade later, John Huston chose the nearby deserted cove of Mismaloya as a location for the film of Tennessee Williams' play *The Night of the Iguana*. Of his first visit, Huston later wrote: 'When I first came here, almost 30 years ago, Vallarta was a fishing village of some 2000 souls. There was only one road to the outside world – and it was impassable during the rainy season. I arrived in a small plane, and we had to buzz the cattle off a field outside town before setting down.' As production on the film commenced, Hollywood paparazzi descended on the town to report on the tempestuous romance between Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, and Burton's co-star, Ava Gardner, also raised more than a few eyebrows. Puerto Vallarta suddenly became world-famous, with an aura of steamy tropical romance.

