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# Puerto Vallarta

*The Jewel of the Mexican Riviera*

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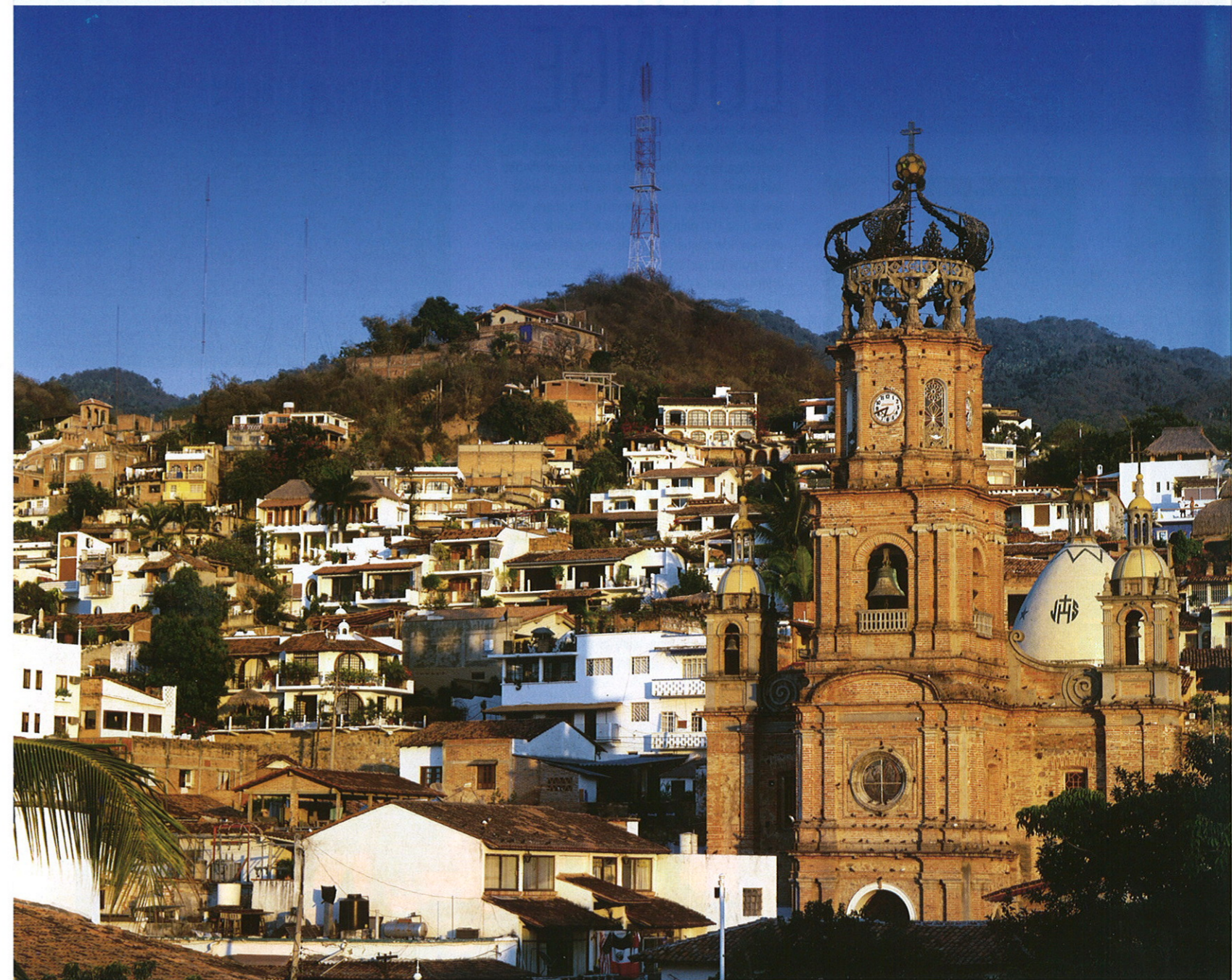
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# Puerto Vallarta

## Jewel of the Mexican Riviera

Bougainvillea, beaches and balmy ocean breezes  
make this the perfect spot for winter relaxation.

By **Nicole File**



**T**his is Puerto Vallarta: a world-class resort with the familiar friendliness of a small town, a quaint fishing village with first-rate amenities and activities, playground for the rich and famous and nursery for many of

the world's most beautiful species. It's no wonder Puerto Vallarta makes the travel itinerary for jetsetters from all over the world.

Ever since Academy Award-winning director John Huston filmed the classic *Night of the Iguana* here in the early 1960s, Puerto Vallarta has been known as an exclusive destination for stars and beautiful people, as well as a popular site for moviemakers. The world first learned of Elizabeth Taylor's love affair with Richard Burton when she followed him here for the filming of *Iguana*. Eventually, Burton would buy Taylor an oceanfront mansion for her birthday, and live next door to her with a convenient adjoining footbridge. In fact, Casa Kimberley (the twin mansions) and many of the stunning villas where jet-set celebrities and their friends have stayed are available to rent.

Two of John Huston's children, Danny and Anjelica, helped co-found the Vallarta Film Festival, a more relaxed alternative to Venice and Cannes. This year, the festival takes place from November 29-December 3. Since this will only be the fete's third year, the media hype and overzealous security are likely to be tempered. Instead, you might engage in conversations with screenwriters, directors, musicians and actors—some of them household names—from all over the globe. In addition, you'll enjoy a mix of releases from major U.S. studios, American independents and filmmakers from all over North and South America.

The Film Festival is just one reason November is one of the most active months in Puerto Vallarta. The afternoon temperatures hover around 85 degrees—perfect for enjoying the Festival de



las Artes, a month-long celebration of Puerto Vallarta's culture. Visitors can enjoy special art gallery shows and open-air, ocean-side theater performances. The city has a vibrant and eclectic art scene, and frequent Art Walks feature food and cocktails to those wandering from shop to shop in the evenings.

Since enjoying the local cuisine is as important as seeing the sights, Puerto Vallarta also hosts a Gourmet Festival. This 10-day bacchanalia features not only local chefs and specialties, but also guest chefs from some of the world's most renowned hotels, restaurants and resorts. Special cooking classes, sunset wine and tequila tastings, festival menus and elite chef's tables at the area's finest restaurants are just a few of this festival's highlights.

Another main attraction in November is the International Sailfish Tournament, when fishermen from around the world gather in gorgeous Banderas Bay to vie for one of the most prestigious prizes in the sport. Awards are given for catching the largest sailfish, marlin, dorado and wahoo, as well as First to Catch and various sub-categories. The registration fee includes an inaugural cocktail reception at the marina pier, dinner and the awards ceremony; this year's tournament takes place November 16-19.

While November is the busiest month for organized events, Puerto Vallarta's natural beauty and fine attractions mean there's plenty to do throughout the year. One of the main places to see and be seen is the Malecon—an oceanfront promenade lined with exclusive shops, restaurants and bars. Exquisite sculptures dot the walk, and visitors can sit alongside and watch the sun set over the sea. Local musicians stroll the Malecon, many of them entertaining bystanders with Mariachi music, which was invented right in Jalisco state.

One of the most notable sights in town is the Cathedral of Our Lady of Guadalupe, located in the town's main plaza. The red brick bell tower is

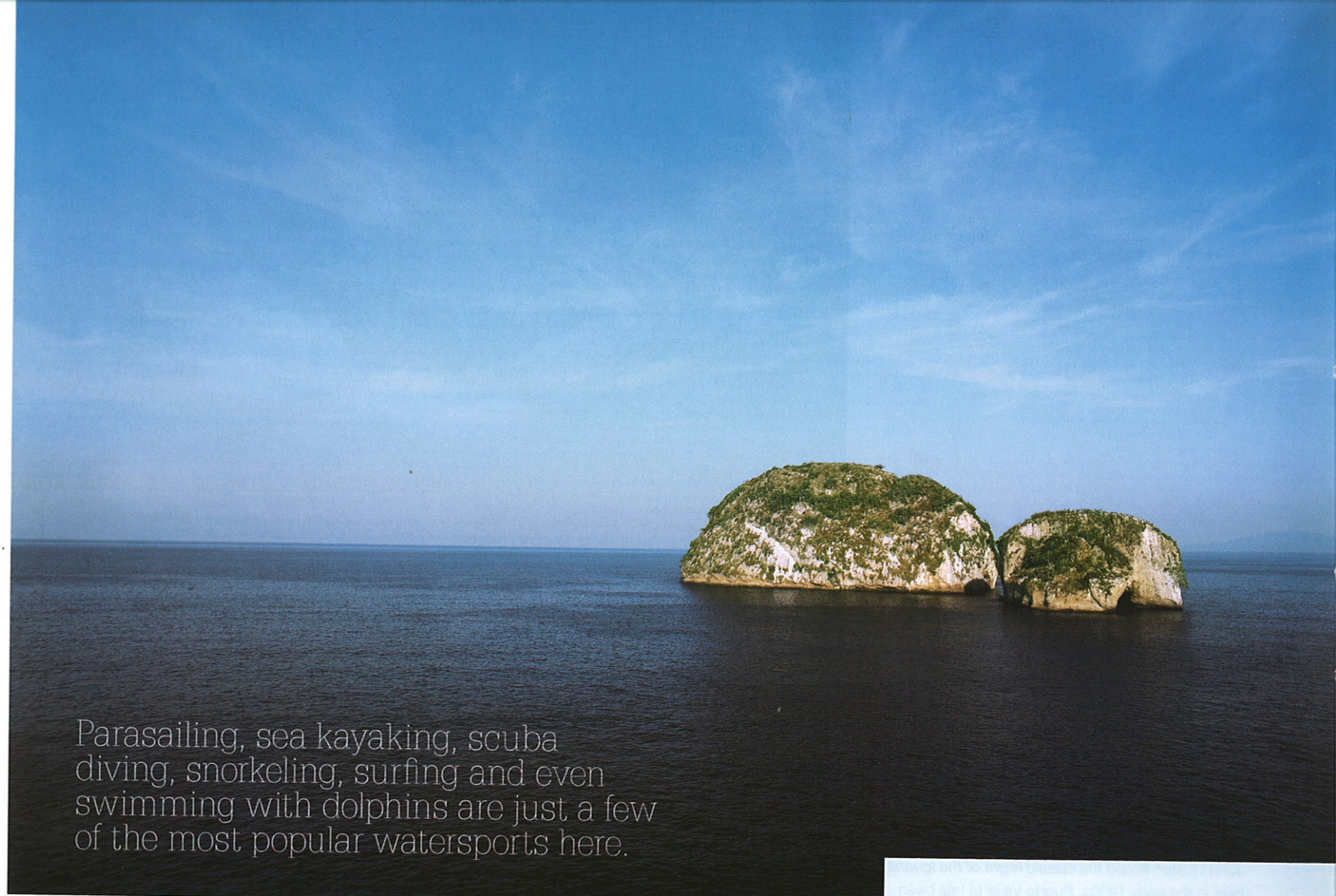


The jungles, tropical forests, marine preserves and other natural wonders here will take your breath away.

one of the most famous landmarks in Puerto Vallarta, and the crown that tops it is modeled after one worn by the 18th-century Mexican empress Carlota. The church is the centerpiece of a 12-day festival in honor of Mexico's patron saint, which takes place each December.

For a glimpse of Puerto Vallarta as you've seen it in postcards, visit the Zona Romantica, or Romantic Zone. Ornate scrolls of bougainvillea wind up and trail down the old, red-roofed buildings on winding, cobblestone streets. You can taste real Old Mexico in some of the restaurants here, or visit Los Muertos beach, where besides the usual ocean attractions you can find public Day of the Dead displays in the first days of November.

The jungles, tropical forests, marine preserves and other natural wonders here will take your breath away. One of the most renowned destinations, Los Arcos, is a natural phenomenon—an underwater series of rock formations that acts as a pristine marine nature preserve. The deep tunnels, caves and arches host a rainbow of sea life.



Parasailing, sea kayaking, scuba diving, snorkeling, surfing and even swimming with dolphins are just a few of the most popular watersports here.

Snorkelers might catch the luminous colors of damselfish, idolfish or chromis; or glimpse turtles, sharks, dolphins or even giant manta rays, whose wingspans can measure up to 30 feet across and are as harmless as their shadows.

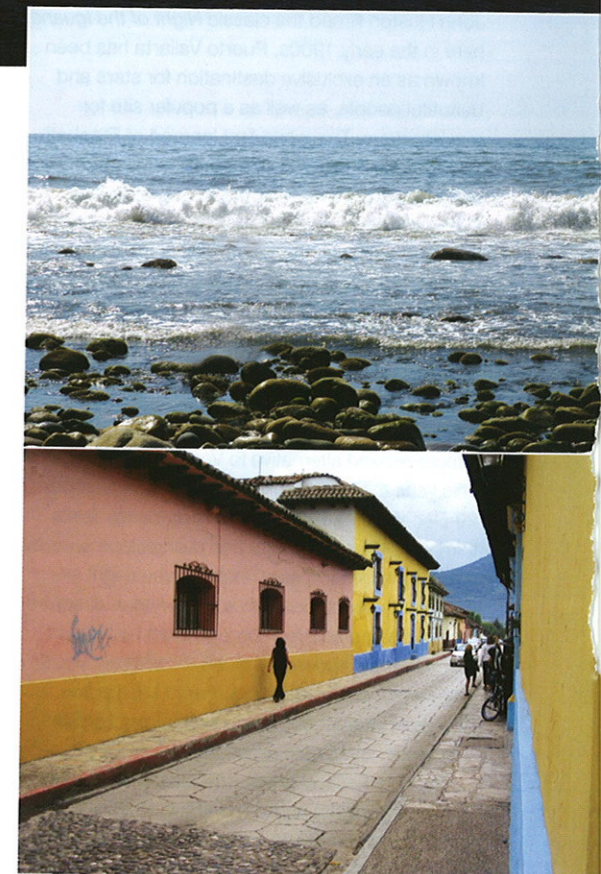
In fact, all of Banderas Bay—the horseshoe-shaped bit of Mexican coast that includes Puerto Vallarta—is a treasure trove of marine species. The area has been deemed one of the World's Most Beautiful Bays and is one of the deepest in the world. Those deep, calm waters make it one of the world's great marine nurseries. Humpback whales spend months here mating, birthing their calves, and teaching them the ways of the world. You can witness these gentle creatures by taking a whale-watching cruise. Sea turtles also lay their eggs on the shores each year, and Puerto Vallarta has set up multiple protected areas to shelter the young. When the eggs hatch—around this time of year—the little guys make their mad dash for the ocean. Visitors can join one of the sea turtle ecotours, which allow tourists to help protect the baby turtles from predators and other dangers, and help them reach the safety of the sea.

Needless to say, Puerto Vallarta is a hotbed of water activities. Parasailing, sea kayaking, scuba

diving, snorkeling, surfing and swimming with dolphins are just a few of the most popular watersports here. This coast is also an ideal one to learn to dive, with clear, deep water and professionals dedicated to keeping you safe without diminishing the intensity of the experience.

Besides the ocean, the area also boasts breathtaking tropical waterfalls. One of the most fabulous ways to see these is a horseback tour. A bilingual guide will take your group up jungle trails, past wild orchids and bromeliads, beneath chattering parrots and macaws, to some of the best falls in the area. You might even get a chance to swim in the cascade pools and sunbathe on river rocks.

If you enjoy nature in a slightly more refined form, try one of Puerto Vallarta's seven world-class golf courses. Golfers who prefer a more relaxed game will enjoy the Los Flamingos Country Club's wide fairways or the Vista Vallarta (which ranges from laid-back to harrowing). Meanwhile, even the most experienced player might lose a club or two at the Four Season's "Tail of the Whale". This 194-yard, par-3 hole sits on a small natural island also famous for its whale-watching. The undulating terrain is surrounded by rocky, sandy shoreline and the mother of all water hazards, the ocean.





After a day of hitting the links, exploring the jungles and beaches, shopping the exclusive boutiques, and enjoying fine dining, some might want to call it a night. If you do, you'll be missing some of the best action in Puerto Vallarta. From chic nightclubs to suave jazz venues, you can choose your scene and make a splash. Of course you'll want to start at Nikki Beach, where an enormous undulating sofa overlooks the ocean, allowing guests to recline on white pillows and sip specialty cocktails as intoxicating as the sea breeze. Once you get your second wind, you can club-hop until daybreak to the beats of salsa, Cuban and Peruvian music, mariachi, and even blues and disco.

Marina Vallarta is the most sophisticated area of the city, featuring attractions and accommodations for the most discriminating travelers. A 500-slip marina allows yachts of all sizes to dock by the dozen. Exclusive boutiques, an 18-hole-golf course and

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fine dining round out the experience. 110-foot El Faro Lighthouse offers a spectacular view of Puerto Vallarta, the Marina and Banderas Bay. At the base is an aquarium featuring hundreds of saltwater species; at the top, outdoor seating provides a stunning venue for enjoying contemporary music. And at the end of the day, you can close your eyes at one of the grand hotels or resorts, or at the private villa you've rented for your stay.



## Dia de los Muertos in Puerto Vallarta: Celebration, Not Sorrow

One of Puerto Vallarta's most important historic festivals, Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) honors late loved ones with a mixture of reverence and hilarity. The practice is believed to have originated more than 3,000 years ago among Mexico's pre-Hispanic residents. When Spaniards arrived about 500 years ago, they tried to stamp out the ritual, but it survives with the addition of many Catholic inflections. Dia de los Muertos lasts for two days, November 1 and 2—corresponding with the Catholic All Saint's Day and All Soul's Day.

During Dia de los Muertos, families hold graveside vigils or picnics, build lavish altars to deceased loved ones in their homes, and decorate graves with all the supplies needed for a success-

ful "vacation" from Mictlan, the Land of the Dead. November 1 is reserved for dead children, who are said to be guided home by the sweet smells of candy, honey and marzipan or bread baked in the shapes of skulls, skeletons and the like. Adults are honored on November 2, and their gifts include favorite meals, cigarettes, alcohol (especially tequila) and occasionally even Viagra. Flowers decorate cemeteries, especially marigolds, which Aztecs regarded as a symbol of death. Personal items of the dead are believed to help them recognize the celebration planned especially for them; so jewelry, photographs and treasured possessions are added to graves and altars. Favorite stories, especially humorous or ribald ones, are told in remembrance; and signs or letters are often left



graveside, highlighting a loved one's accomplishments, exploits and charms.

While most of these celebrations are private, tourists can take a bus to the panteon, or cemetery, and take in the sights. However, remember that photography or boisterous behavior may not be appreciated. For a more public display, head to Rio Cuale Island, which hosts a public exhibition each year, as well as a contest for the best art and calavera, or death-related decorations.