

TRAVEL

Nuevo Vallarta: A Paradise Escape in Riviera Nayarit, Mexico

Having spent a glorious week in Puerto Vallarta last year, I was anxious to explore what was touted to me as the *new* Puerto Vallarta. Nuevo Vallarta, just 16 miles north



Mira Temkin

of its more famous sister city, is a beach town in the state of Nayarit. This beautiful destination is filled with sprawling mega-resorts, four miles of fine sand beaches, exciting water sports, and lots of family activities. Wildlife

enthusiasts will delight in swimming with the dolphins, visiting a sea turtle reserve, or going whale watching. The area also boasts world-class golf, tennis, Splash Water Park, and two marinas. For those who can't stay away from traditional shopping, there's also the Paradise Village Mall.

The magnificent Grand Mayan complex served as our home for the week. With six pools, nine restaurants, immaculate grounds and our own two-bedroom condo, the Grand Mayan more than lived up to its name. A good part of my day was spent in the winding, lazy river where I could just float and soak up the warm Mexican sun.

Another part of the day was spent watching the craftsmen on the beach paint colorful people on wooden bowls. Yes, a few found their way back home. The resort also offered family-friendly activities such as the Fiesta Night, which featured Mexican cuisine and entertainment (all on the beach). We met tons of people from the Chicago suburbs here, quite a few with several generations in tow. Many were returning guests. I'm hoping to be among them. Grandmayan.com.

What I especially liked about the resort was that in addition to the various onsite dining choices, we could also walk to local favorites like Guido's Italian for pizza, Porto Bello's, and the marina's other fine restaurants. Worth the cab ride was Fajita Republic, with its colorful ambience and fabulous Mexican fare. Or La Laguna Tino's, an authentic Mexican setting by the lagoon with traditional music. And the food was excellent.

Las Caletas: (day) or night of the iguana.

Years ago, we took a shore excursion from a Holland-American cruise called "Rhythms of the Night." This exquisite evening took place at the former private island getaway of movie director John Houston, where he filmed *Night of the Iguana* with Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. It turned out to be one of the highlights of our trip. So I was delighted to



VALLARTA ADVENTURES

Las Caletas is a private island getaway, accessible by sea only, where you can go kayaking, snorkeling, and scuba diving.

discover that Vallarta Adventures also offered a day trip to Las Caletas.

The day excursion started at the pier, where we were entertained by playful dolphins. We boarded the boat for a glorious ride out to Las Caletas, a beach hideaway accessible only by sea. When we arrived at the island, there was a blackboard of the day's activities, including kayaking, snorkeling, and scuba diving. Before lunch, we took a cooking class as the chef whipped up seafood paella with fresh-caught fish and other natural ingredients. It was great fun to watch, and the recipe is available on their website. Lunch included a delicious buffet of salads, fresh fruits, and fabulous desserts. Then it was time for a nature walk through the jungle to learn about the flora and bird life that inhabit the island. And, oh yes, relaxing on the beach before heading back. You can also opt for a rejuvenating spa treatment in the Spa Center. Even the boat ride back was fun, with its seemingly endless supply of drinks and snacks; we even spotted a humpback whale or two. Day or night, visiting Las Caletas is like spending the day at your own private island. Vallarta Adventures is the number one tour company in the area, and I highly recommend them. Vallartaadventures.com.

Bucerias on the bay. We also visited the charming town of Bucerias, a quaint little fishing village that's just a short cab ride away. Friendly locals, beautiful beaches,

great dining, and art greeted us. We enjoyed walking through the streets and bargaining for souvenirs, noticing many cars with U.S. and Canadian license plates; always a good sign. We happened upon Encore, a beach-side restaurant. The food was wonderful, the staff were welcoming, and we took in the best views of Banderas Bay, to boot. Come for the live jazz Tuesday through Saturday nights. Encore makes a great evening out of it.

More beach towns. The gorgeous coastline of Nayarit is also home to many other beach destinations, including Punta Mita, and its elegant St. Regis and Four Seasons resorts. After spending a week here, I discovered that

Nuevo Vallarta is a little less crowded and more laid back than Puerto Vallarta. If you're looking for more hustle and bustle, Puerto Vallarta is about 45 minutes away; but, come back. Nuevo Vallarta is a great place to call it a night. Vallarta.com, rivieranayarit.com.

Mira Temkin is a Highland Park-based freelance travel journalist who has ventured across Europe and visited most of the Caribbean Islands. Her travel articles have appeared in the Chicago Tribune, Family Time Magazine and six-00-three-five magazine. In addition, she's the Chicago Upscale Travel Examiner for examiner.com. Reach her at miratemkin@gmail.com.



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