

TRAVEL

Puerto Vallarta: Where Mexico Comes to Life

If you're still looking for someplace warm to go for the holidays, Puerto Vallarta should be atop your list. Once a small fishing village on the shores of Banderas Bay, Puerto Vallarta



Mira Temkin

has grown into a vibrant resort town that refuses to forget its humble beginnings. From glorious beaches and gourmet dining to great outdoor adventure and fabulous shopping, Puerto Vallarta has more than enough to keep you busy – or happily doing nothing at all.

Having stopped in Puerto Vallarta on a Holland America cruise, I was anxious to come back and explore more. What I discovered on a longer visit is absolutely glorious 85-degree weather, a friendly and welcoming atmosphere, and an authentic Mexican experience.

Gourmet Cuisine on an International Stage.

While one would expect great Mexican fare, Puerto Vallarta restaurants have expanded their palate and are now recognized for their culinary expertise. And the annual Festival Gourmet International is a testimony to their international reputation in the culinary world.

One of the newest dining experiences is La Leche ® Almacén Gourmet. La Leche means "milk" in Spanish, and their all-white décor creates a singular and irreverent culinary experience in a monochromatic space. Chef Alfonso Cadena's cooking, which changes daily, is, in a word, superb. Everything embraces an element of surprise, like a delicious peach salad spilling out of a can...

No, wait, I don't want to spill any more secrets. But I will tell you some highlights on the menu include portobello veal shank and mahi mahi, fresh from the bay. Suffice to say,

there are many surprises, and you'll just have to enjoy dining here on your own. La Leche is conveniently located at the entrance of the Fiesta American Hotel in the downtown zone. Lalecherestaurant.com.

Take Three – Trio. A cosmopolitan restaurant where you'll really feel like you're in Europe, Trio Restaurant Bar Café is designed with the classic architectural influence of the European Art Nouveau. The warm, friendly atmosphere invites patrons to enjoy the "Mediterranean cuisine cooked with love." Dining is accompanied by a wide selection of international wines.

Trio uses the freshest local ingredients and Mediterranean touches hinted with Mexican spices. Though the menu changes seasonally, their signature dishes include seafood antipasto, braised lamb, and grilled sea bass. Homemade pastas and heavenly desserts are prepared daily.

Trio continues to dazzle food critics. Its culinary experiences, expressed with the pride and creativity of owners Chef Bernhard Güth and Ulf Henriksson, make Trio the pillar of fine dining in Puerto Vallarta.

During a recent chat with Güth, the chef mentioned he recently visited my town, Highland Park, to cook for the mayor. "Highland Park is a sister city of Puerto Vallarta," he says, proudly. Imagine that! For reservations, book online at triovp.com.

Other outstanding restaurants – Don't miss Chef Thierry Blouet's Café des Artistes, considered the best restaurant in town (cafedesartistes.com). Or enjoy fabulous cuisine, and a romantic serenade, right on the beach at La Palapa (lapalapapv.com).

Dining with the Kids. Many restaurants cater to families with special kids' menus that offer standard American fare, along with smaller portions of Mexican specialties. If your kids are game for fish tacos, let them try!

Pirates of the Bay – What a treasure! Here's something really fun for the whole family. This fabulous half-day tour includes buffet breakfast and lunch, pirate-show fun, and a treasure hunt on the island. The morning starts off at the Maritime Terminal, where we're greeted at the pier by Angie, our own personal pirate and server for the day.

After a breakfast buffet, we take off for seas unknown. The pirate show is very entertaining for adults and kids alike, with some stunts that took even me by surprise. We arrive at our destination, the Majhuitas Ecological Island, a secluded beach accessible only by boat. Here, the kids go on a treasure hunt, while the adults lay back and soak up the sun. After two hours (that go by too fast), we re-board the ship for lunch with more fun and games.

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