

36 Hours in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico

By ONDINE COHANE DEC. 22, 2016

With its inventive food scene, excellent beaches and “Night of the Iguana” mystique, the city makes the perfect weekend getaway.



A folk dancer performs along the streets of Puerto Vallarta's old town in front of the Church of Guadalupe. Danielle Villasana for The New York Times

Despite its reputation for numerous Señor Frogs and lowbrow all-inclusive resorts, Puerto Vallarta — and especially the older part known as Viejo Vallarta — was actually once one of the country's most glamorous getaways, with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton among the A-list fans. Now the destination is drawing a new set of stylish devotees for its vibrant local community and charming architecture, as opposed to the coastal towns built in the last decades just for tourists. Because of this authentic but still party-happy vibe and the excellent beaches, Puerto Vallarta has become one of the country's preferred getaways, both for snowbirds and for visitors looking for a long weekend escape. But it is not just sun and sand that make “P.V.” (as it is known locally) a draw, but the new generation of shops,

restaurants and galleries that have grown up in the old town's storefronts. A growing food scene, including hole-in-the-wall taco spots and new restaurants with up-and-coming chefs, makes it one of Mexico's best eating cities. And with a plethora of gay bars and clubs (and a four-year-old Gay Pride event), the city has the deserved reputation for being one of the most L.G.B.T.-friendly destinations south of the border.

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Friday

1. FISH TALES, 3 P.M.

You would be forgiven for missing this small restaurant opposite the airport, tucked behind the pedestrian bridge over the highway, but not to go inside [Tacón de Marlin](#) for a midday snack would mean losing out on one of the city's culinary highlights: the smoky, juicy, overstuffed marlin tacon (a type of grilled taco; 78 pesos, about \$3.85), the joint's centerpiece. Local residents and city insiders congregate to pay homage — and the mix of Mexican gauchos in cowboy hats, tanned surfers, wizened gringos and culinary-minded travelers provide a quick snapshot of Puerto's particular mix.

2. SUNSET SAUNTER, 5 P.M.

The port and El Malecón, the ocean boardwalk that runs along the Pacific (with postcard-worthy views of the water and Sierra Madre behind), have been a destination for tourists and residents since the 1930s. But a \$2.4 million renovation in 2013 took it from seedy to sleek. After checking out the new pier and overlook, head to [Cuates y Cuetes](#) for a margarita under its dried corn husks. “Happy hour” actually seems to run most of the day, but it’s the preferred spot for expats and locals for a sunset drink, or two. Meanwhile, the new [Cervecería Unión](#) offers a large selection of local craft beer from microbreweries in a large airy space with ceiling fans. Try the Calavera, a stout from Tlalnepantla, along with delicious briny local oysters.

3. HOLLYWOOD WATTAGE, 8 P.M.

When John Huston filmed “The Night of the Iguana” on the coast nearby, he put Puerto Vallarta on the celebrity map. One of its high-wattage stars, Mr. Burton, had a passionate affair with Ms. Taylor, while both were married to other people — so it was perhaps inevitable that Puerto Vallarta became associated with one of the most famous love affairs in the world. One of the shrines to their romance is [Casa Kimberly](#), a present from the actor to Ms. Taylor on her 32nd birthday. The icon was recently reimagined as a nine-suite boutique hotel, with a restaurant and tequila bar, the Iguana. Try the octopus, scallop and shrimp ceviche (236 pesos) and grilled sea bass with hibiscus and chipotle, alongside a top-shelf tequila or mezcal, before checking out the Puente del Amore (Bridge of Love) that connected Ms. Taylor’s digs to those of her paramour across the road.



Preparing oysters at Puerto Vallarta's Cerveceria Union. Danielle Villasana for The New York Times

Saturday

4. ALL TO MARKET, 10 A.M.

Farmers' and crafts markets have popped up recently in towns along this coast, and Saturday morning brings vendors to Lázaro Cárdenas Park in Puerto Vallarta for their weekly turn. Organic Mexican coffee, local jams, freshly baked bread and small artisanal producers, who sell everything from hand-woven bags to jewelry, are among the draws at the open-air stalls all grown, made or produced within 47 miles of the [Old Town Farmers Market](#) .

5. FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS, NOON

Although most visitors to town concentrate on the beachfront, Viejo Vallarta is a charming mix of cobblestone streets and colonial architecture, dotted with cafes, restaurants and boutiques. Start your day with a visit to its centerpiece, La Iglesia de Guadalupe, the Church of Guadalupe, with its beautiful domed tower — replaced after an earthquake in 1995 with a new one by the Jaliscan artist Carlos Terrés. Across the street, the new

cafe [Salati](#) offers delicious and purifying fresh juices served in Mason jars in a cute Williamsburg-like space.



Swimming near Puerto Vallarta's new pier. Danielle Villasana for The New York Times

6. ARTISANAL TREASURES, 2 P.M.

As Puerto Vallarta concentrates on transforming its image away from a more kitschy reputation, small boutiques among the storefronts have started to take up a “Made in Mexico” ethos. Ponciana Boutique, for example, offers everything from locally made tequila glasses to Oaxacan textiles, while [Banderas Soap Blends](#) has organic coco and hemp oils, as well as scented body creams — perfect gifts to take home.

7. CONTEMPORARY SENSATION, 5 P.M.

When the [OPC gallery, Oficina de Proyectos Culturales](#), a nonprofit, opened in 2014, it brought a new seriousness to the art scene here, with museum-quality exhibitions and a cultural counterpoint to the city’s more

touristy reputation. Curated by Pilar Pérez (formerly the curator of Track 16 in Santa Monica, Calif.), past exhibitions have included a retrospective on El Nopal Press (a publishing house that concentrates on fine art prints that address social issues that cross between Los Angeles and Mexico City) and a show devoted to the missing university students whose unresolved mass kidnapping in 2014 in the Guerrero province galvanized the country.



Dining at Cuates y Cuetes, a popular spot for a drink at sunset. Danielle Villasana for The New York Times

8. FARM TO TABLE, 7 P.M.

A network of smaller, family-run restaurants is springing up in the old town, testament to a growing local foodie scene. One of the new entrants, [Tre Piatti](#), was opened by an American couple who are chefs (they met at San Francisco's Quince). The menu changes every two weeks but always with an Italian focus, and the fresh pasta, like Gorgonzola ravioli with fig compote, local vegetables and desserts like blueberry tart, have made the spot a standout. Dinner for two costs about 1,600 pesos without wine. [El Campanario](#), on the other hand, is an example of how simple Mexican food can be transportive — don't miss the pozole, a thick corn soup with pork, lime and tortilla strips. Dinner for two costs about 150 pesos.

9. AFTER HOURS, 10 P.M.

El Patio de Mi Casa is where hipsters gather in a terraced space for live music and artisanal cocktails like Ginger Verde: a frozen drink with mezcal, orange, ginger and basil and a slight touch of honey (75 pesos). [El Solar](#) is a preferred local spot for dancing by the beach, with D.J.s on Friday nights, live gigs Saturdays.



A mariachi band plays for beachgoers in front of Puerto Vallarta's pier. Danielle Villasana for The New York Times

Sunday

10. BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS, 10 A.M.

Off-duty chefs, artists, local families and Puerto Vallarta insiders head to [Coco's Kitchen](#) for brunch. Join them in the courtyard garden over a plate of huevos rancheros, French toast stuffed with queso and marmalade, and churro hot cakes, with a cup of café con leche (450 pesos for two).

11. SUNDAY AT THE BEACH, NOON

On Sundays, many shops, restaurants and galleries close for their day of rest, making it the perfect day to check out one of the pristine beaches, a short boat ride, or hike, away. [Ocean Grill](#), close to Boca de Tomatlán, offers a free boat service for guests who reserve for lunch — and has a private beach for swims before and after your meal — which might include mahi mahi and the restaurant's signature margarita for about 1,000 pesos for two. Even more secluded, [Casitas Maraika](#) serves ceviche and mean cocktails like Bloody Marys with a Mexican twist, while overlooking a perfect stretch of sand and aqua water. Lunch is about 600 pesos for two.

Lodging

Owned by the Mexican architect Oscar Moran, **Villa Mercedes Petit Hotel**, hotelvillamercedes.com, near El Malecón, comes with an airy courtyard, cute and well-priced rooms and a bohemian vibe (double from \$89; children not allowed).

The new nine-suite **Casa Kimberly**, casakimberly.com, housed in a Puerto Vallarta landmark, also offers a tequila bar and restaurant (doubles from \$290 to \$1,125).