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MELANIE HAIKEN, MARCH 2020

As wisps of clouds float across the sky like fluffs of pink cotton candy, I wonder what it is about Puerto Vallarta sunsets that makes them so vivid—and so absurdly photogenic? Maybe it's the way the rainforest-covered Sierra Madre mountains enclose Banderas Bay, outlining the flaming sky as if in a picture frame. Or maybe it's simply that there's nowhere I feel more relaxed, more attentive, more able to enjoy the moment. Of course, it doesn't hurt that tonight I'm on a boat, mint-infused mojito in hand, watching the glistening backs of bottlenose dolphins arc from the water alongside the prow.

We're on an evening cruise bound for the Robinson Crusoe-like cove of **Las Caletas**, a hammock-studded crescent of golden sand accessible only by boat that was once the private hideaway of film director John Huston, whose 1964 movie *The Night of the Iguana* put Puerto Vallarta on the tourist map. **Vallarta Adventures** leads daytime excursions here, featuring a menu of activities from snorkeling to ziplines to spa treatments, but we're here for **Rhythms of the Night**, a lantern-lit spectacle created by Cirque du Soleil cofounder Gilles Ste-Croix and designed by Oscar-winning art director Eugenio Caballero. Based on the Aztec creation story *Legend of the Five Suns*, *Savia* dazzles with ribbon-dangling aerialists and torch-spinning contortionists, after which we dine by candlelight on fresh-grilled marlin and the traditional cinnamon-spiked rice pudding, *arroz con leche*, before slipping back across the water under a cover of stars.

The next day, I opt to go as local as I know how, tagging along with **Vallarta Eats** to some of Old Town's most popular taco trucks and local lunch stops. After a lesson in just how spicy some of the sauces in those squirt bottles can be, I embark on a newfound love affair with *birria*, Jalisco's traditional goat, pork or beef stew, served in the crispy tortillas known as *tacos dorados*. (**Vallarta Food Tours** offers a nighttime taco tour that's equally fun and a great way to see downtown come alive at dusk.) Then it's down to the **Malecón** to saunter along the promenade, where young couples lounge on the steps of the Los Arcos bandstand and children peer, shrieking, into fishermen's buckets. I finish my stroll at **Los Muertos Pier**, rebuilt in 2013 to end in a dizzying modern spiral that offers yet another Technicolor sunset view.

I've planned my trip to include a visit to sleepy **San Sebastián del Oeste**, 5,000 feet up in the mountains and designated a Pueblo Mágico and a tentative UNESCO World Heritage Site. Founded in 1605 and once home to 20,000 people, the city was all but abandoned when wealth from nearby silver mines played out, leaving behind a treasure trove of Spanish colonial architecture. Meandering San Sebastián's hacienda-lined cobblestone streets and ficus-shaded plazas is as soothing as walking a labyrinth, and by the time I arrive at the blue-domed cathedral, I'm ready for a cold drink at **el Fortín**, one of the cafés on the plaza. It's also a chance to sample the local specialty of

huiltacoche, a purplish-black fungus sometimes called “corn truffle,” stewed with onions.

On my way down the hill, I peer over whitewashed adobe walls into secluded courtyards, wishing I’d booked a night at one of the boutique hacienda hotels so that I could experience the timeless quiet of a town steeped so thoroughly in the past. Instead, I stop at the **Mirador La Bufa** overlook and watch the lights of Puerto Vallarta wink on, far in the distance. I’ll come back, I tell myself, thinking of what John Huston once said about Puerto Vallarta to *Vogue* magazine: “I have no idea how I got to this point in my life, but I am happy to have arrived precisely here.”

Where to Stay

Mindfulness comes naturally at **Marriott Puerto Vallarta Resort & Spa**, whether you’re swinging in a basket chair in the open-air tequila bar or enjoying a Huichol-influenced fire opal massage in the 22,000-square-foot Ohtli Spa. For sunset-watching solitude, choose a suite with a private pool at nearby adults-only **Casa Velas**, or sleep in Spanish colonial splendor high on the hill above Our Lady of Guadalupe Church at **Hacienda San Angel**, the former home of actor Richard Burton.

Where to Eat

Come to **El Arrayán**, named for the sweet-sour fruit that drops from a tree in the courtyard, for adventurous regional dishes like crispy cricket tacos and nopal cactus salad. **The Rooftop**, a bar at Hotel Mousai, has stunning 360-degree views and makes the best marlin tacos in town, and no one does birria dorado like **Tacos Chanfay**.



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