

# Top Things to Do in Puerto Vallarta

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The sun-soaked Pacific paradise of [Puerto Vallarta](#) calls out to outdoor enthusiasts, with its palm-fringed emerald coves, thrilling wildlife-watching opportunities and delightfully walkable downtown. Top that off with buzz-worthy cuisine, loads of public art and Mexico's most accessible and relaxed LGBTQ scene and you'll see why this is one of Mexico's most popular [beach destinations](#). Here are some of the best things to do on your next visit to Vallarta.



Living the beach life at Yelapa, one of the southern beaches ©karamysh / Shutterstock

## Bask on the southern beaches

Vallarta's southern beaches hug a spectacular jade-green coastline, dotted with secluded coves, making this an ideal spot to get away from big city life. One of several lovely coastal hamlets, [Yelapa](#) has fine sandy beaches and jungle trails leading to quiet hillside B&Bs and a cascading waterfall. It's a great alternative to the busy beaches in town. Most visitors reach the coves around Puerto Vallarta via water taxis departing from Playa de los Muertos pier.



Playa Escondida, the hidden beach on the Marietas Islands ©ferrantraite / Getty Images

## Discover the hidden charms of Islas Marietas

The secret is out about this national marine park's hidden beach (Playa Escondida appears unexpectedly, hidden inside a collapsed sinkhole) but these uninhabited islands also provide some of the best wildlife-watching on the bay. Sea turtles, rays and dolphins are easily spotted in the Marietas' pristine waters, while on land you'll see a variety of tropical bird species, including the charismatic blue-footed booby. To visit on a snorkeling, diving or kayaking outing, drop into tour operator [Vallarta Adventures](#) and see what is on offer.





Newly hatched baby turtles crawl to the surf ©irin717 / Getty Images

## Watch baby turtles make for the surf

If you've never participated in a sea turtle release you should definitely sign up for the thrill of watching tiny hatchlings scurrying into the ocean for the first time. Vallarta Adventures runs private tours to the nearby beach towns of [Sayulita](#) and San Pancho from August to December when the turtles are nesting, offering the chance to sit on egg-laying and chaperone hatchlings on their way to the surf, a truly timeless experience that will mesmerize [kids](#) and captivate adults.





The clear waters off Playa Majahuitas are great for snorkeling ©Avin77 / Getty Images /iStockphoto

## Explore an underwater world at Playa Majahuitas

Snorkelers rave about the clear, wildlife-rich waters at Playa Majahuitas, one of Vallarta's [best beaches](#). Visibility is excellent in this small protected cove, which teems with parrotfish and angelfish, and its tranquil golden sands make for a great escape from downtown. If you have your own snorkeling gear, water taxis departing from Playa de los Muertos pier will drop you at the beach; if not, numerous tour operators can kit you out with everything you need and ferry you to and from the cove.



The Zona Romántica is famed for its friendly gay scene ©Inti St Clair / Getty Images

## Fall in love with the Zona Romántica

Also known as Old Town, Zona Romántica is the center of the action in Puerto Vallarta. There's never a dull moment in this convivial neighborhood, crammed with pulsating bars and discos and stalls selling highly addictive street food. It's also the setting for downtown's best beach, Playa de los Muertos. Another huge draw for travelers is the hopping LGBTQ scene, with loads of fun, gay-friendly places to sleep, drink and socialize.

## Escape to San Sebastián del Oeste

For a change of scenery from the coast, rent a car and head for the cool climes of San Sebastián del Oeste, a centuries-old mining town perched 4855ft (1480m) above sea level. Half the fun is getting here, as you make stops along a winding mountain road for freshly made pastries and sips of *raicilla* (a mezcal-like agave drink). For an overnight stop, some intriguing former silver-mining haciendas offer rooms for the night.





Grown extensively in Jalisco, the spiny agave is the foundation for half a dozen Mexican spirits

©Matt Mawson / Getty Images

## Take an agave spirits tasting tour

You've heard of tequila for sure, but have you tried lesser-known distilled agave drinks such as *sotol*, *bacanora* or *raicilla*? A boozy 'Spirits of Mexico' session with the experts at [Vallarta Tequila Tastings](#) will allow you to do just that, as guides explain how to detect the subtle differences between half a dozen different agave beverages produced around Mexico.

## Soak up the green spaces of Vallarta Botanical Gardens

For a botanical garden experience like no other, head for the the tropical highlands of the Sierra Madre mountains and wander the well curated Jardín Botánico de Vallarta (Vallarta Botanical Gardens), home to one of Mexico's most extensive orchid collections and a tropical jungle's worth of native plants and birds. After peaceful strolls through the grounds, cap off the visit with a refreshing dip in the boulder-strewn river that winds around the gardens.





Scuba diving through the lush reefs of Los Arcos ©Inspired By Maps / Shutterstock

## Dive in Los Arcos National Marine Park

Revered for its iconic arched rock formations and deep waters that are alive with marine critters, Los Arcos is far and away the most popular snorkeling and diving destination in Puerto Vallarta. A must-see for scuba enthusiasts is Devil's Canyon, where you can hover above an abyss that drops an astonishing 550m (1800ft). Get to Los Arcos early to beat the midday parade of tour boats; [Banderas Scuba Republic](#) is one of several operators who can get you here.

## Surf the bay's northern coast

Ideal surf conditions on the scenic peninsula of [Punta de Mita](#) draw both beginner and intermediate surfers with the promise of long, rideable waves. Numerous surf shops offer classes and board rentals around the centrally located beaches of Playa El Anclote and Stinky's. Experienced boarders prefer to paddle out to the more challenging breaks at El Faro, La Lancha and Punta Burros.



Humpback whale breaching off Puerto Vallarta ©Gerard Soury / Getty Images

## Go whale-watching

If you're visiting from December to March, don't miss out on the chance to spot 30-ton humpback whales creating almighty splashes as they leap out of the sea. Tour company [Ecotours de México](#) runs four-hour whale-watching expeditions aboard boats equipped with hydrophones—underwater microphones that will let you listen in on the whales' mesmerizing mating calls.



## Take a coastal hike

Starting from [Boca de Tomatlán](#), a fishing village 16km (10 miles) south of Vallarta, a trail traces the coast to a string of quiet jungle-backed coves, some with shady seafood *palapas* (low-key cafes in thatched huts). You can extend the hike as far west as Playa Quimixto if you're up for a long hot walk. Buses to Boca de Tomatlán depart from the Zona Romántica at the corner of Constitución and Basilio Badillo.



The food of the Pacific Coast makes extensive, creative use of local seafood ©Lindsay Lauckner Gundlock/Lonely Planet



## Explore Vallarta's food scene

Vallarta's fabulous foodie scene will have you licking your chops with every mouthful. As well as ubiquitous street stalls slinging delectable fish and *birria* (goat) tacos, the city is chock-full of restaurants serving fresh seafood, traditional Mexican staples and innovative international fare. For the ultimate gourmet smorgasbord, [Vallarta Eats](#) runs themed food-focused tours, including a popular taco crawl.

## Discover art and crafts on the streets

Art is everywhere in Vallarta. Larger-than-life bronze sculptures dot downtown's esplanade, while beautiful sea-themed murals add color and character to the vibrant city center. The Centro is also known for its exceptional art galleries and craft stores—places such as [Galería de Ollas](#) and [Peyote People](#)—where you can buy unique ceramics and surreal and psychedelic bead and yarn art.

## Enjoy a relaxing Isla Cuale river walk

While exploring downtown, linger for a while on Isla Río Cuale, a traffic-free sandbar lined with shady rubber trees, riverside restaurants and stalls hawking everything from colorful Huichol crafts to touristy knick-knacks. On the island's east end, look for the tiled Iguana bridge and cross over to the upscale neighborhood of Gringo Gulch to roam the old stomping grounds of Hollywood celebrities.