

Fodor's Travel

21 Ultimate Things to Do in Puerto Vallarta

Beaches, hikes, restaurants, adventures in the jungle, and more—check out our best bets for one of Mexico's most exciting destinations.

Puerto Vallarta, located on Mexico's Pacific Coast, is not only an internationally famous vacation destination but is also widely regarded by many as the most liveable beach town in all of Mexico. Cobblestone streets meet modern luxury high rises, and the Malecon (boardwalk) runs past both new construction and charming authentic Mexican neighborhoods in what used to be a small Mexican fishing village. That all changed in the early 1960s when Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor brought international attention to the little-known Mexican town while brazenly carrying out their affair during the filming of Burton's *Night of the Iguana*.

Today, the friendly locals, well accustomed to mingling with visitors, are technically Vallartanese but are more commonly referred to as *pata salada*, or literally, salty foot. This is a term they embrace and are proud of as it indicates they are coastal natives.

Famous for its stunning beaches, nightlife, impressive nature, and of course, being in Mexico, delicious local dishes, Puerto Vallarta is a destination that offers something for every traveler. In this guide to PV (as it's often referred to by foreign visitors and the many ex-pats who reside in the beach town), here are can't-miss things to do to have the best vacation possible.



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Check out Puerto Vallarta's Beaches

You're in one of Mexico's best beach towns—you have to spend some time exploring the numerous beaches that make up Puerto Vallarta. Los Muertos beach is the most popular, as it's the most easily accessible—it's a short walk from the Malecon and littered with shops and restaurants. A short stroll from Los Muertos is Conchas Chinas. Conchas Chinas is considerably less crowded and you won't find nearly as many vendors, which makes it well worth the walk.

There are a couple of beaches that you'll need to hire a boat to get to: Quimixto, Las Animas, or crowd favorite Yelapa. If you make it to Yelapa, be sure to look for the women on the beach selling slices of homemade tropical pie. Many consider the trip to Yelapa beach worth it just for the pie, with banana cream being a favorite. But come early—pies sell out quickly, and when they're gone, business is done for the day.



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Explore the Malecon

Puerto Vallarta's pier and *Malecon* are both emblematic of the city. The Malecon, or boardwalk, stretches for a mile along the oceanfront and is filled with art, statues, shops, restaurants, street food vendors, buskers, sculptures, and the famous Puerto Vallarta sign. The majority (more than 80%) of the Malecon is pedestrian-only. You can find people strolling the Malecon any time of the day, but after sunset, the Malecon really comes alive. You can find locals and visitors sitting on the seawall or strolling hand in hand, stopping to buy *esquites* (Mexican Street Corn Salad) or cotton candy.



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Ride an ATV Through the Jungle and Across the World's Largest Suspension Bridge

One of the most adventurous tours in PV (booked through [Canopy River's website](#)) includes racing through the jungle on ATVs before crossing the world's longest suspension bridge. It sounds scarier than it is, I promise! There is also a stop midway for swimming and diving off rocks located next to a small waterfall, so be sure to bring your bathing suit.



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Zip Line Over the Jungle and Rappel Down Waterfalls

This full-day trip, which can be booked through [Vallarta Adventures](#), starts with a boat ride across the bay before you strap on your gear and ride a mule into the heart of the jungle to begin zip lining and rappelling your way back down to the base. You'll experience traditional zip lining as well as two new types of zip lining (roller coaster and surfboard), waterfall rappelling, jungle hiking, and even a water slide!

This tour isn't for those with mobility issues, and you'll want to be reasonably fit, but it will be some of the most fun you have during your time in Puerto Vallarta!



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Sunset Hike up to Mirador de La Cruz

One of the most popular things to do in Puerto Vallarta, and a great way to burn off some of those tacos and margaritas, is to hike up to Mirador de la Cruz, or the Lookout on Cross Hill. The hike is a bit grueling but doesn't last long, and you'll be rewarded with some of the best views in all of Puerto Vallarta. The stairs are steep and rustic at best, so this is another tour not suited for those with mobility issues, and again, you'll need to be reasonably fit.

There are several routes you can take, but maybe the most popular is starting from the Malecon, then following Abasolo Street straight up the side of the hill. You'll be able to see the lookout above you. Once up top, be sure to finish strong and climb the last several stories up the staircase to the top of the elevated platform for the best panoramic views.

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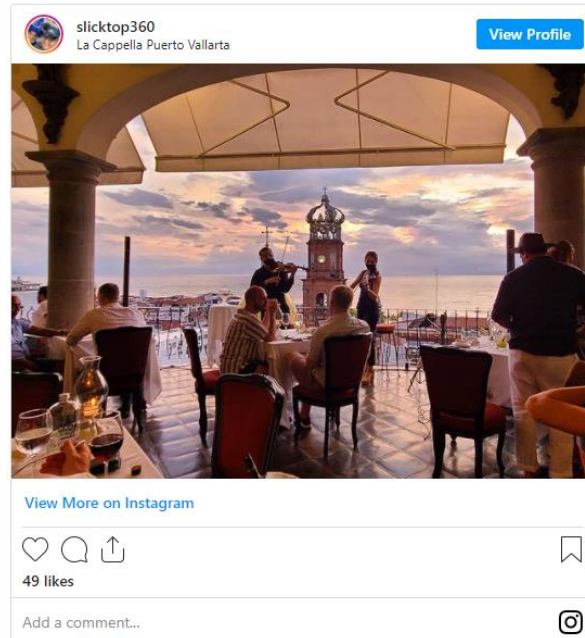


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Take a Walking Food Tour

Walking food tours are always a fantastic opportunity to get to know a new destination. It's a great way to get a feel of the city, try some of the best food in town, and get personalized recommendations from your guide for the rest of your trip. Make this one of the first tours you book, as it could help you structure the rest of your time in Puerto Vallarta. [Vallarta Food Tours](#) offers a great time learning about Puerto Vallarta through a culinary lens.

With a dozen different tours, you're sure to find one suited to you and your gastronomic interests. The original downtown tour spends a half-day sampling tacos, ceviche, typical Mexican drinks, chocolate, mole, and lots of other great dishes, all while learning about the fascinating history of Puerto Vallarta.



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Book a Sunset Table at La Capella for an Unforgettable Dining Experience

My favorite, number one, must-visit foodie find truly deserves its own place on the list. This is where I take all out-of-town visitors when they come to visit me in Puerto Vallarta. [La Capella](#) is an open-air fine dining restaurant with stunning views of Banderas Bay. The restaurant serves up modern Italian cuisine, and the food is good, sometimes very good, but the views and atmosphere set La Capella apart.

As the sun sets over the bay, talented violinists begin to play, making for an incredibly romantic setting. I have seen diners brought to tears simply because it's so beautiful. At the end of the evening, you're likely to see fireworks over the bay as there's usually at least one display per night.

Be sure to book a sunset table, and if you're in town for a birthday, anniversary, or you're planning on proposing—this is your spot. Reservations are required and can be made on [OpenTable](#).



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Explore Puerto Vallarta's Other Fine Dining Options

Puerto Vallarta has many other impressive fine dining restaurants to choose from. You can find everything from thoughtful tasting menus in gorgeous modern restaurants to gourmet dishes being served on the beach. Here are a few of my favorites:

La Palapa is famous for good reason. La Palapa has been around since the late 1950s, back when it was the first beach restaurant in Puerto Vallarta. I've never had a dish from their dinner menu that I didn't like (I don't love their breakfast menu as much), but standout dishes include the coconut shrimp, tuna tataki, grilled octopus, short rib, and lobster tail. Be sure to call for reservations, especially if you want a table on the beach. You can also book

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via [OpenTable](#), but I usually call to ensure I receive a table on the beach. Also, be sure to check out their wine menu; it's one of the best in the city.

[Tintoque](#) was recently named by a prestigious guide as one of the 120 best restaurants in all of Mexico. Tintoque is the only restaurant in Puerto Vallarta to be named in the guide. The chef is originally from PV, and that is reflected in his menu, demonstrated by the thoughtfulness of his menu choices. Tintoque has an a la carte menu, but I recommend you try the tasting menu.

[El Dorado](#) is the sister restaurant to La Palapa, featuring a completely different menu with the same incredibly high standards. Here you can also dine on the beach, but this menu features dishes such as lobster and bone marrow tacos, stone crab cakes, seared scallops, or a New York Strip steak with bacon-wrapped asparagus.



Spend the Afternoon at a Beach Club

Puerto Vallarta has a wide range of beach clubs, from simple plastic chairs on the beach to luxury clubs with bottle service and DJs playing international hits for guests. Los Muertos beach has a high concentration of beach clubs, but you can find beach clubs all along the oceanfront, with many restaurants offering chairs on the beach with the purchase of food or drinks.

Some of our favorites luxury clubs include: Sapphire, with beach access and a private swimming pool making this high-end beach club a popular option, and Mantamar, an adults-only luxury beach club most popular with LGBT visitors and locals. This is where you can easily run up an impressive tab splurging on cabanas, bottle service, and sushi platters while listening to DJs spin sets.

Casual club recommendations include: Ritmos/Green Chairs, which is the beach club I frequent most often. The service is good, the food is decent and affordably priced, and the drinks are strong. And El Solar, located on the opposite end of the Malecon, serves up impressive mezcal cocktails, and also delicious food from their sister restaurant Barracuda. You can often find DJs spinning here at sunset.

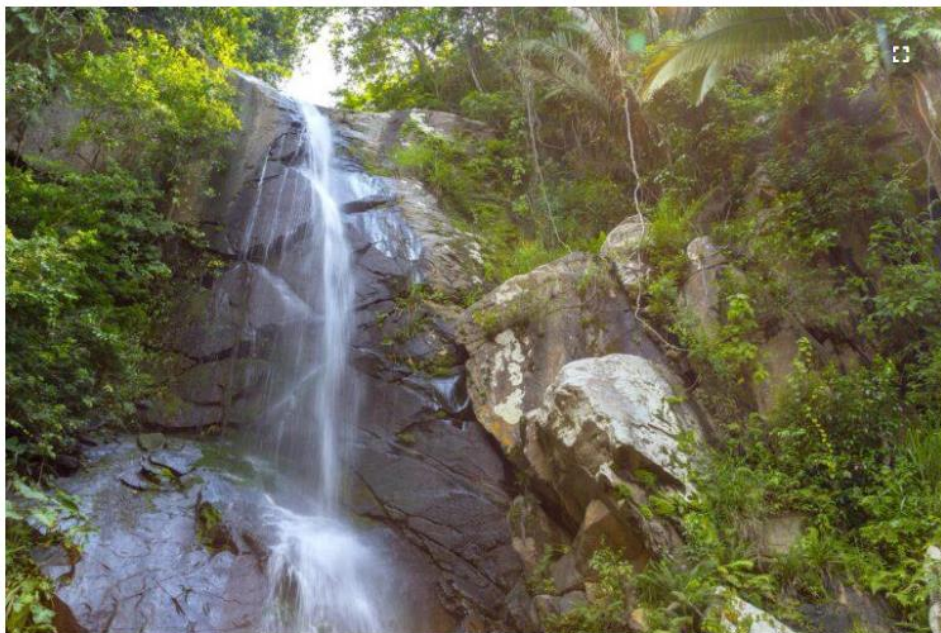


PHOTO: Nailoti Mendez/Dreamstime

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Book a Waterfall Hike

Puerto Vallarta is surrounded by some impressive waterfalls and one of the best ways to explore them is by booking a waterfall hike. Hikes range from a couple of hours to all day and are geared for various fitness levels. Be sure to check out the popular [Jungle Waterfall Hike & Swim](#) or [Hidden Beaches](#) tours. One of the best places to find hikes is by using [Airbnb Experiences](#)— a great way to support the local community.

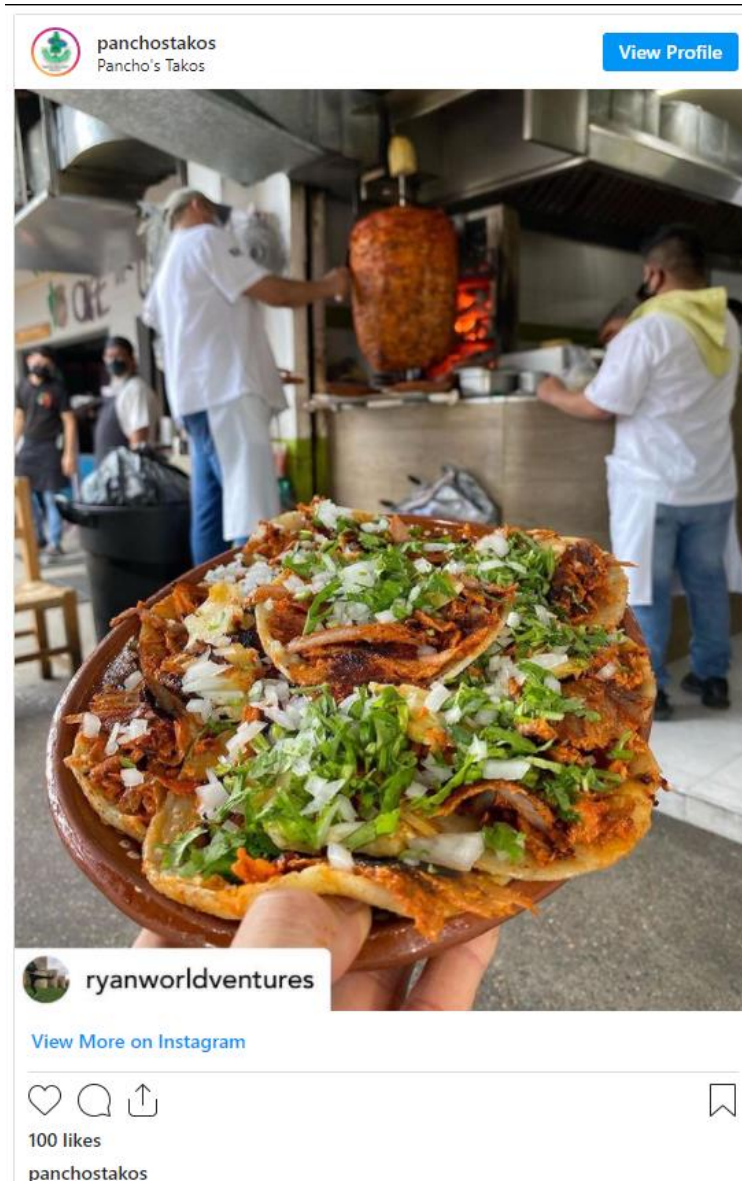


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Spend the Day at Las Caletas

Las Caletas is considered one of the best secluded beaches in all the world and is only accessible by boat. Once your boat arrives, you have a wealth of options to choose from: snorkeling, scuba diving, kayaking, standup paddleboarding, mezcal tasting, a cooking class, or you can find a hammock and do nothing. There are three beaches in total and a set of impressive water slides, or you can find a masseuse if you really want to spend the day relaxing. There are various activities aimed at children of all ages, making this

a great day trip for families. [Vallarta Adventures](#) has exclusive access to Las Caletas, so be sure to visit their website to book this tour.



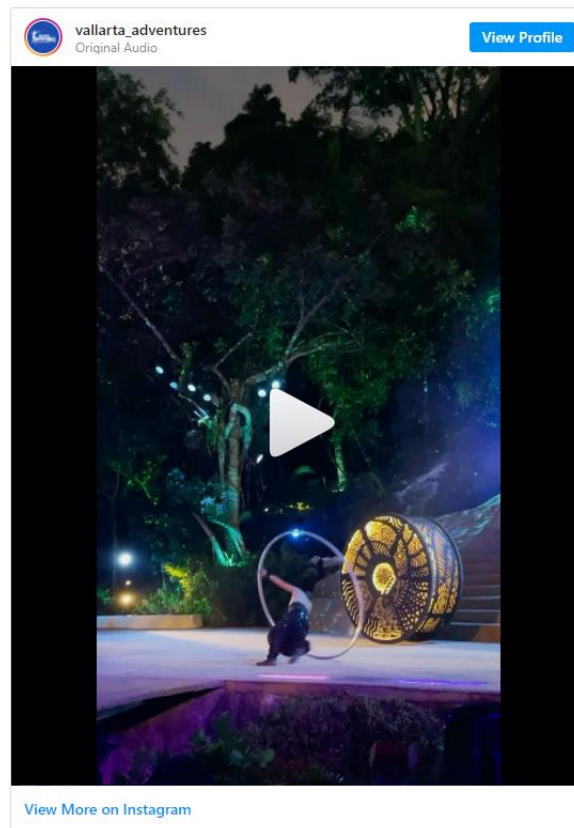
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Eat Tacos al Pastor Streetside From World-Famous Panchos Takos

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You can't come to Mexico and not have tacos from a street vendor. Puerto Vallarta has one of the most famous stands in all of Mexico: Pancho's Takos (yes, that's *takos* with a *k!*).

Come early or be prepared to get in line, and when it's your turn to order, ask for tacos al pastor, arguably the most famous tacos in Mexico. I like to get mine with everything (roasted pineapple, cilantro, and onion) before hitting my tacos with a squeeze of lime and adding salsa.



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Book a Sunset Cruise

Sure, it seems cheesy and a bit touristy, but Rhythms of the Night is one of the most popular tours in Puerto Vallarta. You'll travel by boat to Las Caletas beach to an amphitheater in the jungle for dinner before enjoying the show. Brought to life by one of the co-creators of Cirque du Soleil, the show is a cinematic interpretation of the Aztec creation story complete with music, acrobatics, and costumes.

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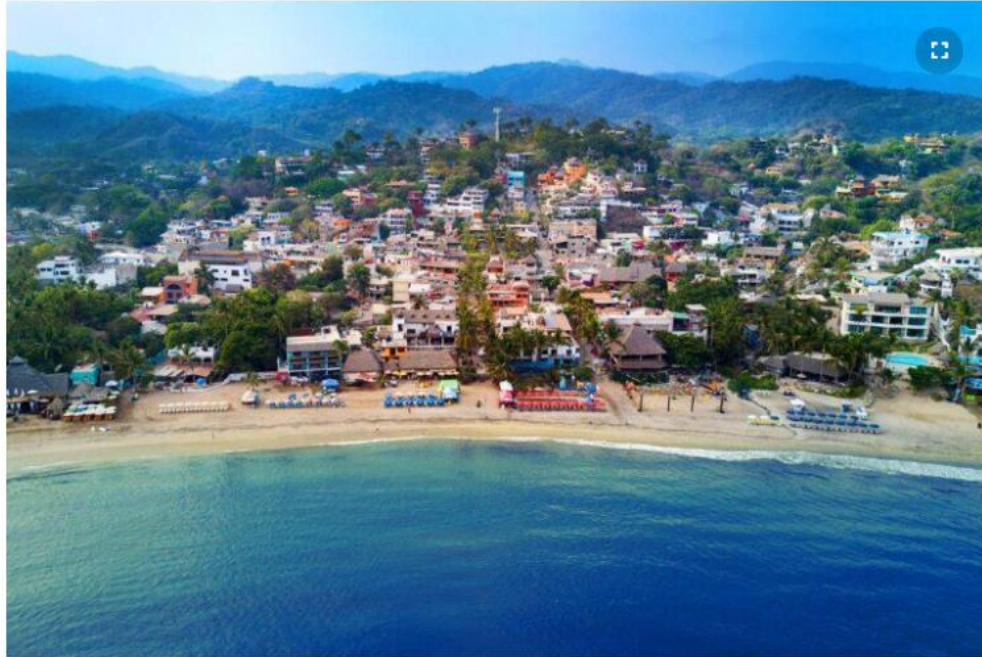


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Visit the Vallarta Botanical Gardens

About an hour outside of Puerto Vallarta, nestled in the Sierra Madre mountains, is an impressive botanical garden that makes for a perfect half or full-day family-friendly trip. The garden is full of native flowers, trees, and plants, including Mexico's most extensive collection of orchids as well as more than a dozen species of hummingbirds. You can visit on your own or arrange for a guided tour, with some tours including lunch.

Be sure to bring your bathing suit, as a mountain river flows through the gardens and you'll want to stay for a swim. You can hire a private taxi to take you, take an Uber there and arrange for a return time, or there is a local bus that will take you near, but not directly to the gardens.



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Visit the Nearby Surf Town of Sayulita

An hour north of Puerto Vallarta, in the neighboring state of Nayarit, is one of Mexico's most famous beach towns. Sayulita is worthy of more than a day trip, but if that's all you have time for, it's enough to let you get a feel for the laid-back surf town.

If you're a surfer (or aspiring surfer), you can rent boards directly on the main beach or visit a surf shop to sign up for lessons. If you're not into surfing, you can lounge on the beach or explore the charming town center, visiting the interesting shops and restaurants.

Be sure to find your way to the beach for sunset before making your way back to Puerto Vallarta.



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Go Scuba Diving

The Pacific waters are mostly calm and clear, making for ideal scuba diving conditions. Whether you're already certified or considering taking lessons, you'll find a dive shop to suit your needs.

Some of the best dive spots around PV include Las Caletas, Los Arcos, or the famous Marietas Islands. Divers in Puerto Vallarta often encounter many types of different fish, octopus, schools of dolphin, turtles, giant manta rays, and the occasional humpback whale or whale shark. When diving offshore, you can explore cave systems and shipwrecks.

Most scuba diving trips are half-day, depending on how many tanks of air you purchase for your dives.



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Explore Puerto Vallarta's Local Craft Beer Scene

A perfect way to beat the Mexican heat is with an ice-cold beer. Puerto Vallarta has a burgeoning craft beer scene that beer enthusiasts will want to check out. Most famous is Los Muertos brewery (they also do a good pizza), but my personal favorite is Monzón. Be sure to check out Monzón's burger menu while you're there.



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Visit Islas Marietas

Islas Marietas (the Marietas Islands) are a group of small, uninhabited islands in Banderas Bay that house Hidden Beach, one of the most famous tourist sites in Puerto Vallarta. Imagine a cave with the ceiling opening up to the sky to reveal a sandy beach at the base—that's Hidden Beach!

You'll need to book a tour to visit Hidden Beach, as it can only be reached when the tides are low, and I've heard rumors that only a certain amount of tickets are sold daily. Tours can be booked with [Vallarta Adventures](#).



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Book a Whale Watching Trip

The official humpback whale watching season in Puerto Vallarta is December-March, but lucky visitors have sighted whales as early as November or as late as May. The best time of year to spot whales is January or February, with most tours sighting whales daily.

It's said that during whale season, more than 18,000 whales will pass by Puerto Vallarta, so you have a high chance of spotting a pod during the season. Be sure to bring your camera on this trip, as tour companies are able to get you up close for some truly stunning photos.



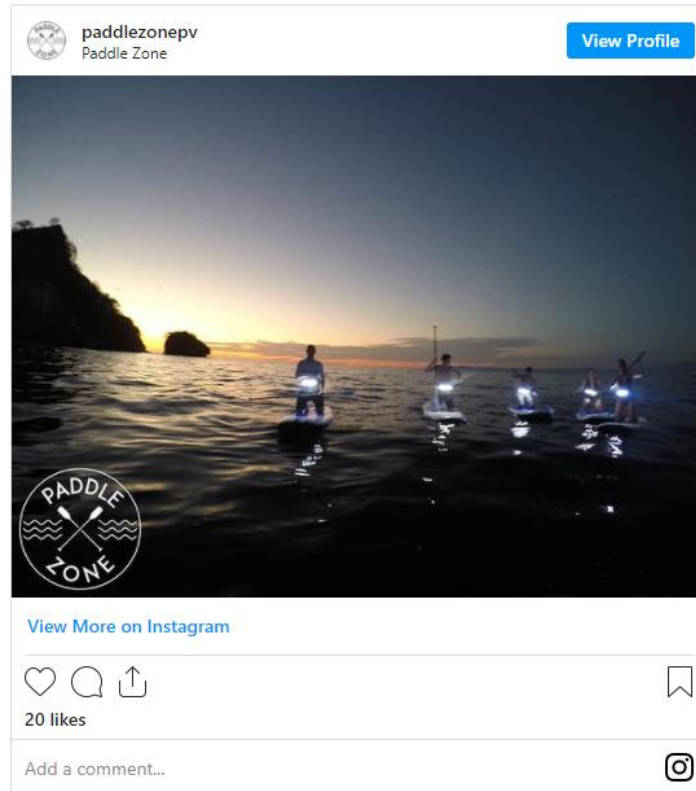
PHOTO: Located in Banderas Bay, between Las Gemelas and Mismaloya beaches, is a natural rock formation known as Los Arcos (the arches). The granite arches provide natural swim-throughs, caves, tunnels, and even a coral reef. One of the best ways to explore Los Arcos is to book a snorkeling trip to take in the beauty both above and below the water. Snorkelers will swim above arches, tunnels and cave and observe many types of fish. It is possible to snorkel Los Arcos without booking a tour and using your own equipment but for safety reasons I would advise going with a tour company.

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Go Snorkeling at Los Arcos

Located in Banderas Bay, between Las Gemelas and Mismaloya beaches, is a natural rock formation known as Los Arcos (the arches). The granite arches provide natural swim-throughs, caves, tunnels, and even a coral reef. One of the best ways to explore Los Arcos is to book a snorkeling trip to take in the beauty both above and below the water. Snorkelers will swim above arches, tunnels, and caves and observe many types of fish. It is possible to snorkel Los Arcos without booking a tour and using your own equipment but for safety reasons, consider a tour company.



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Book a Sunrise or Sunset Kayaking/SUP Bioluminescence Eco-Tour

Another great way to explore Los Arcos is to book a standup paddle boarding bioluminescence tour. You'll start with a quick safety lesson before paddling out to Los Arcos, where you'll be surrounded by bioluminescent waters that fade away as the sun rises or become darker as the sun sets. The water glows due to an algae bloom of plankton reacting to disturbances in the water such as waves. Puerto Vallarta's warm and relatively calm waters make it an ideal place to observe this phenomenon.

This tour makes for impressive memories but is another where you'll need to be at least reasonably fit, as the kayaking or paddle boarding can be quite physically demanding. This tour can be booked via [Airbnb Experiences](#) and please be aware that brightness levels vary depending on the season, temperature, and lunar cycle.

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