

## Postcard from Puerto Vallarta on Mexico's Pacific coast

By [Dennis Lennox](#), CP Contributor [FOLLOW](#)



Puerto Vallarta's old town with its iconic Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. | Dennis Lennox

It is easy to forget about the sun and sand when in Puerto Vallarta.

This city on Mexico's Pacific coast has all the big-name branded hotels and all-inclusive resorts. But unlike other competing destinations in the region, it also has a rich local culture with far more to do and see, thanks to the tourists, locals and large expat community that mixes and mingles with each other in a way not seen in purpose-built resort destinations.

Ironically, [Puerto Vallarta](#) was actually one of Mexico's first getaways for Americans. Hollywood stars like Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, whose former homes are now an upscale boutique hotel, put it on the map back in the day. In fact, one of the neighborhoods in the old town — more formally Viejo Vallarta or the Romantic Zone — is named Gringo Gulch for the large number of Americans who once called it home.

I discovered all this and more when I visited earlier this month on my first foreign trip since the start of the pandemic last year.

My home base was the Westin Resort & Spa, where I stayed four nights. The architecturally striking hotel faces the Bay of Flags (Bahía de Banderas) and is located in Marina Vallarta — a short drive from the airport. Several other hotels and expat-inhabited condos dominate the very walkable neighborhood, which is centered around an upscale marina.

As tempting as it was to never leave the hotel, I did make the most of my extended weekend getaway.

Locals and visitors alike walk the Malecon, the beachfront promenade that runs a couple of miles and features countless works of public art. As expected, the people watching is superb.



The streets of Puerto Vallarta's old town. | Dennis Lennox

Turning on any of the streets leads into the picturesque old town with its cobblestone streets and terracotta tile roofs reminiscent of a coastal town somewhere in the Iberian Peninsula.

Dominating this cityscape is Our Lady of Guadalupe Church with its tower topped in an iconic wrought-iron crown. The best views, particularly at sunset, come from the [lookout at an old lighthouse](#) on Matamoros Street. More than a dozen nearby art galleries participate in Puerto Vallarta's [ArtWalk](#) every Wednesday through May.

Old town is also home to several incredible restaurants that challenge any preconceived ideas about Mexican cuisine. [Trio](#), which blends Mediterranean and Mexican flavors, and [Café des Artistes](#) are among the best. Just be sure to make a reservation.



The Vallarta Botanical Gardens is located about an hour by car from Puerto Vallarta. | Dennis Lennox

I highly recommend a day trip to the 64-acre [Vallarta Botanical Gardens](#). The hour-long drive is more than worth the experience. Plus, the rooftop restaurant with its panoramic views of the gardens is perfect for breakfast and brunch.

### **If you go**

President Joe Biden's recently imposed travel restrictions that require all visitors to the United States, including citizens returning home from trips abroad, to present a negative coronavirus test at check-in with their airline is little more than Kabuki theater. Don't let this deter you.

The Westin and several other hotels offer complimentary testing to guests. There is also a testing center only yards from the airport terminal with tests priced at 450 pesos (about \$21) and

results delivered by email in 45 minutes.

Getting around is easy. Both local taxis (cash only) and Uber are widely available. For excursions to the botanical gardens consider either a rental car or private driver, as this gives you considerable flexibility.

The airport is served by all of the major U.S. airlines, including Alaska, American, Delta and United.

The bottom line: Puerto Vallarta, which feels smaller than its population of about 300,000 people, is safe and open for visitors. Go now and enjoy this authentic Mexican coastal city before the crowds of post-pandemic travel return.

*“Spires and Crosses” is a weekly travel column. Follow @dennislennox on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).*

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Dennis Lennox writes about travel, politics and religious affairs. He has been published in the Financial Times, Independent, The Detroit News, Toronto Sun and other publications. Follow [@dennislennox](#) on Twitter.