

MEXICO

A (long-overdue) return to Puerto Vallarta

By Meagan Drillingier | May 01, 2021

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Los Muertos beach, as seen from the new Mantamar tower at the Almar Resort in Puerto Vallarta. Photo Credit: Meagan Drillingier

Returning to Puerto Vallarta was like culture shock for me. Which is shocking in itself, since I've been to Mexico well over 200 times. But for the bulk of the past year, this New Yorker, like millions of other Americans, (mostly) stayed home. It had been two years since I had been in Puerto Vallarta. And for me, that's quite a long time to be away from a city that I have considered to be a second home for more than seven years.

It's a story that is not unique to me: The pandemic messed up a lot of peoples' plans. And while travel-lovers and professionals clashed on the ethics of travel, tourist destinations in Mexico worked round the clock to be able to provide a safe (yet still fun) experience to those who were willing to make the journey south of the border. There are no stimulus checks in Mexico, so for thousands of families across the country, tourism equals survival. And that is especially true for someplace as tourism-dependent as Puerto Vallarta.

For the better part of a year, I wasn't going to promote travel. But a personal matter came up in Puerto Vallarta, and so I found myself back on its familiar beaches, unsure, and wary, of what I was going to find. What I found was a city that has reawakened with a vengeance and is as "back to normal" as one can expect while we're still battling a global pandemic.

In 2019 Puerto Vallarta welcomed more than 5 million visitors. But in 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, that number was slashed by nearly 50% arrivals were just over 2.5 million. But as the vaccine rollout continues in the U.S. and more and more Americans are feeling comfortable traveling, Puerto Vallarta seems to be reaping the benefits. Between Jan. 1 and March 30, Puerto Vallarta welcomed 652,900 arrivals, which shows a recovery of 44.9% versus the previous year.

Still, I had the horror stories in my head from the social media scene all around Puerto Vallarta of Americans skirting Covid-19 rules and regulations and finding ways to gather in groups, no matter the restrictions that the destination had put in place.

We were coming into a slightly different situation this time around. We landed a few days after Easter, when the hordes of crowds from Holy Week (known as Samana Santa in Mexico) and spring break had mostly decamped. For a few short days, the state of Jalisco had rolled into the green traffic light phase but quickly pulled back to yellow after the crowds left the city in anticipation of a rising number of cases.

Yellow means that hotels can operate at 66% of their capacity. Pools, beach clubs, spas, gyms, and restaurants are open to guests. Public beaches are open, as are museums, galleries, theaters, cinemas, bars, and clubs. Restaurants operate with the allotted capacity until midnight. Bars and clubs are open until 3 a.m. This makes Puerto Vallarta one of the most open tourist destinations in Mexico. In places like Cancun and Los Cabos, nightlife still remains relatively shut down.

Even so, the energy and excitement downtown was palpable the clamor of busy restaurants spills from open windows, where it blends with the chatter from those dining at sidewalk tables. Music from the bars and nightclubs fills the air until the early hours of the morning. Beach clubs are thriving with the energy of live music. We were staying in a hotel on the malecon, where the commotion didn't quiet down until well after 2 in the morning.

Out on the Bay of Banderas, the water always seemed to be churning with tour boats and sightseeing cruises some, it appeared, running at more than the mandated two-thirds capacity. If not for the masks on hotel employees and restaurant workers and the omnipresence of hand sanitizer and thermometers at most bars and restaurants, you might think Covid-19 didn't even exist. The vibe feels -- dare I say it -- normal.

With that mindset, Puerto Vallarta has its sights firmly set on the summer season. If my initial impression is that things are back in action, I got the feeling that we ain't seen nothing yet.

Before the pandemic, Puerto Vallarta was in a constant state of investment and construction, with shopping centers, hotels and restaurants going up all across the city. That has not stopped. The sounds of construction are in the air, and money is being poured into revitalizing the infrastructure, as well. Streets are temporarily closed all around the city for repairs and renovations. And you'll find the skeletons of newbuild hotels and condos from the north end of the bay all the way to the southern outskirts.

Visitors to Puerto Vallarta will now see additions to several hotels and signs of many more to come. The Sunset Plaza Hotel, for example, added 100 guestrooms and suites in December. The Hotel Mousai will debut a 72-room South Tower in November, which includes new dining, a spa and outdoor wellness amenities. Almar Resort Luxury LGBT Beach Front Experience has a new, 50-room Mantamar Tower; guests can book into 16 of those new rooms and suites right now.

And air service is on its way back. With new flights from American Airlines, Southwest, Frontier Airlines, Sun Country Airlines and United, Puerto Vallarta is not only bringing back old hubs but adding new ones.

"The new airport terminal in Puerto Vallarta is set to be completed in 2024 as one of the first to be designed under the concept of net-zero and environmental sustainability," said Luis Villasenor, director general of Puerto Vallarta Tourism. "This effectively integrates the sustainable management of the environment, zero carbon footprint, recycling capacity and optimal use of water, among other exciting standards."

Perhaps most exciting for the destination is Royal Caribbean International's return to Mexico's west coast in November, with its Navigator of the Seas homeporting up the coast in Los Angeles. The line, which plans seven-night sailings that will stop in Puerto Vallarta, has been out of the market for a decade.

Residents have begun to get vaccinated, as well. The rollout of the vaccine began in February for residents over age 60. The second dose for seniors was carried out the first week of April, with just more than 41,000 doses administered.

Development, demand and getting back to business is all great. But does Puerto Vallarta actually feel safe?

From my perspective I've never felt safer than I did while in the hotels. I stayed in three during my three weeks there, and each one showed just how much effort they had put into adhering to safety standards and protocols. From social distancing and capacity restrictions to sanitizing and mask-wearing, the hotels and resorts in Puerto Vallarta made it very comfortable for those who are anxiously dipping toes back into the travel pool.

The street scenes, however, are quite different. While Uber drivers I encountered were all wearing masks, the same wasn't always true for city taxis. And I found shops in the city to be inconsistent with their protocols. While there are many that will do temperature screenings before entering, in others you will be hard-pressed to find even an employee in a mask.

Crowds do gather. Bars are open, and the parties do go on. A quick stroll down the cobblestone streets of the Zona Romantica show bars with so many people that the crowds spill out onto the street. That was always one of my favorite parts about Puerto Vallarta before the pandemic. Nowadays, if I wasn't staying in a hotel, I was ordering Uber Eats to enjoy in the solitude of my Airbnb. But it needs to be mentioned that I write this as someone who barely left home in 2020 and am not yet vaccinated. I left the U.S. back in March before my age group was eligible for the vaccine.

Comfort level is in the eye of the beholder. But I will say that it is entirely possible to visit and enjoy Puerto Vallarta while staying safe and socially distanced, hitting the beach or the hotel pool and dining al fresco. Despite my reservations about traveling during a pandemic, in the end it felt pretty darn good to be "home," and I am looking forward to returning soon fully vaccinated, of course.