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SEPTEMBER 2, 2021

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Puerto Vallarta puts the focus on travel advisors

A Q&A with Luis Villaseñor, managing director of **Puerto Vallarta Tourism Board**

July was a historic month for Puerto Vallarta as the destination saw an increase of 23.3% in arrivals compared to the same month in 2019. Travel Courier caught up with Luis Villaseñor, managing director of Puerto Vallarta Tourism Board, to find out more about what's new, what's hot and all about the new virtual Travel Agent

The pandemic has been challenging for the travel industry. Can you give us an update on the state of tourism in Puerto Vallarta right now?

Puerto Vallarta reopened to tourism in June 2020, and we have enjoyed the best recovery among any of Mexico's leading sun and sand destinations in terms of hotel occupancy and international arrivals. In 2020, we averaged 38% hotel occupancy — the best of any of the top three leisure destinations in Mexico.

During 2021 Puerto Vallarta continues to be the leader, in these first seven months, the average hotel occupancy has been 52.64% — considering that hotels were operating at 66% capacity the first five months, hotels can now operate at 80% capacity — for the same period in 2019, the hotel occupancy was 76.99%. The recovery continues to gain strength as last July reached 73% versus 77.7% in 2019.

In terms of international arrivals, July was historic with an increase of 23.3% compared to the same month in 2019 (prior to the pandemic). This year The Puerto Vallarta International Airport welcomed 240,800 passengers

versus 195,300 in 2019. So far in 2021, we have recovered 56% of the number of international passengers from January to July compared to the pre-pandemic figures in 2019 (2,165,900 in 2019 versus 1,169,100 in 2019).

Without a doubt, the Canadian visitors have been “the push that was missing” to recover the pre-pandemic figures. The five airlines that flew before the pandemic have confirmed their return this year in the coming months, currently only WestJet operates flights to our destination.

Finally cruises, the important segment



that was pending to be reactivated. On Aug. 24, Puerto Vallarta welcomed the first tourist cruise ship after more than a year — Carnival Cruise Lines' Panorama.

Tell us a little about what inspired the new Travel Agent Academy platform and what role you see travel advisors playing in the recovery of the industry?

Puerto Vallarta is one of Mexico's most popular leisure destinations and a preferred travel option for North American travellers. The aim of introducing Puerto Vallarta Specialist through a virtual training platform is to expand knowledge of the destination among certified partners who specialize in sun and sea destinations.

We seek to update travel advisors on new products in the destination and the biosecurity measures implemented. Additionally, to provide them sales tools on new niches/segments such as wellness, outdoor adventures and romance/weddings that have been very strong in the destination and keys to its recovery. Also the elements that make us unique and that travellers are looking for to live a "revenge experience/moment."

The travel agent has always been a key ally for the sale of the destination and now in times of pandemic their role is more important to recommend safe places and provide travel assistance in case of any eventuality. The destination has always recognized the importance of them and therefore this campus is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Why are you optimistic about the future?

The state of Jalisco, which includes Puerto Vallarta, has had a responsible management of the pandemic which has allowed progress in both the health and economic reactivation. Since June 15, 2020, our city is open to receive tourists and currently the 90% of employees in the tourism sector have been vaccinated, two out of three locals have been vaccinated and only those under 18 years of age are waiting for the vaccine. We expect that by the end of 2021, 55% of the annual average hotel occupancy will be reached, the Canadian market will be key to achieve this and to be able to get as close as possible to the 2019 figures (72.4%).

What are your views on community tourism and how it could help impact the local economy?

In the wake of the pandemic, the traveller has looked for unique products where they have direct contact with mother nature. Puerto Vallarta is surrounded and protected by the Sierra Madre with more than 68 miles of beaches to discover. This means that the most intrepid traveller can find options to get in touch with nature, immerse themselves in the culture of the local community and reduce the impact on the environment. Companies such as Wildlife Connection, EcoTours, Vallarta Food Tours, Vallarta Adventures, Canopy River and Navegante Urbano have strengthened their products. More information on Responsible Tourism can be found on our website, for those who wish to make a difference and "give back" on their next visit to the destination.

Perhaps you can share a bit about the importance of the Canadian market and what kind of impact it has on tourism in the area especially as lift from Canada is finally ramping up again.

Canada is the second most important market for Mexico and for Puerto Vallarta, its importance lies in the number of visitors and long average stays.

Canadians are lovers and enthusiasts to explore the local culture and nature. Before the pandemic, five airlines flew, including Air Canada, Air Transat, Sunwing, Swoop and WestJet, connecting with 16 cities in Canada. The Puerto Vallarta International Airport was, in Latin America, the one with the largest number of Canadian cities with direct flights. Our goal is to regain that leadership.

In 2019, there were 2,296,061 Canadians who visited Mexico, by 2020 there were only 948,319 travellers from that country, which represented a decrease of 59%. For this 2021, from January to May only 33,871 visitors from "the land of the maple leaf" have come to our country.

In 2019, 438,015 passengers visited our destination, in 2020 the first three months (the most important in operation), contributed to bringing the figure to 198,230 tourists and for this 2021, the panorama continues to be low after the restriction measures established in that country. As of May of this year, only 4,714 Canadians have arrived. Puerto Vallarta will seek to recover at least 10% of the number of visitors we had in 2019.

What should a traveller not leave Puerto Vallarta without seeing, doing or eating?

Admire the city from Matamoros Lighthouse or Cerro de la Cruz, hiking to Colomitos (the smallest beach in México), eat "pescado zarandead" and try "Cuala" for dessert, as a digestive try a "raicilla" from Hacienda El Divisadero, recently awarded in Paris and NYC.

