

# The Columbus Dispatch

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Keywords:

## FAMILY INLET

# Puerto Vallarta, known for its cruise visitors, has plenty for whole gang to do

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BY ANNE Z. COOKE  
FOR THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

PUERTO VALLARTA – If you find yourself strolling through Puerto Vallarta's Old Town on Mexico's Pacific coast, keep an eye peeled for the Playa Los Arcos. When you spot this traditional Mexican hotel, peek inside the courtyard. Within is the spirit of Old Mexico.

Two youthful bellboys sport charro shirts, with matching striped pants and red sashes. Smiling desk

clerks wear white mariachi dresses adorned with gold-tone horse-head buckles.

Hand-painted furniture made in the Mexican state of Michoacan sets off the lobby, and woven straw decorations – also from Michoacan – announce one of Mexico's many fiesta weeks. Red bougainvillea spills over the porticoes, and the glossy leaves of a breadfruit tree shade the courtyard.

But it's the kids you'll notice most. Children with their families, splashing in the pool and snapping photos of the resident iguana that climbs down out of a tree to bask on the pool deck. Kids learning to swim. Teens on Los Muertos Beach, lying under beach umbrellas and jumping in the surf.

Sales manager Ramon Tapia stands at a photo board beside the elevator, pinning up snapshots of happy-looking vacationers. The Playa Los Arcos, it seems, caters to families.

"These are our regular guests," Tapia says, pointing to photos taken in previous year of smiling couples in the dining room and children posing in embroidered sombreros. The photos from yesterday show a couple of dads sitting on the edge of the pool with their kids and a group shot with grandmas and babies.

"Some of these people have come here since they were children," he explains. "Now they're grown-up and bringing their own kids. For many of them, holidays here are a family tradition."

Well, there's a surprise. What about the trendy to-do list in Puerto Vallarta's latest "Free Map and Guide," the one that urges visitors to "hit the bars," "buy a bikini," and "fall in love"? Is the resort town famous for pink sunsets and candlelight romance losing its mojo?

Our first memories of Puerto Vallarta date from an accidental encounter in the late 1970s. We were cruise passengers, in port just long enough to grab a cab into town,



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buy souvenir T-shirts, share a pitcher of margaritas at Senor Frog's and nip back to the ship before it sailed.

On our second visit, we stayed in an American-style hotel in the hotel zone north of town, traveling on a package that included a sightseeing cruise on Banderas Bay. The trip stopped at Quimixto, a rural village accessible only by water, memorable for its juicy fish tacos and the hot dusty horseback ride to an over-visited waterfall.

On the next trip, we brought the kids, taking them on the signature bus tour to Mismaloya Beach, where director John Huston filmed *Night of the Iguana*, with a return stop at Gringo Gulch to look at the two connecting "love nests" made famous by actors Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. We stayed in Old Town for the first time, around the corner from the heart of Puerto Vallarta.

You can walk to restaurants, sidewalk cafes, Internet coffee shops, the historic cathedral, the park, grocery stores, pharmacies and crafts stores. The art district is there, too, with galleries, antiques stores, and shops specializing in blown glass, silver jewelry and handmade ceramics. If you would rather ride, taxi fares for four, within the area and to the perimeter, cost about \$6.

For younger kids, the beach is the biggest attraction, followed by the hotel swimming pool. As the kids get older, they can try snorkeling, horseback rides, whale-watching and jeep safaris into the jungle. By the time they're teenagers, they can play golf, go parasailing and take historic tours.

As it happens, most Mexicans love children and expect to include them along with adults. Hotel workers and cabdrivers invariably tried to teach the kids some Spanish, and at most restaurants, the waiters offered to let our kids taste prospective menu items before they ordered. One waiter served the children two desserts -- no charge.

What didn't work? Our biggest mistake was buying tickets for a day cruise on the Sarape, one of the tour boats that docks in the marina (near the cruise port docks), before seeing the boat close up. The Sarape picks up passengers for a coastal cruise that includes snorkeling, all the beer you can drink and a lunch break at an isolated beach.

Some tour boats do a good job. But the Sarape rolled and pitched, the snorkel masks were hard to adjust and leaked water, and before long, half the kids were green around the gills. The crew, a half-dozen hardworking young people, tried their best. But the trip was too long, the rock music too loud, the sun too hot and the ocean swells too big.

What did make the A-list? The visit to the balloon man on the plaza near the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the morning's walk along the Malecon seawall, a trip to the Woolworth's on Calle Juarez and the dolphin encounter.

The balloon man, a veritable pied piper who clutched an enormous bouquet of inflated red hearts, silver ovals and shiny whale shapes, was mobbed by kids and adults. Street vendors are a fixture here, but none are more beloved than the toy sellers. One of our grandchildren selected a curvaceous blue dolphin. Tied to our balcony, it bobbed in the wind for a couple of days before breaking free and disappearing.

The Malecon walk was a great success, although it's a long hike from Los Muertos Beach. Because the oceanfront shops are half the fun -- handmade toys, puppets on strings, jewelry stores, handblown glassware, Huichol wool-on-wax pictures, ceramics from Puebla and Tonalá, lacquered wood boxes -- we took our time while the kids climbed on the Malecon's statues.

An even bigger success was the Woolworth's, an enormous store with floor-to-ceiling shelves stuffed with board and computer games, action figures, trucks, puzzles, balls, art supplies and dolls in every size. Wagons, bicycles and skateboards hung from the ceiling. The kids each chose a toy, all at budget prices.

Despite my doubts, everyone loved the 90-minute dolphin encounter at the Dolphin Center, in Nuevo Vallarta north of town. Putting aside the ethics of using captive dolphins to entertain people, the size and cleanliness of the pools and facility were better than what we've seen elsewhere.

The program begins with a 20-minute introduction, after which we showered, donned life jackets and jumped into the pool. During the next hour we took turns stroking the creatures' velvety-smooth skin, posing for kisses and riding stomach to stomach around the perimeter. Just before climbing out, the dolphins ran through a final acrobatic routine.

When Dillon, the youngest of the grandchildren, got into the pool and saw how big the dolphins really are -- 600 to 1,000 pounds of solid muscle -- he panicked. Eventually he was persuaded to pat that silky skin, and he relaxed enough for a photograph.

In the end, the best entertainment was in front of the hotel: the ocean. The hotel provided umbrellas, beach chairs and towels; Mexico kicked in the blue sky, sunshine, sand and warm water.

When everything else fades, it's what you'll remember.

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Although long a playground for cruise passengers, the city is also a fine spot for families.

## STAYING THERE

The Playa Los Arco, with 171 rooms and suites, is not an American-style hotel.

The decor is Spanish colonial; room sizes vary and include hair dryers, air conditioning, an electronic safe, cable television and a telephone.

Suites have kitchenettes. Always inspect your room before accepting it. The hotel has two pools and a bar. The restaurant has fiesta entertainment three nights a week.

Room rates are usually below published prices. Doubles run about \$75 a night; kids stay free. All-inclusive meal plans are popular.

Call 1-800-648-2403 or visit [www.playaloscocos.com](http://www.playaloscocos.com).

## LEARNING MORE

For more information on the city, visit [www.visitpuertovallarta.com](http://www.visitpuertovallarta.com).

For the Dolphin Adventure, visit [www.vallarta-adventures.com](http://www.vallarta-adventures.com).

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