

SUNDAY Travel

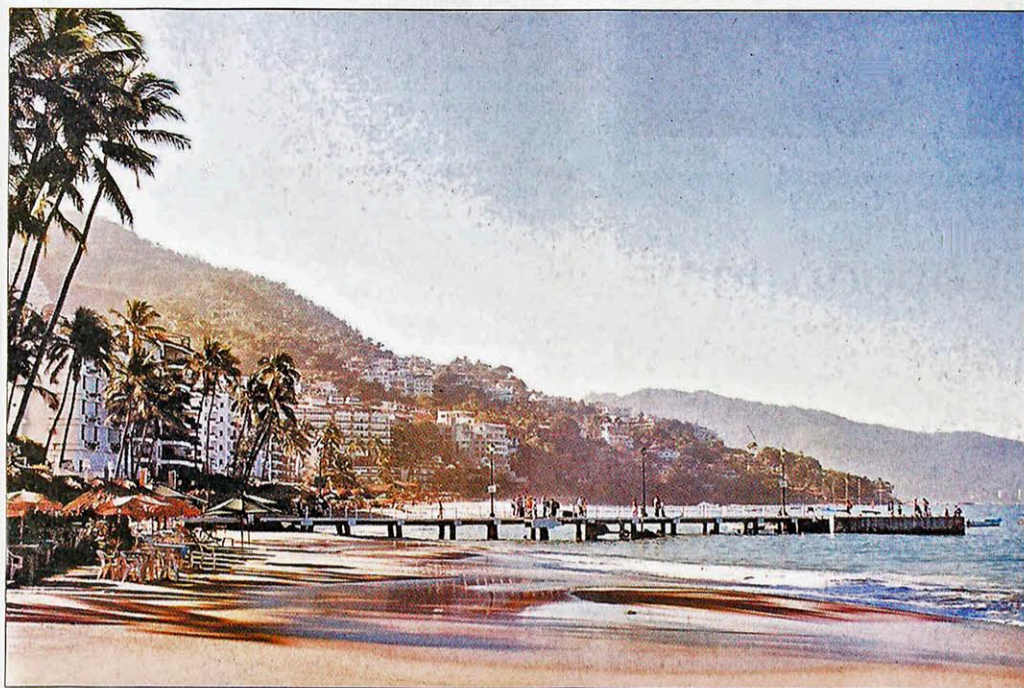


A CENTRAL OHIO TOPIARY GARDEN RECALLS A FAMOUS FRENCH PAINTING / **Where I've Been, D16**

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JANUARY 18, 2004

SPECIAL MEXICO SECTION



STEVE HAGGERTY PHOTOS

Early-morning fisherman line the pier at Playa Los Muertos.

PUERTO VALLARTA

Coastal town can be a family affair

By ANNE Z. COOKE
NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

Last year, in Puerto Vallarta, I peeked into the courtyard of the Hotel Playa Los Arcos, on Los Muertos Beach, and wished we were staying there.

Hand-painted chairs from Michoacan stood in the lobby. The bell boys wore "charro" costumes, with traditional cowboy shirts, loose-fitting striped pants and a bright-colored waist sash; the women wore "mariachi" clothes with gold buckles.

Hand-woven straw wreaths, brought in by Los Arcos' owner, announced the approach of Christmas. Flowering vines climbed up the porticoes, and the deep green leaves of a bread fruit tree shaded the patio.

But it was the kids I noticed most. Lots of kids, splashing in the pool and playing on the beach in front of the hotel. Eating lunch with their parents and riding in the elevator.

While I waited for the sales manager, Ramon Tapia, who was busy mounting photos of frequent guests on the wall, I counted the kids: two little boys taking a swimming lesson from their dad; a mother and daughter watching the resident iguana that had climbed down out of the tree to soak up the morning sun; a splash of kids diving in the deep end under the watchful eyes of their parents.

"Most of our guests are families," said Mr. Tapia, pointing to pictures of entire families, with teenagers, grey-haired couples and babies in arms. "People who came here in the 1960s as children are now grown up and bringing their own children," he said. "Holidays here are a family tradition."

Was Puerto Vallarta, where the "to do" list in the Free Map and Guide exhorts visitors to "hit the bars," "buy a bikini" and "fall in love," growing up? Was the tropical resort famous for its fiery pink sunsets and candlelit romance losing its mojo?

Our first memories of Puerto Vallarta date from an accidental encounter in the late 1970s. We were cruise passengers then, traveling with friends, in port just long enough to rush into town, buy souvenir T-shirts, linger over several pitchers of margaritas at Señor Frog's and, feeling no pain, nip back to the ship before it sailed.

On our second visit, we stayed longer. Since our package price included a tour, we chose the sightseeing cruise on Banderas Bay. The trip stopped at Quimixto, a rural village accessible only by water, where we took a dusty and completely forgettable horseback ride to a waterfall.

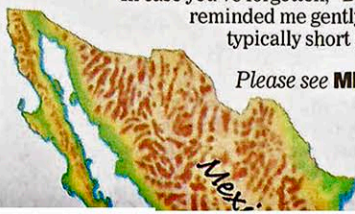
Undaunted, however, we signed up for the bus trip to Mismaloya Beach, where director John Huston filmed 1964's "Night Of the Iguana," starring Richard Burton. On the return, we stopped at Gringo Gulch, where Burton and Liz Taylor, who followed him to P.V., bought adjoining homes.

More trips, more outings, more fun, and we were hooked.

Early December is a lovely month on the narrow band of land that lies between the mountains and Banderas Bay. The sun is hot but the air is dry, with daytime temperatures in the low 80s. The nights are pleasant with cool overtones, and high season hasn't quite started. It was time to go again, this time with family, kids and 5-year-old Dillon.

"In case you've forgotten," Dillon's dad reminded me gently, "he's got the typically short attention span of

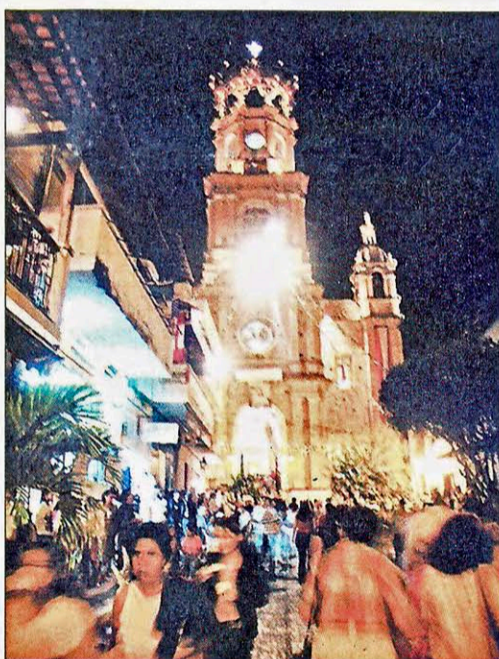
Please see **MEXICO** on **D16**



An iguana makes an unplanned pool visit.



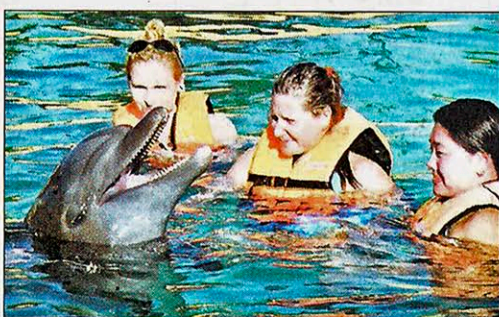
Sarape takes its passengers on a seven-hour tour.



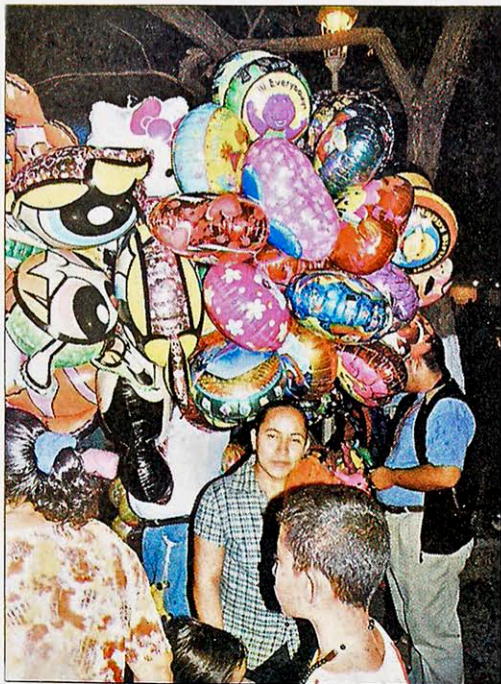
Everyone gathers at the cathedral during the Virgin of Guadalupe fiesta in December.



A local angel prepares to be in a Christmas play.



Tourists frolic at the Dolphin Adventure.



The balloon man does a brisk business.

SPECIAL MEXICO SECTION

Niños no problem in Puerto Vallarta

MEXICO

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a kindergartner. We don't cater to him, but we've learned that when he gets bored and whiney, we don't have any fun. We need to find some stuff he likes to do."

Point taken. So we booked adjacent rooms at the Playa Los Arcos. Los Muertos Beach, P.V.'s most famous, was out front. The pool was in the courtyard, the Los Muertos Pier was steps away. The central location in the heart of Old P.V. couldn't be more convenient — or more entertaining. Restaurants, sidewalk cafes, Internet cafes, art galleries, grocery stores, souvenir shops, pharmacies and a park are within 10-minute walk.

What about the usual tourist fare, appropriate for older kids? The list is endless in this visitor-oriented town, from parasailing, ecotours and whale watching to snorkeling, horse-back riding, golf and jeep trips in the forest. But Dillon was too small for most of them.

But we needn't have worried. He was happy just being there. On the way from the airport, our cab driver Jorge smiled a welcome, taught Dillon to count in Spanish and pointed out local sights. On our next taxi ride, Alberto asked what he liked best about Mexico. Antonio the waiter brought bites to sample and an extra ice cream for dessert. And Pedro, at Andale Cafe across the street, remembered he liked scrambled eggs.

When our *panga* (water taxi) to Boca de Tomatlan stopped in deep water, we adults splashed ashore while Dillon rode piggy-back on Francisco the pilot (Francisco also carried an old lady ashore, gently setting her down on the beach).

What didn't work? Our biggest mistake was the seven-hour sightseeing cruise on the *Sarape*, a 200-passenger rust bucket past its prime. The *Sarape* sails from the Marina daily, with stops for snorkeling (with ill-fitting gear), a tour of two pretty beaches, a buffet lunch on board and all the beer you can drink.

The crew, a half-dozen hard-working young people, couldn't have been nicer. But the day was too long, the sun too hot and the ocean swells too large. Within an hour, a half-dozen passengers, including Dillon, felt queasy.

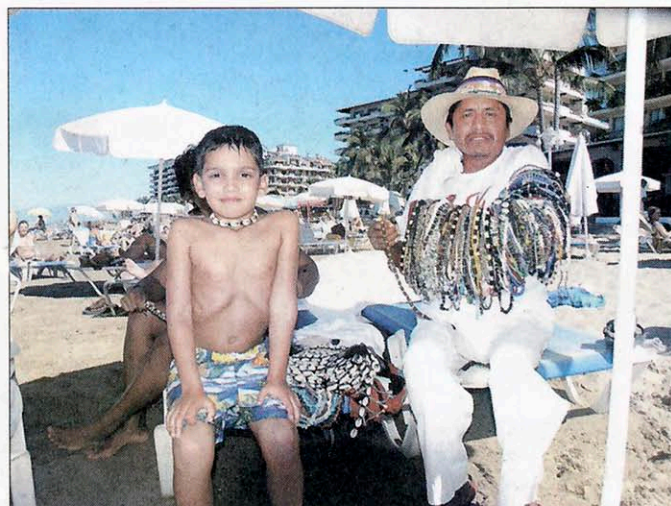
What made every parent's A-list? A visit to the balloon man on the Plaza near the Church of the Virgin of Guadalupe; a leisurely walk along the Malecón seawall; a trip to Woolworth's, on Calle Juarez; and the dolphin encounter.

The balloon man, who clutched an enormous bouquet of red hearts, silver ovals and assorted shiny animal shapes, was a veritable Pied Piper, mobbed by kids and adults. Street vendors are a fixture here, but none are more loved than the toy sellers. Dillon selected an ample, shiny blue dolphin; it survived two days before a broken string sent it flying.



STEVE HAGGERTY PHOTOS

First order of business: Sunbathing on the beach in Puerto Vallarta.



Dillon shows off his shell necklace.

The walk along the Malecón was a great success, though, for a 5-year-old, it's a long way to go from Los Muertos Beach. Since part of the fun are the shops — the silver merchant, the jewelry shop, the hand-blown glass, the Huichol "wool" paintings, the ceramics from Puebla and Tonalá, and lacquered wood — we took our time. But the pace gave Dillon a chance to climb on the famous Malecón sculptures. The Woolworth's, which we

passed by chance, was the largest I'd ever seen, with a cavernous second story packed floor-to-ceiling with toys. Bins and shelves were stuffed with board games, computer games, action figures, trucks and dolls of every size. Wagons, bicycles and skateboards hung from the ceiling. After much wavering, Dillon finally chose the Max Steele figure, in his Forest Ranger gear.

Halfway through the trip, we decided to try the 90-minute dolphin

IF YOU GO

Getting there: Aeromexico, American, Continental, America West, Alaska, Delta and many vacation charter flights fly directly to Puerto Vallarta. Other airlines connect through New York, Mexico City, Toronto, Atlanta or other cities.

Staying there: The Playa Los Arcos, a mid-priced hotel with a prime beach location, was built in sections over 25 years. The 175 rooms and suites are plain but comfortable; some need renovation. Included are air conditioning, telephones, color/cable TV, hair dryers, two pools, bar and restaurant, beach service and private parking.

Double rooms are \$80 per night, but money-saving senior discounts, packages and meal plans are available through travel agents. For best prices, check with large tour operators. Some suites have kitchenettes. Call 800-648-2403, e-mail hoteles@playaloscocos.com, or visit www.playaloscocos.com.

Handy Web sites: For general information and hotels check www.vallartaonline.com and www.visitpuertovallarta.com. For the Dolphin Adventure at Vallarta Adventures, visit www.vallarta-adventures.com. For airport pickup, tours, cruises, golf packages and car rentals, visit www.tour-vallarta.com.

encounter at the Dolphin Center, although it's north of the Marina, in Nuevo Vallarta. Aside from the ethics of using dolphins to entertain, the size and cleanliness of the pools and facility looked better than those we've seen elsewhere.

The program begins with 20-minute introduction, after which you shower, put on a life jacket, divide into small groups and jump into the pool. Over the next hour you take turns stroking the dolphin's velvety-smooth skin, receive a big wet kiss, get a short stomach-to-stomach ride and watch the dolphins cling to the edge of the pool while they run through their final acrobatic routine.

When Dillon saw how big the dolphins really are — 600 to 900 pounds of energetic muscle — he wanted to get out of the water. Then he patted that silky skin, relaxed a little and — agreed to have his picture taken.

But in the end, the best entertainment was right there all along, the ocean. The hotels provides umbrellas, beach chairs and towels. With bright sun and warm sand, there's no motivation to move. Best of all, the water is warm. He wasn't allowed to go in without his dad, but in a day or so Dillon had learned to jump over the small waves, duck under the big waves and bob in the swells. So we all joined in.

Anne Z. Cooke is a Marina del Rey-based free-lance writer.