

PV

* for the girls

Story and photos by Cathie Arquilla

Even though Puerto Vallarta is known for a rockin' party scene, there is still seclusion to be had at some beaches with access only by boat. Try Yelapa or Playa Las Animas.

Like the salsas of Mexico, my girlfriends are many and varied. They have different interests, tastes and passions. While I might discuss fashion trends with Molly, I get my kid advice from Jackie or Anne. Diana and I share a love of art and museum-going. Stephanie pushes me to take risks, sometimes more terrifying than fun!

Often a destination is good for just one kind of girlfriend getaway and you need to choose your companion wisely. Not so with Puerto Vallarta. You could invite that crazy, “girls just want to have fun” friend, or your sweet, slightly nerdy, secret-keeper friend. Puerto Vallarta is the place for your outgoing foodie freak or your shy BFF with a green thumb. Be it movie pal or read-by-the-pool-all-day gal, PV’s got you covered.

Puerto Vallarta is 200 miles south of Guadalajara on the Pacific Coast of Mexico. A sweaty affair between Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton in 1963 on the set of John Huston’s film *The Night of the Iguana* put it on the map for many Americans. Today the city attracts all types of vacationers and a fair amount of retirees.

Direct flights from North American cities, including unexpected ones such as Minneapolis, Charlotte and Calgary, land you at Puerto Vallarta’s international airport, which is 15 minutes from downtown. The city is divided into zones, all accessible by cab or bus, and relatively close together. If you stay within the zones of the city along Banderas Bay, no ride should take longer than a half hour, making it incredibly accessible for any girlfriend adventure. It’s bustling enough for some fun, but easy to get away from it all too.

Let the gal pal party begin!

She'll eat almost anything, but she likes a bit of history with her tacos.

Alex, our tour guide on the Vallarta Food Tours, had three goals. He said he wanted, “to keep us entertained, keep us informed and get us deliciously full.” He assured us the food was fresh and safe on this food tour that takes “local” to the next level. Most of the vendors are second- and third-generation purveyors and we sampled a broad range of Mexican dishes — along with a serving of Puerto Vallarta history.

While we tasted three kinds of mole at Mole Rosa, Alex explained that, “Making mole is like being an alchemist.” Different moles, be they pink, green or brown, hail from different regions in Mexico, or just grandma’s kitchen. Mole is an Aztec word, which means, “to grind,” and a volcanic rock known as molcajetes, makes for the best grinding.

According to Alex, there are some 76 types of chili peppers in Mexico. Several sources claim twice that many. When hiking in the Sierra Madre Mountains, the backdrop of Puerto Vallarta, Alex says you might even find a new and different type of chili — and I believe him!

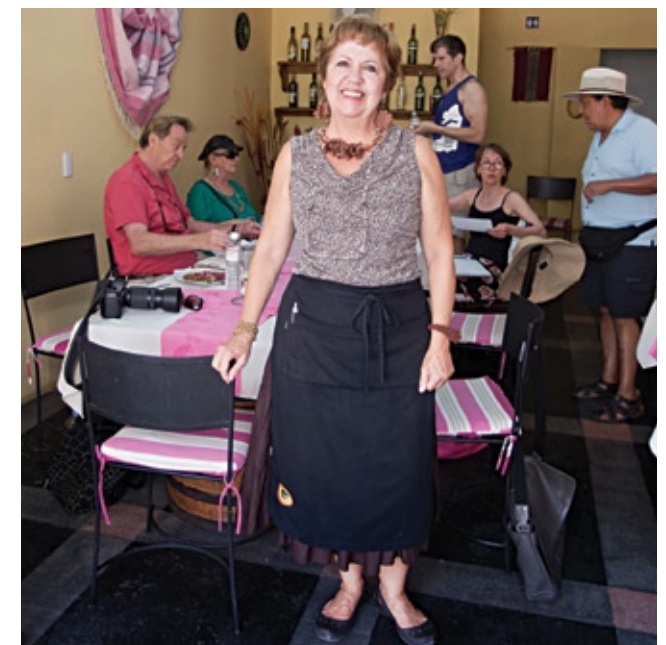
As we walked along the *malecón* (promenade) of the Romantic Zone, I felt the sweeping magnificence of Banderas Bay, the

7th largest bay in the world. Alex told us tales of Los Muertos beach involving buried treasure and burial grounds, while seamlessly giving very practical information: The best time to vacation in Puerto Vallarta is November through April, after the rainy season.

The Robles family is known for its *birria*. Birria is a traditional and popular stew of the region often made by, who else, *birrieros* (or grandmas!). The Robles’ birria recipe has been in the family for 50 years and is considered the best loved in Puerto Vallarta. The family has six food stalls and one restaurant specializing in this rich, rusty colored stew. When I asked about the ingredients, Alex sniffed the air disdainfully and said, “We don’t use ground beef, only steak or pork and you won’t find any crisp tortillas here either, like Taco Bell.” Be sure to get to the stalls early; the Robles’ birria is gone by 1 p.m.

Arriving at the El Güero family’s ceviche-serving hole-in-the-wall, we tasted fish from the great Banderas Bay that could only have been fresher if it were still swimming! Making ceviche seems relatively easy, but keep in mind, one needs to get up each morning at 4 a.m. to purchase the fish (and it must be *really* fresh), then prep it and cure it in lime. Alex explained that it was a labor of love for this family, whose members have evolved into local celebrities. As the citrusy, spicy juice from the ceviche ran down my chin, I knew that my “eat anything” girlfriend would love this!

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The queen of mole sauces, Pilar Castillo, proprietor of Mole Rosa, one of many delicious stops on Vallarta Food Tours.



She's nostalgic — likes galleries and museums and an old movie with her guacamole.

Entrepreneur Christina Pérez started her restaurant, Gaby's, as a take-out place from her mama's backyard. From there, this single mom moved Gaby's to the front of the house, eventually spreading throughout the whole house, upstairs and down, back terrace and front! Gaby's serves classic homemade Mexican food, nothing fancy or fusion.

On some nights, if seated on the front terrace (which is one floor above street level), you can see old Mexican movies projected on the white wall of the building across the street. My nostalgic girlfriend would swoon! We could watch vaqueros chasing bad guys while sipping margaritas and planning tomorrow's art gallery-hopping downtown.

She's a plant whisper, tree hugger and likes a comfortable hammock.

Mexico has the biggest variety of oak trees in the world, according to Carlos Mendoza, the administrator of Vallarta

Botanical Gardens. Who knew?! But what is even more interesting is that vanilla comes from an orchid. My green thumb girlfriend would probably know this, but I did not. It's just one of many fun facts I harvested at the enchanting Vallarta Botanical Gardens. This oasis covers 20 acres, is at 400 meters above sea level, and highlights two different ecosystems, pine and oak tree above, jungle below. There are Dr. Seuss-like hanging pots, bougainvillea muscling its way here and there, and a maze of trees, shrubs, succulents, and cacti.

When you're ready to sit down and enjoy the breeze that comes from this elevation, even on the hottest days, you can have lunch on the big terrace of Hacienda de Oro Restaurant. Skip the traditional dining tables and enjoy dining from the big lounging beds! Start with a complimentary nibble; Jicama, drizzled with lime and sprinkled with chili pepper and salt, move on to specialty margaritas and then ease into a main course, anything from wood-oven baked pizza to enchiladas. Afterwards, take a snooze right there in the restaurant!

Above from top: A fresh off the grill taco from Tacos Robles; Don't be wary of "street food" from Tacos Robles. The plastic bags that cover the plates are disposable and used to keep germs away from food. Bottom row: The back patio at Gaby's feels like a home oasis; Gaby's homemade tortilla soup. It's Puerto Vallarta!

She's a beach babe, loves the feel of dried seawater on her skin and in her hair, covets a good read and appreciates intimate conversation with a best friend.

With 26 miles of beaches, Puerto Vallarta delivers when it comes to a vacation by the sea. If a big hotel with lots of amenities is your thing, there are plenty. CasaMagna Marriott lives up to the expectations of the Marriott brand: good food, pools, spa and service, all served up with a beach vibe. It's a big hotel with a rather busy scene.

Dreams Puerto Vallarta Resort & Spa offers a bit more flexibility in the way of getting away from it all but there's also the feeling that you're having a party, or waiting for one to happen.

My beach babe friend would be happy at either of these resorts, but we would opt for a side trip to one of Puerto Vallarta's secluded beaches accessible only by boat. Two in particular boast settings and accommodations worthy of serious beach worship: Yelapa and Las Animas.

Yelapa is a tiny seaside village located in the southern-most

cove of Banderas Bay, 45 minutes by boat from Puerto Vallarta's downtown. Some say it is what coastal Mexico used to be, before tourism hijacked the economy. But it's getting discovered; apparently Hilary Swank vacations there. You decide whether that's a good recommendation or not!

Accepted wisdom is to arrive at Playa Las Animas early (you can hire your own boat from Los Muertos beach). About noon, tourist boats arrive and for a couple of hours the beach, and its few restaurants, can get busy. This brown sand beach with shallow waters framed by oak, coconut and pink-flowering amapa trees can be the stop for almost any activity you desire — hiking, snorkeling, horseback riding or, with proper planning and a little effort, a very lazy beach day.

Both Yelapa and Playa Las Animas would provide beach-loving girlfriends a place to float in the sea, read on the sand and share a laugh-until-you-cry moment — an ultimate girlfriend getaway — on a beach in Puerto Vallarta.

Above from top: Signage at the Vallarta Botanical Gardens, a place to wander, wonder, sleep, eat and drink; Infinity pool with views of the Banderas Bay at CasaMagna Marriott; A rest stop at Vallarta Botanical Gardens; Fresh air dining at Hacienda de Oro Restaurant at the Vallarta Botanical Gardens.



PUERTO VALLARTA 411

Puerto Vallarta Tourism
www.visitpuertovallarta.com

CNT Nexus Tours
cnttravel.com

Staying
 There are literally hundreds of places to stay in PV. Here are a few *Travelgirl* can recommend:

CasaMagna Marriott
www.casamagnamarriottpuertovallartaresort.com

Dreams Puerto Vallarta Resort & Spa
dreamsresorts.com/puerto-vallarta

Hacienda San Angel
haciendasanangel.co

Eating/Tasting
Eating/Tasting
Vallarta Food Tours
www.puertovallartafoodtours.com

Gaby's
www.gabysrestaurant.com

No Way José
www.nowayjosemx.com

Vallarta Botanical Gardens
www.vbgardens.org/hacienda-de-oro

Trio Restaurant Bar Café
www.triopv.com

Xocodiva, Artisan Chocolates
www.xocodiva.com

See/Explore

Teatro Vallarta
teatrovallarta.com

Vallarta Botanical Gardens
www.vbgardens.org

Vallarta Adventures
www.vallarta-adventures.com

Las Animas Beach Adventure Park
www.adventureparkpv.com



Above: View from a balcony at the CasaMagna Marriott

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