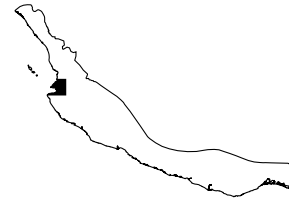


Puerto Vallarta



The jewel of Jalisco, Puerto Vallarta – referred to simply as ‘Vallarta’ by its loyal boosters – is one of Mexico’s liveliest and most sophisticated resort destinations. Stretching around the sparkling blue Bahía de Banderas (Bay of Flags) and backed by lush, palm-covered mountains, you couldn’t ask for a lovelier or livelier place to while away a cosmopolitan vacation. Each year millions come to laze on the dazzling sandy beaches, browse in the quaint shops, nosh in the stylish restaurants, and wander through the picturesque cobbled streets or along its beautiful seafront *malecón*. If the pretty town beaches aren’t enough, you can venture out on cruises, horseback rides, dive trips and day tours – and be back in time for a late dinner and an even later outing to one of the many sizzling nightspots.

The appeal of Puerto Vallarta transcends its city limits, and everywhere you go the dazzling sea beckons. During the winter months humpback whales arrive after a long journey from arctic seas, ready for a little R&R in Mexico’s warm waters. All around the bay sportfishing and diving are famously first rate, while up at Punta de Mita surfers find plenty of long, curling waves to keep them busy. Escape artists disappear into small towns such as Bucerías and La Cruz de Huanacastle to ease into the local rhythm.

Find yourself on a paradisiacal beach, accessible only by boat. Start with the remote coastal villages of Yelapa, Quimixto and Las Ánimas, and then set out to discover some empty beaches that you can call your own. There’s no shortage of boat operators ready and waiting to take you there.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Luxuriating day in and day out on Vallarta’s world-famous **Playa de los Muertos** (p69)
- Taking a *panga* (motorized skiff) to **Yelapa** (p107), one of many surrounding beaches only accessible by boat
- Strolling beneath the shady rubber trees on **Isla Río Cuale** (p72) alongside the burbling Río Cuale
- Riding the waves at **Punta de Mita** (p102), near the northern tip of Bahía de Banderas
- Catching a boat to **Los Arcos** (p105), the area’s best-loved snorkeling site, for some exemplary bubble-blowing action



■ AVERAGE JANUARY DAILY HIGH: 26°C | 78°F

■ AVERAGE JULY DAILY HIGH: 33°C | 91°F

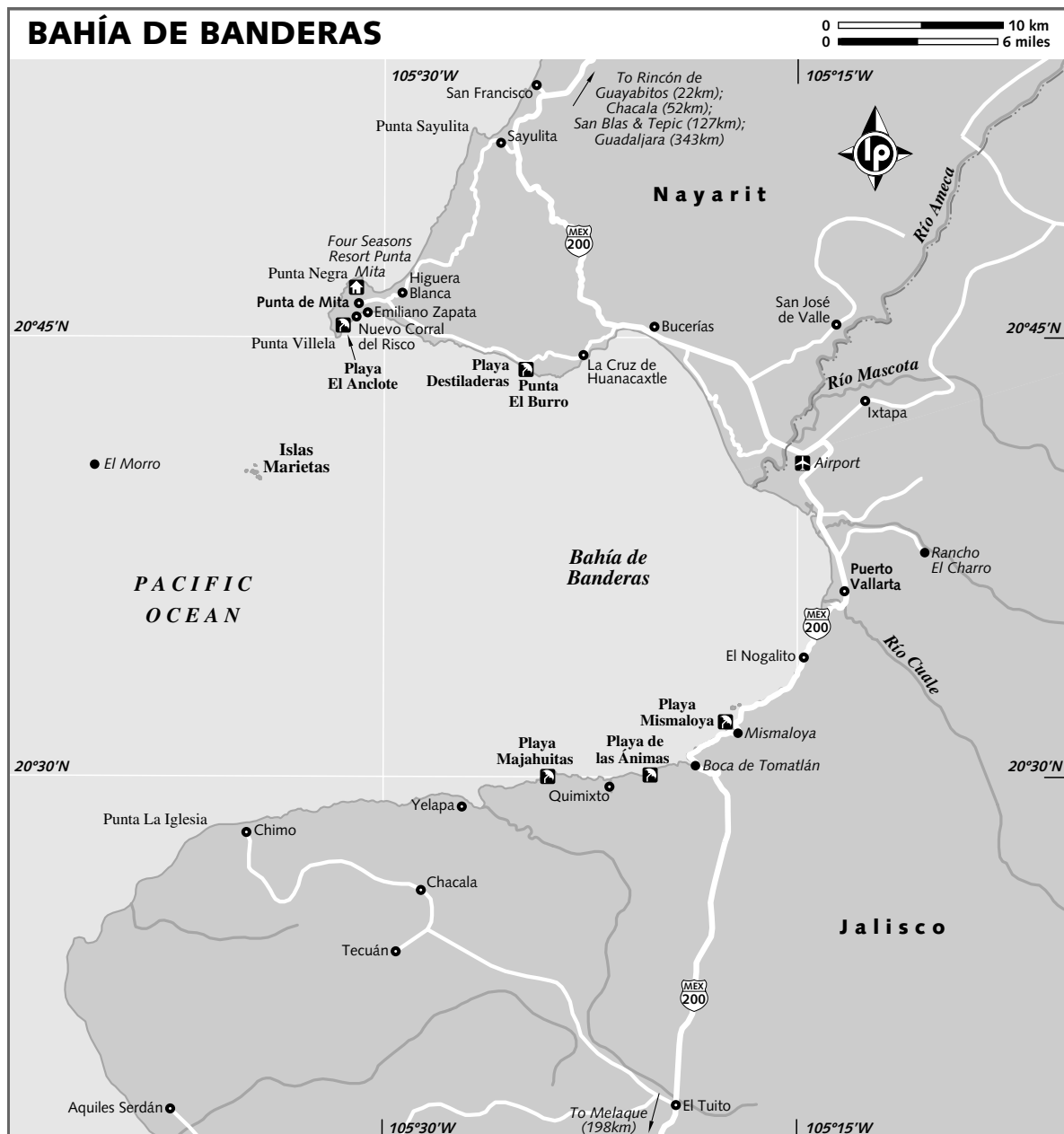
■ ☎ 322

HISTORY

Although indigenous peoples probably lived in this area for centuries, as they did elsewhere along the coast, the first documented settlement was in 1851, when the Sánchez family came and made their home by the mouth of the Río Cuale. Farmers and fisher folk followed, and farmers began shipping their harvests from a small port north of the Río Cuale. In 1918 the settlement was named Vallarta, in honor of Ignacio Luis Vallarta, a former governor of the state of Jalisco.

Tourists started to trickle into Puerto Vallarta back in 1954 when Mexicana airlines started a promotional campaign and initiated the first flights here, landing on a dirt airstrip in Emiliano Zapata, an area

that is now the center of Vallarta. A decade later, John Huston chose the nearby deserted cove of Mismaloya as a location for the film of Tennessee Williams' play *The Night of the Iguana*. Of his first visit, Huston later wrote 'When I first came here, almost 30 years ago, Vallarta was a fishing village of some 2000 souls. There was only one road to the outside world – and it was impassable during the rainy season. I arrived in a small plane, and we had to buzz the cattle off a field outside town before setting down.' As production on the film commenced, Hollywood paparazzi descended on the town to report on the tempestuous romance between Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, and Burton's co-star,



THE ART & SYMBOLOLOGY OF THE HUICHOL

In some of the furthest-flung and inaccessible areas of Jalisco and Nayarit, in a rugged region of about 39,000 sq km straddling the Sierra Madre Occidental, the Huichol have managed to maintain their culture through the centuries up to the present. Believed to be direct descendants of the Aztecs, there remain approximately 8000 Huichol living where they have for centuries in five autonomous mountain communities.

Huichol art reflects a belief system steeped in symbology, revealing a world where deer, scorpions, salamanders and wolves speak to shamans, arrows carry prayers, serpents bring rain and pumas carry the messages from the gods. With no written language, the Huichol document and encode their legends and spiritual knowledge in beautiful and elaborate works including yarn paintings, brightly colored beaded bowls and carvings such as puma heads and serpents. Their undeniably beautiful work is never merely decorative: each piece manifests an aspect of tradition and belief, drawn from lifelong participation in rites and ceremonies.

The hallucinogenic peyote cactus is sacred to the Huichol, who consider it a gift from the gods and use it to acquire shamanic powers or to approach enlightenment. Peyote is a prime influence on Huichol art, inspiring its vibrant color and fantastic design but also appearing as a symbol for what scholar Angela Corelis called 'the essence, the very life, sustenance, health, accomplishment, good fortune of the Huichol.'

Originally all forms of Huichol art were made as *ofrendas*, or prayer offerings to the gods. Today, some of their art is also made to sell, providing the Huichol people with a means of livelihood that encourages them to maintain and preserve their cultural and spiritual identity. In recent decades some 4000 Huichol have descended from the highlands to sell their art in cities such as Tepic, Guadalajara and Mexico City. In Puerto Vallarta fine examples are offered for sale at several locations (p93).

Visiting Huichol territory on your own is difficult, as there are no direct ground transport links or accommodations. However, Vallarta Adventures (p77) offers a half-day air tour to the remote mountain village of San Andres Coamihata, a Huichol religious and political center. The tour costs US\$245 and departs from the Aerotron Aerodrome next to Puerto Vallarta international airport every Friday from December to April at 8:30am.

To learn about efforts to preserve Huichol culture or to find outlets for artwork, contact the **Centro Indigena Huichol** (☎ 457-983-7054, in the US 503-436-1376; www.huicholcenter.com; Calle Victoria 24, Huejuquilla El Alto; Jalisco 46000).

Ava Gardner, also raised more than a few eyebrows. Puerto Vallarta suddenly became world-famous, with an aura of steamy tropical romance.

This is not to say that the town had anything resembling a tourism infrastructure. Those who took advantage of Mexicana's Los Angeles–Puerto Vallarta route, inaugurated in 1962, discovered a town where cows still wandered onto the runways and where there was a notable lack of hotel beds. Moreover, during the rainy season it was often necessary for visitors to cross the swollen Río Pitillal in a canoe on the way into town. When one of the few taxis was not available, donkeys were pressed into service to carry tourists' luggage.

Guillermo Wulff, an engineer from Mexico City, fell under Vallarta's spell in the late 1950s and began building houses in what

would become known as Gringo Gulch and Mismaloya. In the late 1960s, as more and more visitors came to soak up the sun and expatriates put down roots, Jalisco governor Francisco Medina Ascencio took his vision for Puerto Vallarta's emergence as a world-class destination to President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz. The president enthusiastically embraced the plan, declaring 'we will start tomorrow, hear me well, tomorrow!'

Soon the town had electric power and telephone service. Construction began on bridges and highways, banks were open for business and hotels sprouted from the sands of Playa Olas Altas. Ships began loading and offloading at the new port at El Salado – Jalisco's first – and the newly incorporated city even hosted a summit between the presidents of the United States and Mexico.

When the *peso* was devalued in 1980, causing economic hardship for Mexico at large, resort towns such as Puerto Vallarta prospered as tourists with pockets full of dollars streamed in for bargain vacations. Between 1980 and 1990 Puerto Vallarta's population doubled to reach 112,000. Through it all, the town's historic center managed to retain its vintage character, as new development was centered around the new Marina Vallarta, completed in 1993. Today, Puerto Vallarta has cemented its position on the A-list of international beach resorts, attracting nearly three million visitors per year.

ORIENTATION

Puerto Vallarta's historic center is bisected by the Río Cuale, which splits to encircle the long and narrow Isla Río Cuale. Two short road bridges, two rickety suspended bridges and a new beachside pedestrian bridge allow easy passage between the Zona Romántica to the south and the Zona Centro to the north.

North of the Río Cuale lies the more modern part of town, the Zona Centro, whose heart is the seaside Plaza Principal. The crown-topped steeple of the cathedral perches nearby. On a few long blocks paralleling the beachless *malecón* (waterfront street) are many modern boutiques, galleries, cafés, bars and restaurants, along with a few hotels. Avs Morelos and Juárez are Puerto Vallarta's two principal thoroughfares.

South of the Río Cuale is Puerto Vallarta's most picturesque district, the Zona Romántica (also called Old Town or Olas Altas), with hotels, boutiques, restaurants and bars. It has the only two beaches in the city center: Playa Olas Altas (which doesn't have 'high waves,' despite the name) and Playa de los Muertos (Beach of the Dead), which takes its strange name from a fierce fight there in the late 19th century.

North of the city is the Zona Hotelera, a strip of giant luxury hotels; Marina Vallarta, a large yachting marina (6.5km from the center); the airport (10km); the bus terminal (10.5km); and Nuevo Vallarta, a

PUERTO VALLARTA IN...

Two Days

Breakfast on **Isla Río Cuale** (p72), then stop in at the **Museo del Cuale** (p72) or linger beneath shady rubber trees on the Isla Río Cuale River Walk. Spread out a towel on **Playa Olas Altas** (p69) or join the happy throng on the waterfront *malecón* and enjoy the **public sculptures** (p75). Linger over dinner at one of Vallarta's splendid **restaurants** (p85) and then hit one of the raucous late-night **dance clubs** (p91).

On day two get up early (yeah, right) and continue indulging in the pleasures of the city with some **shopping** (p93) or browsing at an **art gallery** (p95). Otherwise, take your pick from the many opportunities for **outdoor adventures** (p72).

Four Days

To the two-day itinerary add an overnight trip to **Yelapa** (p107), a charming, scenic village on the southern shores of Bahía de Banderas. Luxuriate in the sand, enjoy fresh *mariscos* (seafood), or perhaps take a rejuvenating hike to a waterfall. Along the way, stop in at the seaside communities of **Quimixto** (p107) and **Las Ánimas** (p106) for more snorkeling, hiking or beach bumming. All three towns are accessible only by boat.

One Week

Add on a day enjoying Puerto Vallarta's epic landscapes from the perspective of a **mountain bike** (p75) or a **riding saddle** (p74). Explore underwater at one of the area's great **diving** and **snorkeling sites** (p73) or test your skills while enjoying some world-class **sportfishing** (p72).

Take a day or two to enjoy one or more of the small waterfront communities north of town. Find new ways to relax in **Bucerías** (p97) with its less-crowded beaches or in **La Cruz de Huanacaxtle** (p100), a simple fishing village. Alternatively, learn or practice the art of surfing at **Playa El Anclote** (p102).

PUERTO VALLARTA & AROUND

1 INFORMATION

Ameri-Med Urgent Care.....(see 2)
 San Javier Marina Hospital.....1 D3
 State tourist office.....2 C3

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Bloodhound.....3 C3
 Diana Tours.....(see 15)
 Fishing Puerto Vallarta.....4 C3
 Jump the Pacific.....5 C5
 Los Flamingos Golf Club.....6 B1
 Mamá Lucía.....7 C6
 Marina Vallarta Golf Club.....8 C3
 Mismaloya Divers.....9 B6
2 Mister Tequila.....10 C6
 Rancho Manolo.....11 B6
 Rancho Palma Real.....12 D3
 Splash Parque Acuático.....13 C2
 Vallarta Adventures.....14 C3

SLEEPING

Blue Chairs Beach Resort.....15 C4
 Brisas del Mar.....16 C4
 Buenaventura Hotel & Beach Club.....17 D4
 Casa Iguana Hotel.....18 C6
 Costa Linda.....19 C4
3 Dreams Puerto Vallarta Resort & Spa.....20 C4
 Fiesta Americana Puerto Vallarta.....21 D3
 Hotel La Misión.....22 D4
 La Jolla de Mismaloya Rainforest & Beach Resort.....23 B5
 Mar Sereno.....24 B6
 NH Krystal Puerto Vallarta.....25 C3
 Presidente InterContinental.....26 C5
 Quinta María Cortez.....27 C4
 Tacho's Trailer Park.....28 D3

EATING

4 Bogart's.....(see 25)
 Chico's Paradise.....29 B6
 Chino's Paraíso.....30 C6
 El Edén.....31 C6
 Garibaldi's.....32 C3
 Le Kliff.....33 B6
 Restaurant Mi Ranchito.....34 B6

DRINKING

El Faro Lighthouse Bar.....(see 4)

ENTERTAINMENT

5 Christine.....(see 25)
 J&B.....35 D3
 Jabalu.....36 D3
 Plaza de Toros.....37 C3
 Sheraton Buganvillas.....38 D3

SHOPPING

Alfarería Tlaquepaque.....39 D4
 El Gato Gordo.....40 D4

TRANSPORT

Bus to Bucerías; Punta de Mita.....41 D3
 Long-Distance Bus Station.....42 D2
 Mario's Moto Rent.....43 D3

6

Playa Quimixto
 Playa de las Animas
 Boca de Tomatlán
 Quimixto
 To Playa Majahuitas (2km);
 Yelapa (5km)

To Sayulita (22km);
 Rincón de Guayabitos (49km);
 Chacala (80km);
 Tepic (158km);
 Guadalajara (374km)

To San Patricio-Melaque (200km);
 Barra de Navidad (205km)

new resort area of hotel and condominium development (15km). To the south of the city, in a more natural setting than Zona Hotelera, are more large resorts and some of the most beautiful beaches in the area.

For details on getting to/from the airport or the bus station, see p96.

Maps

Guía Roji publishes a detailed *Ciudad de Puerto Vallarta* map; it's available from major Internet booksellers. Tourist maps are available at the tourist office (opposite).

INFORMATION

Puerto Vallarta is in Jalisco state, one hour ahead of nearby Nayarit, so set your watches forward an hour. Also note that any opening hours or days listed in this chapter, especially for restaurants or shops, reflect the busy winter season; in other seasons, hours and days tend to be more limited, with some businesses even closing down altogether.

Bookstores

A Page in the Sun Bookshop-Café (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-36-08; cnr Olas Altas & Diéguez) Buys and sells used English-language books, and serves great coffee.

Libros Libros Books Books (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-71-05; 31 de Octubre 127) Has a fair selection of magazines and books, including Lonely Planet guides, in English.

Cultural Centers

Centro Cultural Río Cuale (☎ 223-00-95; Isla Río Cuale; ☎ 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Sat) Beautifully situated on Isla Río Cuale, offering graphic and fine arts courses. A schedule of courses open to the general public is posted by the office.

Emergency

The tourist police corps, dressed in white safari outfits with matching helmets, are easy to spot. You'll see the bilingual officers buzzing proudly around town in shiny ATVs (all-terrain vehicles) and on foot along the *malecón*.

Ambulance (☎ 222-15-33)

Fire Department (☎ 223-94-76)

Police (☎ 060, 223-25-00)

Internet Access

There are so many Internet places they are practically a plague, especially in the Zona Romántica.

PVC@fe.com (Map pp70-1; Olas Altas 250; per hr US\$3; ☎ 7am-1am) Wireless access, fast machines, good coffee and cheap Internet calls.

Storba's Caffè (Map pp70-1; east of Plaza Principal, 2nd fl; per hr US\$2; ☎ 9am-10pm) Fast, relaxed and central but hot.

Vallart@Millenium (Map pp70-1; Madero 370; per hr US\$2; ☎ 9am-10:30pm) Also fast but considerably cooler.

Laundry

There are many laundries around town, all of which are closed on Sunday and charge less than US\$4 per load.

Lavandería Blanquita (Map pp70-1; Madero 407A)

Lavandería Elsa (Map pp70-1; Olas Altas 385)

Media

Vallarta Today (www.vallartatoday.com) and **Vallarta Tribune** (www.vallartatribune.com) are free, informative daily papers conceived for tourists; you'll find them throughout town in hotel lobbies and at restaurants. *Puerto Vallarta Lifestyles* is a quarterly English-language magazine with good maps, in-depth restaurant reviews, a complete real-estate section and information on shopping, art galleries, activities and tours. *Bay Vallarta* is a free monthly guide with useful culture and shopping listings. *Vallarta Map & Dining Guide* is the official guide for the local restaurant association, including a lengthy directory of restaurants and plenty of maps. *Gay Guide Vallarta* is an up-to-date, definitive guide to gay businesses and events.

Medical Services

Ameri-Med Urgent Care (Map p67; ☎ 226-20-80; Plaza Neptuno, Marina Vallarta) A modern American-style hospital charging American-style fees. They advertise that US medical insurance is accepted.

San Javier Marina Hospital (Map p67; ☎ 226-10-10; Av Ascencio 2760) Vallarta's best-equipped hospital.

Money

Most businesses in Vallarta accept US dollars as readily as they accept pesos, though the rate of exchange they give is usually less favorable than at banks. Several banks can be found around Plaza Principal, but they often have long queues. Most of the banks also have ATMs.

Vallarta has many *casas de cambio* (exchange houses); it may pay to shop around, since rates differ. Though their rates are less

favorable than the banks, the difference may be slight, and the longer opening hours and faster service may make using them worthwhile. Most are open around 9am to 7pm daily, sometimes with a 2pm to 4pm lunch break. Look for them on Insurgentes, Vallarta, the *malecón* and many other streets.

American Express (AmEx; Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-29-55; cnr Morelos & Abasolo; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Also near the center.

Banamex (Map pp70-1; cnr Zaragoza & Juárez; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat) On the south side of the plaza (Western Union is also situated here).

Post

Main post office (Map pp70-1; Mina 188) Send your postcards home from here.

Telephone

Vallarta has many *casetas telefónicas* (public telephone call stations), including one on Plaza Lázaro Cárdenas and another at Cárdenas 267. Public card phones are plentiful everywhere in town. Calling Canada or the USA isn't cheap – expect to pay at least US\$1 per minute.

Telecomm (Map pp70-1; Hidalgo 582; 🕒 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat & Sun) Offers fax as well as phone service.

Tourist Information

Sponsored by the visitors bureau and tourist board, www.puertovallarta.net provides a wealth of information regarding lodging, activities and attractions.

Municipal tourist office (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-25-00 ext 230; Juárez s/n, in Municipal bldg; 🕒 8am-4pm Mon-Fri) Vallarta's busy but competent office, at the northeast corner of Plaza Principal, has free maps, multilingual tourist literature and bilingual staff.

State tourist office (Map pp70-1; Dirección de Turismo del Estado de Jalisco; ☎ 221-26-76, 221-26-80; Plaza Marina, Local 144 & 146; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) In Marina Vallarta, this is the place to go for information about attractions throughout the state of Jalisco.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Puerto Vallarta has an extraordinarily low crime rate, but police occasionally stop and frisk locals and tourists, checking for drugs.

Expect to be approached by the omnipresent touts who are intent on reeling in potential buyers to timeshare presentations. If you choose to attend a presentation – perhaps swayed by the promise of a free meal, tour or cruise – be prepared to fend off the 'hard

sell.' And if you're tempted to buy, make absolutely sure you know what you're getting yourself into, lest you be paying off your vacation years into the future.

SIGHTS

Puerto Vallarta has amazing natural scenery and a growing number of cultural attractions. Beaches remain Vallarta's main draw, and many visitors have no desire to leave the warm sand. Restless souls need not go far to find activities such as swimming with dolphins, bungee jumping, mountain biking and whale-watching. Snorkeling, scuba diving, deep-sea fishing, water-skiing, windsurfing, sailing, parasailing, and riding the 'banana' can be arranged on the beaches in front of any of the large hotels or by making arrangements with the tourist office.

Beaches

Only two beaches, **Playa Olas Altas** and **Playa de los Muertos** are handy to the city center; they're both south of the Río Cuale.

The most significant of the two is Playa de los Muertos, a mile-long stretch of yellow sand dotted by *palapa* (thatched-roof) restaurants and beachfront hotels. The surf is gentle and there's rarely an undertow, making for good swimming and family-friendly conditions. From the recently constructed pier at the terminus of Francisca Rodriguez, water taxis depart for destinations including Yelapa, Quimixto and Los Arcos islands. According to local legend, the Beach of the Dead was named for a grisly battle fought here over a century ago between smugglers working in the gold and silver mines of the Río Cuale and the natives who tried to take their stolen booty from them. When the fight was over, or so the story goes, the beach was strewn with bodies (much as it is today!).

Trendy gay men head to the section of beach called **Blue Chairs**, at the southern end of Playa de los Muertos (there are blue, green and yellow chairs here). For a more isolated gay beach, see p74.

North of town, the shoreline curves to the west all the way to Punta de Mita, many miles away. Beaches along the way include **Playa Camarones**, **Playa Las Glorias**, **Playa Los Tules**, **Playa Las Palmas** and **Playa de Oro**. Further north, at Marina Vallarta, is **Playa El**

CENTRAL PUERTO VALLARTA

0 0.2 miles 400 m

A	B	C	D
<p>INFORMATION</p> <p>A Page in the Sun Bookshop-Café... 1 C7</p> <p>American Express... 2 E2</p> <p>Banamex... 3 D4</p> <p>Banamex ATM... 4 C7</p> <p>Lavandería Blanquita... 5 E6</p> <p>Lavandería Elsa... 6 C7</p> <p>Libros Libros Books Books... 7 E1</p> <p>Main Post Office... 8 D3</p> <p>Municipal Tourist Office... 9 D4</p> <p>PVC@fe.com... 10 C7</p> <p>Storba's Caffé... 11 D4</p> <p>Telecomm... 12 E3</p> <p>US Consulate... 13 D4</p> <p>Vallart@Millennium... 14 E6</p>	<p>Le Bistrot Jazz Café... 94 E5</p> <p>Le Gourmet... (see 53)</p> <p>Los Pibes... 95 D7</p> <p>Mama Dolores Diner... (see 139)</p> <p>Marriscos Polo... 96 E6</p> <p>Mi Querencia... 97 D3</p> <p>No Name Café... 98 D3</p> <p>Oscar's Bar & Grill... 99 C5</p> <p>Pancake House... 100 D7</p> <p>Planeta Vegetariano... 101 D4</p> <p>Rito's Baci... 102 E2</p> <p>River Café... 103 D5</p> <p>Sand Bar... 104 C8</p> <p>Santa Barbara... 105 C7</p> <p>Steak House Brasil... 106 C7</p> <p>Tacos de los Arcos... 107 D4</p> <p>Trio... 108 D5</p>	<p>Mariachi Loco... 138 D6</p> <p>Palm... 139 C8</p> <p>Sama Bar... 140 C8</p> <p>Señor Frog's... 141 D7</p> <p>Tequila's... 142 D3</p> <p>Zoo... 143 E2</p>	<p>SHOPPING</p> <p>Arículos Religiosos La Asunción... 144 D5</p> <p>Artesanías Flores... 145 D6</p> <p>Casa de Tequila... 146 D3</p> <p>Galería de Ollas... 147 C5</p> <p>Galería Mágico Huichol... 148 E3</p> <p>Galería Mata Ortiz... 149 D6</p> <p>Galería Omar Alonso... 150 E2</p> <p>Guantanamera Cigar Club... 107 D4</p> <p>Hecho a Mano... 152 D4</p> <p>Huichol Collection... 153 D3</p> <p>La Casa de los Gatos... (see 65)</p> <p>La Playa Vinos y Licores... 154 E2</p> <p>Lucy's Cucú Cabaña... 155 E7</p> <p>Mercado de Artesanías... 156 D5</p> <p>Mundo de Azulejos... 157 E6</p> <p>Mundo de Cristal... 158 E7</p> <p>Olinálá... 159 D7</p> <p>Patti Gallardo... 160 D7</p> <p>Puerto Azul Galería... 161 D7</p> <p>Serafina... 162 D7</p> <p>Viva... (see 162)</p>
<p>SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES</p> <p>Centro Cultural Rio Cuale... 15 E5</p> <p>Centro Cultural Vallartense... 16 E5</p> <p>Centro de Estudios Para Extranjeros... 17 D5</p> <p>Cooperativa de Pescadores... 18 E1</p> <p>Eco Ride... 19 E4</p> <p>Galería Dante... 20 D7</p> <p>Galería Pacifico... 21 E3</p> <p>Galería Uno... 22 D3</p> <p>Galería Vallarta... 23 D4</p> <p>International Friendship Club... 24 D5</p> <p>La Rotunda del Mar... 25 D2</p> <p>Museo del Cuale... 26 C5</p> <p>Ocean Quest... 27 C6</p> <p>Open Air Expeditions... 28 D5</p> <p>Plaza John Huston... 29 E5</p> <p>Voladores de Papantía... 30 D3</p>	<p>DRINKING</p> <p>Café San Angel... 109 C8</p> <p>Café Superior... 110 D5</p> <p>Cappuchino Café... 111 D3</p> <p>Carlos O'Brian's... 112 E2</p> <p>Club Roxy... 113 D6</p> <p>Club Sports Bar & Grill... 114 D7</p> <p>Kahuna Coffee Co... 115 C7</p> <p>La Barriga Cantina... 116 D6</p> <p>Memories Café... 117 D3</p> <p>Pool Hall... 118 D6</p> <p>Viva Café... 119 D6</p> <p>World of Coffee... 120 C6</p>	<p>ENTERTAINMENT</p> <p>Anthropology... 121 C5</p> <p>Bar El Morbo... 122 C8</p> <p>Cactus... 123 D6</p> <p>Cine Bahía... 124 E6</p> <p>Club Paco Paco... 125 D7</p> <p>Casa Dulce Vida... 126 E2</p> <p>Hard Rock Café... 127 E2</p> <p>High After Hours Bar... 128 E6</p> <p>Hilo... 129 D3</p> <p>Kahluá... 130 E2</p> <p>Kit Kat Klub... 131 C8</p> <p>La Cantina... 132 E2</p> <p>La Iguana... 133 D6</p> <p>La Noche... 134 D6</p>	<p>SLEEPING</p> <p>Casa Amorita... 31 E4</p> <p>Casa Andrea... 32 C8</p> <p>Casa de los Cuatro Vientos... 33 E3</p> <p>Casa Dulce Vida... 34 E3</p> <p>Casa Kimberley... 35 E5</p> <p>Estancia San Carlos... 36 D6</p> <p>Frankfurt Hotel... 37 D7</p> <p>Hacienda San Angel... 38 E4</p> <p>Hotel Ana Liz... 39 E6</p> <p>Hotel Azteca... 40 F6</p> <p>Hotel Belmar... 41 E6</p> <p>Hotel Bernal... 42 E6</p>

CENTRAL PUERTO VALLARTA

A **B** **C** **D**

- 1 A Page in the Sun Bookshop-Café... 1 C7
- 2 American Express... 2 E2
- 3 Banamex... 3 D4
- 4 Banamex ATM... 4 C7
- 5 Lavandería Blanquita... 5 E6
- 6 Lavandería Elsa... 6 C7
- 7 Libros Libros Books Books... 7 E1
- 8 Main Post Office... 8 D3
- 9 Municipal Tourist Office... 9 D4
- 10 PVC@fe.com... 10 C7
- 11 Storba's Caffé... 11 D4
- 12 Telecomm... 12 E3
- 13 US Consulate... 13 D4
- 14 Vallart@Millennium... 14 E6
- 15 Centro Cultural Rio Cuale... 15 E5
- 16 Centro Cultural Vallartense... 16 E5
- 17 Centro de Estudios Para Extranjeros... 17 D5
- 18 Cooperativa de Pescadores... 18 E1
- 19 Eco Ride... 19 E4
- 20 Galería Dante... 20 D7
- 21 Galería Pacifico... 21 E3
- 22 Galería Uno... 22 D3
- 23 Galería Vallarta... 23 D4
- 24 International Friendship Club... 24 D5
- 25 La Rotunda del Mar... 25 D2
- 26 Museo del Cuale... 26 C5
- 27 Ocean Quest... 27 C6
- 28 Open Air Expeditions... 28 D5
- 29 Plaza John Huston... 29 E5
- 30 Voladores de Papantía... 30 D3
- 31 Casa Amorita... 31 E4
- 32 Casa Andrea... 32 C8
- 33 Casa de los Cuatro Vientos... 33 E3
- 34 Casa Dulce Vida... 34 E3
- 35 Casa Kimberley... 35 E5
- 36 Estancia San Carlos... 36 D6
- 37 Frankfurt Hotel... 37 D7
- 38 Hacienda San Angel... 38 E4
- 39 Hotel Ana Liz... 39 E6
- 40 Hotel Azteca... 40 F6
- 41 Hotel Belmar... 41 E6
- 42 Hotel Bernal... 42 E6
- 94 Le Bistrot Jazz Café... 94 E5
- 95 Le Gourmet... (see 53)
- 96 Los Pibes... 95 D7
- 97 Mama Dolores Diner... (see 139)
- 98 Marriscos Polo... 96 E6
- 99 Mi Querencia... 97 D3
- 100 No Name Café... 98 D3
- 101 Oscar's Bar & Grill... 99 C5
- 102 Pancake House... 100 D7
- 103 Planeta Vegetariano... 101 D4
- 104 Rito's Baci... 102 E2
- 105 River Café... 103 D5
- 106 Sand Bar... 104 C8
- 107 Santa Barbara... 105 C7
- 108 Steak House Brasil... 106 C7
- 109 Tacos de los Arcos... 107 D4
- 110 Trio... 108 D5
- 111 Centro Cultural Rio Cuale... 15 E5
- 112 Centro Cultural Vallartense... 16 E5
- 113 Centro de Estudios Para Extranjeros... 17 D5
- 114 Cooperativa de Pescadores... 18 E1
- 115 Eco Ride... 19 E4
- 116 Galería Dante... 20 D7
- 117 Galería Pacifico... 21 E3
- 118 Galería Uno... 22 D3
- 119 Galería Vallarta... 23 D4
- 120 International Friendship Club... 24 D5
- 121 La Rotunda del Mar... 25 D2
- 122 Museo del Cuale... 26 C5
- 123 Ocean Quest... 27 C6
- 124 Open Air Expeditions... 28 D5
- 125 Plaza John Huston... 29 E5
- 126 Voladores de Papantía... 30 D3
- 127 Casa Amorita... 31 E4
- 128 Casa Andrea... 32 C8
- 129 Casa de los Cuatro Vientos... 33 E3
- 130 Casa Dulce Vida... 34 E3
- 131 Casa Kimberley... 35 E5
- 132 Estancia San Carlos... 36 D6
- 133 Frankfurt Hotel... 37 D7
- 134 Hacienda San Angel... 38 E4
- 135 Hotel Ana Liz... 39 E6
- 136 Hotel Azteca... 40 F6
- 137 Hotel Belmar... 41 E6
- 138 Hotel Bernal... 42 E6

- 138 Mariachi Loco... 138 D6
- 139 Palm... 139 C8
- 140 Sama Bar... 140 C8
- 141 Señor Frog's... 141 D7
- 142 Tequila's... 142 D3
- 143 Zoo... 143 E2
- 144 Artesanías Flores... 145 D6
- 145 Casa de Tequila... 146 D3
- 146 Galería de Ollas... 147 C5
- 147 Galería Mágico Huichol... 148 E3
- 148 Galería Mata Ortiz... 149 D6
- 149 Galería Omar Alonso... 150 E2
- 150 Guantanamera Cigar Club... 107 D4
- 151 Hecho a Mano... 152 D4
- 152 Huichol Collection... 153 D3
- 153 La Casa de los Gatos... (see 65)
- 154 La Playa Vinos y Licores... 154 E2
- 155 Lucy's Cucú Cabaña... 155 E7
- 156 Mercado de Artesanías... 156 D5
- 157 Mundo de Azulejos... 157 E6
- 158 Mundo de Cristal... 158 E7
- 159 Olinálá... 159 D7
- 160 Patti Gallardo... 160 D7
- 161 Puerto Azul Galería... 161 D7
- 162 Serafina... 162 D7
- 163 Viva... (see 162)
- 121 Anthropology... 121 C5
- 122 Bar El Morbo... 122 C8
- 123 Cactus... 123 D6
- 124 Cine Bahía... 124 E6
- 125 Club Paco Paco... 125 D7
- 126 Casa Dulce Vida... 126 E2
- 127 Hard Rock Café... 127 E2
- 128 High After Hours Bar... 128 E6
- 129 Hilo... 129 D3
- 130 Kahluá... 130 E2
- 131 Kit Kat Klub... 131 C8
- 132 La Cantina... 132 E2
- 133 La Iguana... 133 D6
- 134 La Noche... 134 D6

- 31 Casa Amorita... 31 E4
- 32 Casa Andrea... 32 C8
- 33 Casa de los Cuatro Vientos... 33 E3
- 34 Casa Dulce Vida... 34 E3
- 35 Casa Kimberley... 35 E5
- 36 Estancia San Carlos... 36 D6
- 37 Frankfurt Hotel... 37 D7
- 38 Hacienda San Angel... 38 E4
- 39 Hotel Ana Liz... 39 E6
- 40 Hotel Azteca... 40 F6
- 41 Hotel Belmar... 41 E6
- 42 Hotel Bernal... 42 E6

43	E6	Hotel Cartagena de Indios.....
44	D8	Hotel Descanso del Sol.....
45	C6	Hotel Eloísa.....
46	C8	Hotel Emperador.....
47	D6	Hotel Hortencia.....
48	D6	Hotel Molino de Agua.....
49	C7	Hotel Playa Los Arcos.....
50	D7	Hotel Posada de Roger.....
51	D5	Hotel Posada del Pedregal.....
52	C7	Hotel Posada Lily.....
53	D6	Hotel Posada Río Cuale.....
54	E1	Hotel Rosita.....
55	C8	Hotel San Marino Plaza.....
56	C8	Hotel Tropicana.....
57	F6	Hotel Villa del Mar.....
58	E5	La Casa del Puente.....
59	E7	Posada Don Miguel.....
60	C8	Terraza Inn.....
61	C8	Torre de Oro.....
62	C8	Vallarta Sun Hotel.....
63	E4	Villa David.....
EATING		
64	D7	Abadía Café.....
65	D7	Agro Gourmet.....
66	C8	Angelo's Italian Cuisine.....
67	E2	Archie's Burger.....
68	C8	Archie's Wok.....
69	D7	Asaderos.....
70	F2	Barcelona.....
71	C7	Boca Bento.....
72	C7	Café de Olla.....
73	E2	Café des Artistes.....
74	D7	Carisma.....
75	F6	Casa Naranjo.....
76	E2	Cenaduría Doña Raquel.....
77	C7	Chef Roger.....
78	C8	Chiles!.....
79	D7	Como Pizza.....
80	C7	Daiquirí Dick's.....
81	E7	El Palomar de los González.....
82	E4	Esquina de los Caprichos.....
83	C7	Fajita Republic.....
84	D7	Fredy's Tucan Restaurant & Bar.....
85	D6	Gutiérrez Rizoc (GR) Supermarket.....
86	C7	Ibiza.....
87	C7	Kaiser Maximilian.....
88	E1	La Bodeguita del Medio.....
89	E2	La Dolce Vita.....
90	E5	La Fuente del Puente.....
91	C8	La Palapa.....
92	E2	Las Palomas.....
93	C8	Las Tres Huastecas.....

TRANSPORT

Bike Mex.....163 E5

Elite.....164 E7

ETN.....165 D6

Local Buses to Mismaloya & Boca de Tomatlán.....166 D7

Local Buses to North of Town.....167 C7

Local Buses to North of Town.....(see 124)

Primera Plus & Servicios Coordinados Bus Ticket Office.....(see 165)

Stop for Buses to/from South of Town.....168 E6

TNS & Estrella Blanca Bus Ticket Office.....(see 164)

Transportes del Pacifico Bus Ticket Office.....169 E6

Water Taxis.....170 B8

Water Taxis.....171 E1

Salado. Nuevo Vallarta also has beaches and there are others, less developed, right around the bay to Punta de Mita.

For beaches further north or south of town, see North of Puerto Vallarta (p97) and South of Puerto Vallarta (p103).

Isla Río Cuale

This small island at the mouth of the Río Cuale is a charming place shaded by old *hule de oro* (rubber) trees. This is where the city's earliest residents built their humble homes.

The **Museo del Cuale** (Map pp70-1; Paseo Isla Río Cuale s/n; admission free; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Sat), near the western end of Isla Río Cuale, has a collection of beautiful pottery, grinding stones, clay figurines and other ancient objects. Text panels are in Spanish and English.

Upstream you'll notice two rickety cable **suspension bridges** connecting the island to the Zona Romántica. As you pass over them, you'll need your sea legs: the bridges tend to buck and sway, particularly when some little rascal starts to shake it just as you reach the center.

You'll find it hard to resist the **Mercado de Artesanías** (p93), on the adjacent riverbank as you progress up the island. Further on is **Plaza John Huston**, where a stoic bronze sculpture of the film icon sitting in his director's chair holds court.

Continuing up the island, pay a visit to the gallery at **Centro Cultural Vallartense**, a small volunteer-run arts center offering classes and small exhibitions by local talent. Nearby is the new **Centro Cultural Río Cuale** (☎ 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Sat), which offers classes in fine arts and graphic design. Course schedules are posted by the office.

Just beyond is the rocky tip of the island, where you can gaze up the clear running stream and enjoy the refreshing breeze. If you're lucky, you'll catch a glimpse of a slow-moving iguana slinking through the trees.

Cathedral

On Hidalgo, one block from Plaza Principal, stands **La Paroquia de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe**, named for Mexico's favorite – and the city's patron – saint. The simple brick architecture might seem austere were it not for the audacious crown that sprouts like a jaunty mushroom from the tower. Interestingly, the crown is modeled after that of Empress Carlota, the 19th-century Belgian-

born royal who briefly administered Mexico with her husband, Maximilian, at the behest of Napoleon III. The cathedral's doors are unlocked from 9am to 5pm.

ACTIVITIES

Puerto Vallarta is simply chock-full of activities. Head toward the sea for diving, snorkeling, windsurfing, fishing and sailing. (Most activities can be arranged on the beaches in front of any of the large hotels.) Parasailing is also very popular, but there have been some accidents in the past and the activity should be considered potentially hazardous. Turn inland to ride horses, play golf or drive off-road. For the sedate, wildlife-watching boat tours and scenic cruises are a good option; some include meals and plenty of drinks.

Scuba Diving & Snorkeling

Below the warm, tranquil waters of Bahía de Banderas is a world of stingrays, tropical fish and garishly colored corals. The most spectacular spots for diving and snorkeling are **Los Arcos** (opposite), the rocky islands in the bay just south of town (now a protected ecological zone), and **Las Islas Marietas** (opposite) at the entrance to the bay, surrounded by impressive reefs, underwater caves, tunnels and walls. Dolphins, whales and giant manta rays are often sighted between December and April. Most folks get to Los Arcos via a boat tour or a hired skiff.

Vallarta has several diving operators. Most dives include transport, gear and light meals. Water is clearest from May to November, with peak clarity in October and November. Operators also offer certification courses and snorkeling trips (which usually means snorkelers tag along with divers).

Ocean Quest (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-41-03; www.mexico.scuba.com; Cárdenas 230; snorkeling US\$25, 2-tank dive trip US\$65-115, PADI open-water certification US\$280) is well regarded for its small-group excursions to both well- and lesser-known sites. English and German are spoken.

Vallarta Adventures (snorkeling/2-tank dive trip US\$25/99, PADI open-water certification US\$370) has 'gold-palm' instructors and acclaimed service (p77).

Sportfishing

Deep-sea fishing is popular all year, with a major international sailfish tournament held every November. Prime catches are

TOP FIVE DIVING SITES

Any Puerto Vallarta diving provider worth its salt offers trips to the following roundly celebrated diving sites.

El Morro

Just beyond the northernmost waters of the bay, 42km north of Puerto Vallarta, this secluded dive site offers thrills to advance divers. Humpback whales, sailfish, dolphins and even the occasional whale shark are spotted here. Equally grand is the underwater landscape, characterized by a good collection of pinnacles and caves.

Las Islas Marietas

These beautiful islands, nearly 34km from Puerto Vallarta on the north side of the bay, are a diver's dream. Underwater caves and coral reefs shelter great hordes of tropical fish, and whale, dolphin and giant manta-ray sightings are common. Invariably, divers are monitored by personable blue-footed boobies watching from the rocks. Between dives, the divers stretch out on Playa del Amor and count their blessings.

Los Arcos

Far and away the most popular diving destination in Bahía de Banderas and a protected National Underwater Park, Los Arcos (Map p67) is a picturesque spot that features gnarly granite rock formations rising from the sea. Near the largest of the arches you'll enjoy good visibility and depths ranging from 8m to 20m. Follow the shelf to the edge and hover over the abyss of Devil's Canyon, which drops off to a jaw-dropping 600m.

Playa Majahuitas

At the southern end of the bay and accessible only by boat is the hidden cove of Majahuitas. In between dives divers disembark and linger on the beach at Quimixto over lunch. Back in the water, divers commonly spot eels darting in and out of black coral, manta rays, dolphins and any number of brightly colored tropical fish.

Chimo

You're not likely to have to mingle with those pesky snorkelers at the dive sites near this small fishing village, which lies 42km from Puerto Vallarta on the bay's southern coast. Giant manta rays are plentiful during the winter months, and great swarms of tropical fish are a sure bet all year long. Its most unique feature, however, is the amazing pinnacles rising from a wide underwater plateau called Torrecillas.

sailfish, marlin, tuna, red snapper and sea bass. Fishing trips can be arranged dockside at Marina Vallarta or at the cooperative on the *malecón*. Moreover, *pangas* can be hired on the beach in front of several major hotels, including Hotel Playa Los Arcos on Playa de Los Muertos and NH Krystal on Playa de Oro. The going rate is US\$25 to US\$30 per hour for trips of two to three hours. Equipment and bait is included, but you may have to negotiate for cold drinks!

Cooperativa de Pescadores (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-12-02; fishing charters for 1-8 people from US\$90; 🕒 7am-10pm Mon-Sat) This cooperative, with an office on the *malecón*, adjacent to the Hotel Rosita,

acts as an agent for a long list of sportfishing boats. During the low season try your luck at fishing for a discount.

Fishing Puerto Vallarta (Map pp70-1; ☎ 224-72-50; www.fishingpuertovallarta.4t.com; Marina Vallarta) Trawl from the *Carolina*, a 30ft sportfisher. Prices are US\$100 per person or US\$350 for the whole boat for up to four customers. Gear and hotel pickup is included.

See p96 for information on hiring private yachts or *pangas*.

Cruises

A host of daytime, sunset and evening cruises are available in Vallarta. The most popular

ones are the cruises to Yelapa and Las Ánimas beaches; others go to Las Islas Marietas, further out. Prices start at US\$45 for sunset cruises and beach trips. Longer trips lasting four to six hours, with meals and bottomless cocktails, will set you back US\$80 to US\$100. To pick the right cruise, ask your fellow travelers or inquire at the tourist office.

The **Marigalante** (☎ 223-03-09; www.marigalante.com.mx) is a reproduction Spanish galleon that does daytime cruises from 9am to 5pm (US\$65) and an evening cruise from 6pm to 11pm (US\$70) that culminates in a mock pirate attack on the *malecón*. It departs from the Terminal Maritima, off Blvd Francisco Ascencio, opposite Sam's Club.

On Thursday **Diana Tours** (☎ 222-15-10; www.bluechairs.com/cruisePAY.htm) offers an all-day gay and lesbian cruise, with plenty of food, drink and snorkeling (US\$75).

Bloodhound (☎ 01-322-222-22-85; tours adult/child US\$50/25) is a graceful 30m (98ft) replica of a 1874 British yacht. It runs four-hour whale-watching cruises on Fridays at 9am from mid-December to mid-March, and at other times visits Las Islas Marietas for snorkeling. Tours depart from the Hotel Westin Regina in Marina Vallarta.

If you just want to visit the beaches, a cheaper way to get there is by water taxi (p96).

Dolphin- & Whale-Watching

A frequent, year-round visitor to Bahía de Banderas, the Pacific bottlenose dolphin is often seen leaping out of the water or gliding along the bows of the boats. Humpback whales also visit from late November to March to bear their calves (see below).

Whale-watching trips operate from December to March, when humpback whales are in the bay mating, bearing young and caring for new calves. Open Air Expeditions is a popular operator; Vallarta Adventures (p77) also does whale-watching trips. Both kids and adults can enjoy close encounters with Pacific bottlenose dolphins at Vallarta Adventures Dolphin Adventure (see Puerto Vallarta for Children, p76).

Horseback Riding

Explore Vallarta's jungly mountains from the privileged perspective of horseback. Most stables charge around US\$15 per hour or US\$100 for a full-day excursion. For a short ride suitable for children, there are sometimes horses for rent around Playa Olas Altas, near the western end of Carranza.

Rancho El Charro (Map p64; ☎ 224-01-14; www.ranchoelcharro.com; rides US\$47-100) Recommended for their healthy horses and scenic three-to eight-hour trots into the Sierra Madres. Several rides are conceived for kids. Setting them apart from competitors are their multi-day tours, including the tempting Overnight Lost in the Jungle Ride (US\$350).

Rancho Palma Real (Map p67; ☎ 221-12-36; www.ranchoalmareal.com; Carretera Vallarta; rides from US\$62) In the village of Las Palmas, 40 minutes by car northeast of Puerto Vallarta, this ranch offers two off-the-beaten-track routes and a popular excursion to El Salto, a lovely jungle waterfall. Its office is on Carretera Vallarta, about five minutes north of the airport.

For a short ride, suitable for children, there are sometimes horses for rent around Playa Olas Altas, near the western end of Carranza.

BAHÍA DE BANDERAS

Measuring 42km from north to south and one of the largest bays in the world, the Bay of Flags was supposedly formed by an extinct volcano slowly sinking into the ocean. It now has a depth of some 1800m and is home to an impressive variety of marine life.

Like many people reading this book, humpback whales come here to mate during the winter months. They leave their feeding grounds in Alaskan waters and show up in Mexico from around November to the end of March. Once they arrive, they form courtship groups, mate, or bear the calves that were conceived the year before. Although the mating rituals of humpbacks remain a mystery, they are thought to be promiscuous breeders. By the end of March, the whales' attention turns to the long journey back to their feeding grounds up north.

With the humpbacks gone, the giant manta rays take their turn. During the month of April you may catch sight of their antics as they jump above the water's surface, flashing their 4m-wide wings in acrobatic displays that you can sometimes see from boats or even from the shore.

Golf & Tennis

In recent years Vallarta's acquired four new golf courses. Most acclaimed is the Jack Nicklaus-designed **Four Seasons Punta Mita** (Map p64; ☎ 291-60-00; Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita; green fees/club rentals US\$260/60), where golfers are blissfully distracted from the challenging course by sweeping ocean vistas. One hole is on a natural island and requires the use of an amphibious golf cart.

There are also other courses:

Marina Vallarta Golf Club (Map p67; ☎ 221-00-73; Paseo de la Marina s/n; green fees US\$136) An exclusive 18-hole, par-74 course just north of Marina Vallarta.

Los Flamingos Golf Club (Map p67; ☎ 298-06-06; Hwy 200 s/n; green fees US\$95) Recently renovated, 13km north of town.

Most of the large luxury hotels have tennis courts and charge between US\$15 to US\$20 to smash the ball around. Call in advance to reserve a court. The following welcome nonguests for tennis:

NH Krystal Puerto Vallarta (Map p67; ☎ 224-02-02; Av Las Garzas s/n, Zona Hotelera)

Fiesta Americana (Map p67; ☎ 224-20-10; Paseo de las Palmas s/n, Zona Hotelera)

Mountain Biking

Surrounded by the mountains, jungle and sea, Vallarta offers some truly thrilling mountain biking.

The adventure-loving **Eco Ride** (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-79-12; www.ecoridemex.com; Miramar 382; tours US\$45-175) offers guided cycling tours suited for beginners and badasses alike. All are one-day rides. The most challenging is a 50km hair-raising expedition from El Tuito, a small town at 1100m, through Chacala and down to the beach in Yelapa. The views are stunning along the way. Other tours include an easy trip to Vallejo, a typical local village, and a technical ride to El Salto waterfall.

Bike Mex (☎ 223-16-80; Guerrero 361; 🕒 8am-8pm Mon-Sat) runs quite a few hiking and mountain-bike tours using experienced bilingual guides, tailored to your level of fitness and experience. Mountain bike rentals are available for US\$33 per day.

Bungee Jumping

The good folks at the **Jump the Pacific** (Map p67; ☎ 228-06-70; www.vallarta-action.com; 🕒 10am-6pm) bungee jump promise that 'if the cord breaks your next jump is free.' From a

platform jutting out over the sea cliffs, it's a 40m plunge. It's 9km southwest of Puerto Vallarta on the road to Mismaloya.

WALKING TOUR

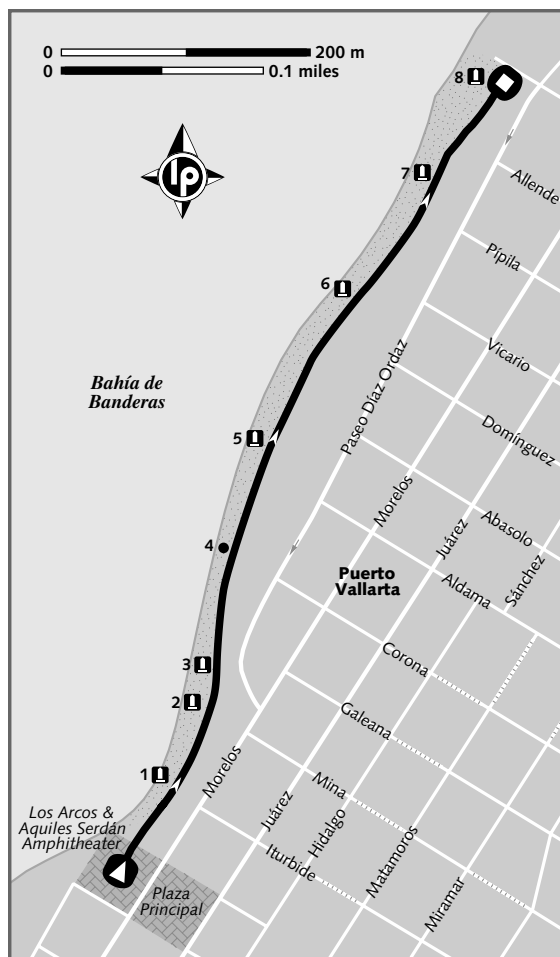
It's Saturday evening at dusk on Puerto Vallarta's *malecón*, the broad seawall boardwalk that stretches the length of downtown Vallarta. You and your companion – like nearly everyone else, it seems – have joined the cheerful throng for one of this town's most popular traditions: the twilight promenade.

This walking tour focuses on one of Puerto Vallarta's most beguiling assets: its collection of bronze public sculptures. Begin at the south end of the beachfront boulevard at the **Aquiles Serdán Amphitheater** and **Los Arcos** (the Arches); here you'll find frothy live entertainment, including clown and pantomime shows, folkloric dance and live music.

WALK FACTS

Distance 740m

Duration one hour



Just north are the three leaping dolphins known as the **Friendship Fountain (1)** by California artist James 'Bud' Bottoms. It was installed in 1987 as a gift to Vallarta from sister city Santa Barbara.

Every seaside city on Mexico's Pacific coast has at least one mermaid statue, but few are as lovely as Italian artist Carlos Espino's **Triton and Nereida (2)**, depicting two wistful lovers reaching for each other. Triton, son of Neptune, and his sea nymph mate Nereida, took their place on the *malecón* in 1990.

Vallarta's most recognizable statue is Rafael Zamarripa's **Caballero del Mar (3)** (the Seahorse), featuring a naked boy riding bareback on a 3m-tall seahorse. The original sculpture, once located at the end of Playa de los Muertos, was tossed into the drink by Hurricane Kenna, and was so missed that Zamarripa was quickly commissioned to create a new one.

With the installation of Guadalajara artist Sergio Bustamante's **In Search of Reason (4)** in 1990, *malecón* statuary took a sharp left turn into surrealism. Two pillow-headed children climb a ladder leading to nowhere, as their robed mother directs them from the sidewalk. Passersby are irresistibly drawn to follow the puff-headed imps up the rungs.

Similarly interactive and even more bizarre is Alejandro Colunga's transcendent installation **La Rotunda del Mar (5)**. Six mutant alien sea creatures with clawed feet, serrated spines and prodigious posteriors take the shape of high-backed chairs; to sit on one of these bizarre thrones is an oddly mystical – or perhaps just odd – experience. Nearby is a bench seemingly composed of eyes, ears and feet.

Representing the cycle of life and death, Tapatio Adrian Reynoso's **Nature as Mother (6)**

offers a spiraling wave on a snail for your reflection. Further on is Ramiz Barquet's well-loved **La Nostalgia (7)**, a romantic bronze rendering of the artist and his wife.

The walking tour concludes at one of Vallarta's most audacious sculptures, Mathis Lídice's **Millennium (8)**, adjacent to the Hotel Rosita. Depicting a host of mythic figures emerging from a wave and crowned by a buxom nude offering a dove to the sky, the whole thing looks like it's about to topple into the sea.

COURSES

Centro de Estudios Para Extranjeros (CEPE; Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-20-82; www.cepe.udg.mx; Libertad 105-1) Courses range from US\$93 for a week of basic tourist Spanish to US\$431 for a month of university credit courses. Private instruction costs US\$21 per hour. The center, associated with the Universidad de Guadalajara, provides lodging for US\$23 to US\$49 per night and also arranges homestays with local families. Two 'content courses' are also offered both in English and Spanish: one focuses on Mexican culture from an anthropological standpoint, the other on modern Mexican history.

PUERTO VALLARTA FOR CHILDREN

Dolphins seem to like kids almost as much as kids like dolphins. At **Vallarta Adventures Dolphin Adventure** (Map p67; ☎ 297-12-12; www.vallarta-adventures.com/dolphins; Av Las Palmas 39, Nuevo Vallarta), you and your kids can experience thrilling close encounters with Pacific bottlenose dolphins in either a lagoon or special pool, ranging in price from US\$60 to US\$250. A new offering is the Dolphin Kids program for tots aged four to eight, where

AERIALISTS OF THE GODS

Bringing considerable excitement to the *malecón* on Saturday and Sunday evenings, the **Voladores de Papantla** (Papantla Flyers) enact a pre-Hispanic religious ritual wherein four men attached by ropes swing upside down with open arms from a 18m pole. A fifth man balanced at the pole's zenith plays a hand-carved flute to represent the songs of birds, or beats a *tambor* (drum) to evoke the voice of God. The ritual is tied to an ancient Totonaca legend in which the gods commanded 'You shall dance. We will watch.'

The four men signify the four cardinal points, and the pole represents the fertility goddess Tlazoleotl. Each of the four *voladores* flies 13 times around the pole for a total of 52 revolutions, evoking the 52 years of the Mayan calendar's solar cycle. Thus, the ritual is performed as a spiritual gift to the gods so that a new sun can be born.

The Voladores de Papantla perform every Saturday and Sunday night at 6pm, 6:30pm, 8pm, 8:30pm, 9pm and 10pm.

participants enjoy a thrilling, educational encounter with dolphin babies and their proud mothers.

Kids will also enjoy **Splash Parque Acuático** (Map p67; ☎ 297-07-08; Hwy 200, Km 155; admission US\$9), which has 12 water slides, a lazy river swimming pool and a daily dolphin show.

TOURS

International Friendship Club (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-54-66; www.pvmexico.com; Libertad 105; ☎ office 9:30am-1:30pm Mon-Fri) offers US\$30, 2½-hour tours that take you inside some of Vallarta's most luxurious private homes. They are given only in winter and start at 11am Wednesday and Thursday at the Hotel Posada Rio Cuale.

Casa Kimberley (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-13-36; www.casakimberley.com; Zaragoza 445; tours US\$7.50; ☎ 9am-6pm), the house that Richard Burton bought for Elizabeth Taylor in the 1960s, has been left virtually untouched since an American family bought it in 1990. Guided tours are informal, and if you fall in love with the place and the host family, you can spend the night.

Several tour companies specialize in nature and the outdoors.

Vallarta Adventures (Map p67; ☎ 297-12-12, in the US 866-256-2739; www.vallarta-adventures.com; Av Las Palmas 39, Marina Vallarta) offers canopy adventures (child/adult US\$55/US\$77), wild dolphins and snorkeling (US\$66) and romantic dinner shows on a private beach (US\$82). In their four-hour canopy tour, thrill seekers can whoosh from tree to tree on zip lines strung high above the forest floor, among hanging wild orchids, native birds and reptiles.

Canopy Tours de los Veranos (☎ 223-05-04; www.canopytours-vallarta.com; cnr Insurgentes & Diéguez; tour adult/child US\$79/58; ☎ 9am-2pm hourly) offers an extensive zip-line course on an ecopark near Mismaloya.

OpenAirExpeditions (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-33-10; www.vallartawhales.com; Guerrero 339) offers in-season whale-watching (US\$75), bird-watching (US\$60 to US\$80), hiking (US\$60) and customized tours, including snorkeling, jungle hiking and bird-watching.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Semana Santa (Holy Week) is the busiest holiday of the year in Puerto Vallarta. Hotels fill up and hundreds (or thousands) of excess visitors camp out on the beaches and party. It's a wild time.

Fiestas de Mayo, a city-wide fair with cultural and sporting events, music concerts, carnival rides and art exhibits, is held throughout May.

In September, Puerto Vallarta stages several events commemorating **Mexican independence**. On **Charro Day** (September 14), Mexican horsemen and women ride with great élan through the streets wearing traditional *charro* (cowboy) attire. In the evening at various *charro* rings, there are bullfights, calf-roping and other spectacles. The lively **Independence Eve** celebration takes place on the 15th. From a balcony at City Hall, the mayor oversees the lighting of the flame of independence and then leads a parade through town. At 11pm the central plaza fills with revelers belting out the traditional *grito* (shout; ¡Viva México!), followed by an impressive fireworks display over the bay. The next day, a national holiday, sees more colorful parades and festivities in the streets.

November is a busy month for the local cultural calendar, with the city-wide **Festival de las Artes**, featuring a month-long series of gallery exhibitions and beachside theatre performances. Gourmets come from far and wide to celebrate the annual 10-day **Puerto Vallarta Gourmet Festival** (www.festivalgourmet.com), held mid-month. Showcasing the talents of local chefs and guest chefs from around the world, the festival features gourmet cooking classes, wine tastings and other delicious events. Also mid-month is the **Puerto Vallarta Film Festival** (www.puertovallartafilm.com).

Día de Santa Cecilia (November 22) honors the patron saint of mariachis, with all the city's mariachis forming a musical procession to the cathedral in the early evening. They come playing and singing, enter the church and sing homage to their saint, then go out into the plaza and continue to play. During the entire day one or another group of mariachis stays in the church making music.

Held each year in mid-November, the **Torneo Internacional de Pez Vela y Marlin** (Sailfish & Marlin International Tournament; www.fishvallarta.com) held its 50th anniversary in 2005; dates vary according to the phase of the moon, which must be right for fishing.

All Mexico celebrates December 12 as the day of the country's patron saint, the **Virgen de Guadalupe**. In Puerto Vallarta the celebrations are more drawn out, with pilgrimages

and processions to the cathedral day and night from December 1 until the big bash on the 12th.

SLEEPING

Vallarta has a good selection of accommodation for every price bracket. Budget travelers are well accommodated in a number of atmospheric small hotels. Midrange hotels represent a considerable step up from the budget options in price, comfort and ambience, but still offer a good value. The top end is largely dominated by five-star and Grand Tourism hotels, which have hundreds of rooms and mainly cater to package tours. These are best reserved through a travel agent or on the Internet as rates are considerably lower than the 'walk-in' rates quoted in this book. The true gems at the top end are Puerto Vallarta's good selection of special, small and stylish places, which provide a good alternative for those looking for something more intimate.

Prices here reflect the mid-December to mid-April high season; low-season rates can fall 20% to 50%. For accommodation at Vallarta's busiest times – during Semana Santa or at Christmas and New Year's – reserve in advance, and be prepared to pay 20% to 40% more than the prices listed here. The most expensive hotels will most likely tack on almost 18% in taxes, so ask beforehand if these are included. Many budget and some midrange establishments only charge the IVA and ISH taxes if you require a receipt. And remember, if you plan on staying a week or more, negotiate for a better rate; monthly rates can cut your rent by half.

South of the Río Cuale

BUDGET

South of the Río Cuale on Calle Madero are clustered many of Vallarta's most economical hotels, running the gamut from gloomy to good. They are a bit far from the action, but the prices are right.

Hotel Hortencia (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-24-84; www.hotelhortencia.com; Madero 336; s US\$23-35, d US\$28-40, tr US\$33-45, q US\$38-50; 🚽) Perhaps Puerto Vallarta's most agreeable budget accommodations, this family-run hotel offers 20 very good and clean rooms on three floors set around a plain, open courtyard. For a place with few frills, you'll notice right away that the few on offer are thoughtfully presented

and of high quality. Each room has a tiled desk with desk lamp, large mirrors, refrigerator, cable TV and fan; they're bright and welcoming with appealing tile work, quality furnishings and up-to-date bathrooms. The front rooms have balconies but suffer from a fair amount of street noise; if you crave quiet take one of the inside rooms. The more expensive rooms have air-con, and one on offer features a kitchen. In the small lobby, you'll usually find most of the family sitting around waiting to welcome you.

Hotel Posada Lily (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-00-32; Baddillo 109; s US\$30-35, d US\$50-55) So you've come to town with limited funds, and you want to reserve these for two-for-one margaritas at dusk. You could choose to slumber in one of the very cheap guesthouses several blocks from the beach or you could spend a few pesos more and take up residence at this amazingly priced option just off the beach. It's a no-brainer. Sure, it's plain, but the 18 rooms are clean and pleasant with fridge, TV and good light. The larger rooms have three beds – bring your friends! – and there are small balconies overlooking the street. The simple, hand-painted decorations and chintzy paintings are icing on the cake. Just don't ask for room service.

Hotel Belmar (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-18-72; www.belmarvallarta.com; Insurgentes 161; s/d/tr US\$36/46/61, with air-con add US\$6; 🚽) One of the choicest budget places in town, this colorful hotel near the Río Cuale offers clean and comfy rooms with few frills but plenty of personality. The Belmar has long served budget-minded travelers with rooms providing simple comfort. They have tiled floors, wee TVs, ceiling fans and miniature bathrooms; they are a bit small but cozy in their austerity. Snag one with a balcony or, better yet, one of the corner units to take advantage of cross-ventilation. Well-chosen art and simple decor add a small flourish. The brightly painted lobby devotes considerable wall space to extravagant original works of art, and the owners will gladly act as your emissaries to Puerto Vallarta's thriving art scene.

Hotel Villa del Mar (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-07-85; www.hvilladelmar.com; Madero 440; s US\$20-27, d US\$28-32, tr US\$33-37) This one-of-a-kind budget place resembling a brick fortress came into its own in the 1970s and hasn't changed much since. Along the way someone applied an awful lot of paint that is not quite orange and not

quite pink. The owners keep the hotel spick-and-span ('cleanness' it says on the business card) and the air is heavy with disinfectant. The cheapest rooms are tiny and dour with little light; you're much better off dropping the couple of extra bucks for one with a terrace. On the roof are two desirable apartments (per week US\$400) with kitchenettes, a moon deck and many nooks and crannies good for relaxing with a book.

Hotel Azteca (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-27-50; Madero 473; s US\$27-32, d US\$32-37, tr US\$37, apt US\$47) This graceful old-timer offers decent, good-value rooms surrounding an intimate shady palm-potted courtyard. Most of the rooms, unfortunately, are rather dark (though street-facing rooms are lighter), but on the bright side this serves to keep down the temperature. Some have kitchens, dining tables and desks. All have fans and are very clean with old tile floors and small bathrooms. On the roof are a few simple chairs and tables, affording tremendous views over the town and into the mountains. Also on the roof is a small and bright apartment with a kitchen and two beds, offering privacy.

Hotel Cartagena de Indios (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-69-14; hotelcartagenav@yahoo.com.mx; Madero 428; s US\$20-23, d US\$25-28, tr US\$30-34) Basic but decent, this hotel's street-facing balcony rooms are brighter and more pleasant. Singles are tiny, however. The more expensive rooms include TV.

Posada Don Miguel (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-45-40; hpdm322@prodigy.net.mx; Insurgentes 322; s/d US\$20/30; 🍷 🍷) This place has rooms so large you can do three cartwheels down their length. They'd be better if stocked with more furniture, but remain a good deal. Kitchenettes,

air-con and TV are available for extra, and it's clean. Have a splash in the small pool.

Other recommendations:

Hotel Bernal (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-36-05; Madero 423; s/d US\$16/21) An old standby with dark, basic, cleanish rooms around a courtyard.

Hotel Ana Liz (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-17-57; Madero 429; s/d US\$15/18) Acceptable, inexpensive.

MIDRANGE

Terraza Inn (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-54-31; www.terrazainn.com; 299 Amapas; r US\$70-80) Nestled on terraces opposite Playa de los Muertos, this little gem has a class and style all its own, providing a welcome change from the homogenous beach hotels. With only 10 units, the owners have devoted themselves to making each unique, comfortable and attractive. With stained-glass windows in the showers, romantic hand-carved furniture, and comfortable chaise longues on the balconies, the individually named rooms have interesting architectural features, such as arched doorways, columns and brick ceilings with exposed timbers. Each unit comes with a double bed, a daybed, a TV and a small kitchen with fridge.

Hotel Eloisa (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-64-65; www.hoteleloisa.com; 179 Cárdenas; s US\$64-83, d US\$76-90, tr US\$82-96, ste US\$148; 🍷 🍷) With a great location just off the beach, this recently renovated hotel, with 70 rooms and eight thoughtfully designed suites, has an understated charm. For the price, it's one of the best values in town. The standard rooms are pleasingly decorated with rustic furniture, tiled floors and two double beds with floral-print spreads. The suites have eye-catching tiled bathrooms and kitchens and bright sitting areas, good

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Hotel Emperador (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-1767; www.hotelemperadorpv.com; 114 Amapas; d US\$55-80, ste US\$89-200; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This up-to-date beach hotel on Playa de los Muertos gives a lot of bang for the buck with thoughtfully designed rooms and suites, many with incomparable views of the coast. The fresh oceanfront rooms celebrate the sea with large balconies complete with dining tables and kitchenettes for preparing and eating food alfresco. Each tiled unit is furnished with a fridge, king-sized bed and sleeper couch as well as air-con, cable TV and in-room phones. Well-chosen decor gives each unit a patina of warmth and grace. The hotel overlooks an ideal swimming beach, where mariachi bands stroll about looking for business and drum circles coalesce in the sweaty heat of the afternoon. The beach is appointed with several shady palm-roofed *palapas* (where you can try to hide from the jewelry touts). There's also an excellent beach-level restaurant and bar, the Lazy Lizard, where you may find yourself whiling away the afternoon counting empty margarita glasses.

for entertaining. Some feature terrific sea views and furnished balconies. The bedrooms have large mirrors, plenty of closet space and shuttered blinds that open up to the main area. White canvas blinds over the windows emit a pleasant diffused light. Up on the roof, there's a small pool, plenty of room for luxurious sunbathing, and gratifying views over the town and to the cathedral in the distance.

Vallarta Sun Hotel (Map pp70-1; ☎ 22-31-523; vallartasun@usa.net; Rodríguez 169; d US\$55-65; P 🚗 🚰) Only a short walk from one of the town's most glorious stretches of sandy beach, it overlooks a quiet cobbled street on the southern fringes of the Zona Romántica. The hillside location catches the ocean breezes, providing a measure of relief on scorching hot days. Each of the 21 units is done up with Mexican flourishes, including mission-style cathedral ceilings, tiled floors, rustic wood furniture and hand-carved headboards. They are spiffy and attractive, with air-con, fridges, two beds, desks and multiple mirrors. Six open up to an attractive pool, while the brighter upstairs units have balconies, several offering terrific sea views. There's secure covered parking, and frequent promotions bring the price down. At time of research, a third night was free, and children under the age of 10 could stay at the hotel free of charge.

Hotel Posada Río Cuale (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-04-50; riocuale@pvnet.com.mx; Serdán 242; d/tr US\$65/80; 🚗 🚰) Well located and appointed, this hotel offers colonial-style rooms with air-con and cable TV. The grounds are leafy and pleasant, and if you crave salt water rather than the chlorinated type, the beach is only two blocks away. The rooms are tasteful if a bit dark; avoid the ones facing noisy Av Vallarta. A big bonus is Le Gourmet, a pleasant, dependable restaurant serving generous, well-priced breakfast platters with whimsical names like 'This Is Your Brain in Mexico' (spicy scrambled eggs). At dinner, regional specialties and seafood rule the menu: try the lobster simmered in orange liqueur. A godsend in the summer heat, the pool is centrally located and convenient to the bar. Fortunately, the peeing boy (fountain) is well away from the pool area.

Frankfurt Hotel (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-34-03; www.hotelfrankfurt.com; Badillo 300; r US\$30, bungalow US\$41,

apt US\$41-60) Despite a name that evokes the Old World, this bohemian playground could only exist in Puerto Vallarta. Set in a large garden with squawking parrots, the Frankfurt is an urban tropical haven. The German owner and his Mexican wife run this place to their own standards (fortunately, they're good ones). The prodigious foliage attracts wild parrots who come to mock their brethren locked in cages. On offer are a total of 20 units, each distinct and with loads of personality. The simple rooms are dated but immaculately kept, facing a large, jungly open area affording glorious shade. The bungalows stay cool on hot days and feature large porches, couches, TVs, fridges and sitting areas. The nine apartments, some quite large and with two bedrooms, have kitchenettes and cable TV. There's also space for six trailers with hook-ups, available for a scant US\$15 per day. There's no air-con, but the shady forest canopy keeps the rooms fairly comfortable.

Hotel Posada de Roger (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-08-36; www.posadaroger.com; Badillo 237; s/d/tr/q US\$50/60/70/80; 🚗 🚰) This four-story guesthouse comes with some good foreigner hangout spots, such as a 2nd-floor pool and plant-filled courtyards. Maze-like outside hallways surround clean rooms with TV, dark wood furniture and – if you're lucky – a balcony. This was one of the first backpacker haunts in town, and folks still talk about the lascivious free spirits that used this place as their hive in the 1970s. The large and shady courtyard with its dripping fountain is a perfect place to escape the heat and compare travel tales with other travelers. On the 2nd floor, the motif of repose is extended with a small pool and plenty of chaise longues. Alas, the rooms are a bit musty and ill-equipped for basic security, but they're pleasant enough, with phones, ancient air-conditioners, well-worn furniture, diminutive TVs and creaky ceiling fans. The bathrooms sport large tiled showers big enough for three free spirits. For brightness and cross-ventilation, choose the rooms overlooking the street.

Estancia San Carlos (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-54-84; Constitución 210; d/q US\$64/110; P 🚗 🚰) With spacious and appealing fully equipped apartments with plenty of thoughtful touches, this old-timer provides exceptional value in the heart of the Zona Romántica. Some folks

stay here for months. The two-room apartments on offer are large and pleasant with plenty of personality. Each has tiled floors, air-con, TV, sparsely equipped kitchens and (sometimes) private balconies. Sweetening the deal are comfortable king-sized beds, dining areas and bathrooms decked out with inviting hand-painted tiles. Kids go nuts in the small courtyard swimming pool, which is embellished with the double cascades of a roaring waterfall. A secure, covered parking lot serves those arriving under their own steam. The accommodating proprietor lives on the property and runs the place with considerable panache.

Torre de Oro (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-44-88; 132 Pulpito; r US\$79, ste US\$99-130; 🍷 🍷) This old resort with 31 rooms and 12 suites is popular with families for its proximity to the beach and cheerful service. The rooms, with dark-red curtains and jungle-print couches, seem to have been appointed by a gentleman bachelor. Each is decorated with original paintings, but these seem to have been completed on a tight deadline and range from laughable to offensively bad. But the rooms are clean, don't smell bad, and overall provide fair value. If you opt for a standard room, take one of the corner units for superior light and a cross breeze. The suites have kitchens, a master bedroom and two daybeds. All rooms have either ocean or mountain views. An all-inclusive plan also is available.

TOP END

Casa Andrea (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-12-13; www.casa-andrea.com; Rodríguez 174; per week 1-1/2-bedroom US\$450/800; 🍷 🍷) This gorgeous retreat rewards the handful of folks savvy enough to make their winter reservations here. What greets them are 10 beautifully decorated apartments on spacious grounds with flowery garden patios and a pool. Each apartment has a pleasant garden view, and is decorated with original paintings and native crafts, with king- or queen-sized beds and well-equipped modern kitchens. Some may like the fact that the apartments lack TVs, but if this comes as a shock you'll find a large-screen model downstairs in the well-stocked lending library. Other amenities include laundry facilities, a small gym and a recently added Internet room. No children under five.

Hotel Tropicana (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-09-12; www.htropicana.com; 214 Amapas; d US\$82-98, ste US\$132;

🍷 🍷 🍷) On one of the quieter streets of beachfront Vallarta, this venerable 160-room beach hotel is a multilevel affair sporting views of swaying palms and the ocean extending to the horizon. When stepping into the impressive three-story lobby, with its marble floors and immense wrought-iron chandelier tethered from a brick dome, even the most jaded traveler may be moved to emit a low whistle of appreciation. The ground level is immaculately landscaped with brick terraces, a large fountain, open-air bars and a splendid pool. The standard rooms are appealing, with cooling white-brick walls, attractive carved headboards, hand-painted woodwork and rustic furniture. The balconies offer privileged views of the hotel terrace and the beach, revealing the overall quality of the property. The superior rooms are larger, with extra closet space, but have the same amenities as the standard rooms and are not really worth the extra expense.

Hotel Playa Los Arcos (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-05-83, in the US 800-648-2403; www.playalosarcos.com; 380 Olas Altas; d US\$116-140, ste US\$166; 🍷 🍷) For a large beach hotel, this place gets it right. The recent renovations have given the property a streamlined colonial elegance. With its thoughtfully appointed rooms, giant pool and beachfront position, you'll find little to object to...that is, as long as you like kids. Families and honeymooners have made the place one of Vallarta's most popular hotels. Rooms and suites are divided between three buildings, one smack dab on the beach and two more on the other side of Calle Olas Altas. All of the rooms are spacious and bright, with air-con, phone, cable TV, hair dryers, room safes and other amenities that you would expect at this price level. The suites include fully equipped kitchens with dining tables. The beach is Vallarta's best, with plenty of lounge chairs and shade structures. Kids stay free, there's a gratis parking service, and an all-inclusive plan is available.

Hotel San Marino Plaza (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-30-50; www.hotelsanmarino.com; Rodolfo Gómez 111; high season all-inclusive s/d/tr US\$123/153/214; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Built in a 1960s-era cram-'em-in style pioneered in Acapulco, it's not the most attractive hotel in town, but it's right on the beach and kids seem to love it. The pool is where you'll find all the action; it's surrounded on three sides by blindingly white eight-story

blocks of rooms with balconies. Standard rooms have all the expected amenities but smell a tad musty. Oceanfront rooms are sizable, with large balconies and amazing views over the beach and down the coast. There's a pleasant breezy restaurant fronting a second pool; meals are served buffet style. Activities offered include beach volleyball, aqua aerobics and handcrafts.

South of the City Centre

MIDRANGE

Quinta Maria Cortez (Map p67; ☎ 221-53-17; www.quinta-maria.com; Calle Sagitario 132; ste US\$117-280 incl breakfast; 🍷 🍷) Just south of town off Hwy 200, this is perhaps the most atmospheric and sophisticated place to stay near Vallarta. The seven spacious and romantic suites, all different sizes, are furnished with a distinct style the proprietor calls 'Mediterranean.' Most come with kitchen, fireplace and sea views, and breakfast is served in a terraced, *palapa*-covered common space. The suites are equipped for comfort and convenience, with direct-dial phones, fluffy towels and bathrobes, fancy soaps and shampoos and in-room safes. Definitely reserve in advance.

Costa Linda (Map p67; ☎ 223-0553; costalinda_hotel@hotmail.com; Hwy 200, Km 1.5, Playa Conchas Chinas; apt/penthouse US\$60/90; 🍷) The grounds are a little unkempt and in need of an update, but the capacious units and deep discounts for longer stays make this place a good value for budget travelers. The 23 apartments with kitchens are well kept if a bit musty. The two penthouse units are large and attractive, with timbered cathedral ceilings, sleeping lofts and balconies; one comes with air-con. It also has a small pool and, in the courtyard, a mammoth 300-year-old rubber tree with a palm grafted to the trunk. Perched on the southern edge of town on Hwy 200, it's not an easy matter to walk down to the beach, but the Mismaloya bus passes often.

Brisas del Mar (☎ 222-18-00; www.brisasvallarta.com; 10 Abedul; apt US\$90-100; 🍷 🍷) With perhaps the best views in town, this comfortable small hotel is a quiet, get-away-from-it-all haven, ideal for couples and larger groups alike. Choose an upper-level apartment to take full advantage of the views. Each unit is gussied up in warm earth tones and original paintings. The kitchens – fitted with modern appliances

including microwave, blender, toaster and coffeemaker – open themselves to the balcony. On the top level is a huge penthouse with two bedrooms and baths, and plenty of space in the main living area to park the kids. It's a swanky affair with shiny blue-tile floors, cathedral ceilings and a roomy balcony with shaded patio tables. Internet access is provided to guests for a pittance. A steep stairway descends down to Amapas and beach access, but an afternoon by the pool is almost as good.

TOP END

Presidente InterContinental (Map p67; ☎ 228-01-91; www.intercontinental.com/puertovallarta; Hwy 200, Km 8.5; d US\$431-466, ste US\$781-1947; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This luxurious five-star behemoth pampers its guests with rejuvenating luxury. There's a spectacular view from the lobby, but you'll likely spend more time on the fine, yellow-sand beach. With 120 chic suites feature timbered ceilings, huge bathrooms with separate tub and shower, spacious dressing and sitting areas, and balconies. Each room also is equipped with DVD and CD players, and is stocked with all-natural, ooh-la-la French beauty products. If you really want to put on the ritz, you can take advantage of a full-service spa or the international water and pillow menus. Two good restaurants feature healthy low-calorie fare. Recreational activities include kayaking, yoga and grass-court tennis, and, as to be expected, the pool is divine.

Dreams Puerto Vallarta Resort & Spa (Map p67; ☎ 221-50-00, in the US 866-237-3267; www.dreamsresorts.com; Hwy 200, Km 3.5; all-inclusive d US\$298-333, ste US\$598-1500; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Formerly the Camino Real, this storied luxury property recently emerged from a splendid makeover. Sitting pretty before a jungle backdrop and with one of Vallarta's most beautiful beaches, the hotel offers a sense of luxury and privacy.

North of the Río Cuale

BUDGET

Hotel Posada del Pedregal (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-06-04; Rodríguez 267; s/d US\$40/50, ste US\$70-120; 🍷) On a busy mercantile street with a mixture of tourist and local shops, this budget option offers simple rooms overlooking an old courtyard. It's a basic but pleasant hotel with 21 rooms, only a stone's throw from the

handicrafts market and the picturesque Río Cuale. On offer are street-front studio suites sporting small kitchens and a balcony, and small but bright standard rooms. All units come with fridges, tile floors and attractive, up-to-date bathrooms. Each is individually named and has a distinct, understated personality. The best, Cisne, is also the most expensive and the only one with air-con. At last visit the place was heavy with the aroma of pesticide; hopefully, when you arrive, this will be replaced by a lack of pests!

MIDRANGE

La Casa del Puente (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-07-49; www.casadelpuente.com; Libertad s/n; r/apt US\$60/86) This guesthouse is unique in that it has only one room and two apartments, all so large, comfortable and wonderfully decorated that they feel like small houses. Tucked in behind the restaurant La Fuente del Puente, overlooking the Río Cuale, it's in a charming location. Once you pass through the gate you'll feel like you're deep in the jungle. Huge trees filled with winging birds and the occasional iguana spread their limbs to shade the house as the river passes by below. Owned by the grandniece of American naturalist John Muir, all three units are beautifully appointed, with period antiques and tasteful bric-a-brac. The apartments come complete with cozy Mexican-style kitchens, and the friendly resident caretaker is on hand to make sure you feel at home. You'll want to reserve well in advance.

Casa Dulce Vida (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-10-08; www.dulcevida.com; Aldama 295; ste US\$80-180; 🍷 🍷) With the look and feel of an Italian villa, this collection of seven spacious suites with modern kitchens and private entrances offers graceful accommodations and delicious privacy. Most have private terraces and gratifying views of Bahía de Banderas. Back in the 1950s, this part of Vallarta was favored by the many cultural luminaries who came here from 'el norte' to familiarize themselves with the pleasures of genteel Mexican repose. Noted American painter Edith Hoyt was a frequent guest, leaving behind several paintings that are on display to this day. The tastefully appointed suites boast airy rooms with 14ft ceilings and plentiful windows, with sunny living areas and extra beds for groups. The largest and most splendid of them has three

bedrooms. Even when the place is fully booked it retains a quiet and intimate atmosphere. There's a well-situated pool and manicured tropical gardens.

Casa de los Cuatro Vientos (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-01-61; www.cuatrovientos.com; Matamoros 520; r/ste US\$60/69; 🍷) Thriving in its hilly residential location, this guesthouse harbors peaceful, friendly rooms above a garden patio. The upper ones have partial views. Though not large, the rooms are rather cozy, with white-brick walls, hand-painted trim and gleaming red-tile floors. Each has a double bed and is cooled by a fan and salty breezes. The corner rooms are preferable for natural light and cross-ventilation. Quality furnishings, ranging from hand-carved Mexicana to retro pieces from the 1950s, add style and class. Elsewhere, the decorations reflect the proclivities of the owner, with plenty of theater posters and Puerto Vallarta memorabilia. For those wanting more space, there's a two-room suite with a large bedroom and two daybeds. The rooftop bar is an attraction unto itself, affording terrific views of the cathedral and the entire bay.

Hotel Rosita (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-10-33; www.hotelrosita.com; Paseo Díaz Ordaz 901; d/tr US\$68/77; 🍷 🍷) The Rosita is not the most up-to-date place in town, but therein lies its charm. While some other Vallarta hotels have been renovated into indistinguishable, mind-numbing homogeneity, this old place looks like it hasn't changed a whit since opening in 1948. (On the other hand, the word 'charm' can hardly be applied to corroded shower fixtures.) The rooms are no-nonsense but clean, painted in warm colors and filled with worn furniture that's seen better days and lots of them. Cheaper street-side rooms are noisy and a bit outdated, but there are more pleasant rooms on offer upstairs. The terrace has a ho-hum pool – it would be a nice place to look out to sea if it weren't for the chain-link fence blocking the view.

TOP END

Hacienda San Angel (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-26-92; www.haciendasanangel.com; Miramar 336; d US\$250-475; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This, the most noteworthy of Puerto Vallarta's recently opened hotels, elicits *oohs* and *ahs* from most guests, but for others the eye candy comes off as just a bit too sweet. Enough with the soothing dripping fountains already! Every nook and

cranny of the place is crammed with colonial flourish, from domed porticos and old mission antiques to statues of angels playing guitars and even saxophones. The details are so solicitously conceived that you almost feel manipulated into a state of restive bliss. But after a while, even the most jaded grump may be won over by the thoughtful attentions of the staff and the culinary magic practiced in the oh-so-colonial kitchen. The nine suites are individually decorated and undeniably luxurious, and each of the two pools affords tremendous views of the cathedral or Bahía de Banderas. There's also a daily cocktail hour and breakfast brought to your door each morning. Who could complain?

Hotel Molino de Agua (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-19-07; www.molinodeagua.com; Vallarta 130; cabin all-inclusive per person s/d US\$113/88, cabin noninclusive d/r US\$101/113, ste US\$175-225; ♿ ♿) With its central location, this hotel lets you get away from it all without really *being* away from it all. This lush 0.8-hectare property at the mouth of the Río Cuale offers a tranquil retreat right in the heart of town. Small but cute cabanas are set in a beautiful jungle environment; there are also well-appointed rooms and suites with ocean views. All come with air-con and small terrace, and there are bars, pools, whirlpool baths and two restaurants. Once you go through the gates, the hullabaloo of town quickly recedes as you pass into an exceedingly attractive jungle garden. Shady walkways lead past two splendid swimming pools and through abundant greenery. Two gigantic *hule de oro* (rubber) trees spread their limbs like outstretched arms, providing a shady embrace. The brick cabanas are simple rustic-chic and have no phones or TVs to disturb your reverie. The popular and simply elegant beachfront rooms and suites afford more privacy. At US\$30 for a 75-minute rubdown, the therapeutic massages on offer are a great bargain; you might also want to reward yourself with a sea-salt or fruit-sugar body scrub.

Casa Kimberley (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-13-36; www.casakimberley.com; Zaragoza 445; d US\$110; ♿) When Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton took up residence in town during the 1960s, it sealed Vallarta's reputation as a swanky playground. The two adjacent houses at Casa Kimberley, connected by a pink 'love bridge,' were where the famously tempestuous romance played out. Burton bought the first house

as a birthday gift for his paramour in 1962 and, soon after, built the second mansion for himself. The three suites still retain the allure of a cocktail-era love nest. Burton himself put much loving attention into the design of the bar, over which figures of various Catholic saints cast a wary eye. It's kept fully stocked as a tribute to its creator, who some remember as the patron saint of the tippie. Full breakfast is included.

Casa Amorita (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-49-26; www.casaamorita.com; Iturbide 309; r US\$135; ♿) Located on a quiet street with no souvenir shops or other trappings of tourism, this romantic getaway is one of Vallarta's most unique and luxurious accommodations. Some may find it a wee bit precious, but others will swoon. With just four rooms and a capacity of only eight guests, you can be assured that you will be treated to lavish hospitality. The two 2nd-floor rooms catch the sea breezes; one opens up to a mammoth mango tree while the other affords expansive views (it's said you can spy passing whales from your bed in wintertime). The beds are very comfortable, with imported German mattresses and down comforters and pillows. Complimentary breakfasts are fresh, hearty and healthy. There's also a shady rooftop bar with privileged views of the town, and a friendly rottweiler named Maya.

North of the City Centre

BUDGET

Tacho's Trailer Park (Map p67; ☎ 224-21-63; Camino Nuevo al Pitillal s/n; tent or RV sites US\$20; ♿) This large and agreeable RV park offers grassy spots and plenty of shady trees. To find it, turn east at Sam's Club on Hwy 200; Tacho's is approximately 1km on the left.

MIDRANGE

Hotel La Misión (Map p67; ☎ 222-71-04; Av México 1367; s/d/ste US\$45/57/69; ♿ ♿) A tad removed from the party-all-the-time ruckus of the Zona Romántica, this cheerful hotel favored by Mexican travelers gives a lot of bang for your buck. An excellent restaurant serving economical fare closes the deal. The lobby and adjoining restaurant are quaint in just the right way. On arrival, you'll be tempted to drop your bags and head straight for a table in the eminently appealing dining room, which comprises the entire first floor of the hotel. Here they serve

tremendous Mexican breakfasts and fresh seafood favorites throughout the day. Upstairs, the rooms are painted in bright pastels and appointed with modest colonial decor and whimsical artworks. The more expensive apartments, ideal for families, feature fully equipped kitchens and glass-topped dining tables. Head to the roof for sun worship, where you'll enjoy the views while soaking in an impossibly tiny pool.

TOP END

Buenaventura Hotel & Beach Club (Map p67; ☎ 226-70-00; www.hotelbuenaventura.com.mx; Av México 1301; s/d/tr US\$157/180/203; 🚗 🚶 🚲) This high-quality beach hotel offers appealing rooms and impressive hacienda-style architecture. The tile-floored rooms and suites have bright stucco walls with either two double beds or one king. Superior rooms up the ante with whirlpool baths, balconies and ocean views; suites add a kitchenette and living area. Whimsical 'magical realist' art abounds, and two large pools and plenty of lush greenery are used to positive effect. The two restaurants and a snack bar serve up exemplary fare. And then there's the beach: it's not the biggest in town, but the waters

are gentle and you can enjoy a measure of privacy. All-inclusive plans are available.

Fiesta Americana Puerto Vallarta (Map p67; ☎ 224-20-10; www.fiestaamericana.com; Francisco Medina Ascencio, Km 2.5; d US\$180; 🚗 🚶 🚲) This hotel is one of the nicest in the Zona Hotelera, with a stunning lobby ringed by an artificial stream and sitting pretty under a giant *palapa* roof said to be the largest in the world. The wide and wonderful yellow-sand beach is one of Vallarta's loveliest, with limpid waters ideal for swimming. The nine-story terracotta high-rise houses 291 rooms looking over the pool and out to sea. The tile-floored rooms have private balconies and deluxe amenities; they're quietly elegant, with marble trim and wicker furniture. The massive pool is enhanced by a huge fountain and beguiling swim-up bar, and the afternoon water-volleyball games create quite a stir. Three restaurants and a lobby bar with nightly live music help ensure that most guests never leave the property.

EATING

Foodies are pampered in Puerto Vallarta. A goodly number of noteworthy chefs from abroad have put down roots, offering

GAY & LESBIAN RESORTS & INNS

Come on 'out' – the rainbow flag flies high over Puerto Vallarta. The **Gay Guide Vallarta** (www.gayguidevallarta.com) booklet has tons of information and a helpful map for finding gay-friendly businesses. Useful websites include www.discoveryvallarta.com and www.doinitright.com.

Blue Chairs Beach Resort (Map p67; ☎ 222-50-40; www.bluechairs.com; Almendro 4; d US\$69-109, apt US\$79-129; 🚗 🚶 🚲) Overlooking one of Mexico's most famous gay beaches, this resort is a good place to let it all hang out (although officially the beach has a 'no nudity' policy). Amenities are conducive to socializing: there are bars and restaurants on the beach and roof, with a pool on the roof as well. The rooftop bar is particularly raucous, with nightly live entertainment. The breezy and attractive rooms have cable TV and air-con; apartments have kitchenettes. The resort also offers a full menu of tours, excursions, massage and spa services, and scuba-diving instruction and trips.

Hotel Descanso del Sol (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-52-29; www.descansodelsol.com; Suárez 583; s/d US\$90/110, ste US\$120-140; 🚗 🚶 🚲) This hotel on the hill is a well-established enclave. Don't be surprised to find 20 men crammed into the hot tub at dusk. Standard rooms are chintzy, but the suites are much better, with full kitchen and plenty of natural light. Some of the fixtures could use an update, but most guests don't quibble and spend most of their time on the roof enjoying the breathtaking panoramic views.

Paco's Paradise (Map p67; ☎ 227-21-89; www.pacopaco.com; dm US\$20, ste US\$65-75; 🚶 closed Mon & Tue) Accessible by boat only, this rustic (electricity-free) getaway on 11 hectares of wilderness with a private beach is quite a deal. Groups leave from Club Paco Paco (p92) at 11am.

Villa David (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-03-15; www.villadavidpv.com; Galeana 348; r/ste with full breakfast US\$93/119; 🚗 🚶 🚲) This low-key, unique and totally gay villa is a wonderful alternative to more crowded places near Playa Olas Altas. Rooms are spacious with colonial-style decor. Views from the rooftop are extraordinary. Reservations are essential.

competing menus of tremendous breadth and variety. Naturally, there are numerous economical, family-run eateries serving mouthwatering traditional Mexican fare, and the taco stands lining the streets of the Zona Romántica make quick meals a delicious proposition.

Just north of the river, the Mercado de Artesanías has simple and cheap stalls upstairs serving typical Mexican market foods. For more tourist-oriented fare, head toward Paseo Díaz Ordaz, the street fronting the *malecón*: it's thick with restaurants and bars. Many have upstairs terraces offering fine views of the bay.

South of the Río Cuale

BUDGET

If you're watching your budget, look for taco stands that sprout in the Zona Romántica early in the evenings – they serve some of the best and cheapest food in town. For inexpensive seafood stands, try the corner of Serdán and Constitución. There are also a few small, economical, family-run restaurants along Madero. Women sell delicious *tamales* and *flan* along Insurgentes at dusk.

The following restaurants are all south of the Río Cuale.

Pancake House (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-62-72; Badillo 289; mains US\$3-5; ☎ 8am-2pm) You may have to wait in line here because the amazing array of pancakes and other breakfast goodies have made this place more than popular. The food is good in a diner kind of way, but coffee fans should skip the free refills and buy themselves an espresso.

Las Tres Huastecas (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-30-17; Olas Altas & Rodríguez; mains US\$3-7; ☎ 7am-7pm) This is the place for delicious Mexican favorites in a homey atmosphere at local prices. The charming owner, a poet calling himself 'El Querreque,' recites verse as readily as he does the house specialties.

Fredy's Tucan Restaurant & Bar (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-07-78; cnr Badillo & Vallarta; mains US\$3-6; ☎ 8am-2am; ♻) This spick-and-span eatery is a foreigner magnet for breakfast specials like pancakes, waffles and omelets. If you're really hungry, go for the *campesino* breakfast, with a big portion of tender skirt steak and *chilaquiles* (fried tortilla chips with sauce and scrambled eggs). It also serves lunch, dinner, snacks and drinks, and at night this place turns into a bar. The food

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Mama Dolores' Diner (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-58-97; Olas Altas 534; mains US\$6-13; ☎ 9am-11pm Tue-Sun) This cheeky eatery is the only place in town to get good meatloaf or liver and onions (made just like they make it on the New Jersey turnpike). On Sundays – turkey dinner night – the self-described 'saucy bitch' Mama Dolores herself comes in to splash the margaritas around. Be prepared to tell her to keep her hands to herself.

is fine, though the coffee has garnered some criticism (try it and let us know).

Chiles! (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-03-73; Pulpito 122; mains US\$5-8; ☎ 11am-6pm Mon-Sat Nov-May) Chiles! grills up good-sized servings of burgers, hotdogs, roasted chicken and veggie burgers. Get a side of potato salad, coleslaw or chili with beans and head to the beach to digest it all.

Como Pizza (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-32-72; Vallarta 279; pizza US\$5-9; ☎ noon-4am Tue-Sun) This place belts out live tunes Friday and Saturday nights, which go well with the brick-oven, wood-fired pizza. The feel is upscale and open, the location is ground zero for hoppin' bars, and there's a pool table.

Santa Barbara (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-20-48; Olas Altas 351; mains US\$7-9) Attracts gringos like gringos attract sunburn. A comfort menu of burgers, sandwiches, pizzas, seafood and margaritas help ease the hunger pangs after a day of sunning, and the 2nd floor is gorgeous. Plus, there's bingo twice a week.

MIDRANGE

The following restaurants are found in the Zona Romántica.

Boca Bento (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-91-08; Badillo 180; mains US\$7-13; ☎ 6-11pm) This new, cosmopolitan place strikes the right balance with its 'Latina Asiatica cuisine.' Gorge on dishes like chipotle (dried, smoked jalapeño) honey-glazed ribs (US\$19) in an urbane environment.

Mariscos Polo (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-03-64; Madero 362; mains US\$6-13; ☎ noon-10pm) This breezy, comfortable eatery deep in the Zona Romántica serves seafood and salads in a warm, music-filled environment. Start with a smoked marlin taco (US\$1) and finish the job with a roasted shrimp skewer (US\$14) or octopus burrito (US\$6). Mmm!

Kaiser Maximillian (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-50-58; Olas Altas 380B; mains US\$7-18; 🕒 8am-midnight Mon-Sat; 🍷) Get your well-prepared Wiener schnitzel (US\$16) or fresh *roter Rubensalat* (beet salad) at this upscale Austrian restaurant. There's also good coffee, desserts, snacks and meals, all with an Austrian flavor. It's popular for evening drinks.

Angelo's Italian Cuisine (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-20-88; Gomez 158; mains US\$8-22; 🕒 4-10:30pm; 🍷) The red wine flows and the wait staff is jovial. Enjoy certified Angus steaks and well-prepared, straightforward Italian fare, served either on a spacious sidewalk patio or in a romantic, air-conditioned dining room.

Le Gourmet (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-04-50; Serdán 242; mains US\$8-18; 🕒 7am-9pm) At Hotel Posada Río Cuale, this pleasant restaurant serves generous, well-priced breakfast platters with whimsical names like 'This Is Your Brain in Mexico' (spicy scrambled eggs). At dinner, regional specialties and seafood rule the menu; try the lobster simmered in orange liqueur.

Café de Olla (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-16-26; Badillo 168A; mains US\$6-18; 🕒 9am-11pm Wed-Mon) This small, busy and very pleasant tourist-oriented restaurant serves great traditional Mexican food at good prices.

Archie's Wok (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-04-11; Rodríguez 130; mains US\$9-18; 🕒 2-11pm Mon-Sat) The setting here is elegant but urban. The menu changes but it's always Asian fusion cuisine, with savory fish in rich tropical sauces as the highlight. There's live music Thursday through Sunday.

Abadía Café (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-67-20; Badillo 252; mains US\$12-22; 🕒 6-11pm, closed Tue; 🍷) This super-stylish, air-conditioned café has a varied menu of well-prepared, pricey, but unique dishes such as the house favorite, duckling breast in Chiapas coffee sauce.

Carisma (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-49-59; Badillo 284; mains US\$10-19; 🕒 5pm-midnight) Carisma posts its menu at the doors, but beware: one innocent peek and the eager waiters practically reel you in. Luckily, the food is good: savor rustic octopus, hot garlic crab or rib-eye steak. Pizzas and pastas are also available, as are mixed drinks and something called 'sexy coffee.'

Sand Bar (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-08-94; Rodríguez at Playa de los Muertos; mains US\$8-18; 🕒 7am-11pm) This place serves salads, seafood, ribs, burgers, tacos and frogs' legs. The real reason

you're here, however, is to eat on the beach under a shady *palapa*.

Asaderos (Map pp70-1; ☎ 044-342-957-90; Badillo 223; buffet US\$10; 🕒 2-11pm Sun-Tue) Asaderos grills up plenty of barbecued chicken, steak, ribs and Mexican sausage for the popular all-you-can-eat package. Salad and bread are included, but the drinks tack onto the restaurants' profits. The sidewalk or *palapa* seating is pleasant, and there's live music. Add tax to the rates.

Fajita Republic (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-31-31; cnr Badillo & Suárez; mains US\$9-18; 🕒 5pm-midnight) With pleasant open-air dining on a leafy, atmospheric patio, this popular fajita factory grills up generous portions of shrimp, vegetables, steak and chicken with plenty of guacamole. Wash it all down with a pitcher of mango margaritas.

TOP END

In the heart of the Zona Romántica are a good mix of upscale restaurants, including a couple of notable recent arrivals.

Casa Naranja (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-35-18; Naranja 263; mains US\$7-19; 🕒 6-11pm) This chic newcomer has an unabashed predilection for the color orange and a dining room that wraps around the exposed kitchen. On the menu is delicious, fussed-over fare like saffron mussels, ginger-grilled scallops and invigorating cold soups.

La Palapa (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-52-25; Pulpito 103; mains US\$7-48; 🕒 8am-1pm & 6-11pm) This is elegant beach dining at its best. Chilean sea bass with blonde miso and pickled ginger is just one example of the delicacies on the menu. Tables are positioned to take full advantage of the sea views, making it a particularly marvelous spot at sunset or for breakfast.

Red Cabbage Café (☎ 223-04-11; Rivera del Río 204A; mains US\$8-20; 🕒 5-10:30pm; 🍷 🍸) Though the atmosphere is casual, with fabulous eclectic and bohemian artwork, the food is serious Mexican *alta cocina* (haute cuisine). This is the only nonsmoking restaurant in town. Try the subtle mole or hearty vegetarian dishes. To get there from the Zona Romántica, begin at Insurgentes and then follow Cárdenas east five long blocks. Take a right turn before the green bridge and go approximately one more block. It's about a 10-minute walk. Reservations are recommended.

Ibiza (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-63-53; Suárez 321; mains US\$11-20; 🕒 5-11pm) Paella, Sicilian chicken and gazpacho are among the repertoire of dishes at Ibiza. The atmosphere is airy and open, and there's live jazz Wednesday to Friday nights at 7:30pm.

Los Pibes (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-20-44; Badillo 261; mains US\$9-24; 🕒 5-11pm Mon-Sat) Proudly serves Sterling Silver meat from the USA (which one assumes is an asset). Steaks are grilled Argentine-style; try the *bife de chorizo* (sirloin), which is the most basic cut in Argentina. There's another branch up north at the yacht harbor in Marina Vallarta.

Chef Roger (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-59-00; Badillo 180; mains US\$13-25; 🕒 6:30-11pm Mon-Sat) You'll need to arrive here in fancy threads, and with reservations (crucial on weekends). Only then can you enjoy the romantic outdoor fountain seating and fabulous meals like carpaccio of ostrich with pesto and parmesan cheese. Expect elegance and bring a fat wallet.

Daiquiri Dick's (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-05-66; Olas Altas 314; mains US\$7-21; 🕒 9am-10:30pm) An elegant dining establishment, despite its name. Nibble roast duck with scalloped sweet potatoes, bite into the sesame-encrusted tuna or wrestle with lobster tacos. Southwest colors, soft music and a beautiful view help it all go down easy.

Steak House Brasil (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-29-09; Carranza 210; women/men US\$14/17; 🕒 2pm-midnight; 🍷) Carnivores rejoice! Here the meat-hungry masses devour gut-busting portions of sirloin, filet mignon, ribs and turkey. One price gets you all you can eat, including a choice of three salads, soup, veggies and corny live music.

El Palomar de los González (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-07-95; Aguacate 425; mains US\$10-20; 🍷) The superb view over the city and bay is a big draw at this hillside restaurant, especially at sunset. Jumbo shrimp and fillet steak are specialties. It's a steep climb up here, so get a taxi or work up an appetite.

North of the Río Cuale

BUDGET

The Mercado de Artesanías, just north of the river, has simple stalls upstairs serving typical Mexican market foods. You'll find the following eateries north of the Río Cuale in El Centro.

Esquina de los Caprichos (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-09-11; cnr Miramar & Iturbide; tapas under US\$4; 🕒 noon-10pm Mon-Sat) This Spanish-Mexican tapas hole-in-the-wall serves delicious garlic-heavy gazpacho, buttery grilled scallops and much more. Though in a small, stark setting, it's entertaining and popular.

Cenaduría Doña Raquel (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-30-25; Vicario 131; mains US\$3-5; 🕒 6-11:30pm Mon & Wed-Fri, 2-11pm Sat & Sun) You can smell the richness of the traditional Mexican basics served in this local haven from a block away. Friendly atmosphere and friendly prices.

Planeta Vegetariano (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-3073; Iturbide 270; buffet US\$3.50-6; 🕒 8am-10pm) Serves up all-you-can-eat quality buffets at every meal, and they are a vegetarian's dream. Just come: you won't be disappointed. All around are wonderfully painted murals, and the hilly pedestrian street outside is a peaceful backdrop.

Tacos de los Arcos (Map pp70-1; Zaragoza 120; tacos US\$1; 🕒 noon-midnight) In a class by itself, Tacos de los Arcos is simple but indulgent, with all the fixings. Look for the 'Hooters' sign and follow it down.

Archie's Burger (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-43-83; cnr Morelos & Pipila; mains less than US\$5; 🕒 noon-1am Tue-Sun) At this tiny shack of a place budding surfers can catch some burgers, hotdogs, fries, surfer videos and reggae music. Don't bring your surfboard: there isn't much room.

MIDRANGE

Barcelona (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-05-10; cnr Matamoros & 31 de Octubre; tapas US\$3.50-7; 🕒 noon-11:30pm Mon-Sat, 5:30-11:30pm Sun) Requires a walk up a hill and some stairs, but the grand view and excellent tapas are worth it. Lamb, duck and vegetarian dishes are also served. Try to get a table on the patio up top, and by all means order a sangria!

Las Palomas (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-36-75; cnr Paseo Díaz Ordaz & Aldama; mains US\$9-28; 🕒 8am-11pm) Looking over the *malecón* from its comfortable perch, Las Palomas is a popular place for people-watching. The menu lists seafood, chicken crepes and authentic Mexican specialties, and the decor is smart and festive. Soft music serenades loud and happy gringo voices – perhaps they scored a 'free margarita' coupon?

La Dolce Vita (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-38-52; Paseo Díaz Ordaz 674; mains US\$7-10; 🕒 noon-2am; 🍷) This is a cheerful, often crowded spot for wood-fired

pizzas and people-watching. On Friday night there's handmade gnocchi. Live jazz plays Thursday to Sunday for the crowded floor.

No Name Café (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-25-08; cnr Morelos & Mina; mains US\$5-20; 🕒 8am-1am; 🍷) Serving all-American favorites, this restaurant and sports bar has 31 (count 'em) TV sets. Obviously, a good place to catch your choice of game. It claims to serve the best ribs in Mexico: you be the judge. Phone for free delivery.

Mi Querencia (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-20-30; Morelos 426; mains US\$6-18; 🕒 8am-2am) Seviche – the marinated seafood and lime dish that makes an appearance on nearly every Pacific coast menu – gets gussied up here with variations featuring coriander, pineapple, beet juice and oranges. Similar liberties are taken with the shrimp dishes.

La Bodeguita del Medio (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-15-85; Paseo Díaz Ordaz 858; mains US\$7-15; 🕒 11am-2:30am) Test the authenticity of this Cuban joint by trying the Cuban paella or gazpacho with a Caribbean twist. A retractable roof and 2nd-floor balcony make for an open feel and good views over the *malecón*. There's live music all day (if you're lucky).

Rito's Baci (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-64-48; Domínguez 183; mains US\$7-17; 🕒 1-11pm) This place stands proud in cozy spaces filled with foreign patrons sampling delicious Italian cuisine. Moody music and small front tables make it better for romantic liaisons than large rowdy groups.

La Fuente del Puente (Map pp70-1; ☎ 221-11-41; Insurgentes 107; mains US\$5-11; 🕒 8am-11pm) Perched over the Río Cuale at the bridge, this delightfully situated café serves traditional regional specialties from all corners of Mexico. It's particularly charming for breakfast in the morning, when the birds along the river turn up the volume and iguanas pass noiselessly in the trees overhead.

TOP END

Trio (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-42-28; Guerrero 264; mains US\$14-26; 🕒 6pm-midnight; 🍷) The two European chefs put a lot of passion into the seasonal menu at this elegant restaurant-bar-bistro. Mexican and Mediterranean flavors blend beautifully in dishes like lamb ravioli, chili-roasted snapper or Lebanese salad. The rooftop bar area is choice for an after-dinner libation.

Café des Artistes (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-32-28; Sánchez 740; mains US\$18-29; 🕒 6-11:30pm; 🍷) This cosmopolitan restaurant has a romantic ambience to match its exquisite French cuisine. It's not so elegant that 'happy birthday' songs aren't belted out every night, though. Local seafood is featured in many of the dishes, with adventurous dishes like 'soft shell crab and beef tongue fantasy.' Reservations are recommended.

North of Puerto Vallarta

TOP END

North of town, the top-end hotels in the Zona Hotelera and Marina Vallarta all have top-end restaurants. Recommended places:

Bogart's (Map p67; ☎ 224-02-02; Av Las Garzas s/n; mains US\$7-14; 🕒 8am-midnight) At NH Krystal Puerto Vallarta (p92); gourmet international cuisine.

Garibaldi's (Map p67; ☎ 226-11-50; Paseo de la Marina Sur 105; mains US\$6-16; 🕒 8am-midnight) At Westin Regina Resort; fine seafood in a beachfront setting.

Isla Río Cuale

TOP END

The riverside setting of the three restaurants on the island makes for a romantic and relaxing dining experience.

Le Bistro Jazz Café (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-02-83; Isla Río Cuale 16A; mains US\$10-30; 🕒 9am-midnight Mon-Sat; 🍷) Overlooking the river, this swanky spot is good for a martini but even better for its scrumptious cuisine, pleasant jazz recordings and beautiful tropical scenery. The menu is replete with gourmet fare like mahimahi, shrimp Portuguese and 'lobster of desire.' For breakfast there are savory crepes and eggs Benedict.

River Cafe (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-07-88; Isla Río Cuale 4; mains US\$10-22; 🕒 9am-midnight; 🍷) Imaginative seafood dishes are a highlight of this well-regarded and delightfully situated restaurant. Try shrimp with pecans and orange sauce, or the delectable shellfish salad. There's live jazz in the evenings Thursday through Sunday.

Oscar's Bar & Grill (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-07-89; Isla Río Cuale 1; mains US\$10-21; 🕒 11am-11pm) On the peaceful seaward tip of Isla Río Cuale, this restaurant is a fine choice for a romantic meal. Enjoy dishes like vegetable crepes with corn and *poblano* peppers (US\$13) or superfresh mahimahi fillet baked in basil and parmesan (US\$21).

Self-Catering

Cater your own picnic and save some pesos.

Gutiérrez Rizoc (GR; Map pp70-1; cnr Constitución & Serdán; ☎ 6:30am-11pm) A well-stocked, air-con supermarket; OK for self-catering or a small indulgence.

Agro Gourmet (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-53-57; Badillo 222; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat) This small health-food store sells seasonal veggies, whole-wheat bread, grains and spices.

DRINKING

Not surprisingly for a city where lounging around is one of the preferred activities, Vallarta has many choice spots for sipping a strong coffee or tipping a tippie. Coffee shops open early and close late, and most bars keep 'em coming well after midnight.

Coffee Shops

There are plenty of places in Vallarta to satisfy those java cravings and keep your energy levels buzzing.

Café San Angel (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-21-60; Olas Altas 449) Start your day in this artsy, relaxed café with sidewalk tables filled with gringos sitting pretty, sipping their black coffee and nibbling on snacks and sweets. Try coffees laced with whiskey, tequila or Kahlua (US\$3.50).

Kahuna Coffee Co (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-16-93; Badillo 162; bagels US\$1.50-3, coffee US\$1-3) Great for when you're jonesin' for a jalapeño bagel with horseradish cream cheese. This tiny, Canadian-run coffee joint sells other bagel flavors like garlic and bialy, spreadable on top with blackberry, nuts and raisins or veggie cream cheeses. Lox sandwiches are available, and it's also got good java, including frozen versions.

Café Superior (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-44-23; Encino 55; mains US\$3-5.50, coffee US\$1-2.50; ☎ 8am-8pm Tue-Sat, 8am-4pm Sun-Mon) Brews up some great (albeit pricey) stuff, and is efficiently run by a Seattle native. Also on order are tuna salad, nachos, veggie sandwiches, milkshakes and Western-style breakfasts. The corner-store ambience is intimate and casual, with plenty of open doors for street-watching.

World of Coffee (Map pp70-1; cnr Cárdenas & Olas Altas; coffee US\$1-3) Here you can have your carrot cake and eat it, too – with an iced latte, even. It's not atmospheric, but there is pleasant, covered sidewalk seating and it's across from a park. Avoid the pricey Internet service.

Viva Café (Map pp70-1; Cárdenas 292) Perks and bubbles its java among small tables and artsy clutter. Order your usual fancy coffees; packaged grounds are also available for purchase.

Cappuccino Café (Map pp70-1; Galeana 104; coffee up to US\$5) Steams up lattes, mochas and espresso from its 2nd-story open loft. There's a great view of the little seahorse boy statue and some nice-looking desserts.

Bars

It's easy to become inebriated in Puerto Vallarta, where two-for-one happy hours are as reliable as the sunset and the margarita glasses look like oversized snifters. The following bars are preferred watering holes.

La Barriga Cantina (Map pp70-1; Madero 259) This is the perfect bar, in a self-proclaimed 'spicy little neighborhood.' Attracting both gringos and locals, this cozy and friendly place has free pool and a well-curated jukebox.

La Bodeguita del Medio (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-15-85; Paseo Díaz Ordaz 858) This graffiti-covered Cuban joint has live music, stiff mojitos and good views over the *malecón*.

El Faro Lighthouse Bar (Map pp70-1; ☎ 221-05-41; Royal Pacific Yacht Club, Marina Vallarta; ☎ 5pm-2am) Not too many lighthouses serve cocktails, but this one sure does. Panoramic views of the bay in the moonlight are a surefire prelude to a kiss.

Club Roxy (Map pp70-1; Vallarta 217) This club has a dark, crowded atmosphere while music (Santana, say) fills the air. Middle-aged and sometimes skimpily clad rockers sway and smooch in the deepest corners or in plain sight. The live music is pretty good.

Club Sports Bar & Grill (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-02-56; Badillo 286) Ice hockey dominates on the screens, while at the bar aging hippies share space with purple-haired ladies. It's friendly, modern, casual and bright.

Pool hall (Map pp70-1; Madero 279) This is *not* the kind of place where you'll find Tom Cruise types twirling their cues and kicking shit. It's large, full of tables and downright seedy. Get drunk and challenge the locals (all male) to a game.

Other possibilities:

Memories Café (Map pp70-1; Mina & Juárez; ☎ 7pm-midnight) Conversation is king at this down-to-earth, low-key spot.

Carlos O'Brian's (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-14-44; Paseo Díaz Ordaz 786) A favorite drinking hole for rabble-rousing gringos.

ENTERTAINMENT

Dancing and drinking are Puerto Vallarta's main forms of night-time entertainment. In the evenings many people stroll down the *malecón*, where some wonderfully creative 'Dr Seuss-on-acid' sculpture has been placed. Also lining the *malecón* are plenty of romantic open-air restaurants and heaps of riotous bars. Entertainment is often on tap in the amphitheater by the sea (opposite Plaza Principal), and the softly lit Isla Río Cuale is a quiet haven for a romantic, early evening promenade.

Clubs & Discos

Along the *malecón* are a bunch of places where teen and 20-something (or even older) tourists get trashed and dance on tables. On a good night, they might stay open to about 5am. You can see from the street which one has the most action. Usually there's no cover charge, but drinks are on the expensive side, except during the 'happy hours,' which can be any time from 8pm to 11pm.

de Santos (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-30-52; Morelos 771; weekend cover US\$10; 📺 Wed-Sun; 🍷) Vallarta's choicest nightspot commands the most artful DJs and an open-air rooftop bar furnished with oversized beds. On the dance floor the music is frenetic, but there's also a mellow chill lounge.

Zoo (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-49-45; Paseo Díaz Ordaz 638; weekend cover US\$11; 🍷) Sports an animal scene, and I'm not just talking about the decor. Grilled windows resemble cages, so if you're up for a wild time step inside – carefully. You may be greeted with all-the-margaritas-you-can-drink hour. Ignore the gorilla at the door; he's a brute.

Hilo (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-53-61; Paseo Díaz Ordaz 588; weekend cover US\$7-10; 🍷) A cool space well-designed for getting a groove on, with epic statues of revolutionary heroes.

Hard Rock Café (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-55-32; Paseo Díaz Ordaz 652; 📺 11am-2am) In the same area, but gets an older, more sedate, T-shirt-collecting crowd. Spin to live music every night but Monday.

Kahlúa (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-24-86; cnr Paseo Díaz Ordaz & Abasolo) Blares loud disco beats from its huge windows. Inside, gringos check each other out and look for dates, while reaping the rewards of a constant happy hour.

La Regadera (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-39-76; Morelos 664) Dark, smoky and popular with young

local drinkers and dancers. Come for a visit if you want to hear Mexicans singing loudly and badly.

La Cantina (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-17-34; Morelos 700) Also attracts the young, hip and uninhibited, sitting daintily on barstools. Again, it's a mostly Mexican crowd.

La Revolución (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-06-06; Matamoros 235) A cool and casual local joint attracting a good mix of gringos and Mexicans. It's one of the oldest bars in Vallarta: Liz Taylor and Richard Burton hung out here. Wednesday night there's live music, but other times there's open mike – pick up the sax and join in.

South of the Río Cuale, a wider variety of nightspots cater to a more diverse clientele, and drink prices are generally lower than on the *malecón* scene.

High After Hours Bar (Map pp70-1; Cardenas 329; cover US\$10) This hipster haven features oxygen-huffing and dance floor action 'till the sun comes to dance.'

Señor Frog's (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-51-71; cnr Vallarta & Carranza; admission US\$9-11; 📺 11am-4am) Employs waiters eager to recruit female patrons, and has a sign that prominently declares 'Topless women = free drinks; topless men = no service.' Nightly shows include wet T-shirt, bikini and wet boxer. You can guess what kind of place this is. There's no admission charge if you're having dinner. If you don't have time to get alcohol poisoning here, there are other locations in Mazatlán, Ixtapa and Acapulco.

Cactus (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-03-91; Vallarta 399; men/women US\$24/14) A modern disco that plays host to a bikini or wet T-shirt contest some nights. The cover charge (though sometimes estrogen is so needed it gets in free) includes an open bar – which does nothing to promote responsible drinking. Isn't it great?

North of the city, some of the large resort hotels have bars and nightclubs, but they're usually low energy, high-priced affairs. They're busier at holiday times, when well-dressed Mexicans strut their stuff. To cut the cost of the cover charge, look for discount coupons in tourist pamphlets.

Christine (Map p67; ☎ 224-69-90; 📺 10pm-5am) At the NH Krystal Puerto Vallarta (p92), this flashy dance club is occasionally explosive, with cutting-edge sound and lighting systems. Cover charges (free to US\$10 to US\$25) fluctuate depending on your gender

GAY & LESBIAN CLUBS & NIGHTSPOTS

Puerto Vallarta has a formidable selection of gay bars, nightclubs and restaurants. Blue Chairs is the most popular, visible gay beach bar, with droves of gay couples enjoying the ubiquitous sun rays and cool drinks. It's at the southern end of Playa de los Muertos.

Club Paco Paco (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-18-99; www.pacopaco.com; Vallarta 278) With a disco and cantina, this venerable institution is most famous for its transvestite revues (cover US\$6; midnight and 3am Thursday to Sunday).

Los Balcones (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-46-71; Juárez 182; cover US\$2-4, before 10pm free) One of the oldest gay haunts in town, this place has little upstairs balconies where trendy hipsters like to be seen. Great cozy spaces and colorful walls accompany DJ music and nightly strippers.

Anthropology (Map pp70-1; Morelos 101; cover US\$6) Exotic snake and Maya themes seduce the punters. Hot male bodies are on display for one another, and if you're lucky salsa beats will be on tap. If you're not so lucky, you'll get heavy techno thump. Check out the dark, more intimate rooftop patio.

The Palm (Map pp70-1; Olas Altas 508; cover US\$4, before 9pm free) A different show is held every night, including comedy, jazz, pop Latin music or guest performers. Spinning lights, snazzy colors and palm decor make it all seem like a dream. As one of the gay owners says: 'No one has to be lonely here.'

Depending on the alignment of the stars, the following gay bars are mostly mellow. **Kit Kat Klub** (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-00-93; Pulpito 120; 🍸) is an ultra-hip dinner-show spot with wicked martinis. **La Noche** (Map pp70-1; 257 Cardenas; 🍷 4pm-2am) is well loved for its convivial atmosphere and buff bar tenders. **Sama Bar** (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-31-82; 510 Olas Altas; 🍷 5pm-2am) is a likable small place with big martinis. **Bar El Morbo** (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-43-47; Olas Altas 463) glows in the dark, literally. Plus there's a free Jacuzzi on the roof (open Friday to Monday nights; bring your speedos, or don't).

and the night. Sometimes an open bar is included. Terraced levels, spinning spotlights and hip hop music delight well-dressed dancers downing overpriced and weak drinks. Still, it's flashy, modern and lively.

Jabalu (Map p67; ☎ 223-40-99; Francisco Ascencio 1735; 🍷 10pm-3am Sun-Thu, 10am-5am Fri-Sat) Just north of the Sheraton Buganvilias, this place stirs up some passionate salsa and merengue for a varied crowd. Balloons and colored lights add to the mix, although it's not cutting-edge cool. Cover vary, but run around US\$9 on weekends.

J&B (Map p67; ☎ 224-46-16; Francisco Ascencio, Km 2.5; admission Wed-Sun US\$9, Mon-Tue free; 🍷 10pm-6am) Swings with salsa, cumbia and merengue, mostly. The live stuff starts at 12:30am Wednesday to Sunday, and a somewhat tacky tropical theme encourages casual dress. The crowd runs into 40-somethings.

Mariachis

Two places present regular traditional Mexican music performed by mariachis. One attracts mostly tourists; the other is mainly for Mexicans.

Tequila's (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-57-25; Galeana 104; 🍸) The 2nd-story location on the *malecón*

makes for an excellent backdrop to the live mariachi music every night (except Monday), starting at around 7:30pm or 8pm. Try one of the many versions of tequila.

Mariachi Loco (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-22-05; cnr Cárdenas & Vallarta; cover US\$3; 🍷 shows 6:30 & 10.30pm; 🍸) Usually attracting an exuberant all-Mexican crowd, this restaurant-bar presents an entertaining (if slightly amateur) show of music, comedy and mariachi every night. It's a great bit of local color, but you'll need good Spanish to get the jokes.

Fiestas Mexicanas

These fun folkloric shows give tourists a crash course in not-very-contemporary Mexican culture.

La Iguana (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-01-05; Cárdenas 311; admission US\$50; 🍷 7-11pm Thu & Sun; 🍸) Said to be the original of this much-copied tourist entertainment. The deal here includes a Mexican buffet, open bar, live music, folkloric dances, mariachis, cowboy rope tricks, bloodless cockfights and a piñata.

Some of the big resort hotels also do Fiesta Mexicana nights, including the **NH Krystal Puerto Vallarta** (Map p67; ☎ 224-02-02 ext 2091; Las Garzas s/n; admission US\$48; 🍷 shows Tue &

Sat 7pm; 📺). It's considered one of the best Fiestas Mexicanas, though it's not cheap. Add fireworks to the above.

Sheraton Buganvilias (Map p67; ☎ 226-04-04; Francisco Ascencio 999) is another big-name hotel that offers up a decent Mexican Fiesta night (held on Thursdays).

Cinemas

Cine Bahía (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-17-17; cnr Insurgentes & Madero; admission US\$3.80; 📺) For a less frenetic evening out, catch a movie in air-con comfort at Cine Bahía. Recent releases are often shown in English with Spanish subtitles.

Bullfights

Bullfights (☎ 224-11-75; admission US\$14-28; 🕒 5pm Wed Nov-May) These are held in Plaza del Toro (Map pp70-1) opposite the marina. Any travel agency or luxury hotel worth its salt will have information or sell tickets.

SHOPPING

Shops and boutiques in Puerto Vallarta sell fashion clothing, beachwear and just about every type of handicraft made in Mexico, but prices are high, reflecting the richness of the area.

Markets

There are a few markets concentrating on craft stalls, and these are the places to go for cheaper prices and some hard bargaining.

Mercado de Artesanías (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-09-25; A Rodríguez 260) A maze of more than 150 craft stalls, this market offers touristy T-shirts, Taxco silver jewelry, *sarapes* (cloaks) and *huaraches* (leather sandals), wool wall-hangings, painted pottery and blown glass, among many other things. Tons of other shops line Agustín Rodríguez, facing the market. Bargain like your life depended on it: walk away and prices plummet.

The most atmospheric handicraft district, however, is the shady and tropical strip on Isla Río Cuale, where stands sell crafts daily for comparable prices.

Shops & Boutiques

Olinalá (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-49-95; Cardenas 274) This excellent gallery displays authentic Mexican dance masks, folk art, rural antiques, fine guitars and contemporary paintings.

Serafina (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-45-94; Badillo 260) A bit funky, with a good and crowded selection

of pottery virgins, clothing, bags (leather, cloth, plastic) and jewelry.

Patti Gallardo (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-57-12; Badillo 250) A great place for handmade and unique 'eclectic art' (though not necessarily Mexican) made mostly by women: jewelry, sculpture, picture frames, knick-knacks and more. It's not cheap.

Puerco Azul Galería (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-86-47; Constitución 325) This beguiling, well-curated shop tempts with a treasure trove of movie posters, quirky original art, 'kitsch mexicana' and delightful curios.

Viva (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-40-78; Badillo 274) The type of establishment that exclaims 'Welcome to Viva!' as you walk in. The stuff's fabulous, of course: funky sunglasses, stylish espadrilles and excellent straw hats and beach bags. Creative and original jewelry's the specialty, though, with over 450 international designers represented. There's a considerable sofa for the hubbies.

El Gato Gordo (Map p67; ☎ 223-03-00; Av de México 1083) This is Vallarta's best source for *lucha libre* (Mexican wrestling) masks; also boasts a small but choice selection of Cuban cigars.

La Casa de los Gatos (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-30-76; Badillo 220) This casual place carries a variety of fairly priced and eccentric stuff, including some Huichol beadwork.

Huichol Crafts

Puerto Vallarta is a prime place to shop for indigenous Huichol beadwork, thread paintings (made by pressing thread into a wax-covered board) and jewelry. The best selection can be found at **Artesanías Flores** (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-07-73; Cardenas 282), **Huichol Collection** (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-21-41; Morelos 490) and **Galería Mágico Huichol** (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-30-77; Corona 179).

Home Decor

Alfarería Tlaquepaque (Map p67; ☎ 223-21-21; Av de México 1100) This large showroom has been in business for decades, offering the best prices and selection of baked earthenware, blown glass and ceramics.

Mundo de Cristal (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-41-57; Insurgentes 333) Stocks an incredible selection of hand-blown glass.

Lucy's Cucú Cabaña (Map pp70-1; Badillo 295) Lucy's stocks some fine, fun crafts from all over the country – Oaxacan wood animals, papier-mâché masks and recycled metal

BULLFIGHTING ON MEXICO'S PACIFIC COAST

When considering an afternoon at a bullring, one thing to keep in mind is that all *corridos del toro* (bullfights) and all *plazas del toro* (bullrings) are not alike. Mexico's Pacific Coast is considered a region without much local enthusiasm for bullfighting, and bullfights performed here are largely motivated by the tourist dollar.

Puerto Vallarta has the largest and newest plaza along the coast – it's a smaller version of the famous Plaza del Toro in Mexico City. Bullfighting happens on Wednesday afternoons, timed with the arrival of cruise ships. In Latin America, the bullfighting season is December through April (during the summer and fall the bullfighters go to Spain). The best bullfights tend to happen during a town's fiesta, but bullfights are never guaranteed to be 'good' – even the best bullfighters have bad days, and the best bullfighters rarely perform at plazas along the Pacific Coast.

The bullfights you are most likely to see in Puerto Vallarta are real bullfights with real bulls, but technically you are more likely to see a *novillada* (novice bullfight) with *novilleros* (novice bullfighters) fighting *novillos* (younger bulls, between three and four years old). *Novilleros* are professional bullfighters, but they are less experienced than *matadors de toros* (experienced bullfighters who have passed a ceremony called an *alternativa* that allows them to fight fully grown *toros* of at least four years).

Otherwise, the bullfights you are likely to see here are much the same as bullfights anywhere. The bullfighters enter the bullring in a formal procession, each followed by his assistants. A bullfighter will normally fight two bulls in one afternoon; in Vallarta there are typically two bullfighters and four bulls. Bullfight fans will appreciate how the bullfighter builds a series of passes with the bright magenta cape, then later with the smaller red cape. The bull is almost always killed at the end of the bullfight, and the bullfighter is expected to kill the animal quickly, though that doesn't always happen. There is always blood, and it isn't pretty.

Bullfighting was first imported to Mexico with the conquistadors in 1562; the first bullfight in Mexico was in honor of the return visit of Hernando Cortés. Though its popularity is declining, bullfighting is an inextricable part of Mexican culture, and the best Mexican bullfighters are highly respected in all bullfighting countries. So, for a break from the beaches and nightlife, you can't find something more dramatic and memorable than an afternoon at the bullring. You will not be disappointed by the pageantry and grace of the bullfighters or by the awesome power of the bulls – incredibly agile and dangerous animals that live a life as pampered as a thoroughbred horse until their day in the ring. It is something to experience and, the closer your seats, the more you will see. If you are a bit squeamish, however, it is best to get the cheaper seats in the mid-range *tendidos*: the more expensive *barrera* seats (front rows) are often a bit too close to the blood-letting for first timers.

Bullrings along the Pacific Coast (you'll also find them in Mazatlán and Acapulco) rarely sell out, so you can purchase a cheaper ticket and discreetly scoot closer if you want a better look. Tickets are sold for the shady (*sombra*) or sunny side (*sol*). The shady side is more comfortable and closer to the action. You can usually get tickets at the plaza before the bullfight. Come early and enjoy the ambience; look around for the Patio de Caballos and sneak a peak at the snazzily dressed bullfighters before they enter the ring.

If you want your first bullfight to be a good one, you might want to consider attending in a different part of Mexico – some of the best rings are in Mexico City, Aguas Calientes, Queterero and Zacatecas.

arts – among a lot of other things. The owners started an animal rescue program in Vallarta.

Mundo de Azulejos (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-26-75; Carranza 374) This place has to have the best selection of artistic tiles in Vallarta. They're not cheap, but they'll custom-make whatever you can think up.

Artículos Religiosos La Asunción (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-31-86; Libertad 319) This is the place to come for all sorts of religious paraphernalia. Check out the calendars (US\$1) – they make great souvenirs.

Hecho a Mano (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-28-19; Zaragoza 160) Lots of furniture and home decor is on offer here, all made in Mexico and fabulous.

Tequila & Cigars

Casa de Tequila (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-20-00; Morelos 589) This place pours high-quality tequila shots...for free. They also sell the stuff, so they don't appreciate moochers. It's a good place for information on the national drink, if you're curious.

La Playa Vinos y Licores (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-18-18) Here's a good place to buy the two bottles of tequila you're allowed to take back into the USA. They also have a branch at Olas Altas 246 and Gomez 138.

Guantanamera Cigar Club (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-35-07; Corona 186B) This is the place to have your Cubanos rolled.

Art Galleries

Puerto Vallarta has more than its fair share of contemporary fine art galleries. The following are some of the best known for their consistent quality and selection:

Galería Dante (☎ 222-24-77; www.galleriadante.com; Badillo 269) Paintings and contemporary sculpture.

Galería Mata Ortiz (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-74-07; Cárdenas 268A) Very small but fine collection of pottery.

Galería de Ollas (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-10-45; Morelos 101) Displays more beautiful pottery, much of it intricately painted. Bring your wallet.

Galería Omar Alonso (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-55-87; Vicario 249) Mostly antique and contemporary photography.

Galería Pacífico (☎ 222-19-82; Aldama 174) Open since 1987, with an emphasis on local painters.

Galería Uno (☎ 222-09-08; Morelos 561) Mexican fine art in all mediums since 1971.

Galería Vallarta (☎ 222-01-90; Juárez 263) Paintings by Mexico's most collected painters.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Puerto Vallarta's **Gustavo Díaz Ordaz International Airport** (PVR; Map p67), on Hwy 200 about 10km north of the city, is served by several national and international airlines. Inside are many duty-free shops, exchange houses (including AmEx; good rates) and car-rental stalls (again, better rates than in town). There are also some very expensive bars, restaurants and souvenir shops; bring a small bottle of water to save yourself a couple of thirsty bucks.

Aeroméxico (☎ 224-27-77) Service to Los Angeles, San Diego, Guadalajara, La Paz, León, Mexico City, Morelia and Tijuana.

Alaska Airlines (☎ 221-13-50, in the US 800-426-0333) Direct service to Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle.

America West (☎ 221-13-33, in the US 800-263-2597) Direct service to Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Phoenix and San Diego.

American Airlines (☎ 221-17-99; in the US 800-433-7300) Direct service to Austin, Chicago, Dallas, Mexico City and St Louis.

Continental (☎ 221-10-25, in the US 800-231-0856) Direct service to Houston and Newark.

Frontier (☎ in the US 800-432-1359) Direct service to Denver and Kansas City.

Mexicana (☎ 224-89-00, in the US 800-531-7921) Direct service to Chicago, Guadalajara, Los Angeles and Mexico City.

Ted (☎ in the US 800-225-5833) United's budget carrier offers direct service to Denver and San Francisco.

Bus

Vallarta's long-distance bus station (Map p67) is just off Hwy 200, about 10km north of the city center and 2km north of the airport.

Most intercity bus lines have offices south of the Río Cuale, where you can buy tickets without having to make a trip to the station. They include Elite, TNS and Estrella Blanca, on the corner of Badillo and Insurgentes (Map pp70-1); ETN, Primera Plus and Servicios Coordinados, at Cárdenas 268; and Transportes del Pacífico, at Insurgentes 282 (Map pp70-1).

Daily departures from the main terminal include the following:

Barra de Navidad (US\$17, 3½hr, 4 1st-class; US\$13, 4hr, 5 2nd-class) Same buses as to Manzanillo.

Guadalajara (US\$32-39, 5½hr, 36 1st-class)

Manzanillo (US\$20, 5hr, 3 1st-class)

Mazatlán (US\$27-29, 8hr, 7 1st-class) You can also take a bus to Tepic, where buses depart frequently for Mazatlán.

Mexico City (US\$69-71, 14hr, 8 1st-class; US\$95, 13hr, 1 deluxe) To Terminal Norte.

Rincón de Guayabitos (US\$6, 1½hr) Same buses as to Tepic.

San Blas (US\$10, 3½hr, 2nd-class 3pm) Or take a bus to Tepic for transfer.

San Patricio-Melaque (US\$13, 3½hr, 4 1st-class; US\$10, 4hr, 4 2nd-class) Same buses as to Manzanillo.

Sayulita (US\$2, 1hr, 10 2nd-class)

Tepic (US\$12, 3½hr, frequent 1st- and 2nd-class)

Car & Motorcycle

Starting at about US\$60 per day, car rentals are pricey during high season, but deep discounts are offered during other times, particularly if you book online.

Due to immediate competition, showing up in person at the airport car-rental

counters can result in the best deals (watch out for those tricky downtown timeshares posing as rental-car companies). Negotiating is always a possibility.

Check with your credit card company back home to see if car insurance for a rental abroad is covered (to be covered, you must use that credit card to pay for the rental); sometimes the coverage is limited to rentals of less than two weeks. Paying cash is often cheaper, and you won't be forced to use the rental companies' self-favored rate of exchange (check the fine print on the contract). For more information about renting cars in Mexico, see p300.

The following car-rental agencies are at the airport:

Avis (☎ 221-16-57)

Budget (☎ 221-17-30)

Dollar (☎ 221-10-01)

Hertz (☎ 221-14-73)

National (☎ 221-12-26)

Mario's Moto Rent (Map p67; ☎ 229-81-42; Av Ascencio 998), opposite the Sheraton Buganvillas hotel, rents out trail bikes (US\$15 per hour) and scooters (US\$12 per hour).

GETTING AROUND

To/From the Airport

The cheapest way to get to/from the airport is on a local bus for US\$0.40. 'Aeropuerto,' 'Juntas' and 'Ixtapa' buses from town all stop right at the airport entrance; 'Centro' and 'Olas Altas' buses go into town from beside the airport entrance. A taxi from the city center costs around US\$6.

From the airport to town, fixed taxi stands inside the airport ask different prices depending on where you want to go: they charge approximately US\$10/US\$14/US\$18 to Marina Vallarta/Centro/Zona Romántica (also called Old Town or Olas Altas). But go outside the airport (you may need to cross the blue and orange pedestrian bridge) and passing taxis charge around US\$8/US\$12/US\$16 for the same destinations.

Bicycle

If you're after a two-wheeled buzz, **Bike Mex** (Map pp70-1; ☎ 223-16-80; Guerrero 361) and **Eco Ride** (Map pp70-1; ☎ 222-79-12; Miramar 382) rent mountain bikes for guided or self-guided tours starting at US\$25 per day. See p75 for more information.

Boat & Water Taxi

In addition to taxis on land, Vallarta also has water taxis to beautiful beaches on the southern side of the bay that are accessible only by boat.

Water taxis departing from the pier at Playa de los Muertos head south around the bay, making stops at Playa Las Ánimas (25 minutes), Quimixto (30 minutes) and Yelapa (45 minutes); the round-trip fare is US\$20 for any destination. Boats depart at 9:30am, 10:30am, 11am, noon, 4pm, 4:30pm and 5pm.

A water taxi also goes to Yelapa from the beach just south of Hotel Rosita, on the northern end of the *malecón*, departing at 11:30am Monday to Saturday (US\$14 one way, 30 minutes).

If you buy a return ticket from any particular water taxi, you have to return with the same boat at the time the boat operator has set to return. If you buy just a one-way ticket, you can take any boat back with any boatman, though if you go to more isolated places you should probably buy a return ticket so someone knows to come back for you.

Cheaper water taxis (*pangas*) to the same places depart from Boca de Tomatlán (p106), south of town, which is easily reached by local bus.

Private yachts and *lanchas* can be hired from the south side of the Playa de los Muertos pier. Expect to pay anywhere between US\$75 and US\$150 per day. They'll take you to any secluded beach around the bay, and many have gear aboard for snorkeling and fishing. *Lanchas* can also be hired privately at Mismaloya and Boca de Tomatlán, but they are expensive.

Bus

Local buses that are marked 'Ixtapa' and 'Juntas' go to the bus station; 'Centro' and 'Olas Altas' buses run into town from beside the long-distance bus station parking lot. A taxi between the center and the bus station costs US\$5 to US\$8.

Local buses operate every five minutes from 5am to 11pm, on most routes and cost US\$0.40. Plaza Lázaro Cárdenas at Playa Olas Altas is a major departure hub. Northbound local bus routes also stop in front of the Cine Bahía, on Insurgentes near the corner of Madero.

Northbound buses marked 'Hoteles,' 'Aeropuerto,' 'Ixtapa,' 'Pitillal' and 'Juntas'

pass through the city heading north to the airport, the Zona Hotelera and Marina Vallarta; the 'Hoteles,' 'Pitillal' and 'Ixtapa' routes can take you to any of the large hotels north of the city.

Southbound 'Boca de Tomatlán' buses pass along the southern coastal highway through Mismaloya (US\$0.50, 20 minutes) to Boca de Tomatlán (US\$0.75, 30 minutes). They depart from Constitución near the corner of Badillo every 15 minutes from 6am to 11pm.

Taxi

Cab prices are regulated by zones; the cost for a ride is determined by how many zones you cross. A typical trip from downtown to the Zona Hotelera costs US\$4 to US\$7; fare to Mismaloya is about US\$10. Always determine the price of the ride before you get in.

AROUND PUERTO VALLARTA

The appeal of Puerto Vallarta is not limited to its city limits; all around Bahía de Banderas are many beautiful beaches, some with small towns catering to visiting tourists. Many of these destinations are interesting enough to be worth a visit, and each can be seen in a day or less.

NORTH OF PUERTO VALLARTA

North of town, in the Zona Hotelera, are the sandy stretches of Camarones, Las Glorias, Los Tules, Las Palmas, Playa de Oro and, past the Marina, El Salado. Nuevo Vallarta, an expansive land of all-inclusive behemoth beach hotels, is just past here. And beyond that, up toward the roof of the bay, are the day-trip destinations of Bucerías, La Cruz de Huanacastle and Playa El Anclote (at Punta de Mita), with more beaches dotted between.

Remember that as you travel from Jalisco state to Nayarit state (the border is between Marina Vallarta and Nuevo Vallarta) you need to set your watch back an hour. Any business hours listed in the following towns reflect winter high-season hours; in summer, hours and days are often cut back, but hotel prices go down as well.

Bucerías

☎ 329 / pop 8800

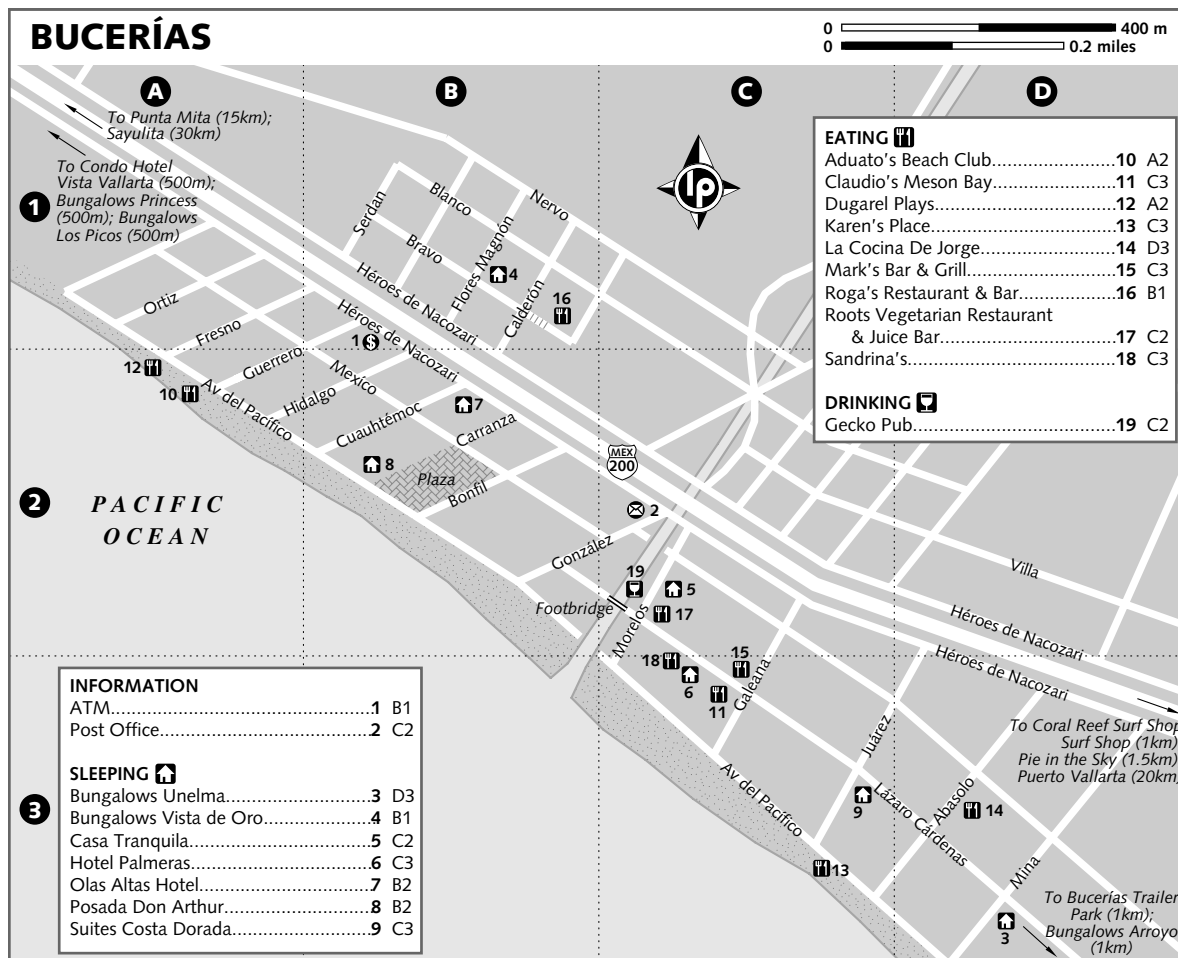
From the freeway, Bucerías looks like another road-straddling town you'd just as soon zoom by on your way to somewhere else. But turn toward the sea and you'll find a restful, traditional town that warrants an unloading of baggage and a day or two of repose. More than a few visitors have found the place so much to their liking that they've stuck around and put down roots, resulting in a smattering of smart restaurants and a choice of quality lodging. The main draw, naturally, is the expansively long, beautiful and surfable beach, which fronts cobblestone and bougainvillea-lined streets. There are several *palapa* restaurants serving seafood cooked the local way, and outdoor touristy shopping stalls not far away. From December to March you can go on whale-watching trips. All this, along with a less-harried feel than Puerto Vallarta, makes for a worthy day trip – and there's a rewarding variety of places to stay if you decide to stretch your visit a bit longer.

The big local celebration, **Fiesta de la Virgen de la Paz**, is held each year in mid-January to honor the town's patron saint, Nuestra Señora de la Paz. Local boatmen deck their launches out with palm fronds, paper streamers, flowers and balloons in anticipation of a blessing from the priest.

Bucerías consists of just a few very long blocks paralleling the beach and Hwy 200. It's a four-stoplight town. The **post office** (cnr González & Héros de Nacoziari) faces the highway. Internet service is available at Sandrina's restaurant for US\$2 per 30 minutes (or free, if you purchase breakfast or lunch). There's an ATM on the western edge of the highway near the corner of Guerrero.

ACTIVITIES

Coral Reef Surf Shop (☎ 298-02-61; surf-mexico.com/sites/coralreef; Héros de Nacoziari & Melgar; 🕒 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) is a full-service shop that rents longboards (US\$19 per day) and boogie boards (US\$8 per day). Long- and short-boards are for sale; after you've broken them in you can bring them back for repairs. Surf lessons and guides/boats for both local and long-distance trips are also offered, as are whale-watching tours in season.



SLEEPING

Bucerías has only a few truly budget options, and only a few more places priced in the midrange. However, if your budget allows a night's sleep in the US\$100 range, you can choose from a diverse selection of quality digs.

Prices quoted are for high season; you'll pay considerably less in the heat of the summer. Most hoteliers are amenable to bargaining, particularly if you plan to stick around for more than a few days.

For longer-term villa rentals, try websites such as www.sunworx.com or www.las-palmas-travel.com.

Budget

Bungalows Vista de Oro (☎ 298-03-90; cnr Flores Magnón & Bravo; d/q US\$20/28; 🚗) Terraced up a hillside, this friendly, funky-flavored, and pink-themed place is a block east of the highway on the inland side of town (look for the red pagoda and cross the highway). The big, fan-cooled bungalows are good but basic and work well for large, unfussy groups. There's also a two-story pool slide.

Olas Altas Hotel (☎ 298-04-07; cnr Héros de Nacozari & Cuauhtémoc; s US\$25-28, d US\$35-38; 🚗) This bright-green hotel on the main drag has good, clean, modern and large rooms. The more expensive rooms in each category include air-con and TV.

Bucerías Trailer Park (☎ 298-02-65; PO Box 148, Bucerías, Nayarit 63732; sites day/month US\$25/500; 🚗) Elizabeth Taylor once counted this property among her collection of vacation homes. The 48 pleasant sites, about 1km from the town center, have full hookups and good drinking water. There's a boat ramp nearby and a pleasant restaurant in the living room of the lovely house.

Midrange

Casa Tranquila (☎ 298-17-67; www.casatranquila-bucerias.com; Morelos 7A; d US\$45-55; 🚗 🚗) *Tranquila* is the operative word at this breezy, casual hideaway run by Patricia Mendez and Joann Quickstad, an affable iced-tea-loving couple who put down roots in Bucerías in 2001 and decided to stick around. The five one-bedroom units are cozy and individually decorated. Each comes with a

well-equipped kitchen and feels like home right away. On site is a bookstore and coffee shop, and Joann offers therapeutic massage (US\$45 per hour). The proprietors proudly put forth that they 'make all kinds of deals.'

Hotel Palmeras (☎ 298-12-88; www.hotelpalmeras.com; Cárdenas 35; r US\$36-64; 📶 📺 📺 📺) In proximity to some of the town's best restaurants, this well-run hotel provides nine smoke-free one- and two-bedroom kitchenette apartments, all well appointed and modern. The hotel has wireless Internet, a leafy patio and an extra-large pool. Discounts are offered for longer stays.

Posada Don Arthur (☎ 298-09-95; texmexnay@hotmail.com; Av del Pacífico 6; d/q US\$35/48; 📶) The manager initially seems a tad gruff, but once you get to know him you'll find that he's merely discriminating. The location is central and the six rooms are large and OK for this budget, with kitchens, air-con and cable TV. At last visit, work was moving forward on a café. It's good for longer stays, as there's a fair-sized apartment with kitchen suitable for a cozy couple or four good friends (US\$750 per month).

Top End

Bungalows Unelma (☎ 298-00-80; unelma@prodigy.net.mx; Cárdenas 51; d US\$105; 📶) This unique, tropical hideaway offers a little slice of paradise with its two beachside bungalows surrounded by lush, manicured gardens. Each has an outdoor living room and kitchenette. A manicured lawn leads to the beautiful beach with a private sunbathing area and comfortable deck chairs. The bungalows are very private and secured day and night from both the street and the beach. Kitchens are fully stocked and one unit comes with air-con. Boogie boards, sea kayaks and hammocks are part of the deal.

Suites Costa Dorada (☎ 298-21-00, in Guadalajara for reservations 333-825-86-16; www.scostadorada.com; ste US\$128-307; 📶 📺) This six-story hotel looks big in this small town. The huge suites with kitchens and ocean-view terraces comfortably contain the whole family.

Bungalows Arroyo (☎ 298-02-88; bungalowsarroyo@hotmail.com; Cárdenas 500; bungalows US\$100-120; 📶 📺 📺 📺) This popular home-away-from-home five blocks east of the Hotel Palmeras offers 15 two-bedroom apartment-style units half a block from

the beach. The comfortable units, arranged around a palm-shaded swimming pool, sport king-sized beds, balcony, kitchen and living and dining areas. They fill up quick in the winter, so book early.

At the northern end of town is a quiet subdivision called Playas de Huanacastle; here you'll find a series of cul-de-sacs lined with vacation homes and a few upscale accommodations.

Condo-Hotel Vista Vallarta (☎ 298-03-61; vista_vallarta@prodigy.net Av de los Picos s/n, Playas de Huanacastle; ste US\$98; 📶 📺) This three-story stucco hotel enjoys a healthy rate of return clientele for its bright, well-appointed apartments arranged around a shady beachside pool. The spacious two-bedroom suites include dining rooms, kitchenettes and ocean-view balconies. The place empties out in the summer, when the proprietors are apt to make a deal on the price.

Bungalows Princess (☎ 298-01-00; princess@prodigy.net.mx; Retorno Destiladeras, Playas de Huanacastle; bungalow US\$90-130; 📶 📺) The two-story beachfront bungalows on offer here have kitchens and provide plenty of space and privacy suited to families and small groups. Also on offer are more economical suites. All units have phones and satellite TV.

Bungalows Los Picos (☎ 298-04-70; www.lospicos.com.mx; Av Los Picos & Retorno Pontoques, Playas de Huanacastle; 2-/3-bedroom bungalow US\$100/120, ste/studio US\$80/35; 📶 📺 📺) This beachfront complex delivers the goods with excellent large bungalows ideal for groups of four to eight. The largest of the bunch enjoy sweeping ocean views and have pleasant eating and living areas. All units have cable TV, but only some have air-con. Two pools and ample garden areas make this an ideal place to hole up for a while and practice the art of relaxation.

EATING & DRINKING

Many of Bucerías eateries are operated by expats, and the competition makes for some very high-quality Western food.

Karen's Place (☎ 298-14-99; mains US\$9-18, breakfast US\$4-5; 📺 9am-9pm Tue-Sat, 9am-3pm Sun) Near Juárez at the beach, Karen's spins up thirst-quenching cocktails to go along with their sushi, mahimahi and coconut shrimp. Salads and sandwiches are also fixed up. Western-style breakfasts start the day, live music is staged on Tuesday and Thursday nights in season, and a popular champagne

Sunday brunch ends the week. Enjoy the view from the terraced dining area.

Marks Bar & Grill (☎ 298-03-03; Cárdenas 56; mains US\$9-20; 🕒 noon-10:30pm) Foodhounds are known to make a special trip to Bucerías just to eat here, and it's not hard to see why. It's the most elegant restaurant in town, with a welcoming and breezy dining room where you can enjoy a nice cocktail before tucking into that Black Angus New York steak, ricotta ravioli with goat's cheese or lentil-crusted flounder over mashed potatoes. The bar is haunted by expats comparing notes or watching the game.

Roots Vegetarian Restaurant & Juice Bar (☎ 298-25-04; Cárdenas 40; mains US\$4-8; 🕒 noon-midnight) Vegetarians take refuge in this recently opened eatery. The fresh and vibrant cuisine is best washed down by the fresh-squeezed fruit juices and exotic smoothies.

Roga's Restaurant & Bar (☎ 298-15-65; Bravo s/n; mains US\$10-17; 🕒 2-10pm Mon-Sat) This swanky spot perched on a cliff overlooking the town is a tequila lover's dream. They keep a cellar stocked with the stuff, and offer good deals on the Corralejo brand and a rare agave distillate called *raicilla* (which may induce a slightly psychedelic state). The menu is grounded in seafood dishes like tequila shrimp and barbecued oyster fajitas. To get there you can slog up Calderón or take the elevator from the highway.

Sandrina's (☎ 298-02-73; Cárdenas 33; mains US\$4-11; 🕒 10am-10pm Wed-Mon) Has a great backyard patio where you can savor Mediterranean chicken, Greek or Caesar salads, hummus, lasagne and souvlaki. They also bake some great stuff: try the Kahlua flan or chocolate cream-cheese brownies. This place is all-gringo – there's even Internet service, free for customers.

Aduato's Beach Club (☎ 298-04-06; Av del Pacifico s/n; 🕒 noon-10pm) Your host Aduato Ramos, a garrulous and welcoming soul, invariably greets newcomers as if they were family. He'll be happy to show you old newspaper clippings, revealing him to have once been director John Huston's house boy. Give him a wink and ask for a shot of his special *raicilla*. The menu, like so many others round here, is filled with seafood dishes such as octopus burritos and red snapper drenched in garlic butter.

Dugarel Plays (☎ 298-17-57; Av del Pacifico s/n; mains US\$8-20; 🕒 10am-10pm) Overlooking the

beach, this old-school place sits on a rickety-looking wooden terrace with great sea views. You'd do well to go for the giant prawns, lobster or red snapper. The bartender is kept busy whipping up margaritas; two-for-one drink specials are doled out between 4pm and 6pm.

Claudio's Meson Bay (☎ 298-16-34; Av del Pacifico; mains US\$5-18; 🕒 11am-11pm) All-you-can-eat salad bars are few and far between, but at this beachside *palapa* they also set out an endless supply of shrimp and fish on Monday, barbecue on Wednesday and Mexican favorites and margaritas on Friday night.

La Cocina de Jorge (☎ 298-06-13; Abasolo 5; breakfast US\$2.50-4.50; 🕒 9am-noon Tue-Sun) This is the place for a filling and economical Mexican breakfast. The menu has the usual suspects and one puzzling but delicious standout: *juevos divorciados*, drenched in red and green salsa.

Pie in the Sky (☎ 298-08-38; Héroes de Nacoziari 202; 🕒 8am-10pm) On the highway at the first stoplight coming into town from Puerto Vallarta. The *besos* (brownies, US\$3), chocolate mousse and decadent cakes (slice/whole US\$3/24) are so good that you'll want to spend a small fortune on goodies to go. Breakfast and gourmet coffees are also served.

Gecko Pub (☎ 298-18-61; Morelos; 🕒 1pm-2am) This small bar near Cárdenas nurses some barstools and a few tables. There's darts, pool and a jukebox. Drinks are two-for-one on some nights, and ladies drink free on Wednesday and Thursday nights.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are buses every 15 minutes from Puerto Vallarta, leaving from across from the Sheraton Baganvillas hotel in the Zona Hotelera. The trip takes 30 minutes and costs US\$2; in Bucerías, get off at the second stoplight and walk inland to the plaza (unless you're only going to Bucerías for brownies at Pie in the Sky; in this case, get off at the first stoplight).

La Cruz de Huanacastle

☎ 329 / pop 2300

Travelers are just starting to catch on to the traditional little Mexican fishing town of La Cruz de Huanacastle. Fidgety sorts may find the pace of life here underwhelming, but those who enjoy simple pleasures might fall under its spell. Get to know the locals or hear the interesting stories of the expats

who've made this home. Hold court in the pretty plaza, conjugating verbs beneath a shady tree, or watch a fisherman skillfully throwing his net out from the shore.

Local lore puts forth that the town earned its name when the body of an indigenous woman was buried at the base of a giant *huanacaxtle* tree. In tribute a large cross, 2m by 1m, was carved into the trunk of the tree.

The town puts on its best face during its lively annual fiesta in early May, when the church bells toll for patron saint Santa Cruz, the streets fill with food stands and games, and there's a big fireworks show over the bay.

La Cruz supports a growing selection of cosmopolitan restaurants and a pleasant yacht harbor area where many gringos anchor for free. Fishermen sell their catch at the dockside every morning, and there's a village market on Wednesday from 9am to 1pm. Traffic is rare but tourism is starting to pick up – enjoy it while you can.

ACTIVITIES

Acción Tropical (☎ 329-295-50-87; www.acciontropical.com; Langosta 3; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-8pm) is a friendly operation that rents surfboards (US\$25 per day) and kayaks (US\$13 per hour); offers surfing lessons (two hours, US\$75) and surfing trips (from US\$75); and also offers snorkeling excursions to Las Islas Marietas (up to eight people US\$117). Whale-watching, boating and fishing trips are also available. Another branch is at Punta de Mita.

Sportfishing, whale-watching and boat trips are also offered by seasoned professional **Captain Fidel Ramirez** (☎ 295-50-55; columbiafishing@hotmail.com; Coral 18; per hr US\$30).

SLEEPING

La Cruz's accommodation scene is dominated by long-term villa rentals, with only a few traditional hotels.

La Cruz Inn (☎ 295-5849, in the US 707-961-0636; www.lacruzinn.com; r/apt US\$100/125; ☎ ☎) A charming and exceedingly peaceful accommodation situated next to the church just off the plaza. On offer are four tastefully furnished apartments with open-air kitchens and sitting areas. There's an economical room for rent and an attractive small pool and leafy patio area. Kayaks and bicycles are also available.

Bungalows Sukasa (☎ 214-47-04; Coral 25; s/d/tr US\$25/36/56; ☎) This small hotel in the heart

of town offers eight well-priced and decent rooms with kitchens. There's a small pool in the grassy courtyard.

Villa Bella Bed & Breakfast Inn (☎ 295-51-61, in the US 877-513-1662; www.villabella-lacruz.com; r US\$80, ste US\$140-228; ☎ ☎) Perched on top of a hill with a sweeping view of Bahía de Banderas and the Sierra Madres, this upscale retreat offers somewhat over-decorated rooms that are nonetheless bright and comfortable. Some find the panoramic lap pool and sumptuous breakfasts seductive. Spanish classes (US\$25/US\$120 per hour/week) and airport transportation are offered by arrangement.

EATING & DRINKING

Like its neighbor Bucerías, La Cruz supports several stylish expat-run restaurants in addition to typical Mexican eateries. On Saturday and Sunday nights near the plaza, family-run taco stands are set up serving delicious corn tortillas and all the fixings, and the whole town turns out to mingle.

Café Galería Arte Huichol (☎ 295-50-71; www.hikuri.com; Coral 66; breakfast US\$3-5; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat) Situated in a very peaceful courtyard with a gurgling fountain and shady trees, this a great, easygoing hangout – and more than just a café. Wayland and Aruna are Brits with a one-of-a-kind story of designing and building their own boat (with money made by selling tacos on the streets of London), having a baby, then sailing around Central America for 10 years before finally settling in at La Cruz de Huanacaxtle. Here they established a T-shirt printing shop, carpentry workshop, Huichol crafts-center store and café. Wayland also started a project of building and distributing spinning wheels for the Huichol locals to weave more efficiently. You can see Huichol sandals being made, and a sale percentage of the Huichol-designed T-shirts sold are donated to Huichol projects in Mexico. If that isn't enough to make you feel all fuzzy inside, try the delicious breakfasts (waffles, pastries and the like), salads, sandwiches, iced lattes or lemonades.

Philo's (☎ 295-50-68; Delfín 15; mains US\$4-12; ☎ 10am-1am Tue-Sun; ☎) Philo's is a little bit of everything – restaurant, bar, music studio and cultural center. Here's the line-up: Monday is Monday night football, Tuesday is jam-session night, Wednesday there's free pool, Thursday is open mike, on Friday and Saturday live music rocks, and on

Sunday there's more football. Burgers and grilled sandwiches run less than US\$6, and yoga, foreign-language and guitar classes are also offered.

Caledonia (☎ 329-295-50-21; Marlin 8; mains US\$7-17; 🕒 5-11pm) This elegant Scottish-run restaurant has plenty of international wines and some beautiful outdoor seating. Savor seafood cannelloni, chicken cacciatore or the half-rack of pork ribs (all around US\$10). It offers pizza and bar drinks, too.

Black Forest (☎ 295-52-03; Marlin 16; mains US\$6-12; 🕒 5-10pm Sun-Fri) This romantic, cosmopolitan restaurant has become well known throughout the Vallarta area for Chef Winfried Küffner's delicious schnitzel, fried veal sausage and Hungarian goulash, not to mention his long list of mouthwatering desserts. There's live music on Friday nights.

Restaurante La Glorieta de Enrique (☎ 278-32-92; Coral 26; breakfast US\$3; 🕒 8am-7pm) A simple *palapa* restaurant on the roundabout, this local haunt is a fine place to while away a long morning over coffee and a paperback.

Brittania Bar (Coral 68; 🕒 6pm-midnight Tue-Sun) With the look of a wannabe medieval castle, this watering hole and social hall is the only place in town to draw a cool Guinness.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

It's easy to reach La Cruz de Huanacaxtle: simply hop on a north-pointing Punta de Mita bus anywhere along Puerto Vallarta's Zona Hotelera (US\$2, every 15 minutes).

Punta de Mita, Playa El Anclote & Around

☎ 329 / pop 500

Almost at the very northern tip of Bahía de Banderas is the Punta de Mita peninsula. Here lie some creamy strands of beaches, including Playa El Anclote, which is popular with surfers and boogie boarders. Ubiquitous seafood *palapa* restaurants on the beach offer great views of the bay and a distant Puerto Vallarta. Not a bad deal for those who also come to enjoy the beach, go on boat trips or try their balance in the surf.

Playa El Anclote is in the village of Nuevo Corral del Risco. To get there, head downhill from the main road; at the T-junction at the bottom is the beachside road Av Anclote, where most of the local businesses operate. Occupying higher ground just to the east is its sister village Emiliano Zapata,

where many of the region's accommodations are to be had.

You can log on to the Internet at Riki's Café in Nuevo Corral del Risco.

ACTIVITIES

Playa El Anclote is justifiably famous for surfing. **Acción Tropical** (☎ 291-66-33; Anclote; Nuevo Corral del Risco), where local surfing honcho Eduardo del Valle Ochoa provides his considerable expertise from a shady spot across from the *palapa* restaurants on the beach road. Here you can book surfing lessons (two hours, US\$75) and boat trips in the bay, including snorkeling, sportfishing (three hours, US\$110) and whale-watching in season. You can also rent kayaks and surfboards.

Surfing is also the primary concern of **Tranquilo Surf Adventures** (☎ 291-64-75; www.tranquilosurf.com; Pez Vela 130, Nuevo Corral del Risco), a small company promoting low-impact surfing. From November through April they operate a surf school catering to individuals and small groups in pursuit of 'a liquid foundation to surfing.' During the summer months the business shifts to surfing safari adventures to secluded corners of southern Mexico, led by Josué Villegas, a home-grown surf legend.

Formerly a fishing cooperative, **Caseta Cooperativa Corral de Riscos Servicios Turísticos** (☎ 291-62-98; Anclote 17; 🕒 9am-4pm Mon-Sat) offers sightseeing and snorkeling tours to Las Islas Marietas, an hour offshore; fishing trips (\$40 per hour); whale-watching (December to March); and surf instruction.

SLEEPING & EATING

Huerta de la Paz (☎ 291-63-37; www.huertalapaz.com; Carretera Higuera Blanca, Km 4; cabana US\$55-125) This self-styled 'ethnobotanical permaculture ranch' strongly appeals to those who enjoy an environment that promotes the values of meditation and mindfulness. Sitting pretty in its jungly garden setting, it offers four fan-cooled thatch-roofed units with tasteful decor and organic vegetarian meals (breakfast is included). Yoga classes and massage are also offered. To get there, take the turnoff for Higuera Blanca from the main road and follow the signs; it's before the turnoff for Playa Punta de Mita.

Hotel Coco's (☎ 291-63-75; cocosmita@yahoo.com; Av de las Pangas s/n, Nuevo Corral del Risco; d US\$20)

Loved by surfers for its economical rates and air of insouciance, this cheerful accommodation with eight clean rooms is Playa El Anclote's best bargain. It's on the main road into town.

Meson de Mita Bungalows (☎ 291-63-63; meson demita@yahoo.com; Anclote 200; r US\$50-80; 🏠 📺 📶) With a big *palapa* restaurant and a privileged location right on Playa El Anclote, this hotel was under construction at last visit but was already revealing its promise. The rooms are clean and have daybeds and satellite TV. The largest sleeps six.

Punta Mita Hotel (☎ 291-62-69; Zapata 5, Emiliano Zapata; d with/without kitchen US\$35/45; 🏠) It's simple and clean, with nondescript ocean views and a small pool. Some rooms have kitchenettes. You'll find it on the dusty road fronting the beach, south of the T-junction.

Casa Contenta (☎ 294-64-14; www.puntamita-beach.com; Montaña 40, Emiliano Zapata; r US\$55) At the home of friendly former Californian Susan Ingle, this is a single studio suite with an expansive deck and tremendous views of the bay. Painted in bright colors and filled with thoughtful touches, it's exuberantly pleasant, with a queen-sized bed, large bathroom and open-air kitchen.

Casa Las Palmas (☎ 291-63-04; elas_palmas72@hotmail.com; Francisco Madero s/n, Emiliano Zapata; 1-bedroom apt US\$60-70, 2-bedroom apt US\$90; 🏠 📺 📶) Immaculate and welcoming, this well-run operation in Emiliano Zapata offers five large brick and stucco apartments in a garden setting. Guests enjoy access to a large swimming pool, Jacuzzi, barbecue grill,

kayaks, snorkeling gear and surfcasting poles. With wireless Internet, satellite TV, DVD players, large book-lending library and even a telescope for whale-watching, you just may decide to extend your vacation.

Riki's Café (☎ 291-62-72; Av Las Pangas s/n, Nuevo Corral del Risco; mains US\$4-6; 🕒 8:30am-6pm Tue-Sun) A small café and meeting place, this friendly establishment serves simple food and offers Internet access. This is all just a front, however, for German transplant Riki's true passion: therapeutic massage (60/90 minutes US\$55/US\$85).

El Dorado (☎ 291-62-96; Anclote s/n, Nuevo Corral del Risco; 🕒 11am-sunset) Overlooking Playa El Anclote, this is the oldest restaurant in town, meaning that it enjoys first pick from the fishermen's daily catch.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

To get to Playa El Anclote, simply take any Punta de Mita bus roaming north on the Zona Hotelera (US\$2, every 15 minutes) and get off at Nuevo Corral del Risco, the town above Playa El Anclote.

SOUTH OF PUERTO VALLARTA

South of town, off scenic Hwy 200, are the beaches of Conchas Chinas, Estacas, Los Venados, Punta Negra, Garza Blanca and Gemelas. Above this lovely shoreline (and blessed with stunning sea views) perch upscale hotels, timeshare condos, and villas owned by the very rich and very lucky.

Near these beaches and also located further south are the hamlets of **El Nogalito**,

DETOUR: GUADALAJARA

There's nothing wrong, of course, with spending your entire vacation with your toes buried in the sand, but if you want to get a better sense of what makes Mexico tick then a visit to exciting and gracious Guadalajara might be in order. The home of mariachi music, tequila, *charreadas* (rodeos) and the Mexican hat dance, a couple of days in Mexico's second-largest city provides an engrossing and entertaining education. Despite its size, Guadalajara is not an overwhelming city. Its pedestrian lanes, walkable streets and handy public-transport system make getting around easy. Short-term visitors spend most of their time basking in the ambience of the Centro Histórico, with its many leafy plazas, 400-year-old cathedral and stunning murals by José Clemente Orozco. Equally absorbing are the nearby towns of Zapopan for its 18th-century basilica and thriving nightlife scene; Tlaquepaque for its peerless shopping opportunities; and Tonalá for its busy street market.

Guadalajara is 374km from Puerto Vallarta (six hours by car or bus). If driving, head north from town on Hwy 200 to its end at Chapatilla, then south on Hwy 15. Frequent 1st-class buses leave throughout the day from the long-distance bus terminal (US\$29 to US\$32). Direct air service from Puerto Vallarta to Guadalajara is provided by Mexicana and Aeroméxico.

Playa Mismaloya, Boca de Tomatlán, Las Ánimas, Quimixto and Yelapa – these last three are reachable only by boat. There are also quite a few upscale restaurants, both near the highway and further inland, which for some folks are a worthy destination in themselves.

El Nogalito

This small inland riverside community, about 5km south of Puerto Vallarta and 1km inland, offers a lush tropical setting for repose and good opportunities for exploration. Hang out here, enjoy the beautiful river and surrounding jungle, and take a one-hour hike up the Río El Nogalito to some gorgeous, unnamed and rarely visited cascades. Despite its proximity to Hwy 200, tourism has not taken a serious foothold, so don't expect too many services.

Contacto Natural Health Spa and Resort (☎ 221-54-19; www.contactonatural.com; Naranjo 123; all-inclusive US\$100-140; 🏠) is a restful retreat for the body and senses. Here you can truly relax in quiet, wooded surroundings and be rejuvenated by a long menu of body therapies and massage. The all-inclusive rate includes vegetarian meals and four therapies per day. The 12 rooms are rustic but comfortable. The resident duo of a great dane and a chihuahua will keep you company as you walk along the beautiful Arroyo Nogalito.

For a good, atmospheric meal, spend an afternoon luxuriating at the jungle ranch **El Nogalito** (☎ 221-52-25; mains US\$8-20; 🕒 noon-5:30pm). The property is awash in the sound of the river burbling by and surrounded by abundant vegetation, giving joy to bird watchers. The menu offers a good selection of international dishes in addition to several local delicacies, including coal-grilled shrimp and snapper *zarandeado*, cooked whole with spices and vegetables.

Mismaloya

The small but attractive and busy cove beach of Mismaloya, about 12km south of Puerto Vallarta, was the location for the 1963 Elizabeth Taylor/Richard Burton flick *The Night of the Iguana*. It's now dominated by the 303-room La Jolla de Mismaloya hotel (opposite), and the buildings used in the film (look toward the south side of the cove) live on as seafood restaurants. There are also plenty of tourist shopping stalls and

people enjoying many water activities – not quite the scene for those seeking enlightenment, at least in the traditional vein. To reach Mismaloya Beach take the coastal bus (see p96) and get dropped off right after the La Jolla de Mismaloya.

From Mismaloya you can head inland along a riverside dirt road to a couple of rustic yet upscale restaurants notable for their lush outdoor locations and for being able to function without electricity or telephone. Horses can be hired at Mismaloya for the ride up. Take insect repellent.

SIGHTS

Rising from the sea, offshore to the north beyond the cove, are the intriguing rocky islands known as **Los Arcos** (p73), a protected marine park and ecological preserve. It's one of the best snorkeling spots in the Puerto Vallarta area.

Mamá Lucía (☎ 296-51-89; 5 de Mayo s/n; 🕒 10am-5pm) If you've ever wondered why the best tequila simply must be '100% pure agave,' you'll see, smell and taste the reason at this boutique distillery and demonstration farm. Drop by and get up close and personal with some lovely blue-agave specimens planted in neat rows. A guide explains how, after a long life of repose lasting eight to 10 years, the agave plant has its heart (*piña*) carved out by harvesters called *jimadors*. Resembling a wooden pineapple, it's then halved or quartered and roasted in an adobe oven for 24 to 36 hours. Next comes the satisfying moment everyone's been waiting for: the *piña* is crushed to release the sweet (and so hard to come by) agave nectar. You'll want to spread it on toast. But no, instead it's distilled twice in a large round kettle called a pot still for a total of about six hours, and then aged in sweet old bourbon barrels. The demonstration is free, but of course the good people at Mamá Lucía would love it if you'd take some of their delicious product home with you. Choose a delicate *añejo* or perhaps an almond-flavored agave liqueur.

Mister Tequila (Map p67; ☎ 228-05-34; 5 de Mayo s/n; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2:30pm Sun) Next door to Mamá Lucía is this veritable tequila superstore, with an incredible selection of boutique tequilas from all corners of Jalisco and Nayarit. Be careful, the free tastings can quickly get out of hand.

ACTIVITIES

Mismaloya Divers (Map p67; ☎ 228-00-20) On the dirt road leading to the beach you'll find this tourism provider offering three- to four-hour tours to Los Arcos, Las Animas, and Quimixto (up to 10 people US\$150), and in-season whale-watching tours (US\$35 per hour). True to their name they also offer diving trips (one-/two-tank dive US\$65/US\$85) and rent snorkeling gear (US\$15 per day).

Rancho Manolo (Map p67; ☎ 228-00-18; horseback rides US\$15-20) Located beneath the Mismaloya bridge, on the opposite side from the resort, this cheerful operation keeps 25 horses and ponies fat and happy. Their two most popular tours are jaunts through an exuberant jungle landscape to Chino's Paradise restaurant (1½ hours, US\$15) and to another remote jungle restaurant, El Edén (three hours, US\$20). Double saddles are available for kids.

From Playa Mismaloya, launches can be hired for snorkeling tours or passage to the nearby islands. At last visit, the going rate was US\$35 per hour, or US\$150 for a full day for up to eight persons.

SLEEPING

Casa Iguana Hotel (Map p67; ☎ 228-01-86; www.casaignuanahotel.com; Av 5 de Mayo 455, Mismaloya; ste US\$85-250; 📞 📺 📺 📺) Providing a welcome alternative to the nearby mega-resort, this excellent mid-sized hotel on land carved from the jungles of Mismaloya offers eminently pleasant and well-appointed suites, perfect for families and those who eschew ostentatious hullabaloo. The place is well run, with a feeling of style and substance throughout. If you're traveling with kids, the two-bedroom suites (and humongous TVs in the living room) offer the possibility for mom and dad to get some privacy behind closed doors. Each of the 53 units is painted in warm hues of orange and yellow, with good-natured art and rattan furniture. Well-equipped kitchens and large dining tables make home-cooked meals a pleasure. Another option for meals is the pleasant open-air restaurant, La Cocina. The compact grounds are lushly gardenized with a fish pond and large elevated hot tub. Extras include well-priced massage, a laundry facility and Internet café.

Mar Sereno (Map p67; ☎ 228-08-79; www.marsereno.com; Hwy 200, Km 15; r US\$50, ste US\$70-80;

📞 📺 📺 📺) Offering quite a bargain, this 11-story hotel is often underbooked and therefore quite peaceful. You might even get a whole floor to yourself! The rooms and overall appearance are quite appealing, and the panoramic views from the lobby restaurant undeniably seductive. There's no beach to speak of, but there is a saltwater bathing area carved out of the rocks below. You'll find it between Mismaloya and Boca de Tomatlán.

La Jolla de Mismaloya (Map p67; ☎ 226-06-60; www.lajollademismaloya.com; Hwy 200, Km 11.5; ste US\$240-1360; 📞 📺 📺 📺) Carved out of the jungle in Mismaloya, this big resort tries mightily to be sumptuously luxuriant while maintaining its eco-chic credentials at the same time. The suites feature marble floors and over-the-top floral-print bedspreads, with balconies looking out over the expansive courtyard, four impressive pools and scores of coconut palms. Activities include snorkeling, scuba, mountain biking and horseback riding excursions, and there's also a full-service spa.

EATING

Chino's Paraíso (Map p67; mains US\$11-21; ☎ 10am-6pm) Located where relaxing tiers of *palapa*-covered tables decorate rocky ledges on both sides of a river (cross a footbridge), this place is about 2.8km south of Mismaloya. There's a swimming hole too – bring your swimsuit and towel. Seafood and meats are on the menu, but try to avoid being here between 1pm and 3pm, when hungry tour groups arrive for lunch. Look for iguanas – they'll be checking you out.

El Edén (Map p67; mains US\$10-18; ☎ 11am-5pm) This place is worth it if you've hired a horse or taxi, or have wheels; only serious hikers will enjoy the long and dusty walk up (5.5km further upriver from Chino's, and about 7km total from Mismaloya and the highway). The trip rewards you with another pleasant restaurant overlooking the same river. It's still airy but more closed in than Chino's. There are hikes and waterfalls in the area. Also, note the helicopter skeleton lying near the stairs; it was used in Arnold's flick *Predator*.

Back on the highway, going south toward Boca de Tomatlán, is yet another noteworthy restaurant, at least for those with fat wallets.

Le Kliff (Map p67; ☎ 224-09-75; Carretera 200, Km 17.5; mains US\$10-28; 🕒 noon-11pm) Le Kliff brags about being the best whale-watching spot in Vallarta...and that may be right. Its dramatic cliff-hanging location south of town is matched by a super seafood menu – try the tequila jumbo shrimp (US\$28) or go all the way with the seafood carousel, a lobster-shrimp-fish combination (US\$86 for two).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Grab a cab, drive or hop on a ‘Mismaloya’ or ‘Boca’ bus (US\$1.50); they leave Puerto Vallarta from the corner of Constitución and Badillo.

Boca de Tomatlán

About 4km past Mismaloya, Boca de Tomatlán is a peaceful, less commercialized seaside village in a small cove where the Río de Tomatlán meets the sea – a jungly place with quiet water, a nice beach and several small restaurants.

On the beach, **Restaurant Mi Ranchito** (☎ 228-07-07; mains US\$4-16; 🕒 8am-6pm) provides a pleasant spot to eat while you wait for your boat. They sell the much-loved local specialty *pescado zarandeado* (a charcoal-broiled fish stuffed with onion, tomatoes, peppers and spices) by the kilogram for US\$16.

There are no hotels in the village, but if you wish to loiter you may as well do it in style at **Casa Tango** (☎ 224-73-98; www.tangorentals.com; house US\$120/550), an attractive two-bedroom bayfront house surrounded by dense jungle and sleeping four. It's owned by a friendly Argentine and his Scottish partner, who also offer a good selection of other vacation rentals in the area and orchestrate personalized tours.

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Majahuitas (☎ 800-508-7923; www.mexico.boutiquehotels.com/majahuitas; Playa Majahuitas; casita US\$375) Peaceful, primitive and elegantly luxurious, this electricity-free, phoneless getaway is about as far from ‘regular’ life as you can get. There are only eight, open-air casitas on this secluded white-sand beach, making it extremely romantic. Playa Majahuitas is only reachable by boat from Boca de Tomatlán, so you'll need to make reservations.

The highway swings inland from Boca, and you can follow it 5km to the pricey restaurant **Chico's Paradise** (Map p67; ☎ 223-60-55; Hwy 200, Km 20; mains US\$9-24; 🕒 10am-6pm), which perches above the Río de Tomatlán. Dining areas under rustic *palapas* look down to idyllic swimming holes and small waterfalls, and you can sunbathe on large boulders while enjoying the lush jungle backdrop. The menu, predictably, speaks of seafood and Mexican dishes.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Take a bus marked ‘Boca’ (US\$1.50) from the corner of Constitución and Badillo in Puerto Vallarta.

Pangas carrying up to eight passengers depart from the beach here to Las Ánimas, Quimixto and Yelapa.

Las Ánimas, Quimixto & Yelapa

A stay in Puerto Vallarta without an excursion to the paradisiacal tropical havens of Las Ánimas, Quimixto or Yelapa would be a serious oversight. Beyond the reach of roads, they are accessible only by boat – getting there is half the fun. Along the coastline verdant mountains rise from the sea and deserted beaches and picturesque coves beckon. Only Yelapa provides the opportunity to spend the night.

Wear your waterproof sandals, as landings are often wet, and by all means carry insect repellent just in case the mosquitoes are in the mood to swarm.

Water taxis carrying up to eight passengers depart from Boca de Tomatlán hourly from 9am to 11am and 1pm to 4pm to Playa Las Ánimas (US\$5.50, 25 minutes), Quimixto (US\$6.50, 35 minutes) and Yelapa (US\$10, 45 minutes). They also leave from Puerto Vallarta (p96).

PLAYA DE LAS ÁNIMAS

Beach of the Spirits, a 20-minute ride by boat from Boca de Tomatlán, is a lovely stretch of sugary sand fronting a small fishing village. An afternoon spent here provides the most delicious sort of escapism. Your culinary needs will be simply but marvelously met by the good selection of *palapa* restaurants offering ultrafresh seafood such as shrimp empanadas or whole fried red snapper. Dessert is provided by the pie ladies who wander the beach with coconut

or lemon meringue pies for sale. Should you decide to pry yourself from the sands and ease into the water you'll discover some superlative snorkeling opportunities along the rocky shoreline at the far end of the beach. Or you may wish to shake the sand off with a hike through the rain forest to Quimixto, via an adventurous coast trail, in about an hour.

When you get dropped off, let the boatman know what time you'd like to be picked up. But if he doesn't show up, there are always fishermen on hand ready to transport you for a slight markup in price.

QUIMIXTO

A 30-minute boat ride from Boca, the equally lovely Quimixto has a sandy beach lined with seafood restaurants against a jungle backdrop. Just east, past a rocky point, is a pretty and deserted little beach. Lounge on the beach and gorge on *mariscos*, but don't leave without making the undemanding half-hour inland hike to a beautiful waterfall and swimming hole. The hike requires four to five shallow river crossings (wear waterproof sandals). Alternatively – and by doing so you'll be supporting local families whose livelihood depends on it – you can hire a horse to take you up for US\$10. At the falls, two rustic restaurants sell somewhat pricey refreshments. To avoid crowds, make the trip as early in the day as possible.

Further on along the same trail, perhaps another 40 minutes by foot, is yet another waterfall that you are likely to have all to yourself. Along the way you'll enjoy beautiful vistas and ever-changing scenery as you pass through the lush vegetation along the river.

YELAPA

Furthest from town, Yelapa is one of Vallarta's most popular boating destinations, and home to a sizable colony of foreign residents in addition to 100 or so Mexican families. Its picturesque beach cove with turquoise-colored waters is crowded with restaurants, tourists and parasailers during the day but empties out when the boats leave in the late afternoon. There are plenty of horses for rent and hikes to beaches and waterfalls (head upriver), but just a walk around the funky little town, most of which overlooks the cove, is pleasant.

There are now payphones scattered throughout the village and even a couple of Internet cafés. An up-to-date compendium of information about Yelapa can be accessed at www.yelapa.info.

Sleeping

There are quite a few places to stay here, particularly if you're willing to book for three or more days. You can usually find a place to stay by merely inquiring on the beach or visiting the Palapa in Yelapa office at the southern end of the beach. Prices can rise if you miss that last boat. During the peak season it's safest to reserve in advance.

Hotel Lagunita (☎ 209-50-56; www.hotel-lagunita.com; d US\$80-125; 🏠) The nicest midrange place in Yelapa, this hotel offers rustic-chic cabanas with one or two double beds, private bathrooms with hot water, electricity and fan. The 32 units are breezy and welcoming, painted in strong colors with plenty of local flair. There's also a pleasant restaurant bar, a well-kept pool, therapeutic massage and the occasional yoga class. Prices drop precipitously during the low season.

Verana (☎ 222-23-60, in the US 800-677-5156; www.verana.com; d villa US\$200-450; 🏠 🏠) Perched on a hillside with magnificent views of the mountains and sea, this getaway offers six beautifully designed bungalows that *Architectural Digest* magazine saw fit to swoon over. Each has been lovingly appointed and creatively designed by a former film-production designer and his partner, a prop stylist. It has a full-service spa and a much-ballyhooed chef to help you achieve the restive state of bliss that you paid good money for. There's a five-day minimum for reservations, and a mandatory food plan (US\$95) providing breakfast and dinner.

La Joya de Yelapa (☎ 209-51-40; www.bungalows.yelapa.com; d per day US\$60-75, per week US\$450) Located behind Marlin Restaurant near the stable, this is a basic option offering exceptionally private fan-cooled pine cabins with earthen floors, two double beds, hot water and coffeemakers.

Casa Milagros (☎ 329-298-14-70; s/d US\$35/45) Way up in town, up the alleyway toward the mouth of the bay, is this friendly, modern spot with 10 simple rooms. The views from the terraces are unbelievable, but you'll have to climb 178 stairs just to reach the place.

Blue Moon Hotel (☎ 209-50-62; javier_rodriguez@yahoo.com; r US\$40-50) Right on the beach, this simple hotel offers a good selection of rooms with comfortable beds and hot water. Inquire at Chico's restaurant.

Apartamentos La Barca (☎ 209-50-73; per night/week US\$20/140) Budget accommodations can be had at this Spartan option by the Río Tuito, which offers a rustic open-air apartment sleeping up to six with hot water and a utility kitchen. Your host, Valentín, can often be found on the beach.

Eating

Yelapa supports some 20 restaurants catering both to locals and visitors. The atmosphere in all of the restaurants is decidedly casual.

Chico's (☎ 209-50-62; mains US\$5-10; ☑ lunch) This old favorite was among the first to open for business on the beach and has been setting the standard ever since. You'll do well to order a steaming plate of giant shrimp served with the requisite garlic, butter and spices, or fresh red snapper or dorado with handmade tortillas.

Vortex Café (mains US\$3-8; ☑ breakfast & lunch) This friendly eatery serves delicious international breakfasts and lunches, including espresso, bagels, baked goods, seafood, and pizzas baked in a wood-fired oven. It frequently remains open in the evenings, with live music. A few recently added terminals provide Internet access.

As in Quimixto, pie ladies ply the beach with stacks of pies balanced on their heads. You can purchase by the slice or by the pie, and they'll even bake to order.

Getting There & Away

Most visitors arrive via water taxi from either Puerto Vallarta (p96) or Boca de Tomatlán (p106).

From 8:30am to 5pm, water taxis depart for Puerto Vallarta and Boca de Tomatlán

from the small pier next to the Yacht Club and from the beach. Before departing they cruise slowly down the beach to pick up anybody that is waiting.

El Tuito

After passing Boca de Tomatlán, Hwy 200 curves inland and climbs through high pine forests. Then, about 45km south of Puerto Vallarta, it reaches the small, traditional pueblo of El Tuito, which stretches east about 2km. While not incredibly impressive from the highway, it's a pleasant spot if you want to explore a completely untouristy, practically traffic-free and very Mexican place. It's also distinct in that the church is behind the cute plaza and not on it. Be prepared for curious stares, as not many gringos stop here.

There's a unique restaurant nearby, about 2km south past El Tuito and just off the highway. Look for signs leading to **Rancho Altamira** (☎ 322-269-00-35; Km 167; ☑ 11am-7pm). The open but covered restaurant sits on a lofty knoll overlooking green brushy hills, some agave fields and a pond full of ducks and geese. Deer, peacocks and ostriches (that's right) scamper around in the distance, and from your aerie a gentle breeze caresses you while you wolf down the very generous portions of meat and seafood dishes (US\$7 to US\$22). Afterwards, cocktails and tequila shots will wriggle and twitch your whiskers (if you happen to have any). The restaurant offers fishing and horseback tours (US\$12 per hour) as well.

If you need to spend the night, back in town and on the highway there's the decent, modern **Hotel Real de Valle** (☎ 269-00-11; r US\$30-45, ste US\$55; ☎ ☎), with rooms arranged around a shady garden and an astonishing airbrushed mural in the lobby. El Tuito is easily reached via long-distance buses heading south from Puerto Vallarta.