

Luxury and Local Adventure in Mexico's Riviera Nayarit

BY BOBBY MCGUIRE / 18 JUNE 2014

○○○○○

Vote 5

RATE



It's 7:05 a.m. as the sun rises over the Pacific. There is a knock at my door. It's Carlos, my butler, with a tray holding The New York Times Digest and a pot of coffee. Carlos sets my coffee down on my veranda; I enjoy it in my robe as he takes my shirts off to be ironed.

Did I mention that Carlos is really good-looking?

Later on this morning, I'll be off on an excursion that will involve pods of humpback whales, nearly extinct birds, a 16-foot manta ray and a swim through a 50-foot cave to a hidden beach that was a former bomb-testing site.

This is my quintessentially favorite kind of travel, born in front of the TV in my parent's house watching "I Love Lucy" as the cast jaunted throughout Europe. My favorite episode took place in Rome, where Lucy, in an attempt to "soak up some local color" as research for a bit role she'd been offered in an Italian art film, ends up in a cat fight in a grape-stomping vat. In one scene

she's getting advice from a knowledgeable bellhop in her suite at a cosmopolitan hotel with a view of the Colosseum in the Eternal City; after a short commercial break, she's in a vineyard in the bucolic village of Toro. To me, that's travel: adventure by day and sumptuous comfort at night. And that is exactly what I discover in Nayarit, Mexico ... minus the grape stomping.

For those unfamiliar, the Mexican state of Nayarit is located on the west coast of the country, nestled between the Pacific Ocean and the western Sierra Madre mountains. In addition to its charming countryside and stunning mountain and seaside vistas, the Riviera Nayarit shares the same latitude with the Hawaiian Islands, which affords it a mildly tropical climate with warm water and cool breezes. Thanks to a summer rainy season, visitors can enjoy a lush tropical environment virtually free of rain or any residual humidity three seasons a year.



Queen for a Day at the St. Regis

The St. Regis Hotel is located in Punta de Mita, a peninsula on the uppermost tip of Bahia de Banderas (Bay of Flags), with sweeping views of both the bay and open Pacific. Its campus, which stretches across hundreds of yards of private white-sand beach, includes 120 exclusive guest rooms and suites over 22 acres with tennis courts, three pools, a Remède Spa and three restaurants. It is flanked on either side by not one, but two world-class Jack Nicklaus golf courses. Little wonder that this exclusive out-of-the-way enclave has attracted more than its share of Hollywood A-listers.

My room has a private garden entrance and stunning view of the bay from the spacious lanai that includes a table and sun bed. The room's elegant Mexican-Mediterranean décor is straight out of a design magazine. With two sinks, large tub, and indoor and outdoor shower, the luxury and comfort of the bathroom made it difficult to get dressed in the morning. Two items common to most rooms that are conspicuously missing from mine: a coffee maker and iron. This brings me back to Carlos.

My Vallarta: Offline

Of the numerous top-of-the-line amenities offered by St. Regis properties, their signature butler service, which puts a modern spin on an almost archaic art form, is perhaps the most memorable. From making drinks and coffee to packing, unpacking, ironing and other bespoke services, my butler manages the impossible by providing the option of refined elegance without making the experience stuffy.

Rituals unique to St. Regis properties include the sabering of Champagne, where the top of an unopened bottle of Veuve Clicquot is lobbed off in a clean cut by a single swoop of a very large and imposing sword before being poured into flutes at sunset.

Of the three dining options onsite, Carolina, the property's AAA Five Diamond Award-winning restaurant, is not to be missed. Romantic dining is on a vast outdoor terrace among gentle ocean breezes, with an offering of several foie gras appetizers and a variety of freshly caught fish, poultry and beef entrees prepared in Mexican-Mediterranean fusion style. A dessert coffee prepared tableside with a parlor trick of ladled flaming tequila is a warm ending to an unforgettably luxe experience that prepares me for the following day's adventure.



Island Hopping

The Marietas Islands are located six nautical miles from our beach at the St. Regis. Six of us and a crew of three travel in a small boat operated by Punta Mita Expeditions. Our trip to the islands, which could take as little as 20 minutes, is delayed numerous times to stop and observe several small pods of spouting adult humpback whales and their calves.

A national park since 2005, the Marietas Islands, which were formed from volcanic rock, are called the "Galapagos of Mexico" for the number of rare species of birds that inhabit them. As our boat approaches the rocky coast to get a good view of some blue-footed boobies, our crew tells tales of when they used to cliff dive off the island before it was declared off-limits to visitors. Coral reefs and crystal-clear water offer the perfect opportunity for snorkeling, scuba diving and paddleboarding.

One of the few places on the Marietas where visitors are allowed on land is the hidden beach, a secluded formerly subterranean beach believed to be formed in the 1950s when the Mexican government used the islands as target practice for bombs.

To reach the hidden beach, our boat moors roughly 300 feet off the coast of the island. We're given life jackets and snorkeling gear and have to swim nearly the length of a football field before reaching a cave where the tide takes us 50 feet underground to a spectacular beach inside the perimeter of the island. Getting back to our boat after our brief trip on land takes more than a bit of doing, but the adventure is well worth the effort. Upon getting back in the boat, a 5-meter (16 foot) manta ray gracefully swims a mere 10 feet under us.



Coastal Discoveries

Heading down the coast from Punta Mita, we stop off in the seaside village of Bucerías for a first real taste of local culture. Meaning "the place for divers," Bucerías is an unassuming Mexican coastal town built in the 1930s with cobblestone streets and a number of charming shops and restaurants. Literally split in half by a dry riverbed, Bucerías features an authentic open-air Mexican market selling any number of souvenirs, from ironic T-shirts, Lucha Libre wrestling masks and a plethora of the ever-present Day of the Dead skeleton figurines. A donkey tethered to a nearby tree completes the postcard experience.

Lunch at the beach restaurant El Brujo proves my theory that sometimes the best things in life come in modest packages. Seated in a plastic chair at a table with mismatched umbrellas, I feast on the most delicious mahi mahi I have ever had the pleasure of eating in a lifetime of seafood dining. Caught fresh that morning, the generous portion of mahi is covered with huitlacoche, a fungus grown on corn, dubbed by Mario Batali as the "Mexican truffle." Earthy, nutty and deeply savory, this traditional Mexican delicacy pairs beautifully with the local fish.

Tablesides entertainment comes with the arrival of quite possibly the worst mariachi band ever to grace the Pacific sands. Two drums, an out-of-tune trumpet and the vocal styling of a tone-deaf 8-year-old boy provide more than a few unintentional laughs. Their rendition of "Canta y No Llores" (the "Ay-yi-yi-yi" song) prompts me to give them 50 pesos with the promise of a quick adios, proving another theory: mariachi bands are like prostitutes. You pay them to leave.

[readon1

url="http://www.edgeonthenet.com/nightlife/photo_albums/159940/luxury_and_local_adventure_in_mexico%E2%80%99s_riviera_