



Puerto Vallarta offers affordability, great healthcare, and nature at your doorstep.

“In Puerto Vallarta, We Live Life on Permanent Vacation”

Kirsten Raccuia

My love affair with **Puerto Vallarta** has been a slow burn. It started with a spark, mind you. The first time my husband Mark and I visited, we were there for a month and went [whale watching](#).

I cried as the gentle humpbacks and their babies swam close to our boat, mom boosting her baby up for air. We were so close we could see the barnacles that had been using mom’s skin as a safe haven. The pair stayed with us, showing off the baby’s new swimming skills as we bobbed in the water, staring at them in awe...

Nature is close here. And I found it irresistible.

From the start, life felt easy in Vallarta, and we were comfortably “at home.” The plan was to stay in this part of Mexico for just those few weeks, the start of a wandering journey to see where we might want to ultimately settle.

Nearly three years later, we’re still here...

In Mexico, We’re Closer to Family

After spending most of the pandemic in Malaysia, we wanted to move closer to our families in the US. But we were a bit ruderless.

When our friend told us about his

neighbor’s vacant apartment in Puerto Vallarta’s “Romantic Zone,” we jumped at the chance to spend a month in Mexico.

From our home base in the most popular tourist area, Old Town, we started exploring. Puerto Vallarta is not a big city, but there is so much to do, we decided to stay longer. We wondered: Was this our new “adventurous lifestyle,” or were we merely on an extended vacation?

After a few months, we realized that yes, indeed, this lifestyle could be sustained. Puerto Vallarta was meeting so many of our needs and wants: an affordable life, fantastic healthcare, beautiful beaches, dynamic nightlife, incredible wildlife, and plenty of adventure. Plus tacos!

When the first month was up, we asked to rent for another month. And another. And another. After one year, we decided we should get a proper lease...

Finding that Perfect Rental

Since Mark and I both work from home, we wanted a bit more space. So, we hunted around for a fully furnished two-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment.

We wanted to move to a different *colonia* (neighborhood) because the Romantic Zone is so touristy that we found it hard to meet people who were actually living here.

We still wanted to be downtown, but in the Centro or Cinco de Diciembre *colonias*, just north of Old Town.

We didn’t have great luck with rental agencies, so we took our search online. Facebook is the way to go because agents and property owners add their listings to group pages. There are more than half a dozen Facebook groups for rentals, but we found these to be the best: [Puerto Vallarta Yearly Rentals](#), [Puerto Vallarta Affordable Yearly Rentals](#) and [Puerto Vallarta Housing Rentals & Sales- Information Zone](#).

If you’re fluent in Spanish, an even better way to find a home is to wander the streets looking for “se renta” signs. You’re practically guaranteed a lower rent by going directly to the owner and speaking their language.

We found our perfect home in a complex called La Loma in Cinco de Diciembre. The building has a rooftop lounge with a BBQ, hot tub, and views of the sapphire blue bay and jungle-covered Sierra Madre mountains. In the rainy season (July through October), the mountains turn the color of emeralds as the jungle comes alive. (We used [Taniel Chemsian Properties](#) to find our home. He’s the broker on the HGTV show *House Hunters International*.)

Cinco de Diciembre, also known as 5D, is a more local neighborhood. It’s where kids ride their bikes and chase each other through the streets. We have a farrier fixing horseshoes on our corner, right across from a volunteer organization called Abuelos (which means Grandparents) that is a place for kids to go to keep out of trouble. It isn’t super touristy, yet it offers high-end restaurants, a produce and fish market, tequila tasting places, and a grocery store.

5D is quieter than Old Town—but it’s still Mexico, so it’s not exactly quiet. The other night we heard a mariachi band, so we stopped cooking and followed our ears. A neighbor we’d never met was celebrating his mom’s 86th birthday with an outdoor concert on the corner. He handed us each a beer and a plate and told us to party with the family. This is the Mexico we love.

Life Is Easy Here

The city’s three most popular coastal neighborhoods are Old Town, Centro, and 5D. Old Town is great if you want to be in the thick of the party. Centro and 5D are still considered downtown (we’re a leisurely 25-minute stroll—mostly along the

malecon), but they’re not as touristy. We’re comfortable there—in part because Puerto Vallarta is safe. I’ve never felt uneasy.

In 5D, we pay \$1,600 a month for our rental. If we’d been ok with a two-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment, we’d be paying half that. (After nearly 22 years of marriage, two bathrooms are non-negotiable for me.) In Chicago, this apartment would cost at least \$4,500.

We’re an eight-minute walk to the beach, along a street lined with busy restaurants and taco stands. But we have a pool on the first floor with chaise lounges and umbrellas for when walking to the beach feels like too much work.

If we’re ever missing a taste of home—like good beef—we take advantage of the nearby Costco and Walmart. But three other fantastic grocery stores supply everything else. With the exception of a few specific Asian foods we miss, we can get everything here.

And there’s always Amazon Mexico, too, which delivers within a few days.

Healthcare is something we took into account when deciding to stay in Puerto Vallarta. It’s a medical tourism hub. Five-star hospitals like CMQ, Medassist, and Joya provide first-rate care. And neighborhood walk-in clinics are ideal for minor illnesses.

Puerto Vallarta is convenient when we travel, too. The international airport offers direct flights to dozens of places in the US and Canada. Living here, it’s easy to get to family events in Chicago or Connecticut.

Adventure, Pampering, and Lazy Days

Every whale season, we take at least one or two tours to see the graceful beasts—and we’re able to because they’re affordable. Tours start at \$50 for a ticket on a large boat (or rent your own boat for about \$200).

It might sound crazy, but it’s during these whale-human interactions that I feel certain staying in Vallarta was the right choice for us. As I said up front, nature is near.

When the whales aren’t here, the turtles are. You can help release baby turtles into the sea.

But we can be pampered here, too.

Sometimes we hop on a [superyacht](#) for the day.

For about \$135 (food and drink included), you’ll get six hours on a 90-foot ship with about 30 others. You’ll motor south along the coast, passing epic mansions and tiny isolated beaches. Then, you’ll

anchor and jump into the water to snorkel, kayak, paddleboard, or just hang out on the lily pad.

We have our regular work-week routines, too.

After moving into our place, we found Simmon’s Gym two blocks away. It’s nothing fancy. In fact, it’s pretty old and has no A/C, but one of the women in my book club told me about a great trainer who uses it as his home base.

Now, three days a week at 7 a.m., Mark and I join a small group (sometimes it’s just us) for \$100 a month each, and that

includes the fee for the gym. Back in the US, that same \$100 wouldn’t even cover a single session for the two of us. I’m almost 51, and I’m stronger than I’ve been in decades.

Sundays Are for Tacos and Tequila

We like to spend Sundays at the beach clubs being super lazy or going on our own self-guided taco crawls...

Jalisco, where Vallarta sits, is the official state of Tequila—and we’re three hours from the town of the same name, where all the big distilleries are. It’s no surprise that there are tequila stands, stalls, and stores all over downtown.

Our favorite neighborhood place to sip tequilas is The Tasting Room. It’s a bar, shop, and place to taste all the small batch tequilas you’ve never heard of.

Speaking of never heard of: Until we moved here, we were unaware of the difference between day tacos and night tacos...

Seafood and fish tacos are for the day, as that’s when the fishermen haul in the freshest swimmers. Head to [Mariscos el Guero](#), [Mariscos Cisneros](#), or [Tacon de Marlin](#) for the freshest fish and seafood. The shrimp tacos (\$2 for one taco) are so simple, yet so divine. The briny shrimp snap with every bite. I squeeze a lime over the sliced avocado, onion, cilantro, and tomatoes then add a little chipotle sauce.

At dinner time, it’s meat tacos, specifically chorizo, and [Taqueria La Hormiga](#) is a local fave. For *pastor* (achiote marinated spit-roasted pork with pineapple) and *carne asada* (chili and citrus marinated skirt steak), try [El Carboncito](#).

Tacos at stands generally cost under \$1.50. Even in a restaurant, they usually go for under \$2.

The nature, the healthy living, all the activities, the good food... Vallarta has crept into our hearts.

We’re living an adventurous life for less than half of what we’d spend in the US.

And so many things we enjoy all the time would just be occasional, “holiday” activities if we still lived in Chicago. Yet here... it feels like we’re living on permanent vacation. ■

Kirsten Raccuia shares her expat adventures and insights on her blog, [Sand in My Curly](#). After nine years in Penang, Malaysia, she traded *laksa* for tacos in Puerto Vallarta.

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HOW WE FOUND OTHER EXPATS

Puerto Vallarta is full of expats—but finding them proved tricky at first, when we met mostly vacationers. So, we turned to Facebook groups, which made all the difference.

[Puerto Vallarta: Everything You Need or Want to Know](#), is a great resource. But the group we are most active with is [Gen X-Pats PV](#). It hosts monthly events like movie nights, fundraisers, and theme parties. We’ve met most of our good friends through it.

Facebook aside, things are always happening about town. During Wednesday Art Walks, galleries stay open late and often the artists are there to talk about their work and share a glass of wine or tequila.

Rarely a month goes by without some sort of parade or event on the *malecon*. In the Plaza de Armas you’ll find a nightly street food market with weekly entertainment—mariachis, folkloric dancing, live bands. There is more going on than we have time to take part in.