

MEXICAN IDOL



Puerto Vallarta, on Mexico's Pacific coast, found fame as the playground of the Hollywood jet-set back in the Sixties, and it's tropical good looks have been winning over celebrities ever since. Now Thomson and First Choice are getting in on the act. From summer 2014, their airline, Thomson Airways, will be the only one in the UK to fly there direct. GEORGIA ANDERSON reveals why you should be first in line for a plane ticket...

“PUERTO VALLARTA HAS ENTICED EVERYONE FROM KATE WINSLET TO BRITNEY SPEARS.”

Mexico's Pacific coast has long been a siren call for the A-list. It first crept on to the celebrity radar during the Golden Age of Hollywood, when the likes of Ava Gardner and Elizabeth Taylor sipped bourbon cocktails on the shores. Since then it's enticed everyone from Kate Winslet to Britney Spears.

The Puerto Vallarta region is made up of a coastal city of the same name, and a stretch of neighbouring beach resorts that curve around the blue waters of Banderas Bay – the largest bay on this coastline. As part of the western state of Jalisco – birthplace of mariachi music and tequila – it's got a serious pedigree. But what really gets people talking about this part of the world is the landscape.

Crashing waterfalls and blankets of tropical jungle frame the beach towns in these parts, and the coastline backs on to the slopes of the Sierra Madre Mountains. The diverse terrain is worlds away from Puerto Vallarta's Caribbean cousin, Cancun, over on the east coast. What they do have in common, though, is the climate – temperatures nudge 30 degrees between May and November.

OLD-TOWN CHARM

At the heart of the region is Puerto Vallarta city. This place wears its colonial charm like a crown, and the jewel is the old town. In this little

pocket of old Mexico, whitewashed Spanish-style buildings knock shoulders with smart galleries and boutiques. Down on the waterfront, luxury boats fill the marina and iconic bronze statues spread out along the malecón. The cityscape's paired with a lively beach scene, where towels are unrolled by locals and tourists in equal measure, and both crowds pack out the sea-view restaurants to sip margaritas and eat ceviche.

GETTING ACTIVE

Head inland and the city's cobbled streets merge into the forested foothills of the mountains, putting adventure on the doorstep. Action-seekers can take their pick of jungle treks and aerial zip wire challenges, but it's the whale-watching boat trips that really get people's adrenaline pumping. The 50-foot-long humpbacks descend on Banderas Bay's warm waters every December for a three-month speed-dating session.

It's not just adrenaline junkies that Mexico's Pacific coastline caters for. If you define being outdoorsy as eating al fresco, there's good news for you, too. Mañana is still the catchphrase here, and this 'Why do today what you can do tomorrow?' mantra sets the tone for its laid-back beach scene – nowhere more so than in the retreats north of Puerto Vallarta city. Nuevo Vallarta is among the best of them. It's home to a cluster of plush RIU hotels, each with their own private stretches of white sand and a string of smart

restaurants, pools and Jacuzzis. These 4 and 5-star resorts are all about sun, sand and solitary, but they're also the perfect springboard for snorkelling around the bay's Technicolor corals. Try Clubhotel RIU Jalisco, nestled in a park of palm trees, the Art Deco-style RIU Vallarta, or RIU Palace Pacifico, where junior suites come as standard.

SUN, SEA AND VIPS

Further north are a clutch of peaceful, deserted beaches, followed by the northernmost point, Punta de Mita, where chilled-out bars, cafés and seafood restaurants look out over the sea. If you choose this spot to take surfing lessons you'll join a rollcall of students that includes pop megastar Lady Gaga, who learnt to ride the waves here in 2011.

For a slice of old-school Hollywood history, head south to Mismaloya – the sandy bay that first put this part of the world on the map. John Huston cast this beauty spot as the backdrop in his Oscar-winning adaptation of Tennessee Williams' play, *The Night of the Iguana*, in 1964. The media frenzy around its stars, Ava Gardner and Richard Burton – who brought soon-to-be-wife Elizabeth Taylor – thrust this sleepy corner of Mexico into the headlines, where it's still at home nearly five decades later. ■

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