

P U E R T O V A L L A R T A

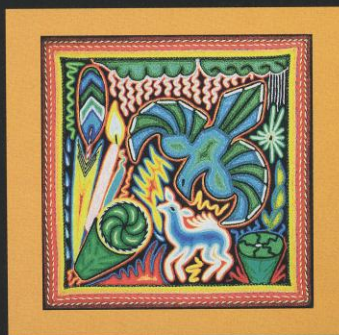
The Feeling of Mañana

On the balcony of my villa, eating grapes, smelling the sultry summer air, palm branches licking the parapet, fresh-cut flowers in a lovely blue vase, I feel all my busy vacation plans dissolve into *mañana*—distant “tomorrow,” an eternity away.

An hour ago, I landed in Puerto Vallarta, halfway down the west coast of Mexico, with a gym bag full of books, maps and ideas to fill a five-day excursion. Now, it lies unopened on the kitchen floor. I can't focus enough to plan anything. I won't think about dinner until I'm hungry. The only time that exists is the present. I am completely free.

And that's the way it will be for the next few days: no agenda, seeing but not looking, choosing from what offers itself, like fruits in the wooden banana-leaf bowl that was waiting for me when I arrived at Los Flamingos Villas.

The villas are 20 masonry *casitas* with domed staircase turrets, tile floors and private terraces on a tree-lined golf course a few miles north and inland from hopping Puerto Vallarta. Long golden beaches, thick jungle, laid-back villages and bustling city life are a short drive away. You don't have to check in, you just park on the cobblestones next to your house and walk inside. Ceiling fans are whirling, beer and soft drinks wait in the fridge, air conditioning has already cooled the bedrooms upstairs. The manager will walk over in a few minutes. The maid will do the dishes, laundry as requested and even ironing while you're out. You'll return to made beds and fresh flowers.



No rush, no worries, everything is taken care of on this WorldMark exchange vacation.

When I finally stir, it is only to shower and change, drive to the old fishing village of Bucerías just up the road and watch the big orange ball of sun slip into the sea, eat delicious grilled shrimp and tomatoes, and squish soft sand between my toes in the warm, moonlit surf.

ROLLING OUT, ROLLING BACK

I have never been deep into Mexico before. Vallarta and Los Flamingos have given a gracious introduction, and their English-speaking modernity makes me curious about the less-cosmopolitan countryside behind it all. So on my first morning, at a fork in the road, short on gas, I drift east and upland into the “mother mountains”—the Sierra Madre. Green foliage arches over the highway. Thick vines hang from unfamiliar trees. Soil breaks through the dense undergrowth in rich chili-powder reds, cinnamon browns and turmeric yellows. A five-foot-long snake slithers halfway across the road, then hurls itself back to avoid a truck. Roadside stands sell coconuts, pineapples and exotic spiky fruits.

I pull in to a Pemex station to fuel up. My fourth-grade Spanish is sufficient to get the tank filled. But when I ask for

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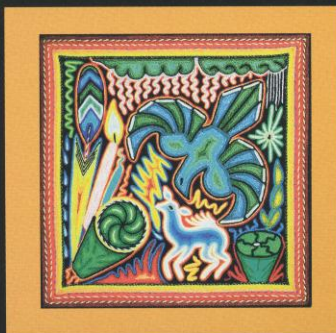
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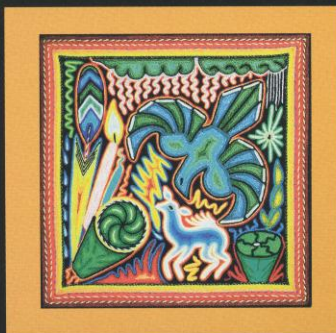
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