

# GOOD LIFE CONNOISSEUR

The Connoisseurs' Choice In Luxury Living

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# Punta Mita – Live the Dream

By Terry Tremaine

Photos by Connie Ekelund

A hike to the top of Careyeros Mountain on this spear-shaped peninsula with our naturalist guide Enrique Alejos served two purposes. We were able to explore the ruins of an Aztlán Indian ceremonial site for the worship of god Quetzalcoatl, and also attain an observation point from which to view boats coming to trade. What had been called Puerto Tintoque was now Punta Mita, and from our vantage point we could look over Punta Mita Resort, an innovative resort and gated residential community covering more than 1,500 acres. The peninsula is surrounded on three sides by white sand beaches and Pacific Ocean waters, and covered with lush tropical flora.

Enrique pointed to the watch tower overlooking the resort and explained that observers were on the watch not only for fires and the like, but also paparazzi trying to sneak photos of the many "rich and famous" attracted to the Four Seasons Punta Mita, which anchors the property. A big part of the draw are the Four Seasons Private Villas nestled on the hillside. Each has expansive indoor and outdoor living spaces, ranging in size from approximately 6,500 to 8,000 square feet and come fully equipped — including not only private pools, but also a butler to tend to the slightest wish.



Opened in 1999, the Four Seasons Punta Mita is the most profitable resort property in the Four Seasons group. It's also one of the few properties where Four Seasons is a partner in the overall development. This ultra-luxurious, low-density, gated community boasts one of the finest Jack Nicklaus-designed golf courses in North America, which will be complemented with the opening of a second Jack Nicklaus Signature Golf Course this fall. Also in development are a St. Regis

Resort & Residences, a Mii Amo destination spa, and an all-suite La Solana Resort.

My first trip to Puerto Vallarta was made in a van with a school buddy. We drove from Toronto to Guadalajara in two and a half days. From there we went to the coastal fishing village of Puerto Vallarta, where we were able to rent a thatch-roofed cabana on the beach for a peso a night. We bought an evening meal of fresh fish, shared with the owner/fisherman and his family, for two pesos, and that included a bottle of cerveza. Though I've returned numerous times, the hour's drive north from Puerto Vallarta's airport to the tip of the Punta de Mita peninsula certainly illustrated to me how much the area has grown.

Now of course, Puerto Vallarta is the leading tourist destination on the west coast of Mexico. The first grouping of resort hotels built on the beach of the sleepy little fishing village has become a thriving community with all the amenities expected from a growing cosmopolitan city. It has also become the principal centre for medical tourism in Mexico.

Until we reached the turn-off for the Punta de Mita Peninsula, there was extensive development on both sides of the four-lane highway, new communities such as Nuevo Vallarta and numerous English billboards promoting luxury, gated communities.

The Punta Mita Resort at the end of the road across the Punta de Mita peninsula would appear to be the premier development in the whole area. DINE, the owner/developer, is one of Mexico's leading real estate development companies and their expertise shows in the quality of the project and the concern for the environment.

The ongoing success of the project is apparent. The first four phases of the Four Seasons Private Villas are sold out and prices in Phase 5 start at over \$3 million. There are currently six other residential developments going on within the gated community; everything from million-dollar condos to beachfront or golf course-facing luxury villas. All are done on a grand scale and to North American standards. As a result of the immense actual size of the property, the ongoing development is not a disturbance to vacationing guests.

We spent our first few nights in one of the villas of the Las Palmas de Punta Mita development. These full ownership spacious homes boast a gourmet kitchen, outdoor shower, and state-of-the-art technology. Twenty-eight villas have been sold and completed. An additional ten are to be finished in 2008. Each is designed as a one- or two-storey residence with a choice of three or four bedrooms. Prices start at \$1.3 million. When placed in the rental pool they come with their own maid and a chef who prepares a gourmet breakfast each morning. Naturally, the refrigerator is pre-stocked according to the whims of the incoming guests. The private infinity plunge pool looking out over the ocean from the second storey's expansive living terrace proved hard to leave.

*"Naturally, the refrigerator is pre-stocked according to the whims of the incoming guests."*

However, we did venture forth and discovered the Residents Beach Club. With its own beach and superb restaurant I would suspect many visitors would end up spending their time simply going from their villa to the Beach Club and back again. The cuisine was certainly nouveau Mexican and definitely matched or surpassed the standards expected of a Four Seasons property.

One day we were even more adventurous and actually left the confines of the community to explore the nearby town of Sayulita. This bohemian town is known for its rich surfing culture, eclectic shops and restaurants — a number of which have beach-side seating.



*A personal chef completes the luxurious appointments at Las Palmas de Punta Mita.*





Terry zip-trekking

Now emboldened, we decided to take advantage of some tourist attractions found in Nuevo Vallarta approximately 40 minutes from Punta Mita. Vallarta Adventures would appear to be the most established tour operator, offering numerous tours and attractions.

It seems at every destination we visit that draws tourists, zip-trekking is the new "in" thing, so we decided, "What the heck, let's figure out what the attraction is." Since Nuevo Vallarta is on the ocean, first up was a 40-minute trip in an off-road jeep to find some mountains. The back end of the jeep accommodated ten people seated on benches. A bumpy road took us through a breadfruit forest that brought us to the top of the track.

Our hosts were gung-ho, though safety conscious, very fit, friendly and apparently well-used to ensuring their guests have as much fun as possible. Taking the first plunge was a little unnerving and caution tempered my speed to the next landing. But by the end of the sixteenth leg of the track, speed was definitely the attraction. Look Mom, no hands!

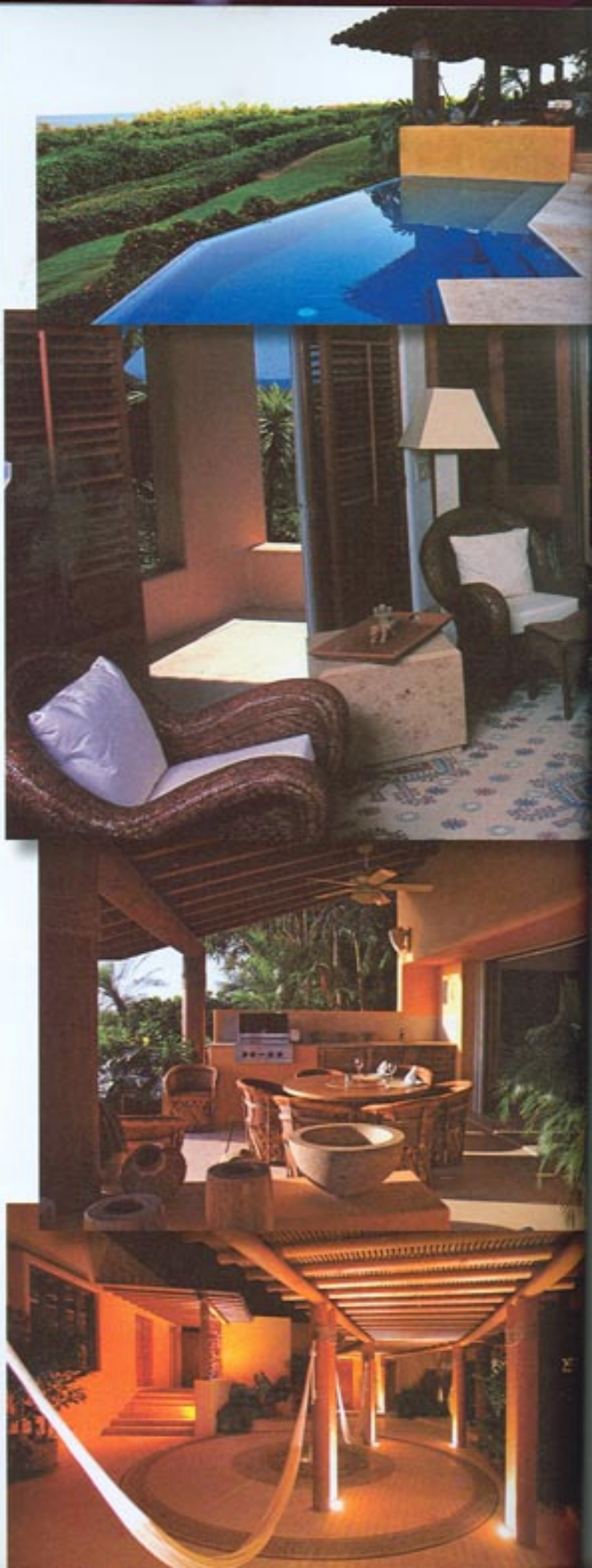
I should point out however, that every day, there is a guest who, upon reaching that point where they have to entrust their life to a wire cable and a small harness, just can't do it. As a result they miss out on the long, hot, hike back up the valley to the main station to re-board the jeep for the journey back to Nuevo Vallarta.

Just outside the back gate of Punta Mita resort is the local fishing village. We stopped to have dinner at the newly opened Café des Artistes del Mar. This gourmet bistro specializing in seafood was created by Chef Thierry Blouet, owner of one of Puerto Vallarta's more acclaimed restaurants, similarly named Café des Artistes. The beachfront location offers both in- and outdoor seating and a great menu complemented with a good wine list.

For the last half of our visit we moved to one of the Four Seasons Private Villas. This relocation gave us the added benefit of being tended to by our personal butler, Bismarck, who oversaw preparation of our breakfast in the gourmet kitchen by one of the resort chefs each morning, arranged evening meal preparation at our whim and organized anything else we wished to undertake.

In reading the guest book it would appear that the amiable and very professional Bismarck has made quite the impression on many young guests. The villas attract families because of their size, and there were quite a number of children who made reference to how much they appreciated Bismarck's efforts to make their stay a pleasure.

Typical of Mexican architectural design, all the rooms opened to an enclosed courtyard, and we took advantage of the privacy offered to have massage treatments provided by resort spa staff. It is truly a most relaxing experience to listen to the gentle gurgling of the courtyard water fountain while having muscle knots untied.





The Four Seasons' Private Villas

These very luxurious villas sit overlooking the Four Seasons Resort and the ocean below. They are very secluded and when swimming in your own infinity pool its easy to forget this is actually a resort and not simply your private residence. But of course all the resort amenities are very tempting.

We spent an afternoon in a private poolside cabana at the Tamai Pool, one of a number of pools within the resort. Each cabana features contemporary wood furnishings, including a daybed strewn with pillows. Other features include a 42-inch plasma television, DVD player, state-of-the-art sound system, wireless high-speed Internet access, telephone, private bar, and a variety of books and music selections. Outside each cabana are two reserved chaise lounges. Food service includes fabulous sushi to order. For those with rooms within the resort and without the advantage of a private villa these cabanas are great.

*"A variety of tropical fish, sea turtles and friendly giant manta rays flourish in the crystal-clear waters surrounding these islands"*



Enjoying the wildlife of Punta Mita by boat with Rudy, our guide.

Just off the northern coast of Punta de Mita, lies the Marietas Island Marine Reserve and one of the most popular places to snorkel in Puerto Vallarta. A variety of tropical fish, sea turtles and friendly giant manta rays flourish in the crystal-clear waters surrounding these islands. Whales and wild dolphins are often sighted. But this craggy, wild, grass-swept national park's most famous residents are the thousands of blue-footed boobies.

In the Punta Mita fishing village can be found Sociedad Cooperativa de Servicios Turisticos. This co-op of local fishing men turned tourist guides offers boat trips to the reserve. Rudy, our guide, seemed to be the inspiration behind the co-op but, as he was most willing to point out, not everything he had to say was accurate, even though generally very entertaining.

Rudy was a young globe-hopping short order cook from Germany who happened upon Punta de Mita quite a number of years ago and never left. Now married to a local, he and his brother-in-law have become naturalist guides and own a couple of the boats operated under the auspices of the co-op. Apparently, his family back in Germany have given up on him due to his desire for a laid-back lifestyle. The only member of his family to visit, his mother, stayed for just a couple of days. She had to leave as she was too disheartened by his attachment to this relaxed way of life.

Two more of Rudy's tales stand out. The first: the reason people are no longer allowed to land on the island was that one group's untended campfire burned out of control, causing the deaths of many boobies too slow-witted to get off the island. It's hard to comprehend how a high-flying, sea-diving bird would not get out of the way of advancing flames.



Other Punta Mita residences.



Rudy also pointed out one of the more grandiose private beachfront villas within the Punta Mita resort as we were sailing by. Apparently, the very wealthy owner, a principal shareholder of one of the more popular social networking websites, was very hard to please. He had the villa built and torn down three times before he felt it was up to his standards. The story goes he now visits for all of ten days a year.

*"This ultra-luxurious, low-density, gated community boasts one of the finest Jack Nicklaus-designed golf courses..."*

No matter some of the tales, Rudy certainly has learned a lot about the local wildlife and fauna and goes to great lengths to ensure his guests go away with at least some of the love he has for Punta Mita.

One evening we also made a point of visiting Casa de Mita, a seven-room member of Mexico Boutique Hotels, found five minutes from the main gates of Punta Mita on the other side of the bay. A wooden door conceals the entry courtyard, and once across the threshold hospitality comes in the form of two miniature Italian greyhounds, who make a point of greeting all guests. Food at Casa de Mita is a passion, with the menu a daily surprise. Dinner in the outside eating area features a great view of the sun setting over the peninsula.



Enjoy Punta Mita's signature Jack Nicklaus Golf Course.



Naturally, with the Punta Mita resort home to one of the most acclaimed golf courses, we had to see what all the fuss was about. The golf course is a pleasure to play due to the gorgeous ocean views and natural surroundings. The signature third hole is only playable at low tide as the green is on a small island only accessible by foot when the tide is out. The new second course will be a little more demanding, but we were more than happy to test our skills while at the same time taking the opportunity to have a look at some of the fabulous private villas which border the fairways.

We have the onerous task of having to travel to some of the finest resort destinations in the world and report back on our findings. Since we're duffers, we get to play on some very remarkable golf courses. The course at Punta Mita I would classify as one of my favourites. It's simply great fun and a true pleasure for the eyes.

The overall experience at Punta Mita was very relaxing. It's hard to find something to complain about while spending time in luxurious spacious villas being looked after by gracious attentive staff — plus have access to all the amenities expected of a resort run by the Four Seasons.

### Connoisseur's Choice in Punta Mita

#### Punta Mita General Info and Rentals:

Punta Mita Properties  
011.52.329.291.6500  
www.puntamita.com.mx

#### Restaurants:

Café des Artistes del Mar  
011.52.322.222.3228  
www.cafedesartistes.com

#### Casa de Mita

011.52.329.298.4114  
www.mexicoboutiquehotels.com

#### Zip Trekking:

Vallarta Adventures  
1.888.303.2653  
011.52.322.297.1212  
www.vallarta-adventures.com

#### Marieta Islands Marine Reserve:

Sociedad Cooperativa de Servicios Turísticos  
Rudy: 011.52.329.291.6722

I'm not surprised that real estate sales in the gated community have been so brisk. According to the marketing director, some resellers have experienced as much as a 25% appreciation. I would suspect with the downturn in the U.S. economy sales will not be quite as brisk. But that presents an opportunity for Canadians to have a greater presence.

The closeness to Puerto Vallarta is certainly a plus and it's easily accessible. The airport is modern and relatively efficient, though I do find it a bit off-putting that after having collected their baggage visitors must pass through an area bordered on both sides by counters occupied by timeshare representatives before finally reaching local transportation counters.

Puerto Vallarta itself has grown tremendously over the last number of years. There is little doubt the humble cabana I discovered some years ago, and which was home to a resident scorpion, has long ago been replaced on that gorgeous beach with some much more elaborate structure. But I am certainly not complaining. I completely enjoy the amenities of a fine luxury resort and highly recommend the experience. ■

### Connoisseur's Choice in Cameras

*This trip was photographed with the Nikon D300, AF-S VR 70-300mm lens, AF-S DX 18-135mm & SB-800 Speedlight*



#### D300

Nikon Canada's most advanced DX-format digital SLR camera, the D300, is engineered with pro-level features and performance. The 12.3-effective megapixel D300 combines new technologies with advanced features inherited from Nikon's D3 professional digital SLR camera to offer serious photographers remarkable performance and image quality.