

TRAVEL



B

enito Juarez, Pancho Villa, Emilio Zapata (as in "Viva!") — are high-powered Mexican heroes, and honored as such throughout the country. Except in the beautiful Pacific resort of Puerto Vallarta, where the townspeople have another hero of a very different ilk: John Huston.

John Huston? The movie director? None other, odd as that may seem to an outsider who's more accustomed to Mexico's predilection for heroes who had a role in their country's independence movement.

Testimony to Huston's genuine hero status, however, is the exquisitely maintained, life-sized bronze statue of him seated in his director's chair. The figure is positioned in a lovely garden situated in a delightful park on the banks of Rio Cuale, the dividing line between northside and southside, the terms all Puerto Vallarta uses to give directions.

After all, it was John Huston who was responsible, in a way, for the success of Puerto Vallarta as a resort. He brought Richard Burton to the town to film the Tennessee Williams play "The Night of the Iguana."

And people came flocking — to enjoy the weather and the rolling Pacific surf and especially to indulge in the fantasy that if they came, maybe, just maybe, they'd pick up a touch of the glamour that they associated with Richard Burton, who was then involved with Liz Taylor.

In the years after the film's release, Puerto Vallarta grew quickly, even explosively. Hotels sprang up like proverbial weeds along the shoreline, most of them high-rise structures similar to those in other resort communities.

Condominiums sprang up, too. And with them came "touts" to sell them. Lurking on every street corner, offering all kinds of "deals" from free meals to Jeep rentals, they became overly bold in their insistence that people accompany them to see and then buy "a gorgeous unit," ostensibly the bargain of a lifetime. They became such a nuisance that tourists began to shun Puerto Vallarta in spite of its beauty and charm, and to migrate to other resorts where they didn't have to endure "the pestilence of the 'touts.'"

Then came the dawn of realization. The city fathers (and mothers) woke up to the fact that they would have to run these pests out of town in order to recapture the former glory of the city — where John Huston came over and over again, even after the movie was finished. And where Burton and Taylor, among other celebrities, built a house high above the town in "Gringo Gulch." But, except for the Hollywood-style haciendas up in "Gringolandia," Puerto Vallarta managed to retain its character.

One of the leaders in the movement to revamp Puerto Vallarta and restore it to its former prominent role on the tourist circuit was Iddar de la Parra, scion of a family that owned a major Mexican publishing house. Iddar de la Parra had a dream. To carry out that dream, he bought one of the earliest properties to gain fame after "The Night of the Iguana," a sprawling property known as the Posada Vallarta.

What appealed to de la Parra was that the Posada was not a high-rise hotel like the

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Puerto Vallarta's mood is pure Mexican — upbeat, relaxing and pleasurable

By BARBARA ANN ROSENBERG
Special to the Exponent

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others along the oceanfront. Rather, it was laid out like a Mexican village, spread out over 40 acres, complete with a *zocalo* (the square that is the heart, operational and emotional, of every town). And de la Parra would showcase the property as a beacon of Puerto Vallarta's change for the better.

Idyllically situated about 10 minutes from the *mercado* (central market) in the epicenter of Puerto Vallarta, the Posada was prime property — but it had grown a bit tatty over the years.

The hotel was renamed Krystal Vallarta (Krystal for Iddar's younger sister), and the family began a furious pace of reconstruction — to revitalize, to expand, to turn the property into the prettiest Mexican village imaginable, complete with the amenities and services that he hoped would bring the tourists flocking back to Puerto Vallarta, and especially the Krystal Vallarta, of course.

Puerto Vallarta has, indeed, changed — for the better. Gone are the "touts" from the streets of Puerto Vallarta — or, at the very least, they're hidden in storefronts advertising "Jeep rentals — \$10 a day" (instead of the normal \$60).

Along with the Krystal Vallarta, the town has spruced itself up. Even with all the changes, Puerto Vallarta has kept its essential Mexican character, a feeling of upbeat living, of relaxation and pleasure in a town where real people live and work and play.

The streets of downtown Puerto Vallarta have all the usual upscale tourist shopping attractions — such as Guzzi (the Mexican Gucci), with many styles in handbags, shoes, boots and wallets similar to the original designer.

Art galleries, too. One of the most prominent, Galleria Uno (at Morelos 561), is outstanding in its handsome, contemporary architecture and in the works for sale: original paintings, sculptures and prints from the most inspired artists in the country, both contemporary and from earlier periods. Considering the quality of the art, the prices might be viewed as within the reasonable range — in the context of today's art market.

The Mercado Central and another, much smaller handicraft market in the middle of town carry the usual stuff: silver jewelry in every weight and style, including knockoffs of some famous designers; embroidered dresses, blouses and shirts; wood,

papier-mache and ceramic masks; and all manner of other appealing stuff. There is nothing startling in its originality or craftsmanship, but there are some appealing souvenirs, and perhaps even an occasional find.

People should know, however, that none of the crafts is indigenous to Puerto Vallarta itself.

"Nothing is made here," said one of the locals. "It all comes from the other side of the mountains" — meaning Guadalajara or Mexico City, or other craft outposts.

Puerto Vallarta, like the other Pacific resorts, is proud of its sunsets, and with good reason. The combination of terrain and quality of light make for some spectacular examples. After sitting at the Krystal Vallarta, observing or photographing the sun descend past the seven signature classic columns that symbolize the seven members of the de la Parra family, or perching high on a hill overlooking the entire bay from Senor Pepe's rooftop watering hole, people will take home some spectacular memories.

Without question, when one of those Puerto Vallarta memories flashes to the fore, people will be certain to think it's time to return. And to think that it's all because of John Huston. ■