

ALGOMA NEWS

Mastering Mexican Time



Pauline and Gerry Clark near the hotel zone. Banderas Bay and old town are in the background.

PHOTO PROVIDED

Fine-tuning the art of not being tourists

PAULINE CLARK
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

We've been to Mexico a number of times. Every visit except one was to Puerto Vallarta. Now, if you're rushing to Expedia to investigate this beautiful west coast city, don't get it mixed up with Nuevo Vallarta, the more modern resort area to the north. In fact, I wouldn't even want you to confuse our Puerto Vallarta with the hotel zone. Those are the resort areas and — as one Mexican tour guide said — if you stay in the hotel zone, you'll always be a tourist.

We are not tourists. Instead, when we arrive, we feel like we are home. And, yes, we do stay in a hotel, though it's no five-star, ultra-modern suite that could be in any resort in the world. No. This boutique hotel, Casa Dona Susana, is one of Puerto Vallarta's older hotels and for that reason it's got a certain charm about it. It's also small. Small enough to be intimate and it's easy for us to quickly get to know, not only the staff, but the other guests.

While our adults-only hotel has nice amenities such as frigides in the rooms, comfy king-size beds, an authentic Mexican-style lobby and a roof-top pool, it's what lies outside the hotel doors that truly captures our hearts.

Now don't get me wrong; it's not like we're entrenched in some small Mexican community, away from everything we know. Actually, we heard someone say there were more Canadians than Mexicans in Puerto Vallarta. I'd like to think that's not true, but there are a lot of foreigners; short-term tourists, winter residents and expatriates who've made a permanent move to the region.

And, so Puerto Vallarta has become a community that's not only filled with Mexican-run businesses, you'll also find Canadians and Americans running bars and restaurants, art galleries, shops, theatre venues and even offering medical and dental services.

When you want to be where the action is, visit the city's recently revamped "malecon," the mile or so long walkway along the ocean. Though some call it a boardwalk, there are no boards. There are cement walkways, palm trees and lush greenery. Besides being a beautiful place to walk, the malecon has restaurants and night clubs, shops, vendors selling food and wares, lots of musicians and of course those tourist attractions like living statues, hair braiders and the occasional time share salesperson.

There are also artists; many copy

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This beach restaurant is one of several found both on the beach and along the malecon.

the works of world-famous artists such as Mexico's Diego Rivera. But there are also individual artists. Like Antonio Salas Villalvazo, whom we first met last year. I was attracted immediately to Antonio's unusual, brightly coloured whimsical creatures and, though Antonio says many of his customers don't really care, his paintings carry messages that he's happy to share.

We had decided to buy a painting from Antonio on our final day in PV last year so, with our flight departing in a few hours, we rushed down the malecon to make the purchase. Antonio, who said he arrived at about 10 a.m. each day, was nowhere to be found. We finally had to acknowledge that this was "Mexican time," a reference often made to the country's laid-back lifestyle where no one is in a hurry to be on time. We finally had to give up.

And so this year, we went in search of our artist again and there he was, in the exact same spot. Antonio, originally from Michoacán, drew his first stick figure when he was about four and, at 15, went to Guadalajara to study art. His father, a violinist with a mariachi band, brought the boy back home within a couple of months, worried that they knew nothing about where their son was living.

Then Antonio moved three hours away to attend secondary school, but the school closed in 1984 due to lack of students. Antonio attended a preparatory school and spent several years with the Franciscans with the intentions of becoming a Catholic priest. He finished his studies in theology and philosophy.

Now 49, Antonio has gained a deep wisdom. After studying under Bernardo Wolf and earning a master's degree in education, history and geography at Univa University, he went on to teach at the university for 15 years. Though he loved teaching, he was dismayed with the 50 pesos (\$3.75 Canadian) per

hour wage and gave it up. Now he works full time as an artist.

Though we think Antonio (Shaman is his professional name) is very individual, he claims no artist is. He started painting the whimsical animal designs after being inspired by a photo of a cow on the internet. He created a similar creature, but gave the cow a margarita. Now his whimsical animals tell tales about life and having courage and passion.

Antonio has shortened his hours on the malecon so that he can return to his studio to work on commissioned pieces. Someday he'd like to be in the studio full-time, teaching others to paint and selling art supplies. Last year, an American bought several of Antonio's works. He returned and told the artist he'd resold the paintings in Canada for even more money. While we're dismayed, Antonio shrugs.

Wego back once more to talk with Antonio. He is late but we chat with his friend, Hilda, who is watching his paintings. Antonio and other artists have been at a meeting with the city. He dislikes meetings and the bureaucracy. We chat for a bit and then we purchase another painting, smaller than the one we'd bought a few days earlier. This one costs 500 pesos (\$37.50). We promise to return again next year and we're sure we'll find Antonio in the same spot.

While we enjoy morning walks on the malecon, we seldom walk it at night — and it's not because it's dangerous. We just prefer to walk the Mexican neighbourhoods in the evenings.

But no matter if you choose ocean-front, the busy streets one block over or the more traditional neighbourhoods a few blocks back, you're going to be greeted by smiles from locals and tourists. You'll hear beautiful music and smell the most amazing aromas from the open-air restaurants and street vendors. You'll be approached by people wanting to make a buck — musicians and vendors, men, women

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Musicians frequently appear in restaurants, hoping to serenade diners for a few pesos.

and even children trying to sell you everything from flowers and jewellery to small packs of Chiclets gum. If you don't want any, simply say, "No, Gracias." But sometimes you'll say yes. Because this is how these people live.

You'll also meet those ex-pats and snowbirds who volunteer with organizations to help Mexicans living in poverty: people who live at the dump, children in orphanages, people disfigured by disease and displaced in the community and even organizations formed to save stray dogs and cats. That's a small sampling.

Do Mexican people always want the help the foreigners feel it's so important to provide? I'm not always sure, but what I am sure of is that it's a small way the tourists can try to give back to a city that gives them so much.

Yes, the sidewalks are crooked and uneven. Walking on cobblestone streets can be treacherous. You may need to be wary of food vendors on the beach and fake silver jewellery. You might wonder how some buildings are liveable, buildings that we'd snub our noses at in our home towns.

But the thing you don't need to be wary of in Puerto Vallarta is danger. We have never once felt threatened or in danger in this city. Unfortunately, we can name instances of feeling in danger in our own country.

There's a peacefulness we feel when we're there. Along with being treated well and seeing smiles from people who are always happy, we feel very relaxed with people who try to cater to our needs without a grumble. And they remember us when we return the next year.

On our last day around the pool this year, we talked to fellow travellers. Many have been there the same two weeks as us; they include a mayor from Illinois, a professor from Connecticut, retirees from Winnipeg, a tattoo artist from Vancouver and a bus driver from Michigan. We all agree it's hard to explain the magic of this place to people at home.

Sometimes, when we're recounting our stories, I think we sound a little silly when we mention we only visit Puerto Vallarta for two weeks out of each year. I suppose if it sounds like we've been there longer, it feels like we've been there longer. It's probably because our hearts are still there.

See a video of the Clark's most recent Mexico visit:
<https://www.dropbox.com/s/9u7jtd8zsqbixh/AntonioSalas.wmv?dl=0>

The Anglican Church of Canada
St. Luke's Cathedral
Brock & Albert Street 254-7144
Sunday Worship: 8:00 am & 10:30 am

CHRIST CHURCH
288 Allen St. Rd. (top of hill) 789-1024
Rev. R. Reed
9:30 am Worship Service and Sunday School/Nursery
Join us for coffee after the service

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★ GALAXY CINEMAS ★

Batman V Superman: Dawn of Justice 14+	Zootopia G	Sun 1:35, 4:25, 7:15, 10:05	Sun 2:00, 4:20, 7:55, 9:45, 10:15	Sun 1:40, 4:00, 7:25
(3D) Sat 11:35, 12:05, 3:30, 6:20, 6:50, 9:45, 10:10	(3D) Sat 1:05, 6:30, 9:20	Madama Butterfly (Puccini) Italian	The Divergent Series PG	The Peanuts Movie G
(3D) Sun 12:30, 1:00, 4:35, 6:20, 6:50, 10:25	Sat 3:55 • Sun 4:45	Sat 12:55	Sat 7:20, 10:05	Sat 11:00
Sat 2:55 • Sun 4:05, 9:55	God's Not Dead PG	Miracles From Heaven PG	Sun 1:30, 4:15	WWE WrestleMania 32
	Sat 12:55 3:45, 6:40, 9:55	Sat 11:25, 2:00, 4:30, 7:10, 9:40	Big Fat Greek Wedding 2 PG	Sun 7:00
			Sat 11:50, 2:10, 4:40, 7:00, 9:30	

