

# You, Me and Mexico

Good guide made trip that much more delicious

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

There are two things I love about Mexico; the sounds and the smells. The sounds are mostly music. Everywhere. At all hours of the day and night.

But there's nothing like the sweet and savoury smells of Mexican food. Fresh seafood, spicy peppers, and chocolate mole sauce blended together as you pass by Mexican homes, restaurants and even street vendors.

Street vendors. Not only do they smell good, they have long lines of customers. But, should we?

Sure, we'd been to Puerto Vallarta, Mexico numerous times, but eating street food was something my husband and I had never done. And yet there are many taco stands in Zona Romantica, the neighbourhood where we stay. Some of them have lineups of gringos, such as ourselves. Other stands are entirely populated by Mexicans.

How could we choose where to eat?

It was our daughter who provided us with an answer. Courtney, who first drew us to Puerto Vallarta when she lived there several years ago, works with Tours by Locals, a Vancouver-based company that connects travellers with tour guides all over the world.

Courtney sent me a link for a Puerto Vallarta street food and craft beer walking tour. We'd assumed those tours were geared to first-timers and, at first glance, this one was more basic than we wanted, but Courtney suggested we contact the guide directly via the Tours by Locals website ([www.tourbylocals.com](http://www.tourbylocals.com)) to discuss customizing it to our needs.

Already familiar with Puerto Vallarta and many of the restaurants, I contacted our future guide who created a tour offering exactly what we wanted.

Another great thing about Tours by Locals is that you can arrange the tour when you want it rather than having to go at a set time that's not always convenient. We were also able to indicate how we wanted to get around and how much time we wanted to spend.

And with just four of us in our party, we liked that we wouldn't have to compete with a large group



Gerry Clark drinks a michelada.

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to ask questions. There'd be no ending up at the back of a long line of tourists, unable to hear a scripted presentation.

With the trip finalized and paid for, including cancellation insurance that was returned as a credit at the end of the tour, we were set. An evening tour that would start with drinks at sunset, introductions to a variety of street foods and vendors — and an evening out. We were getting a deal.

And so, we waited at the pier, trying to pick Rafael out from among the crowds meandering in the area. I had a heads-up, having seen his photo on the website and I spotted him first.

A small-framed man wearing a big smile, a crisp white shirt and a Fedora straw hat, Rafael spoke excellent English as he reviewed what our tour would entail and asked if we wanted to change anything.

Then he led us along the malecon to a two-storey, open-air beach restaurant we'd often sat near but never ventured into. This is where beach vendors get the fish on a stick they sell on the beach.

Rafael said we were correct in

assuming food carried on the beach for long periods could contain bacteria. "Much better to get it at the source," he said as he gave us the pescado en vara asado, a food that's also been nicknamed pescado embazado (pregnant fish).

We also had micheladas, a drink made with our only commercial beer of the tour. One story is that this cocktail was originally served to construction workers in Baha, California by Chinese immigrants. The Chinese themselves didn't love the cold beer they served with ice so they began experimenting with their own ingredients, including soy and English sauces, lime juice and tajin (dried peppers).

Rafael's inside knowledge of the food industry in Puerto Vallarta was a highlight of our tour. Not only did he grow up in a restaurant in Tecate, Mexico, he's also a trained chef.

After drinks, we made our way to Los Muertos Brewery; a craft brewery we'd been to but only for their mildest beer. On this night, we sampled all seven of the craft beers available — served in larger than normal flight glasses. We drank moderately, sampling each but downing only our



Churro treats are prepared.

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favourites, as we needed to be able to walk on the infamous Mexican sidewalks. I particularly enjoyed a beer infused with chili.

Rafael told us it's difficult for craft breweries to operate in Mexico due to the sparse availability of supplies. The large commercial companies have a monopoly so small breweries must get supplies shipped from the United States. This makes craft beer much more expensive than domestic brands but in this market of primarily Canadians and Americans — they can do it.

Smelling the pizza baking in the Los Muertos ovens made us hungry, so we were happy to drink what we could and continue walking. Street vendors in Puerto Vallarta are not only regulated and licensed by the city, they are inspected regularly. But some are safer and serve higher quality food than others.

We learned good tacos should be priced from 13-40 pesos (\$7-2.69 Canadian). And that we should make sure the vendor doesn't use household ice. Since most Mexicans don't have freezers, safe ice is purchased from local suppliers. The jugs from the suppliers are easily identifiable by colour.

"Look for ice that is shaped like a cylinder or pipe or is in very small cubes. It comes from a machine that is double-filtered," says Rafael.

He also suggests looking for two people working; one handling food, the other handling money. If there's only one person, he or she should use a plastic bag or glove to avoid touching the cash.

And most vendors will put a plate inside a plastic bag to provide a clean, sturdy surface for food, a help especially when you're eating standing up.

The first vendors we passed are popular at 3 a.m., said Rafael. But they're close to the ocean. The best taco stands are a few blocks further back. For the very best, look for stands surrounded by locals.

Restaurants close to the ocean may be popular with tourists, but you'll pay more and be subjected to long waits. And, in Rafael's opinion, the food is nowhere near as good.

We learned about tortilla quality while passing the tortilla factory. Mid-level tortillas as those made in this factory are made with nixtamal (white corn), which is dried in the sun, then soaked overnight until it pops like wet popcorn. It's then mixed with milk to make dough. Machines must be cleaned thoroughly each day to the corn mixture then drying like which would seize the machines.

Some food stands have been in the same spot for generations. Each is licensed to serve a specific product at its appointed location.

Our first stop was for tacos de barbacoa, tacos made from beef head. Though we could specify which part we wanted, I let Rafael choose — and I was relieved they were out of brain. We dressed our tacos with a selection of condiments: onions, red and green salsas and limes though the flavourful meat alone would have been enough to make us drool.

A neighbouring fish taco stand was closed, but just a couple blocks over we feasted our eyes on a huge spit of pork layers, its juices dripping and

sizzling over an open flame. This pineapple-infused pork is a result of the Greek influences in Mexico.

Rafael ordered for us and, while we waited, he told us about the condiments we could use. There were also plates of radish and cucumbers.

"When we feel our taco needs a kick, but we don't want to add salsa, we bite a radish," said Rafael. "If it feels too spicy hot, we take a cucumber to cool it off."

Vendors in Puerto Vallarta use the freshest of ingredients. The market is just down the street and all produce is grown within two hours of the city.

Mexican cuisine was voted the No. 3 UNESCO cultural treasure because of the varied foods it has brought to the world. Those include vanilla, tomatoes, chocolate and corn. Mexico also brought such cooking techniques to the world as using the sun and cooking underground.

When we visited the churro man, we learned how Mexicans fell in love with French pastries when the French came to the country. With no ovens to recreate the sweets, Mexicans adapted cooking techniques to fit their climate. Their best option was deep-frying, and so churros were born. With our introduction to the churro man — who's been in the same location for 42 years — we instantly knew we'd return to stand in line for his delicious treats a few more times during our stay.

Our bags of hot churros in hand, we continued our tour, stopping to taste the most delicious hot coconut drink sold right on the street from a thermal jug.

The treats at our last stop — a paleta (Popsicle) and ice cream stand — are all made from fruit grown right in the state. Flavour choices range from lime, hibiscus, banana, pineapple and guanabana, to watermelon and coconut mango. For spice lovers, there is chamoy (dried prunes and chiles).

Filled to the brim, we assured Rafael we knew our way back along the malecon to our hotel. I asked for directions to the vanilla store and he reminded us where to look for achote paste. And, in Mexican fashion, we hugged goodbye.

Tours by Locals is definitely a great concept. It was started by Canadians Paul Melhus and Dave Vincent after their own trip to China in 2008. According to their website, the men couldn't connect with a formal tour so a travel agent arranged a driver to take them to the Great Wall. There, they encountered two local women who gave them an impromptu tour. The men returned to Vancouver and created Tours by Locals to provide similar services at the convenience of travellers worldwide.

Tours by Locals offers more than 2,500 guides in 153 different countries — and it's still growing. To find a tour, visit [toursbylocals.com](http://toursbylocals.com). Pick your tour and once details are finalized, you'll receive a link to pay directly through the website. Then use their online message system to stay in touch with your guide right up until your tour.

Touring like a local. Giving a local job. And keeping our daughter working. What's not to like about Tours by Locals?

## Sault Ste. Marie and Area Forecast

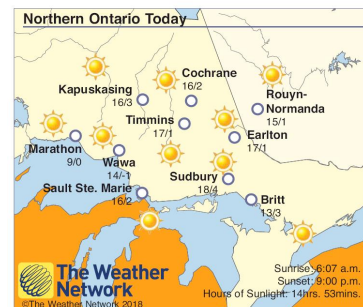
Today	Tomorrow	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday
High 16° Low 2° Sunny. Winds northwesterly 17 km/h.	High 19° Low 7° Sunny. Winds light.	High 19° Low 8° Sunny. Winds light.	High 21° Low 7° Variable cloudi- ness. Winds light.	High 18° Low 6° Isolated showers (POP 40%). Winds southeasterly 17 km/h.

Today:  
Normal High ..... 15.8°  
Normal Low ..... 4.1°  
Record High ..... 28.0° (1991)  
Record Low ..... -3.0° (1967)



Know what the weather  
will be 14 days from now.

Check the 14 day trend



Canada	tomorrow
Barrie	sunny 21/3
Calgary	sunny 24/7
Charlottetown	sunny 12/6
Edmonton	sunny 25/10
Fredericton	sunny 19/5
Halifax	sunny 17/4
Gander	showers 11/1
Iqaluit	cloudy -8/-13
Kamloops	sunny 29/12
Kingston	sunny 18/9
Moncton	sunny 19/8
Montreal	sunny 19/9
Ottawa	sunny 19/7
Quebec City	sunny 19/7
Regina	sunny 26/8
Saint John	sunny 16/6
Saskatoon	sunny 26/8
St. John's	sunny 10/2
Thunder Bay	sunny 23/11
Toronto	p. cloudy 15/6
Vancouver	sunny 24/14
Victoria	sunny 23/13
Windsor	sunny 27/9
Whitehorse	showers 10/4
Winnipeg	sunny 26/11
Yellowknife	p. cloudy 6/-6