



BEACHED ON MEXICO'S PACIFIC COAST

I'M IN BED AND I'M NOT ALONE. BUT IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK.

TOP: The 274-room Occidental Grand Nuevo Vallarta is located on Bahía de Banderas, a beautiful stretch of sand on the Pacific coast.

OPPOSITE: Royal Club features include a dedicated VIP check-in and check-out area. Occidental Grand Nuevo Vallarta by Barceló Hotels & Resorts.

BY DIANA BALLON

Behind me people are chatting and splashing around in the pool. And in front, there's the ocean at my feet. A soft late afternoon sun shines down on my face and I hear the crackling of palm fronds nearby. A waiter leans down to hand me a salt-rimmed margarita and guacamole—my green food. And I sit up to let the tequila and lime seep through my veins.

This beachside Bali bed with its crisp white sheets is on the west coast of Mexico. It's all part of the royal experience at the

Occidental Grand Nuevo Vallarta, a 274-room all-inclusive resort on Bahía de Banderas, a beautiful stretch of sand on the Pacific coast. The resort is also only 25 minutes from the airport and part of Riviera Nayarit, a region north of Puerto Vallarta (PV.) that covers 300 kilometres of coastline.

A RESORT WITHIN A RESORT

Although the Occidental Grand Nuevo Vallarta is a four-star resort, you can easily add a star if you opt for their Royal Club, which gives you not only these luxurious sunbathing day beds,



but other perks as well—such as your own dedicated restaurant, reception area, check-in, concierge and even your own private beach area with Bali beds for the ultimate relaxation. The modern rooms are also super luxe, with 24-hour room service for Royal Club guests and a wooden door that slides back to reveal a glassed-in shower so you can enjoy a full view of the ocean as you bathe. Certainly, the Royal Club suits me because I like intimate boutique resorts and, because it's a resort within a resort, I still get all the amenities of a larger property.



Over the last few years, the resort underwent a huge makeover. The property shut down for a year from December 2010 to December 2011, and owners have added more upgrades since then. Spending a whopping US\$14 million, their improvements include renovating all the guest rooms, building a new state-of-the-art theatre, and adding a kids' club and an adults-only pool. (I appreciated the latter: if I'm not going to holiday with my kids, why vacation with anyone else's?)

Aside from kids' activities, there's plenty of entertainment for adults too. Nightly shows include karaoke and a Miss Occidental talent show another evening. During the day, I while away many relaxing hours with a book on a chaise longue next to the pool, which has its own concierge, bar, pergolas and outdoor showers.

Scheduled activities include stretch and yoga classes, aqua aerobics sessions and any number of other organized options, ranging from kayak lessons, beach volleyball or a bike tour to Spanish lessons, painting workshops or cooking classes. If it's too hot, head indoors to the new fitness centre.

Of course, food at an all-inclusive is key. While it was not the fanciest of the resort's four restaurants, the outdoor à-la-carte Mexican restaurant, La Hacienda, serves the type of food I travel to Mexico to enjoy—traditional tortilla soup and large-sized plates of delicious tacos, burritos and enchiladas.

Los Olivos is another à-la-carte restaurant featuring breathtaking views of the ocean and offering excellent Italian and Mediterranean fare, which includes a wide range of pastas as well as an excellent seared tuna and beef tenderloin.

FROM NUEVO TO PUERTO VALLARTA

All-inclusive resorts give guests that safe, leave-your-wallet-at-home kind of feeling, however, sometimes it's good to step off the compound to experience the local culture.

Since downtown PV. is only a 35-minute drive away, it's well worth a day trip to stroll along its *molecón*, which borders the shoreline. Or—far more interesting—leave the tourist hub and meander through the town's historical district. We visited the impressive Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe and climbed PV's hilly cobblestone streets, passing many adobe houses with tiled red roofs and the remnants of Casa Kimberley, where Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton once enjoyed a romantic tryst.

Our day ended with a candlelight dinner at the River Café. Entertained by live jazz and surrounded by iguanas and trees on the Rio Cuale Island in downtown PV., we dined on rainbow shrimp breaded in coconut and pecans, followed by asparagus soup, mahi mahi and a delicious deep-fried ice cream.



ABOVE LEFT: Enjoy refreshments at the Beach Club Bar.

ABOVE RIGHT TOP: While away relaxing hours with a book on a chaise longue next to the pool.

ABOVE RIGHT BOTTOM: Air-conditioned guest rooms feature a king-size bed or two double beds, a full-size washroom, satellite TV and much more.

BELOW: Room service is available to Royal Club guests 24 hours a day. Occidental Grand Nuevo Vallarta by Barceló Hotels & Resorts.



BOHO CHIC

Beyond both P.V. and the resort are cool bohemian towns I imagine P.V. must have resembled a half century ago. To these places I vow to return.

When I visited Sayulita in the late 1990s, it was a sleepy surfing town with small restaurants along the beach, including the renowned Don Pedro's Restaurant & Bar. Still a haven for surfers, cafés, restaurants and boutiques proliferate and cater to tourists. We combined a trip to town with a zip-lining excursion at the nearby Rancho Mi Chaparrita, where, travelling up to 45 kph, we gazed down at the ocean.

Nearby San Francisco (or San Pancho) was another enjoyable place to tour. Here you can wander through the main plaza, rent a bungalow near the beach or stop by the Bistro Organico in the Hotel Cielo Rojo for a soothing *capomo* (coffee substitute) after morning yoga, or for a tequila tasting at night.

Another day found us on the Marieta Islands, a protected national park off P.V.'s coast, where pastimes include snorkelling, whale watching, paddleboarding and hanging out on a beach.

Now back in Canada, I still dream of my Bali sunbathing bed. DS

TRAVEL PLANNER

Direct flights are available from Toronto, Vancouver and Calgary to Puerto Vallarta. Check schedules and times via Air Canada Vacations (aircanadavacations.com).

Barceló Hotels & Resorts recently took over the management of Occidental Hotels. Barceló guarantees you can your book your stay at any Occidental property safely and securely at the best online price and enjoy exclusive benefits. For more information on Occidental Grand Nuevo Vallarta, visit, occidentalhotels.com/resort/occidental-grand-nuevo-vallarta, barcelo.com or call 1-800-Barcelo.