

THE 5 MINUTE GUIDE TO: PUERTO VALLARTA

Ed Walsh discovers a Mexican gay Nirvana where the locals love nothing better than a pair of smiling Irish eyes.



"Your colour, it is so beautiful and your eyes, so beautiful", said Juan, a handsome 27-year-old Mexican schoolteacher I met in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico.

Who knew my pale skin, blue eyes and freckles would be so popular?

A black man and friend with whom I was travelling also noticed that same opposites-attract phenomenon.

But the affinity Mexicans have for the Irish is more than skin deep. In the 1846-48 war between Mexico and the United States, the Saint Patrick's Battalion, a contingent of Irish-American soldiers led by Captain John Riley of Clifden, County Galway, deserted the US and fought with the Mexicans. The Irish-Americans were Catholics and weren't too happy over how they were being treated by the mostly Protestant US Army. They felt they had more in common with the Mexicans, who were Catholics. The Mexicans affectionately called them Los Colorados, or The Red Ones, because of their red hair. The 'San Patricios' are honored in ceremonies twice a year in Mexico and several schools,

churches and streets are named for them throughout the country.

Today Mexicans welcome the Irish and anyone with money to spend in a number of seaside resort towns. Puerto Vallarta is the most popular gay destination in the country. The resort town on Mexico's West Coast is popular both with foreign visitors and gay Mexican tourists who live in other parts of the country.

Puerto Vallarta's gay clubs, bars and hotels are in the southern end of the city, in an area known as Zona Romantica or Old Town. It's also where you will find Playa de Los Muertos, the city's largest public beach and home to Blue Chairs Beach - the unofficially gay section of that beach at the southern end. Just look for the roped-off section of blue chairs in front of the Blue Chairs Resort by the Sea. The green and rainbow-coloured chairs right next to them are just as gay and more plentiful. You can sit all day on a chair, as long as you buy a drink.

Diana DeCoste runs gay cruises that depart from Los Muertos Beach

(www.DianasTours.com), while handsome gay oceanographer, Oscar Frey, leads Ocean Friendly Tours. It is a gay-friendly whale-watching cruise available during the winter when the whales return to Mexico. Check out www.oceanfriendly.com for details.

Zona Romantica boasts more than a dozen gay or gay-friendly hotels and nearly 20 gay bars and nightclubs. Everything is located within walking distance. Don't even think of renting a car. Cab service is cheap and plentiful.

The currency of Mexico is the peso. You will get about 16 pesos per euro. You can get a nice hotel room in Zona Romantica for less than €75, even in the high winter season. A gourmet meal will run you about €17.

Don't worry if you don't speak Spanish. Just about everybody in the tourist areas of the city speak enough English to get by. They have to. Puerto Vallarta's economy is largely dependent on American and Canadian tourists.

You will find no shortage of gay accommodation. The newest gay hotel in Puerto Vallarta is also the largest. The high-rise Abbey Hotel has 55 rooms, many with ocean views, and it is just short walk to the gay Blue Chairs Beach. It is gay and lesbian mixed, but most of the clientele are gay men.

You will find another gay hotel, the Hotel Mercurio, just a couple of blocks from the Abbey. Like the Abbey, it is mostly gay male but lesbians are very welcome.

The nearby Vallarta Cora hotel is all-male and clothing optional. The hotel's bar is open to the public from 3pm to midnight. For 50 pesos you can cruise the pool, hot tub, darkroom and sauna, plus, you will get a free drink.

Sitting on a hill over Zona Romantica, Casa Cupula is the most upscale gay hotel in Puerto Vallarta. Many of its rooms have great views and the only drawback is that can be a bit of a hike walking back uphill from the gay beach.

The nightlife options in Puerto Vallarta abound. The best part is that they are all within walking distances of each other in Zona Romantica. If you are staying at one of the gay hotels, you will have no trouble getting around gay Puerto Vallarta on foot.

While we are on the subject, be sure to check out the city's excellent gay guide at www.gayguidevallarta.com to be updated on all things gay in the city. You can download a gay map from the site or you can pick up a free copy at a gay place once you get in town.

Club Manana and Paco's Ranch are the most popular gay nightclubs. You will find some women in both clubs but gay men predominate. There are no specifically lesbian bars, but Apaches on Olas Altas Street is lesbian-owned and is popular with gay women.

Puerto Vallarta has its own international airport, but no flights go there directly from Dublin. Your best bet is to fly to Los Angeles (LAX) and connect from there. Aer Lingus



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flies directly to LAX, while a daily return flight from LAX to Puerto Vallarta with Mexicana takes two hours and 48 minutes and costs approximately €230. Several flights go from LAX to Puerto Vallarta and back each day, so connections are easily made.

THE VERY BEST...

BAR: The Blue Sunset Rooftop Bar, The Malecon and Almendro Street

On the top of the Blue Chairs Resort by the Sea, this open-air bar is famous for its drag shows and is usually packed at sunset.

RESTAURANT: El Arrayan, Allende 344

This is one of the hottest restaurants in town. It is owned by Carmen Porras, a lesbian who is originally from Mexico City, and is known for its authentic Mexican food.

CAFÉ: Choco Banana, Amapas and Pulpito Streets

A great place to stop for coffee, a quick meal, or its signature food: a frozen banana dipped in chocolate.

CLUB: Club Mañana, V Carranza 290, every day, 5pm to 6am

The upscale Club Mañana has an indoor disco but the club's centrepiece is an open-air pool surrounded by a dancefloor and seating areas.

HOTEL: Hotel Mercurio, Francisca Rodriguez 168, +52 322 222 4793, www.hotel-mercurio.com

Hotel Mercurio has budget prices without a low-budget look. It offers a free buffet breakfast and free international phone calls.

CRUISING: Diana's Gay Cruise, DianasTours.com

A very entertaining gay French-Canadian woman, Diana DeCoste, runs this fabulous tour boat business. She offers sunset cruises and daytime cruises.