Chapter 15

Settling into Puerto Vallarta

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In This Chapter
► Knowing what to expect when you arrive
► Finding your way around town
► Discovering helpful information and resources

From the moment you arrive, you’re likely to settle into Puerto Vallarta’s welcoming ways. In this chapter, I take you from the plane, through the airport, and to your hotel, helping you quickly get your bearings in this easy-to-navigate town. I also provide tips on everything from taxis to Internet access. You have insider information here — Puerto Vallarta has been my home for the past 14 years!

Arriving in Puerto Vallarta

Puerto Vallarta’s airport is easy to get through, so you can reach the sun-soaked days in no time. Recently recognized as the friendliest international city by the travel magazine Condé Nast Traveler, Puerto Vallarta is a pleasure. The people here are genuinely welcoming and proud to share their town with visitors. They strive to make your stay as pleasant as possible. Visitors usually get a taste of Puerto Vallarta’s hospitality right from the start — you should find both immigration and customs to be brief, generally easy procedures.

Navigating passport control and customs

After you deplane, you go through a jetway and wind your way down some stairs into the immigration-clearance area, or a bus may take you directly to immigration from your plane. When you reach immigration, an officer asks you to show your passport and your completed tourist card, the FMT (see Chapter 7 for all the FMT details).
Your FMT is an important document, so take good care of it. You’re supposed to keep the FMT with you at all times because you may be required to show it if you run into any sort of trouble. You also need to turn it back in upon departure, or you may be unable to leave without replacing it.

Next up is the baggage claim area. Here, porters stand by to help with your bags, and they’re well worth the price of the tip — about a dollar a bag. After you collect your luggage, you pass through another checkpoint. Something that looks like a traffic light awaits you here. You press a button, and if the light turns green, you’re free to go. If it turns red, you need to open each of your bags for a quick search. It’s Mexico’s random search procedure for customs. If you have an unusually large bag, or an excessive amount of luggage, you may be searched regardless of the traffic-light outcome.

Just past the traffic light, you pass into an enclosed space with people behind counters — it may look like a tourist information center, but the people behind the counters are actually timeshare sales reps. Unless you want to start your vacation shopping for timeshares with these high-pressure sales pros, keep moving.

Just beyond this entryway you see a bustling crowd of people waiting for fellow passengers, transportation representatives, and taxi drivers promoting their services. If you’re part of a package tour that includes ground transportation to your hotel, start looking for your rep here. Generally he or she is carrying a sign with your name or the name of your tour company on it. If you haven’t arranged transportation, head for the blue and orange booths marked “Taxi” to purchase your set-price tickets to your hotel.

**Getting to your hotel**

The airport is close to the north end of town near the Marina Vallarta, about 10km (6 miles) from downtown. Transportes Terrestres minivans and Aeromovil taxis make the trip from the airport to all the hotel areas. Costs for both options are determined by zones — clearly posted at the respective ticket booths. Fares start at $8 for a ride to Marina Vallarta and go up to $25 for a trip to the south-shore hotels. Airport taxis (Aeromovil) are federally licensed taxis that operate exclusively to provide transportation from the airport. Their fares are almost three times as high as city (yellow) taxis. A trip from the airport to downtown Puerto Vallarta costs $14, whereas a return trip using a city taxi costs only $4.50. Yellow cabs are restricted from picking up passengers leaving the airport.

If you don’t have too much baggage, you can walk across the highway via the overpass at the side exit of the airport. Yellow cabs are lined up on the other side of the highway ready to take you anywhere your heart desires for a third of the price of the airport cabs.
Getting Around Puerto Vallarta

Puerto Vallarta is very easy to get around. Essentially, one main road stretches from the airport in both directions around the bay. Puerto Vallarta has followed this central roadway — which changes names a few times along the way — as it has grown along the beach to the north and south. Linking the airport to downtown, the road is called Avenida Francisco Medina Ascencio (sometimes still referred to by its previous name, Avenida de Las Palmas). Along this main thoroughfare are many luxury hotels (in the area called the Zona Hotelera, or Hotel Zone), plus several shopping centers with casual restaurants.

As you come into the central downtown area, known as El Centro, the main road becomes Paseo Díaz Ordaz, which runs north to south through the town. The seaside promenade, called the malecón, which borders Paseo Díaz Ordaz, is frequently used as a reference point for giving directions. This section of downtown marked off by the malecón is the original town and is sometimes referred to as Viejo Vallarta — the cultural and civic heart of Puerto Vallarta. City hall, the waterfront, the open-air Los Arcos Theater, the landmark Our Lady of Guadalupe church, and scores of restaurants, galleries, and shops all call this area home.

From the waterfront, the town stretches back into the hills a half-dozen blocks. The areas bordering the Río Cuale (Cuale River) are the oldest parts of town — and home to Gringo Gulch, named for the dozens of U.S. expatriates that made their homes here in the late 1950s.

The area immediately south of the river, called Olas Altas after its main street (and sometimes Los Muertos after the beach of the same name), is now home to a growing selection of sidewalk cafes, fine restaurants, espresso bars, and hip nightclubs (many with live music).

From the center of town, nearly everything both north and south of the river is within walking distance. Bridges on Insurgentes (northbound traffic) and Ignacio L. Vallarta (southbound traffic) link the two sections of town.

Taking a taxi

Taxi travel is the preferred way for getting around Puerto Vallarta. Away from the airport, taxis are plentiful and relatively inexpensive. Most trips from downtown to the northern Zona Hotelera and Marina Vallarta cost between $3.50 and $5; a trip between Marina Vallarta and Playa Mismaloya to the south costs $8. Rates are charged by zone and are generally posted in hotel lobbies. You can also hire taxis by the hour or day for longer trips when you prefer to leave the driving to someone else, a good alternative to renting a car. Rates run between $10 and $12 per hour with discounts available for full-day rates.
Beware of restaurant recommendations offered by taxi drivers — many drivers receive a commission from restaurants where they discharge passengers. Be especially wary if a driver tries to talk you out of a restaurant you’ve already selected and to one of his own personal “favorites.”

**Catching a bus**

Another option for travel around town — combining cheap, easy transportation with some local color — is Puerto Vallarta’s city buses. They run from the airport through the Zona Hotelera along Calle Morelos (1 block inland from the malecón), across the Río Cuale, and inland on Vallarta, looping back through the downtown hotel and restaurant districts on Insurgentes and several other downtown streets. To get to the northern Zona Hotelera strip from old Puerto Vallarta, take the Zona Hoteles, Ixtapa, or Las Juntas bus. These buses in the Zona Hotelera follow the same route and may also post the names of hotels they pass such as Krystal, Fiesta Americana, Sheraton, and others. Buses marked “Marina Vallarta” travel inside the Marina Vallarta area and stop at the major hotels there. City buses, which cost about 50¢, can service just about all your transportation needs frequently and inexpensively.

Buses generally run from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m., and waiting more than a few minutes for one is rare. An additional bus route travels south every 10 to 15 minutes to either Playa Mismaloya or Boca de Tomatlán (the last point on the southern shore of the bay that can be reached by land — the destination is indicated in the front window) from Plaza Lázaro Cárdenas, a few blocks south of the river at Cárdenas and Suárez, and along Basilio Badillo, between Piño Suárez and Insurgentes.

Buses in Vallarta tend to be rather aggressive, and some even sport appropriately intimidating names — “Terminator,” “Rambo,” and “Tornado” are three of my favorites. Don’t tempt fate by assuming that these buses stop for pedestrians. Although Vallarta is an extremely low-crime city, bus accidents are frequent — and often fatal.

**Renting a car**

Rental cars are available at the airport and through travel agencies, but unless you’re planning a distant side trip, don’t bother. Car rentals are expensive, averaging $60 per day, and parking around town is difficult.

If you see a sign for a $10 Jeep rental or $20 car rental, be aware that it’s a lure to get people to attend timeshare presentations. Unless you’re interested in a timeshare, stopping to inquire is a waste of your time.
Cruising around

The cruise-ship pier, or muelle, also called Terminal Marítima, is where excursion boats to Yelapa, Las Animas, Quimixto, and the Marietas Islands depart. The pier is north of town near the airport and just an inexpensive taxi or bus ride away from the Vallarta region. Just take any bus marked “Ixtapa,” “Las Juntas,” “Pitillal,” or “Aurora” and tell the driver to let you off at the Terminal Marítima. Note: Odd though it may seem, you have to pay a $1 fee to access the pier where the tour boats are docked.

Water taxis offering direct transportation to Yelapa, Las Animas, and Quimixto leave at 10:30 and 11 a.m. from the pier at Playa Los Muertos (south of downtown) on Rodolfo Rodríguez next to the Hotel Marsol. Another water taxi departs at 11 a.m. from the beachfront pier at the northern edge of the malecón. A round-trip ticket to Yelapa (the farthest point) costs $12. Return trips usually depart between 3 and 4 p.m., but confirm the pickup time with your water-taxi captain. Other water taxis depart from Boca de Tomatlán, located about 30 minutes south of town by public bus. These Boca de Tomatlán water taxis are a better option than those at Playa Los Muertos if you want more flexible departure and return times from the southern beaches. Generally, they leave on the hour for the southern shore destinations, or more frequently if there’s heavy traffic. The price is about $10 round trip with rates clearly posted on a sign on the beach. You can hire a private boat taxi for between $35 and $50 (depending on your destination), which allows you to choose your own return time. The boats take up to eight people for that price, so people often band together at the beach to hire one.

Fast Facts: Puerto Vallarta

American Express
The local office (Morelos 660, at the corner of Abasolo; ☎ 01-800-333-3211 in Mexico, or 322-223-2955) is open Monday to Friday 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Saturday 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. This location offers excellent, efficient, travel-agency services in addition to offering currency-exchange and traveler’s checks services.

Area Code
The telephone area code is 322. The area code for Nuevo Vallarta and the northern areas is 329.

Babysitters
Most of the larger hotels can easily arrange babysitters, but many sitters speak limited English. Rates range from $5 to $8 per hour.

Banks, ATMs, and Currency Exchange
Banks are located throughout downtown and in the other prime shopping areas of Vallarta. Most banks are open Monday to Friday 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. with partial hours on Saturday. You can find ATMs throughout Vallarta, including the central plaza downtown. They’re increasingly becoming the most favorable way to exchange currency because they offer bank rates plus 24-hour, self-service convenience. Money exchange houses (casas de cambio) are also located
throughout town and offer longer hours than the banks with only slightly lower exchange rates.

**Business Hours**

Most offices maintain traditional Mexican hours of operation (9 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. to 8 p.m., daily), but shops remain open throughout the day. Offices tend to be closed on Saturday and Sunday, but shops are open on Saturday, at least, and increasingly offer limited hours of operation on Sunday. During peak season, many shops and galleries remain open as late as 10 p.m.

**Climate**

Vallarta is warm all year with tropical temperatures; however, evenings and early mornings in the winter months can turn quite cool. Summers are sunny, but an increase in humidity during the rainy season, between May and October, is the norm. Rains come almost every afternoon in June and July. These usually brief but strong showers are just enough to cool off the air for evening activities. September is the month in which heat and humidity are the least comfortable and rains are the heaviest.

**Consular Agents**

Both the U.S. and Canadian consulates maintain offices here in the building on the southern border of the central plaza (note the U.S. and Canadian flags). The **U.S. Consular Agency** office ( 322-222-0069; Fax: 322-223-0074; both available 24 hours a day for emergencies) is open Monday to Friday 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. The **Canadian Consulate** (322-293-0099 or 322-293-0098; 24-hour emergency line: 01-800-706-2900) is open Monday to Friday 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

**Emergencies**

Police emergency ( 060); local police (322-290-0513 or 322-290-0512); **intensive care ambulance** (322-225-0386; **Note:** English-speaking assistance isn’t always available at this number); **Red Cross** (322-222-1533).

**Hospitals**

**Ameri-Med Urgent Care** ( 322-221-0023; Fax: 322-221-0026; www.amerimed-hospitals.com) offers healthcare service 24 hours a day that meets U.S. standards and is located at the entrance to Marina Vallarta in the Neptune Plaza. In addition to excellent diagnostic capabilities, it also has emergency facilities and helicopters to evacuate patients to the United States. The excellent **San Javier Marina Hospital** (322-226-1010) also offers U.S.-standard healthcare service that’s available 24 hours. It’s located on the main highway across from the cruise-ship terminal (Terminal Marítima).

**Information**

The **Municipal Tourism Office** (Juárez and Independencia; 322-223-2500, ext. 230, ask for the Tourism Office) is in a corner of the white Presidencia Municipal building (city hall) on the northwest end of the main square. In addition to offering a listing of current events and a collection of promotional brochures for local activities and services, these folks can also assist you with specific questions — an English-speaking person is usually on staff. This is also the office of the tourist police. It’s open Monday to Friday 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

The exceptionally helpful and friendly **State Tourism Office** (Plaza Marina L 144, 2nd floor; 322-221-2676, 322-221-2677, or 322-221-2678) also offers promotional brochures and can assist you with specific questions about Puerto Vallarta and other points within the state of Jalisco including Guadalajara, the Costa Alegre, and the town of Tequila. It’s open Monday to Friday 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Saturday 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

**Internet Access**

Puerto Vallarta is probably the best-connected destination in Mexico as far as the Internet goes. Of the numerous cyber-cafes around town, one of the most popular is **The Net House** (Ignacio L. Vallarta 232, 2 blocks past the southbound bridge;
It’s open daily 8 a.m. to 2 a.m. Rates are $4 per hour, and there are 21 computers with fast connections and English keyboards. Café Net (Olas Altas 250, at the corner of Basilio Badillo; ☎ 322-222-0092) has become a social hub. Rates run $2 for 30 minutes. Complete computer services, a full bar, and food service are also available. It’s open daily 8 a.m. to 2 a.m. Some hotels also offer e-mail kiosks in their lobbies, but this is a more expensive option than the Net cafes.

Maps
One of the best around is the free American Express map, usually found at the tourist information offices and the local American Express office. Other free maps of the area are available at the Municipal Tourism Office, on the southeast corner of city hall (the corner nearest to the Our Lady of Guadalupe church).

Newspapers/Magazines
Vallarta Today, a daily English-language newspaper (☎ 322-225-3323 or 322-224-2829; www.vallartatoday.com), is a good source for local information and upcoming events. The quarterly city magazine, Vallarta Lifestyles (☎ 322-221-0106), is also very popular. It has plenty of helpful information and good colored maps of all the major tourist areas. Both publications are available for sale at area newsstands and hotel gift shops although you can also find them distributed for free at local businesses. The weekly P.V. Tribune (☎ 322-223-0585) is distributed free throughout town and offers an objective local viewpoint.

Pharmacy
CMQ Farmacia (Basilio Badillo 365; ☎ 322-222-1330) is open 24 hours and can also deliver to your hotel free of charge with a minimum purchase of $10. Farmacia Guadalajara (Emiliano Zapata 232; ☎ 322-224-1811) is also open 24 hours a day.

Police
The policemen in white, safari-style uniforms with white pith helmets belong to a special corps of English-speaking police established to assist tourists. For the main police department, call ☎ 322-290-0513 or 322-290-0512.

Post Office
The post office (correo) (Mina 188; ☎ 322-222-1888) is open Monday to Friday 9 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. and Saturday 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Safety
Puerto Vallarta enjoys a very low crime rate. Public transportation is perfectly safe to use, and tourist police (dressed in white safari uniforms with white hats) are available to answer questions, give directions, and offer assistance. Most crimes or encounters with the police are linked to using or purchasing drugs, so simply don’t do it. Note: The tourist police are making a more frequent habit of conducting random personal searches for drugs. Although some questions have arisen about their right to do this, the best course of action is to comply if they want to frisk you — objecting may result in a free tour of the local jail. Report any unusual incidents to the local consular office.

Taxes
There’s a 15% value-added tax (IVA) on goods and services, and it’s generally included in the posted price.

Taxis
Taxis are plentiful and relatively inexpensive. Most trips from downtown to the northern Zona Hotelera and Marina Vallarta cost between $3.50 and $5; trips between Marina Vallarta and Mismaloya Beach to the south cost $8. Rates are charged by zone and are generally posted in the lobbies of hotels. You can also hire taxis by the hour or day for longer trips when you prefer to leave the driving to someone else. Rates run between $10 and $12 per hour with discounts available for full-day rates.
Telephone
Avoid the phone booths that have signs in English advising you to call home using a special 800 number — these are absolute rip-offs and can cost as much as $20 per minute. The least expensive way to call is by using a Telmex (LADATEL) prepaid phone card, available at most pharmacies and mini-supers, using the official Telmex (Lada) public phones. In Mexico you need to dial 001 prior to a number to reach the United States, and you need to preface long distance calls within Mexico by dialing 01.

Time Zone
Puerto Vallarta operates on central standard time, but Mexico’s observance of daylight savings time varies somewhat from that in the United States.