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PUERTO VALLARTA

'Relax,' say the locals, 'You're on the fun side of the wall.'

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Photo by Tracy Walsh



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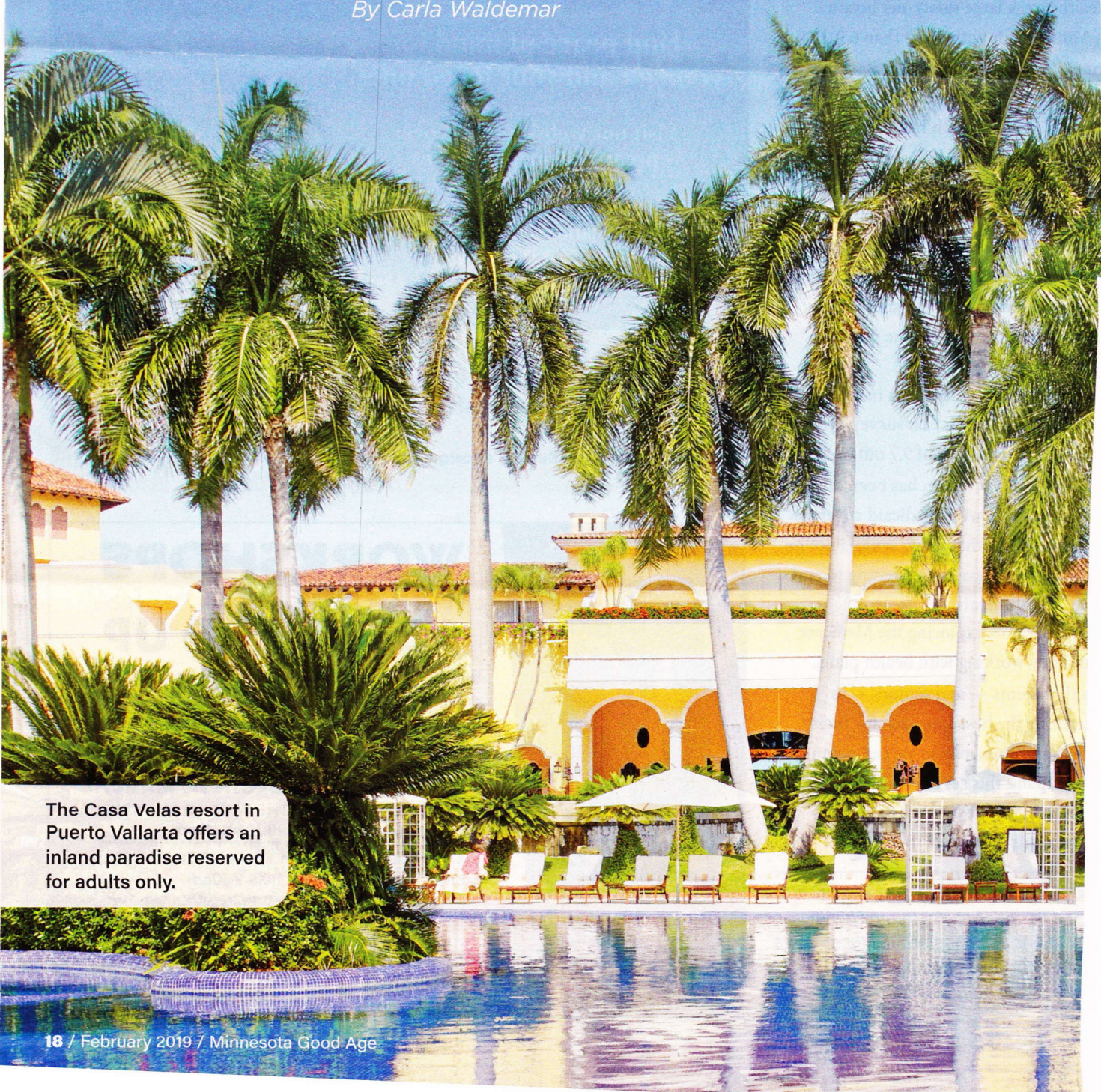
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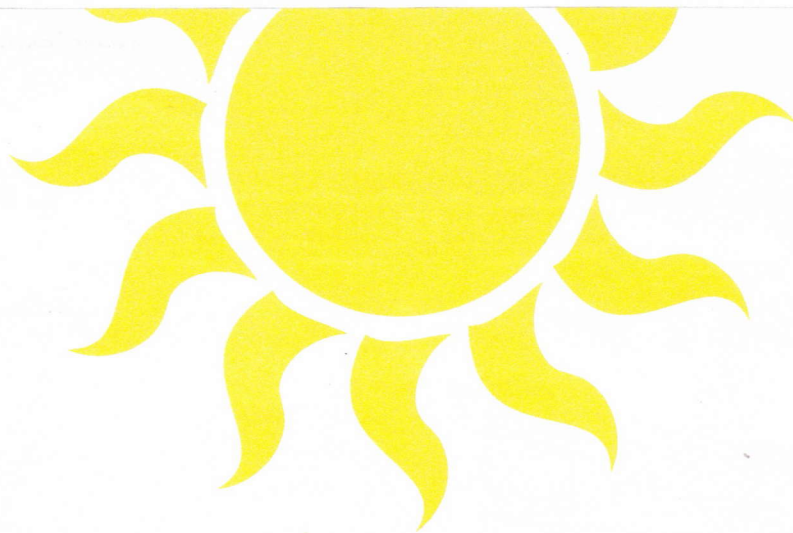
RIGHT AT HOME

TAKE A PEEK INSIDE **CASA VELAS**, AN ALL-INCLUSIVE
RESORT NORTH OF DOWNTOWN PUERTO VALLARTA

By Carla Waldemar



The Casa Velas resort in Puerto Vallarta offers an inland paradise reserved for adults only.



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iblical scholars have long speculated on the actual location of the Garden of Eden.

Clearly they haven't visited Casa Velas, or the quest would be over. It's

arguably the prettiest resort in Mexico's beach town of Puerto Vallarta — a 4½ hour direct flight (Delta or Sun Country) from MSP.

Coconut palms sway in the gentle breezes above a jungle landscape populated by the glossy houseplants you find at Bachman's — except these reach past your knees. They border a lush golf course — where Casa guests are entitled to unlimited rounds (carts cost extra) — and creep up to the languid waters of its pool, where iridescent birds dip, the occasional iguana darts by and the resident peacock wanders. (Bonus: Casa Velas is only five minutes from the airport, which stretches your leisure time. It's also five minutes from the beach — more on that later.)

Another bonus about the real-life Garden of Eden? No children to clutter the pool.





And no going over budget with food and drink costs either.

The Casa, which is about 30 minutes up the coast from downtown PV, is an all-inclusive, adults-only, hacienda-style resort of 80 rooms, including many with their own pools and/or hot tubs on their balconies/patios. (Rates start at \$560 a night in April.)

And even though all meals, drinks and gratuities are included here, all the staff and attendants spoiled us like crazy with service anyway: "My pleasure" seems to be the most frequent English phrase. (Note: Most guests do tip 10 to 15 percent for good service, despite the all-inclusive deal.)

Staff deliver complimentary snacks poolside (don't miss the shrimp burrito) along with more offers of cocktails than it's wise to accept. (However, when it comes to the potent margaritas, just say yes.)

Feeling energetic? Stroll in the cool shade of the botanical garden. Or check out the espresso bar, which segues into a bar-bar, where a cocktail maestro named Benny conducts tequila tastings and classes in margarita making.

Emiliano's, the resort's restaurant, features dining indoors and at patio tables near a pond where giant golden koi glide among the water lilies.

And yes, you can drink the water here, although I'd rather peruse the wine list (all-inclusive, after all) for a red to accompany my rack of lamb. Or something from the elaborate juice menu to wash down your morning huevos rancheros. The menu favors international recipes more than local ones and every plate is cautiously seasoned.

◀ Casa Velas of Puerto Vallarta isn't located on the beach, but the resort offers a shuttle to its own private ocean-side club (top) as well as hacienda-style rooms with pools (middle) and gorgeous common areas (bottom).

(I don't think the kitchen owns as much as a head of garlic, never mind chilies.)

While we were dining alfresco in the evening — surprise! — in strutted a vivacious mariachi band. There's also a chanteuse crooning at the outdoor bar for your after-dinner entertainment.

Dress code for dinner? Nothing formal. Just get out of your beachwear. And just because you forgot to pack a pretty little handbag for every outfit, not to fret: The Casa offers a unique handbag-lending program. From its ornate selections, I chose a silvery Michael Kors number.

But you came to Puerto Vallarta to stroll along the ocean? The Casa takes care of that, too. Simply jump aboard the property's shuttle for a five-minute jaunt to its private Ocean Club, with a deck and pool just inches away from the surging waves and jaunty pelicans.

Order lunch and drinks while you're at it, and linger to oversee the sunset while dining on a menu of Caribbean flavors, including crab cakes and fish tacos as

starters, grilled tuna or shrimp with creamy risotto for mains, followed by a mango flan. A solo trumpeter added to the magic of the evening on our visit.

Guests also may dine at the Casa's sister property a half-hour distant at its new restaurant, Sen Lin, where the flavors this time are pan-Asian. In an intimate, contemporary setting, I settled on pot stickers, followed by Peking duck and a bite of my companion's chili crab. Again, the flavors have been hushed to please (or not) American palates.

Nearly half of the Casa's guests are repeaters; one woman, completing her 20th visit, was busy making a reservation for No. 21.

Want to start your own tradition? See hotelcasavelas.com.

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EXPLORE THE CITY

Puerto Vallarta—the town itself—is anything but tranquil, and that's its vivid charm.

A 30-minute taxi ride from Casa Velas leads to Puerto Vallarta's famous El Malecon, a mile-long oceanfront promenade punctuated by artsy sculptures, souvenir vendors and plenty of benches for watching the passing parade.

It's at its most vibrant on Saturday nights, when entire extended families join the dog walkers and tourists for a leisurely stroll in the balmy breeze.

Food stands pop up to serve grilled shrimp on a stick, cups of corn kernels — doused with chile and mayo — and other local flavors. Open-air restaurants bordering the wide, wide sidewalk specialize in seafood. And margaritas. Midway into your stroll, you can spot Puerto Vallarta's iconic city symbol, the charming Parish of Our Lady of Guadalupe, all sparkling white and gleaming gold inside, rising outside in red brick to a high steeple topped with a huge silver crown.

Puerto Vallarta boasts the cleanest beaches in all of Mexico, including Playa Los Muertos with its newly revamped spiral-style pier (pictured at left).

Beaches also beckon right below the Malecon, or you can follow the paved path alongside the river that runs from the ocean into the hillside through lush jungle greenery. Along the way, pause at a taco truck for a treat (\$1 each). Join the crowd, seated curbside on little plastic stools and layer on the salsa and garnish.

Meander to the cluster of art galleries that line Calle Guadalupe Sanchez (art crawls Wednesday evenings) — or pick up a T-shirt that instructs, "Relax. You're on the fun side of the wall."

That's for sure — clean, safe, lively.

What's not to like?

