

Leaders & Legends: A Portrait Collection

Houston

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*"The most important
yardstick of your
success will be how you
treat other people."*

—BARBARA BUSH

Colorful Coast

At a family-friendly resort in Puerto Vallarta, kids may love the lazy rivers and sea turtles, as their parents enjoy their outdoor spa treatments by the sea.

By Patrick Magee

Summer and fall are Velas Vallarta's busiest seasons — and not just for tourists. Located on Puerto Vallarta's Marina Vallarta, the all-inclusive resort is visited annually by 10,000 sea turtles, who migrate to lay eggs on the beach. Velas quietly collects and nurses the babies, and offers guests a chance to visit the nursery as they're hatching.

Nature touches every aspect of the Velas Vallarta experience. In fact, only in the confines of your room are you ever truly inside. The entrance to the resort, with three-story vaulted ceilings, leads to a courtyard in the middle of the property. A sense of escape overwhelms as hallways are created by palm trees and manicured shrubbery. Here, you're sure to cross paths with a peacock (or three). The winding "halls" soon lead to the weaving stream of a lazy river that connects three pools, one of which overlooks the beach, the Banderas Bay and, in the close distance, the Sierra Madre Mountains.

At breakfast, Velas serves a green juice freshly squeezed from celery, spinach, parsley and pineapple. It's made in batches in the morning — but is also available upon request in the afternoon. Want an insider tip? Add a splash of tequila and you have a guilt-free, Velas-inspired margarita, best enjoyed poolside, naturally.

Puerto Vallarta averages temps of 85 degrees year-round, and very little rain — so even the spa subscribes to

the unofficial Velas mantra, "Why be inside when the sun is shining outside?" Massages are given at the tip of a peninsula jutting into the bay, and as water crashes on nearby rocks, you feel like you're on a vacation from your vacation.

Just across the bay, the downtown streets of Puerta Vallarta are bustling, filled with the smells of street food and the sights of colorful wares pedaled by local artisans. But guests need not leave the resort for cultural experiences; family activities include the chance to create one's own *arte en popotillo*, an ancient art form using dyed straw adhered to a layer of beeswax, then applied to paper.

You might also dine in any one of several on-property restaurants, all featuring live mariachi music nightly. In addition to a fun, kid-friendly, not-necessarily-Mexican room-service menu available 24/7 — Cajun-style pizza with shrimp and sausage, anyone? — there's the fusion cuisine at Andrea, and the fresh seafood at the nightlife-savvy Alejandra.

And for dining with a view, you can't beat the open-air La Ribera. Offering charcoal-grilled meats and delicious traditional sides a la mashed potatoes, this white-tablecloth steakhouse just might also be the ideal vantage point for watching the return of the momma sea turtles, swimming back to the beach to retrieve their newborns. ■

— from Japanese-style sashimi dishes to ribs drenched in spicy hoisin-tinged barbecue sauce — are set to Buddha Bar-esque beats. You could also opt for an exclusive chef's tasting dinner at Mesa1, located on its own private island with panoramic ocean views.

And while you could easily spend hours checking out the cute shops and bars in trendy Sayulita, just 20 minutes away, there's enough here that you don't have to. Detox with an agave-and-tequila facial at Away spa, followed by a bone-melting session at the spa's water circuit. Learn to surf at Wave, the onsite surf shop, or ask the concierge team to set up everything — from scuba diving and whale watching to sunset sailing — for you.

Before you depart, head to the beach at sunset and snag a lounge chair on the sand as the sun's rays exit the world, reveling in the beauty of it all when the breeze hits your skin. Behind you on the pool deck, there's a DJ spinning tunes in front of a giant ice bucket chock-full of Veuve Clicquot, reminding you that in Mexico, the possibilities are endless. ■

Shell Game
Velas Vallarta touts fresh seafood and family-friendly activities.

