



Family Travel

Family Vacation Ideas

All the Reasons to Run to Puerto Vallarta—With or Without Your Kids

Three words: street. taco. tour.

By [Jessica Payne](#) February 6, 2024



One thing I've learned as a parent is that getting through [all the tantrums](#), the endless chauffeuring, and the [rejected dinners](#) is *so much easier* with a trip on the horizon to look forward to—even if it's months down the road. If you're thinking about [your next adventure](#) (spring break *is* just around the corner), might we put [Puerto Vallarta](#) on your radar, if it isn't already? I recently flew down to Mexico's Pacific coast for the first time and, from the beautiful beaches and lush mountains to adventure sports and incredible food, it's fair to say that I'm hooked. The only issue is that I can't decide whether to go back with my kids or just my husband (we're *long* overdue for some alone time). So I'm going to give you the rundown on both options because there are so many things to do in Puerto Vallarta and there's definitely something for everyone.

Puerto Vallarta for the littles

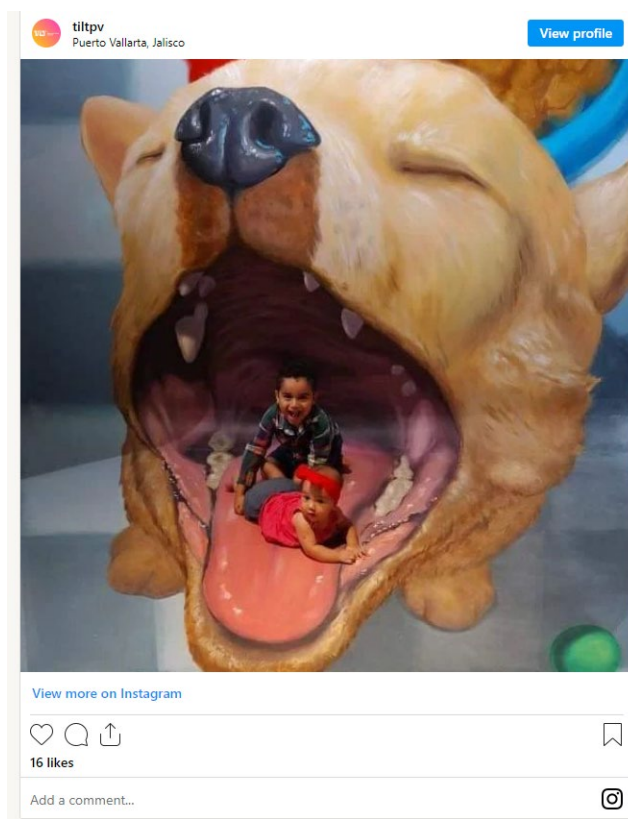
No family vacation is drama-free, from [sibling brawls](#) to stomach bugs, but hopefully your kids can pick up some of the beach town's chilled vibes. I've spent a few trips with my two littles at [all-inclusives in other parts of Mexico](#) where we didn't leave the resort at all, and even though we had a great time, by the end of the trip you start to feel the monotony of it all. So I *loved* having a safe and vibrant town to explore when you need to switch things up, and I know my kindergartener and first-grader would too.

What to do with kids



The Malecon in Puerto Vallarta

Wander the Malecon: Kiddies can live their best lives in PV, starting on the Malecon—an esplanade that runs along the beach in the heart of town where you'll spot a cluster of giant rocking horses inviting tourists big and small to go for a ride. There's plenty of colorful art and bronze sculpture to discover along the mile-long boardwalk, not to mention tub after tub of silky Mexican ice cream. You'll find plenty of beaches, restaurants, and shops to explore and you can catch a free show at the open-air amphitheater, Los Arcos.

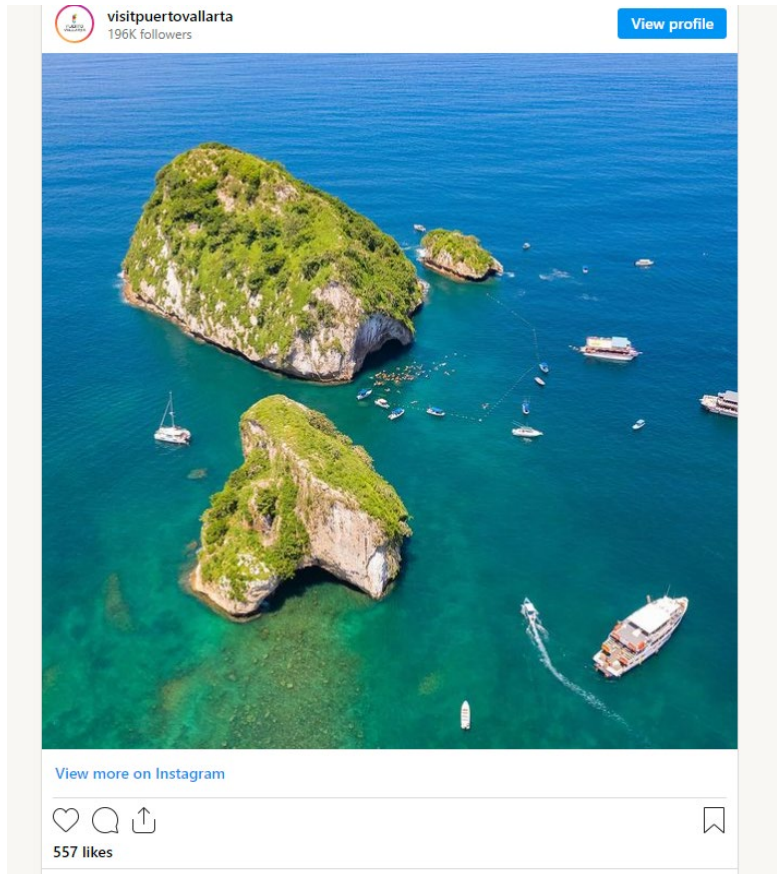


Get turned at the [Tilt Museum](#): You'll love this mind-bending spot as much as your kids—just make sure your [phone is fully charged](#) because you'll be taking a *lot* of pics as you wander through the different interactive 3D murals. Pose as if you're painting a portrait of Frida Khalo, hop onto some scaffolding to pretend to make graffiti, and hang ten on a surfboard with dolphins diving overhead. Artist Tracy Lee Stum (whose other museum happens to be in New Jersey) will turn your world upside down.

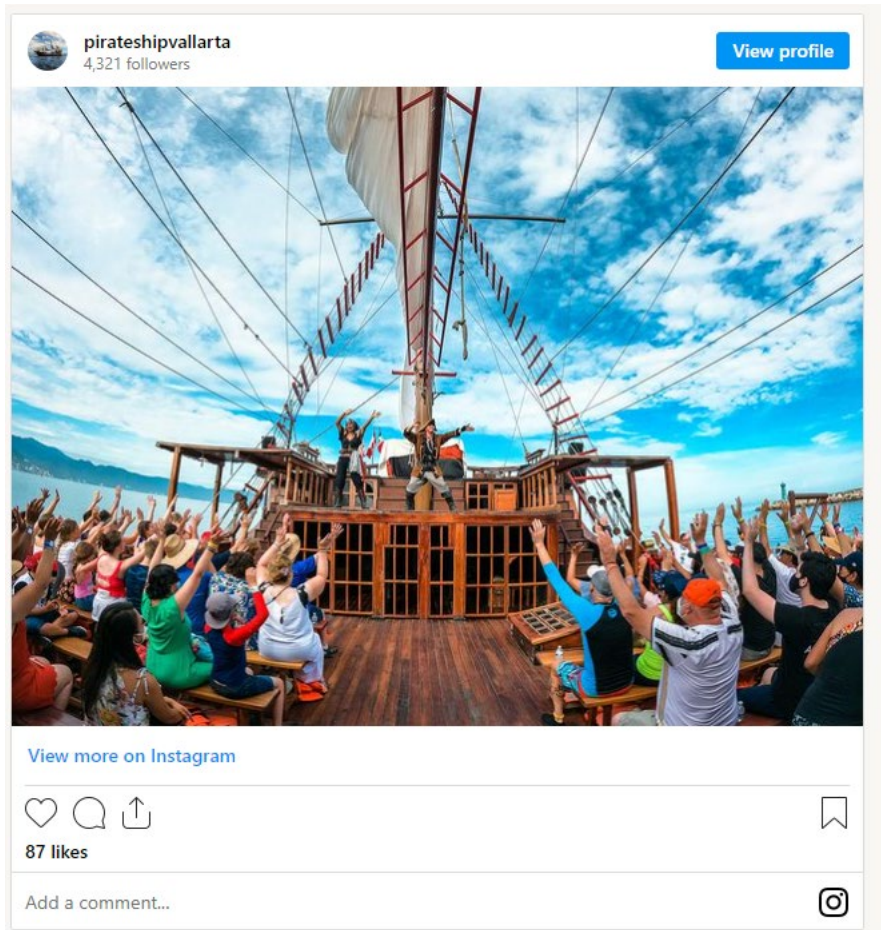


Vallarta Botanical Gardens

Head to the gardens: Your kids are going to want to look out for Ping Pong, the cutest little dog who belongs to one of the guides (and has a hilarious tendency to growl at the gardeners). But you'll be too distracted by the gorgeous growth on these 180 hectares of carefully conserved land at [Vallarta Botanical Gardens \(VBG\)](#), from the most spectacular orchids to vanilla bean plantations (the process to grow them is wild). I'd recommend having a guide take you through to better understand the plants and wildlife, take age-appropriate hikes, and have a cooling dip in the Los Horcones River. Oh, and don't miss the pet cemetery where lots of locals have buried their beloved dogs, cats, and birds. When everyone starts getting hungry, grab some fish tacos and chips with guac on the premises at [Hacienda de Oro](#) (and reward yourself for being awesome parents with a Vanilla Bean Mojito).



Go for a snorkel: Call up Captain Dave of [Ol' Salty's Ranch](#) to charter a boat for the afternoon and head to Los Arcos de Mismaloya, a striking natural rock formation that gives Amalfi vibes and has some amazing snorkeling for all ages. Our in-water guide was [Tatiana from Mexico Real Tours](#) and she was so informative and so. much. fun. Lounge about on the boat snacking on seasonal fruit (with an optional sprinkle of Tajin) and stop by Playa Colomitos, Mexico's teeny tiniest beach. Banderas Bay is also the spot for whale-watching (Humpbacks, in particular). Look into this if you happen to be in PV at the right time of year, from December to March and note that some tours only take kids ages 6 and up.



Set sail with some pirates: Are you the best parent ever? Now you arrrr! Take your crew on a six-hour adventure on the high seas aboard a [real wooden pirate ship](#). You'll get breakfast and lunch, plus a full-on pirate show with acrobatics, song, and dance. And don't worry, you won't have to deal with any cabin fever thanks to a stop at Majahuitas Island, a natural reserve where families can kayak, snorkel, play beach volleyball, and go on a treasure hunt.



Visit Puerto Vallarta

Find some adventure: If you've got older kids who love being active there are so many outdoor activities to tackle, and a great tour operator is Canopy River. You can try a ziplining circuit through the mountains or ride a raft down river rapids, and there's also rappelling, hiking, parasailing, and more.

Where to stay: Velas Vallarta



Velas Vallarta

For an all-inclusive experience just 20 minutes from the center of town and a few minutes from the marina, head to [Velas Vallarta](#). The family-friendly resort is big and bustling but with 345 suites it's not overwhelming. Large rooms easily adapt to the size of your family thanks to connecting doors that add additional bedrooms when needed, and two-bedroom family suites include a kitchen (hello, early morning cereal), dining area, living room, and balcony. There are several pools to cool off and a kid's club for ages 4-12 that runs from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. each day (programming includes sports like tennis and soccer, board games, crafts, sand castle competitions, treasure hunts, and movie nights). Two restaurants, one of which is practically on the beach, serve up international fare, and snack stations with Mexican goodies and ice cream help keep between-meal mood swings at bay.

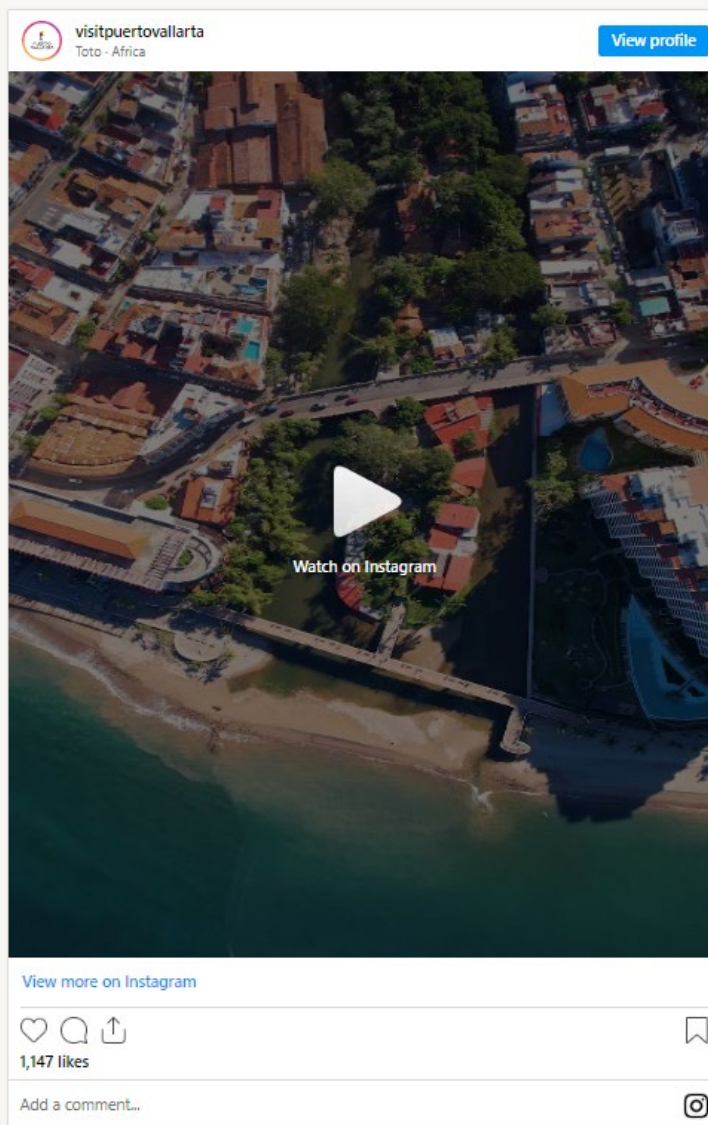


Velas Vallarta Kids Club

Puerto Vallarta for the bigs

Richard Burton fell for Puerto Vallarta after spending time there filming *The Night of the Iguana*. After buying his own casita, he surprised his then-lover Elizabeth Taylor with the house across the street, called Casa Kimberly (now a gorgeous boutique hotel). The pair built a bridge between the two homes, which the hot-headed couple probably used as much for storming out of each others' houses as they did for secret rendezvous free from paparazzi. Let the spirit of Richard and Elizabeth's steamy romance(s) reignite your passion on a parents-only trip to PV. After a decade of marriage and two kids, my husband and I are due to get away and remember that despite the uncapped toothpaste and nagging and overall exhaustion, we really *do* love each other.

What to do with your partner



Explore the Cuale River Island: In the heart of downtown Puerto Vallarta is a narrow strip of land dividing the Centro and Zona Romantica districts and running alongside the Cuale River, perpendicular to the ocean. If you walk the Malecon you'll find an entrance to the small island, where you'll be greeted by the [River Cafe](#) (which I hear has riotous New Year's Eve parties). Beyond the cafe is a treasure trove of art galleries, shops, restaurants, and market stalls with so many lovely ceramics, silver jewelry, straw hats, paintings, and all kinds of souvenirs for your kids. Be ready to snap some pics around the rubber trees, with their signature exposed roots, and possibly some iguanas hanging around.



Tacos el pastor

Take a street taco tour: When's the last time you had four blissful hours to wander around eating tacos and churros and drinking beer? Prioritize this! The six-ish tacos we tried at various stalls, stands and small family-owned eateries were better than any I've ever tasted, from the smoky marlin with chipotle sauce and beef cheek to the crispiest fish tacos and al pastor cooked shawarma-style with a hunk of pineapple dripping down from the top of the spit. Mid-tour we watched a couple make from-scratch churros on the street (unreal) and capped off the night in a super-cool raicilla bar (the local distilled spirit).



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Puerta Villarta

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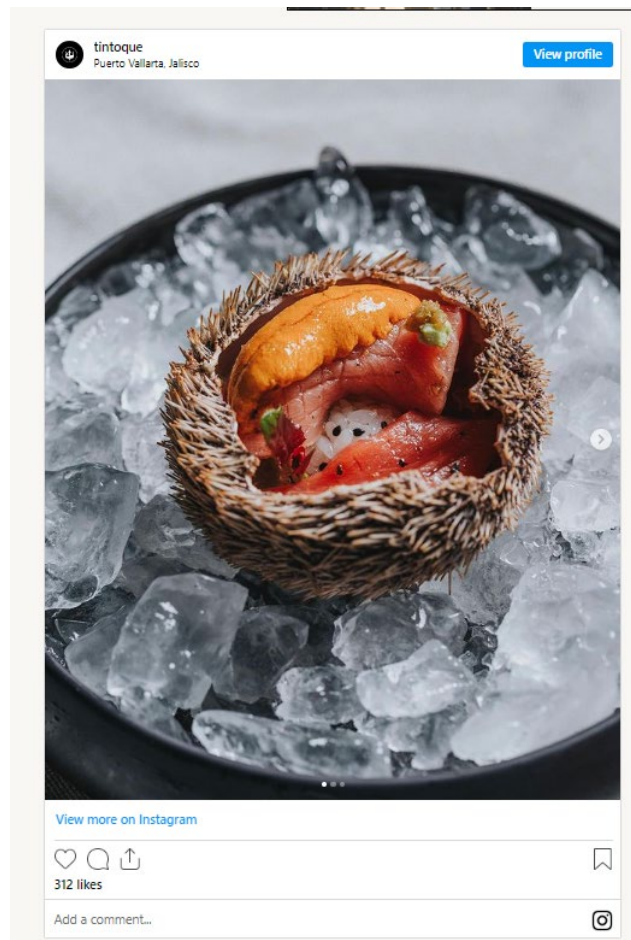
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Spend the night at the theatre: Consider this date night 3.0. Grab tickets to [ALMA, by Rhythms of the Night](#), a dinner show only accessible by water. After a sunset cruise (with an open bar, if that floats your boat), you and your boo have a candlelit dinner before heading to the open-air amphitheater for a musical telling of the story of Alma. It's all about the Mexican people's connection to animals, nature, and the spiritual world told with some serious acrobatics and special effects.



Sail through the bay: Hop aboard a [large catamaran](#) or sailboat for some quiet luxury with your other half. I swear the views will make you forget you even own a phone. You'll anchor up at a secret cove for some snorkeling, paddleboarding, and swimming, then have lunch and a few drinks before heading back to the marina.



Eat your heart out: I couldn't get enough of the food in PV, and I'm not just saying that because I generally subsist on leftover French toast and Xtreme Cheddar Goldfish. Looking out on the Cuale River, my 10-course tasting menu at Tintoque was easily one of the best meals of my life (the 36-hour tomato stuffed with goat cheese was a revelation). It showcased the best of Mexico in the most uniquely creative and sumptuous way. I also had an amazing meal at Makal Gastronomica, where my cocktail came in a test tube and combined raicilla, coffee (because mom), and a cocoa drink called chilate.



Zona Romantica

Live it up in the Zona Romántica: The nightlife is popping in the romantic zone, also known as Old Vallarta, which is one of the top LGBTQ+ destinations in Mexico. You'll find everything from drag shows to mezcal bars and loads of world-class restaurants so you can live it up like you did before your schedule filled up with soccer practices and toddler gymnastics.



ATV Tour on Jorullo Bridge

Go for a wild ride: If you're looking for some couple's adventure, [join an ATV tour](#) over what is said to be the world's longest vehicular suspension bridge. Jorullo Bridge crosses the Cuale River at almost 500 feet, so it's sure to get your adrenaline pumping. You can rip through the Sierra Madre Occidental on your own ATVs or cozy up on one and take turns driving. Tours often include a trip to the El Salto waterfall (bring bathers!) and a tequila tasting.

Where to stay: Casa Velas



Casa Velas

A sister resort to Velas Vallarta but without the little ones, [Casa Velas](#) is a luxe adults-only all-inclusive that's a lot more intimate—and a whole lot quieter. From the moment you arrive and settle into a plush couch for the most relaxing check-in experience of your life (fruity tequila popsicles included), you can feel your entire body relax. Each of the boutique resort's 80 suites is beautiful and spacious (mine had a personal plunge pool on the terrace) and I loved the overall Spanish Hacienda vibe. With just one main pool and one restaurant, it's a slower lifestyle than your typical all-inclusive, perfect to unwind and reconnect. For a change of scenery, hop on the resort's shuttle and it's just a few minutes to Táu Beach Club with private ocean access and seaside eats, or book a round of golf at the Marina Vallarta golf course (you'll save 25%). I'm more of a massage girl, and ABJA spa does not disappoint (be sure to take advantage of their hydrotherapy tub, sauna, and steam rooms).



Casa Velas

Editor's Note: This trip was hosted by the Puerto Vallarta tourism board and all opinions are the editor's own.