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Magical mystery on the Sea of Cortez

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Tribune News Service December 15, 2014



LORETO, MEXICO — What are people doing today and tomorrow at the Villa del Palmar, the mystery resort you've never heard of, south of Loreto, on Mexico's Gulf of California? For some, the answer is "nothing."

When I asked the man digging clams on the beach what was up, he answered "Not much, just relaxing, looking at the scenery." I asked the woman perched on the pool deck near me and she said the same thing. "Oh, nothing, really. I'm just enjoying the solitude." Splashing in the bay, I exchanged smiles with a snorkeler who popped up nearby and all I got were bubbles and a far-away look, as if words were superfluous.

Some say it's the rugged Sierra de la Giganta mountains that make the magic, rising behind the resort to leave guests gasping for adjectives. Others say it's the divine Mexican cuisine, the best they've ever tasted. Or it's the sports and recreation that do the trick: kayaking and paddle boarding, deluxe spa treatments, the tennis courts and the sunrise hikes. But a recent investigation - conducted in situ by yours truly - found the answer.

The enchantment here is the 4,447-acre site on an alluring blue bay framed by red-rock cliffs and access to five offshore islets within the Loreto Bay National Marine Park, now with additional protection as a World Heritage site. Colorful, dramatic and secluded, it compels just-arrived guests to stand and gape, amazed and speechless. Even when most of 181 multi-bedroom units are occupied - as happens over a holiday - the place is gloriously subdued.

Our neighbor Elaine, a new friend in the adjacent one-bedroom unit, provided the proof. "Oh, no, we're not newcomers to Mexico," she said. "We've been coming down to Cabo San Lucas forever. But we transferred our timeshare over to this property this year because Cabo is so crowded it doesn't feel like Cabo used to. Traffic, nightclubs, fast food joints, it's a mess. We had to pay more to make the exchange, but this feels like Mexico did 20 years ago."

Strolling down to the beach after breakfast, I found Jim and his brother-in-law Ron, standing knee-deep in the water, gazing at Danzante Island lying low on the horizon, the very image of a sleeping dragon.

"They say that whales often swim by," I said, hoping to start a conversation. "Six or seven different species, they say. See anything today?"

"Not really," said Jim. "We're just looking. I'm used to wide-open spaces and forests, without a lot of people. I like it empty."

"It's a big change from Cabo," added Ron, asking me not to use his real name. "We had a timeshare in a condo over there, but Cabo attracts so many tourists now that we turned in our membership and moved it over to this side of Baja. The beach here is practically empty and you can get an umbrella when you want one. No beach vendors, either. The resort has exclusive use of all of it. Loreto? It's a nice village, not very big but interesting for a day out. You should see the museum and the church, which dates from the 1750s."

While we were talking, a small yacht motored into the bay and anchored offshore. Five minutes later a man appeared, jumped into the water and swam toward the beach, going like 60. Hmmm, I thought, as he came closer. A trespasser. On the other hand, he looks at home. Maybe he'll talk to me. But while I hesitated he hurried up the beach and vanished behind the building.

Eventually it was obvious why the resort felt empty during the day. People were busy, walking on the trail above the coast; sport fishing for dorado, yellowfin tuna and sailfish; kayaking around the bay, paddle boarding from the beach or shopping in Loreto.

Snorkel and scuba diving excursions headed for the Marine Park almost daily, taking snorkelers and scuba divers into the heart of the "world's aquarium," as marine conservationist and diver Jacques Cousteau tagged it. The first to explore this undersea world, Cousteau became the catalyst behind the campaign to preserve what he called the "North American Galapagos."

Most outings cruise around one or two of the five nearest islands - Coronado, Carmen, Danzante, Monserrat and Santa Catalina, each known for rocky coves, powdery white sand and emerald water. I joined the Isla Coronado adventure and was rewarded with a couple hours of snorkeling in sunlit, glass-clear water, where our guide Manuel estimated the visibility at 25 to 50 feet. The fish were abundant and easy to see, and our group spotted seals and dolphins before heading to a white sand beach for a picnic.

Each evening, as people slowly gathered for dinner, the adults wandering through the gardens to watch the last light fade behind the mountains and kids chasing each other across the plaza, I realized that the resort was actually very full.

Prompted by waiters taking bar orders and by the tantalizing smells of warm tortillas, roast vegetables and grilled pork and chicken drifting from the kitchen, people headed in to eat, some choosing the more casual Market cafe or El Danzante, the resort's upscale restaurant.

Accompanied by candle light and guitar music, the spirit of fiesta took hold, amplified by laughing and talking and plates of food, delivered from the kitchen. And at 9 o'clock, a folk-dance group filed out onto an impromptu stage to announce the evening's entertainment, a show of regional dances and slapstick comedy.

Recognizing their favorite employees as part of the 10-member cast - "that's Clara, in the red and white skirt," and "that's Jorge, our guide," - the audience clapped appreciatively. Transformed by show-biz makeup and embroidered costumes, the group smiled, bowed and put on a good enough performance to suggest that they must have practiced often. I couldn't help hoping that management gave them time off from their jobs to work on their routines. Dancing nonstop for 90 minutes after spending a day chopping vegetables or making beds would have been too much.

Like all resorts in their first year or two - Villa del Palmar opened in the spring of 2011 - some problems surfaced. I heard about misplaced reservations, errors in bar charges and guests who had paid in advance for the all-inclusive option but were repeatedly asked to sign bar chits anyway. Computer glitches were blamed for losing room requests and timeshare owners' names.

The shuttle service between the airport in Loreto and the resort was slower than expected, and didn't run as often as expected. The daily shopping shuttles to Loreto were also off schedule. Continuing roadwork on the adjacent highway - in progress at the time - created irregular closures that stopped traffic. Construction on the Rees Jones golf course has dragged on, with the completion pushed into 2015.

But these pinpricks didn't seem to hurt. The guests I talked to were happy, delighted with the lodging and thrilled with the friendly staff, citing their favorite waiter, bartender, guide or housekeeper as the reason they'd had such a good time. Making personal connections made these travelers feel at home.

Seeing the yacht was still anchored in the harbor after a couple of days, I asked at the desk and learned that the swimmer was one of the Villa del Palmar's investor-owners, there for an on-site review and business meeting.

If I'd caught up with him, I would have had a story straight from the horse's mouth. As it was, I concluded that "nothing," the answer I heard so often, was entirely reasonable. Like the teenager who answers "nothing," when his parents ask him where he went or what he did, it meant, "Do I really have to say, when I'm happy just being here?"

MAKING IT HAPPEN: The property's 181 units, available as hotel rooms or for sale as a timeshare, include air-conditioned, furnished studios, one, two, and three-bedroom villas and suites, all with fully equipped kitchens. Some have balconies. The resort has three restaurants, five swimming pools, a deluxe spa, workout room, water sports equipment, tennis courts, a Kids Club, small market, beach chairs and umbrellas.

The Loreto area is never cold. Summer days can be excessively hot; typical winter days are warm with cool nights, and variable water temperatures, partly dependent on Sea of Cortez currents.

Room rates in a double start at \$288 per night. All-inclusive rates include meals and most bar and pool drinks, or you can pay for items individually. The closest other restaurants and shopping are in the historic town of Loreto, about 30 minutes away by shuttle bus or taxi. For more information, visit www.villadelpalmarloreto.com.

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