

PUERTO VALLARTA

Mexico—Waiter, is that food in my plate?

By Dominick A. Merle

Once a year this popular Pacific resort sets aside the tortillas and tacos to showcase its International Gourmet Festival. Celebrated chefs from around the world join the best from Mexico to present fancy 10-course dinners---you know, the ones that often feature a solitary shrimp with a sprig of parsley as a parasol.



It's become quite an event on the international gourmet circuit, although it can be a bit of mystery at times to decide which utensil to use to consume some of the "creations." Usually, it's a case of follow the leader.

We had our opening dinner at the Alfredo di Roma restaurant in the Presidente Intercontinental Hotel on the southern end of Banderas Bay. The guest chef was Yann Michel Cozic of Lemans, France, and his "one-time-only" menu featured exotic sea foods.

After a week of high dining at a number of other participating restaurants, we ended our gourmet experience at the Emiliano restaurant in the boutique Casa Velas Hotel at the northern tip of the bay. Guest chef Claudio Hotter from Austria unveiled "first servings" that fused European and Mexican cuisine

Other activities during the festival included a chocolate tasting, a coffee course, an open air cooking performance featuring eight international

chefs and the induction of several new members into the Chefs Hall of Fame on the boardwalk in the old section of the city.

But too much of anything---even exclusive food---can be overwhelming, so we slipped away from time to time to wolf down some comfort dishes at beachfront snack shacks. Who knows---there might have been a couple of celebrity chefs in disguise doing the same thing.



Once a tiny fishing village, Puerto Vallarta is now second only to Cancun as a Mexican resort. And why not? It's relatively safe, the sun shines year round, locals are friendly, there are 16 miles of beautiful beaches and a number of interesting day trips to exotic jungles, tiny islands and remote villages that still do things the old way.

From mid-December to March the humpback whales arrive in the bay to give birth, and from May to September thousands of sea turtles lay their eggs on the beaches. The eggs are put into incubation and the hatchlings released into the sea, usually at night to protect against land predators.

Puerto Vallarta is



encircled by the tropical Sierra Madre Mountains to the east and fronted by Banderas Bay, Mexico's largest natural bay and second largest on the American continent. It took off as a tourist destination in the early 1960s, thanks largely to the film "Night of the Iguana" with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. A number of other

Hollywood movies have been shot here, but it was the Liz-Dick flick that cast the biggest spotlight.

Today there are more than 300,000 year-round residents, and several million international tourists arrive annually, 90 percent of them from the U.S. and Canada. It has also become a favorite holiday spot for Mexican tourists, especially those from nearby Guadalajara, Mexico's second largest city.





Popular beaches within the city include Playa Camerones (Shrimp Beach) where fishermen once unloaded their catch, and Playa Los Muertos (Beach of the Dead). The ominous name, some say, stems from the 1500s when pirates left their victims on the beach.

Then there is Playa Boca de Tomates (Mouth of Tomatoes) which doesn't sound ominous, but is. You'll rarely find a bather here because of the rocks and crocs--the reptiles coming from the muddy waters of the nearby river.

Viejo Vallarta (Old Town) is a cobblestone area extending north and south of the Cuale River. This is tourist central--wall-to-wall shops, restaurants and unusual boutiques. A stroll on the Malecon (boardwalk) is perhaps the best way to view this section.

We took two sidetrips during our stay, first a one-hour boat ride to the small town of Yelapa, known mainly because of its majestic natural waterfall. In our walk throughout the village, we met a craftsman who works solely in rosewood and sampled some of

the delicious (but heavy) pies and cakes that are made only here, combinations of chocolate, cheese, custard, apple, mango and other exotic fruits.

Our second tour was a 45-minute drive to El Tuito, a typical village south of the city. We had a bountiful lunch at an open-air café in the main square. No solitary shrimp in the middle of a large plate here---in fact, my plate was completely devoured by food and out of sight. Nothing fancy. But mighty tasty.



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The International Gourmet Festival takes place each November (www.festivalgourmet.com). For further information on Puerto Vallarta use the website www.visitpuertovallarta.com