



The barefoot beach at Four Seasons Punta Mita in Mexico is the perfect setting for family fun and bucket list adventures. *CURT WOODHALL*

FAMILY TRAVEL

Punta Mita is paradise on the Pacific

Resort offers abundance of activities as well as exquisite dining choices

MHAIRRI WOODHALL

“Come on Donatello, you can do it, just a little bit farther,” cheers my daughter Brooklyn, while she bounds around in the sand.

Her face is a mix of emotions, ranging from excitement and wonderment, to nervous anticipation.

“If he’s struggling, I can cross the line, right? Or if there’s a bird? I just have to help him,” she rambles, trying to swallow the panic.

I grasp her hand in solidarity, offering quiet reassurance. Curt, my husband, joins us and together we watch our tiny trio clumsily shuffle toward the surf. Soon, one-by-one, Donatello, Mikey and Leo are gently lapped from shore and disappear into the Pacific. We’ve enjoyed many goosebump-inducing travel adventures. The sunset turtle release at Four Seasons Resort Punta Mita tops them all.

The program is a passion project for Enrique Alejos, the resort’s Cultural Concierge who has led the bucket list experience for five years. It’s offered almost every night, between August and January, through Four Seasons’ partnership with the conservation organization RED Tortuguera AC, which manages hatcheries in the states of Jalisco and Nayarit. The nominal fee of \$950 Mexican pesos (just under \$60) per person supports the initiative.

Enrique opened the evening with a brief presentation in the cultural centre, then each participant was given a tiny, wriggling and totally adorable olive ridley sea turtle. After walking, with great caution, down to the beach, Enrique drew a line in the sand – about two metres from the ocean – that we had to stand behind for the duration of the release.

After setting our turtles onto the sand, we became exuberant cheerleaders coaxing our wards away. If all goes to plan, the turtles will eventually return home for nesting. By the time the sun has set over Banderas Bay, we’ve waved farewell and are crying happy tears. To call the experience magical is an understatement.

Punta Mita is a 1,500-acre gated resort near Puerto Vallarta boasting two five-star hotels (the Four Seasons and St. Regis), luxury residences and a pair of signature Jack Nicklaus golf courses. Cultural and recreational activities are offered in abundance and there are many choices for active families.

The area is hugely popular with surfers, and the gentle waves in front of Four Seasons are ideal for beginners. We booked a kid’s tandem lesson for Brooklyn through Tropicsurf. She began on dry land, learning how to pop up on the board using her chicken wings and lizard legs. Not long after, her instructor paddled them out to the surf. Much to my amazement, they caught their very first wave and rode back to shore.

The temperature was cooler that day, and the water was cold. I was convinced Brooklyn would call it quits after the first few waves, but my tenacious kid persevered for the entire hour and loved every minute. She was equally enthralled with the programming at Kids for All Seasons, and by the end of our stay, we had a pretty robust art collection to bring home.

During peak times, the resort extends kids club hours and hosts dance and piñata parties. Both were well received by Brooklyn. As was the Nunutz Games Room we frequented most nights. PlayStations, Wii, Xbox 360, Guitar Hero, a video dance game, as well as air hockey, Ping-Pong and foosball. My husband was in heaven.

I, however, found nirvana at the spa where tequila is used in the signature massage. For centuries the potent spirit has been touted as a natural treatment for pain relief, and while I still prefer my tequila on the rocks with lime, the topical application is unique, effective and outstanding.

Punta Mita’s humpback whale season spans December through March. In February, when we visited, the viewing was at its peak. From the resort alone we sighted five whales, two of which we watched from the infinity pool.

I quickly fell in love with the



Marietas Islands National Park near Punta Mita, Mexico, is a day trip definitely worth taking whether it’s whale season or not. *CURT WOODHALL*

thrill of the sight and booked a boat charter through Tranquilo Surf with a group of friends who were staying at a condo in town. The tour included whale watching and snorkelling in Marietas Islands National Park.

En route to the protected isles, we were gifted with a family of whales – mama, papa and baby – which we observed for about 20 minutes. On the way home, we saw six humpbacks and a dolphin pod.

The national park is also an impressive sight, and worth visiting even outside of whale season. Brooklyn had a blast exploring the caves and narrow passageways, inspecting the crabs and sea urchins that covered most of the rocks and floating past the famous blue-footed boobies that nest in the craggy windswept outcrops.

After the tour, we wandered through the shops in Punta Mita’s quaint downtown – located about five minutes outside the gated complex – and stopped for supper at the beachfront restaurant Si Senior.

As lobster season was in full swing, deciding on our main was easy. Appetizer selection proved more difficult. Every dish described by our waiter sounded better than the previous. Grilled

panela cheese, Peruvian ceviche, shrimp pastor tacos, octopus carpaccio. We over-ordered, overate and quenched our thirst with freshly squeezed lime margaritas.

There’s a string of eateries along the beachfront in town, and al-

though easy to access, we ate most of our meals at the Four Seasons. Lunch was always taken poolside at the lazy river. For dinner, we tried each of the signature restaurants. All were impressive, but Bahia on the beach has the best view of Punta Mita’s dazzling sunsets, and Aramara’s contemporary Asian menu was our absolute favourite. If I had to count, Brooklyn likely ate four plates of the chicken gyoza and at least six orders of salmon sashimi over the course of our stay.

Curt and I also managed to sneak in a date night at Carolina, in the neighbouring St. Regis Resort. It’s the only Five-Diamond dining experience in the Riviera Nayarit and the four-course tasting menu, with wine pairings, is the biggest draw. Chef Miguel Soltero’s complex creations are beautiful in both flavour and presentation. The ever-changing dishes are designed around the season, but I’m hopeful the duck mole becomes a menu staple.

As a carb addict, I was also thrilled to discover Chef Soltero embraces a passion for baking and bread making, which was passed down from his father, who owns a bakery. Each course was preceded by a delicious doughy morsel. And the dessert? Save room,

The only way to improve upon the experience is to dine on a Friday and take part in the weekly Champagne Sabering Ritual offered in the ocean view Altamira lobby at 6 p.m. Bubbles always taste better at sunset.

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