

# Mexican jewels: cancun and puerto vallarta



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Cancun and Puerto Vallarta are Mexico's most famous beaches, drawing in millions of tourists every year. Yet, as tourist destinations, Cancun and Puerto Vallarta could not be more different. Though both target the upper-middle class social strata - the rich, the famous, the beautiful - the way these two markets their attractions show radical divergence, a divergence that could be traced from their respective histories. Cancun only came into existence in 1970. Originally a near-deserted isle off the coast of the Yucatan peninsula, it was reshaped into a resort with a \$27 million loan from the Inter-American Development Bank.

Located in the state of Quintana Roo, it is bounded by the Bahia de Mujeres, the Caribbean Sea, and the lagoons of Nichupte and Bojorquez. The main draw of Cancun is the turquoise beaches of the Caribbean that are lined with shores of powdery white sand. Surprisingly, the beaches - like the locale - are warm, with a temperature range of 26-36 Celsius year round. However, the daily weather is very unpredictable in Cancun, with a sunny morning turning to a stormy midday to a cloudy afternoon.

Despite the prominence of its beaches, Cancun is also home to vast tracts of lush vegetations and jungles, making it a real center of diversity. The most famous of this is Xel-ha, a natural aquarium bounded by jungles, caves, and archaeological sites. On the other hand, Puerto Vallarta has been in existence since December 12, 1851, when it was founded by a certain Don Guadalupe Sanchez Torres. This village, situated in the state of Jalisco, was initially founded under the impression that it would be serving as a port to ship silver being mined from nearby cities and villages.

Unlike Cancun, Vallarta faces the North Pacific Ocean, specifically the Bahia de Banderas, though it also has the same powdery white sands of Cancun. The beaches, as well as the state itself, are warm year round, with roughly the same temperatures exhibited by Cancun. On its other end, it is bounded by the Sierra Madre Mountains, which creates an ethereal aura that contrasts the placid, clear blue waters of the Pacific with the dense, wild jungles of the mountains. The disparities between the two resorts are further seen in their respective master plans.

Cancun, being an “artificial” resort, is tailor made for tourism. Puerto Vallarta, meanwhile, became a beach resort only through popular demand. The center of Vallarta still preserves its old-world charm, with the small fishing villages contrasting heavily with the huge hotels and high rise condominiums at the borders. These differences in history and developmental strategies give rise to the distinct characters of the resorts. Cancun was planned to become the destination of the younger crowd, given its numerous bars and nightlife infrastructures.

One of the most popular places for tourists in Cancun is Kukulcan Boulevard, a long stretch peppered with hotels, beachfront resorts, and residential condominiums. Right smack in the center of the city, it divides Cancun in the middle and has become a standard stopover for both locals and tourists. Aside from the boulevard, another interesting place for tourists is Laguna Nichupte. It boasts of several marinas, golf courses, shopping malls, as well as restaurants offering fresh seafood. Finally, there is a special “Party Zone” meant for the party animals.

Discos, night clubs, and bars abound in this area, but it is not meant solely for partygoers; even the tourists less inclined to party are welcome as it is also home to Cancun's better known restaurants and malls. Puerto Vallarta, on the other hand, is the exact opposite of Cancun. It is marketed as an unhurried refuge, where relaxation and respite can be had on its lovely beaches. Rather than numerous parties day in and day out, Vallarta offers quiet and serenity, a trademark that harkens back to its past.

As evidence, Vallarta offers tourists a chance to spend their vacation on quiet, secluded nature reserves, most of which need a boat to be accessed. The most famous of these include Bucerias, Mismaloya, Quimixto and Yelapa. According to the locals, Vallarta is also home to Mexico's best boardwalk. It has all the amenities of typical boardwalks - restaurants, food stalls, nightclubs - but it also offers more features, such as a market where artists create their works. This boardwalk also houses Vallarta's most recognizable landmark: the Church of Guadalupe. Finally, in the center of Vallarta runs the river Cuale.

What is most interesting about this destination is not the river itself but the island that lies in its center, the Isla Rio Cuale. This small island contains numerous shops and small restaurants, as well as being home to some of Vallarta's grandest scenery. As tourist destinations, they offer not only the standard water sports and activities that typically accompany beach resorts. Rather, because of their colorful and distinctive histories, Cancun and Vallarta are able to offer diverse and even meaningful activities to their tourists, both the local and international visitors.

Cancun offers day trips to its archaeological digs, which immediately gives it an advantage over its nearest competitors like Acapulco and Ixtapa. For Puerto Vallarta, there is the chance to visit the old colonial towns south of Rio Cuale. Whitewashed buildings, cobblestone streets, distinctive Spanish roofs are part of Vallarta's distinctive charms. Their rich history provides the perfect counterpoint to the commercialism that has enveloped both of them. The distinctive natures of Cancun and Vallarta - highly diverging, yet still intertwined - catapulted both to international status and fame.

Though one was built solely for tourism while the other was a fortunate accident, the boost they give to Mexico's economy cannot be underestimated. Because of their existence, the country has been able to offer jobs to millions of its citizens as well as reap the benefits of tourism revenue. For the tourists, Cancun and Vallarta offer pleasures unlike those seen in other posh getaways, providing them alternatives to the all-too-common Caribbean destinations. As such, Cancun and Puerto Vallarta truly deserve their places among the World's most beautiful.