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BOUTIQUE HEAVEN

A Trio of Small Hotels On Mexico's Pacific Coast

By Anita Draycott

If you've got clients looking for something beyond all-inclusive resorts, there are a string of boutique hotels hidden away on Mexico's Pacific Riviera, near Puerto Vallarta, that may be just their cup of tequila.

Away From It All At Las Alamandas

At the end of a bone-rattling dusty road, the manicured green lawns and gardens fragrant with gardenias, jasmine, and the brilliant yellow Alamanda flower, for which the resort is named, seems like a Technicolour mirage. If luxury is all about time and space, we've hit the jackpot. Set in the middle of a 686-hectare ecological reserve, up to 22 guests in six villas at Las Alamandas enjoy four pristine beaches, secluded lagoons and exotic flora and fauna, including 100 recorded species of wild birds like Inca and White Tipped Doves.

This private paradise, about two hours south of Puerto Vallarta, is the brainchild of its owner Isabel Goldsmith who inherited it from her grandfather, Bolivian tin magnate Don Antenor Patino. Gramps had visions of a mega-resort; not so his granddaughter, whose mission was to preserve the environment and share her intimate retreat with just a handful of guests.

Las Alamandas is a romantic hideaway, perfect for the avid idler who wants to curl up in a hammock with a good book. Or ride horseback along the oceanside cliffs. Or take binoculars and a picnic to the resort's bird sanctuary.

The architecture and décor are bold, bright and authentically Mexican. Upholstery, domed roofs, walls and steps are a fearless

rainbow of canary yellow, rosa mexicana (bubblegum pink and Goldsmith's favourite), turquoise and orange. Goldsmith hired local artisans to embroider the cushions, paint the bathroom tiles and accessorize the villas with folk art. The dazzling colour scheme would clash with Canada's drab winters but it sure works on this sun-drenched Costalegre (Happy Coast).

We could have had dinner delivered to our private terrace or served on a secluded beach, complete with a mariachi band and bonfire. Instead, we strolled along the illuminated garden paths, past gushing fountains to the Oasis restaurant where we dined under the stars to the beat of the pounding waves.

Should we feel the need for a workout more strenuous than climbing into a hammock for a siesta, there's a tennis court and fully-equipped gym designed by frequent guest, Robert de Niro. Who knows? He might be the guy jogging on the beach.

Golf Nirvana at Isla Navidad

Pass through the security gates to Isla Navidad and you know you're in for something special. Lush gardens flourish on each side of the brick road. On the central boulevard, teams of gardeners trim fanciful topiary bushes into the shapes of birds and animals. After about 10 minutes, a sign points to the pro shop built in the style of a grand Mexican hacienda. You have your choice of three nine-hole golf courses – the Ocean, the Mountain and the Lagoon.

We hadn't booked a tee time but that was of no concern. The crew quickly shifted our clubs

to a cart and waved us in the direction of our first nine holes on *Campo Oceano*. Not until the ninth hole with its guarded lagoon and mountain backdrop did we finally see two other golfers. "It's a hideaway golf course," confirmed the pro. "We never want it to be crowded." Music to my ears.

After the game we checked into Mesón Doña Paz, a mansion on the resort built by owner Sr. Don Antonio Leañó as his private retreat. The architecture and décor are a tasteful combination of Mexican, Spanish Colonial and Mediterranean. Our room had a balcony overlooking the pool and beach beyond. A refreshing waterfall provided constant background music.

On the dining room terrace, they'll bring you a menu if you ask, but are more accustomed to cooking whatever your heart desires. Got a craving for a clubhouse sandwich and a strawberry/banana smoothie for breakfast? No problem. With never more than 30 guests, nothing it seems is too much trouble for chef Alfonso. His staff genuinely enjoys making you happy. Perhaps you'd like to have cocktails served down on the beach with some grilled calamari appetizers, then dine via candlelight around the corner on a cliff where the sunsets are spectacular.

Home Sweet Home at Casa Las Brisas

Some small hotels try to be a home away from home. Casa las Brisas truly succeeds. We shared the seven-suite villa with owner Marc Linskog, Tristan and Alegre (his two handsome Italian greyhounds) and Octavio, the chef.

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Just 30 minutes north of Puerto Vallarta, Las Brisas, overlooking the outside cape of the Bay of Banderas, is so "away from it all" that Marc offers an all-inclusive package that gives guests free run of the place and includes all meals, snacks and drinks. Thoughtful details, like a basket of sunscreen at the pool's swim-up bar, snorkelling equipment and boogie boards, Scrabble and other games, a mini-library and gym make you feel right at home.

Feel like a snack? Follow your nose to the kitchen where Octavio will whip up a batch of zesty gazpacho or guacamole and salsa. We arrived late one afternoon to find Marc and his dining staff in the middle of a wine tasting and were invited to join them. Even though it's off the beaten path, Octavio's reputation as a stellar chef has spread so that the well-heeled set from the nearby Four Season's Punta Mita resort have taken a taxi to dine here under the stars on giant prawns, rack of lamb and tequila-scented flan with roasted corn.

Each room is an eclectic mix of Mexican furniture with terra cotta floors, white stucco walls and whimsical Botero-inspired paintings. Bathrooms feature huge tiled showers and colourful hand-painted sinks. Balconies and terraces all overlook the pool and beach beyond.

The next morning after coffee and hot cinnamon/pecan rolls and a plate of tropical fruit on our balcony, we hiked along the sugary Playa Careyeros where the only footprints were our own. We spotted whales breaching in the distance.

Back at Las Brisas, we spent the last afternoon of our vacation lazing by the pool and trading recipes with Octavio. Marc offered us a ride into Puerto Vallarta for some sightseeing but we didn't want to budge. Marc's mission is to make a stay at Las Brisas so good that guests won't want to leave. Mission accomplished.

Going Down Mexico Way

These remote beach hideaways on Mexico's central Pacific Coast are members of Mexico's Boutique Hotels. The association offers a convenient service allowing travellers to select several hotels and tailor a customized "sun and sand escape." It's one-stop-shopping including pre-arranged transfers if needed, and savvy recommendations on how to best plan the route. For reservations, visit www.mexicoboutiquehotels.com.

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