

A Sweet Time

By Samantha L. Stewart



The lesbian travel company Sweet has chosen Puerto Vallarta, along the beaches of Mexico's "Rainbow Riviera," as one of its favorite travel destinations of the year.

Sweet, with its mission to create meaningful travel experiences for women, has found the perfect way to reach that goal, combining exciting adventures with opportunities to make a difference.

The secret is in its hybrid formula: Mix exotic locations, adventurous excursions, and live entertainment with large-hearted, eco-friendly volunteer projects in local

communities. The reactions have been phenomenal.

"It's been so much more than I expected," said Sue Steirer of Napa, Calif., who attended Sweet Puerto Vallarta last spring. "It has all the things you'd expect from a nice vacation. But the volunteer projects have really made this special. Everyone involved with this has been so friendly. Honestly, it's

felt more like an awesome summer camp. I'll definitely be back."

So, does that sound like something you'd spend a week's worth of your hard-earned vacation on? You bet it does.

Here's what to expect: Sweet vacations take place around the world in exotic locations as varied as Kenya and Cancun. In Puerto Vallarta, Sweet is beachside at the five-star Hard Rock Hotel.

Overlooking the Pacific Ocean, the Hard Rock's grounds are exquisite, boasting two pools with swim-up bar, a large outdoor Jacuzzi, excellent restaurants, a spa and a band-shell amphitheater—all just steps away from the beach.

A quick traveler's tip: In Mexico, hotels are rated differently than they are in the States. The hotel rating system is called "Stars and Diamonds." Hotels may qualify to rate one to five stars or diamonds, diamond ratings being the highest, according to Frommer's. So the Hard Rock's five stars are good, but do manage your expectations.

That said, the rooms are a bit small but the amenities are exceptional—from the private in-room hot tubs for two, which are standard in each suite, to the comfy



white robes and slippers. Step out onto your room's Juliet balcony to take your morning coffee overlooking the sea.

But don't linger too long, because Sweet has organized a diverse itinerary of activities for you to choose from, *a la carte*. So plan ahead and make sure you sign up for all the events that are on your must-do list.

Volunteer activities have included the Animal Shelter Project, eco-friendly tree planting, and helping to build a community children's library.

For the adventure seeker, explore the gorgeous waters of the Baja Peninsula on a chartered sailboat excursion. If you're a land-lover, you can go ATV riding through the red-dust mountain trails. You can even dare fate by zip lining over lush jungle canopies. No matter what gets your heart racing, there are plenty of options to satisfy the adrenaline junkie in you.

After feeding your soul with good works and daring adventures, you can retreat to the hotel for some much-deserved pampering. Feast at one of the Hard Rock Hotel's tasty restaurants or just wet your whistle at a spacious swim-up pool bar. And don't forget to treat yourself to a relaxing massage at the spa.

In the evening, the Sweeties come together at the amphitheater for a night of



SAMANTHA STEWART (DOLPHIN, BUS, BABS); ANDY CHRISTMAS, JUDY PRICE, MINDY YU (ATVS, KIDS)



entertainment underneath the stars. Brandi Carlile, Edie Carey, Jen Foster, and Natalia Zuckerman are some of the musicians who have been featured. Funny ladies Shann Carr and Jennie McNulty are just a couple of the comics who've brought on the laughs.

And if you still aren't ready to call it a night... Throw on your dancing shoes because the after-parties are just getting started! Night owls can dance the night away right at the hotel. But get your rest, Sweeties, because tomorrow is another full day.

If you are looking to spread your wings and break from the pack, head out and explore the local villages along the Riviera Nayarit, all within an hour of Puerto Vallarta.

For the brave, rent a car and wind your way up the mountainous jungle highway to the surf town of Sayulita. It's about a 30-minute drive from the hotel, but a

world away from resort life. Buzzing with locals, expat hippies, families and surf enthusiasts, Sayulita is off the beaten path and a great place to spend an afternoon.

Stop by Naty's Cocina and indulge in one (or three) of its famous \$1 marlin tacos. Locals love it. Tourists love it. And your wallet loves it, too. Then kick back under a beach umbrella and watch the surfers ride the waves, or hop on one yourself. Why not?

If shopping is more your thing, the bustling village of Bucerías is about a 20-minute drive from the hotel and offers the best of both worlds. The north side of town is the traditional arts district, or Old Town. It's filled with local artists and shops selling unique indigenous creations. Get lost in the market rows, searching for your treasures. Then stay for an evening on the south side, or New Town, known for its happening nightlife, bars and live music.

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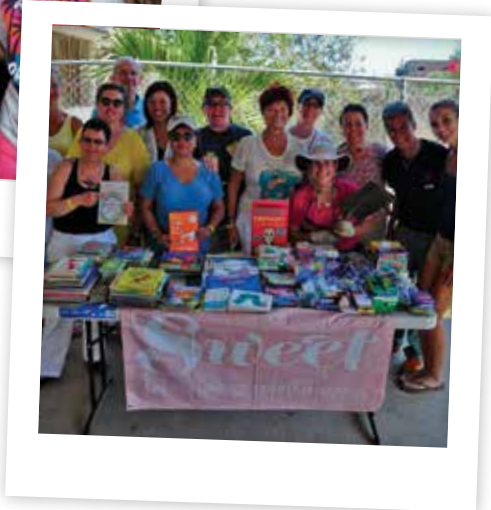
Don't want to rent a car? Hop on a local bus and head downtown to Puerto Vallarta. With the five o'clock shadow of the mountains as its backdrop, downtown Puerto Vallarta is less quaint and more gritty-urban. There are a few gay bars, which the locals are happy to point you toward. And for the very adventurous, there's no shortage of strip clubs along the main drag.

A mix of old and new, modern coffee houses and upscale restaurants mingle alongside small Modeloramas (beer stands) and mom-and-pop shops. For souvenirs, the shops sell colorful woven dresses, jewelry and art. Or buy the traditional souvenir that locals have been offering the tourist since the 1960s: dried

armadillos, frogs and snakes!

If you prefer your animals alive, be sure to pop into Vallarta Adventures and seize the chance to swim with the dolphins. And all this is just a five-minute bus ride from the Sweeties' home base at the Hard Rock Hotel.

All in all, Sweet vacations and Puerto Vallarta offer a well-rounded, exciting and meaningful experience. Make some memories, give back to the earth and come back home again a better person. (discoversweet.com) ●



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