

## DESTINATIONS



Sunset from Kelley's Bar at Pueblo Bonito Emerald Bay

## MEDITERRANEAN MEETS MAZATLÁN

Breathe deeply, and relax at Pueblo Bonito's Emerald Bay Resort

BY RAMONA D'VIOLA

**W**ITHIN MOMENTS OF TOUCHDOWN in Mazatlán, I knew it was going to be a good trip. The driver sent to fetch me was a ringer for Antonio Banderas. *Bienvenidos a Mazatlán*, indeed.

En route to Pueblo Bonito's Emerald Bay Resort, the boom

in Mexico's tourism industry is obvious. A flock of construction cranes, raising luxury hotels and high-rise condos, rivals San Diego's own current count. On the outskirts of what's been dubbed "New Mazatlán," modest farm homes—festooned with drying laundry and horses tied to fences—are becoming remnants of the past.

At the spectacular resort, the temperature reads 93 degrees—with the humidity keeping pace. I've wilted like a two-day-old gardenia, while my Bandaras body-double driver remains cool as a cuke. Stepping from the sauna-like heat into the welcome cool of the hotel's fountain-filled lobby, there's an immediate feel-good vibe. It even smells nice.

"We use aromatherapy at all our hotels," says Pueblo Bonito spokesperson Lizette Sánchez Osuna. "So when you first arrive, you're encouraged to breathe deeply and relax." After a hectic travel-filled morning, I *am* feeling notably calmer, if not noticeably cooler.

Hotel owner Ernesto Coppel wanted the resort to have an Italian villa feel and to complement the colonial architecture of Mazatlan's historic past. Surrounded by a Villa Borghese-inspired landscape—complete with koi ponds, exotic bird aviaries and statuary from ancient mythology—the pale yellow cluster of archetypical edifices feels more Mediterranean than Mexican.

Among blossoming hibiscus and rustling palm trees, meandering walkways guide guests toward Emerald Bay's restau-



Alfresco dining at Plazuela Machado

rants, spa, fitness center and wireless Internet café. With miles of beach access, the resort also boasts two pools, tennis courts and recreation areas with plenty of kid-friendly activities.

Kelley's Bar, the hotel's convivial watering hole, is a page out of Hemingway's hunting journals. Trophies from long-past African safaris—antelope and wildebeest heads, a lion-skin rug—dominate the jungle-theme décor. After a couple of Nettos (the house martini), you might even spot a pink elephant or two.

After a tour, I get treated to the latest in skin-care therapies by a skilled aesthetician. An hour after entering the resort's aromatic sanctuary, I levitate back to my ocean-view room—refreshed, rejuvenated and ready to explore the town.

AFTER THE SUN SETS, the streets around the centuries-old Plazuela Machado are blocked to traffic and filled with tables for alfresco dining. I eat at Pedro y Lola's, named after beloved Mexican songbird Lola Bertran and her legendary leading man (and frequent partner in crime) Pedro Infante. The two are said to have been incurable pranksters who rang the church bells when the spirit moved them—usually after a few too many *cervezas*. But the padres always absolved them because “Lola could sing like an angel.”

In the heart of the historic district, the small plaza is bordered by recently renovated colonial-era buildings, each adorned with ornate wrought-iron railings. Couples and families stroll through the courtyard, catching up with friends and sharing a meal at the restaurants lining the streets. From an elevated gazebo, musicians serenade us with *musica romantica*. What century is it again?

After a satisfying meal of Sinaloan specialties, we join the nightly gathering along the Malecon to watch torch-waving *clavadistas* plunge into roiling seas. Whistling and waving, the cliff diver steps forward. In an instant, the flames are snuffed as he disappears into the ink-black ocean. Moments later there is a collective sigh of relief—accompanied by a round of applause from the crowd—as the diver emerges from the surf unscathed.

Pueblo Bonito Mazatlán—the first hotel venture in the seaside town—met with such success, they built Emerald Bay to handle the overflow. A shuttle bus between the properties runs hourly, and guests of either hotel can enjoy amenities at both resorts.

I am invited to Angelo's, the Mazatlán location's upscale Italian restaurant. Elegantly old world, the interiors are dominated by a sparkling chandelier, baby grand piano and a menu that would make any Venetian proud. We dine on delicious antipasto, broiled fish, rack of lamb and perfectly al dente fettuccini in Bolognese sauce. *Mama mia*. What country am I in again?

I venture a karaoke session with Angelo's house crooner, known simply as Arsenio (I had to resist pumping my hand in the air three times when we meet). The velvet-voiced vocalist indulges me in a duet of Sinatra's “My Way.” Considering the past few days of unadulterated enjoyment, what else could I sing? After our rousing rendition and smattering of applause (probably because I'd *finished* singing), I try to explain the meaning of “schmaltz” to my hosts—but find it nearly impossi-



PHOTOGRAPHS BY RAMONA DIVIOLA

Banda musicians at Plazuela Machado



Poolside at Pueblo Bonito Emerald Bay

ble to translate Yiddish to Spanish.

I've had the pleasure of another unforgettable evening with charming, warmhearted and uproariously funny people—as with everyone I've encountered during my stay at Pueblo Bonito. Must be all that lavender-scented air. ■

## IF YOU GO

Rooms at Pueblo Bonito Emerald Bay (800-990-8250; pueblobonito.com) range from \$165 for a junior suite to \$326 for a master suite. For information on Pedro y Lola's, go to restaurantpedroylola.com.