

TRAVEL

A COSY HOME AWAY FROM HOME

Vivo Resorts residents are like family

By Mansoor Ladha

Vivo Resorts in Puerto Escondido, Oaxaca, on the southern tip of Mexico, is a home away from home for the hundreds of winter-weary Albertans who have been patronizing it while fleeing from the province's harsh winters in search of sun-soaked part of the world.

This is undoubtedly a hidden jewel of Mexico, waiting to be discovered. Hotels are great and comfortable, but they are so impersonal. Vivo offers a homey environment. Whether you are in the dining room or swimming pool, you are bound to see someone among the tenants and owners living in the resort's 400 condominiums or 114 private homes greeting each other like a family. They welcome each other with hugs and kisses and inquire about their whereabouts since they last met. These types of emotional greetings and comradesies are in the air among this resort community who regard themselves as one big family.

A brainchild of two-time Olympian, World Cup champion downhill skier Cary Mullen, the 200-million 75-acre, gated beachfront resort, which is located just nine miles from Puerto Escondido, is designed keeping in mind couples, individuals and families who are well travelled, have a thirst for life, seek new experiences and have a love of the ocean.

Mullen, a Calgary-born sportsman-turned-businessman, is a successful property developer and sharp investor, who is believed to have chosen the location of Vivo Resorts after travelling 12 countries and carefully studying 30 prospective destinations against 44 factors and driving thousands of miles to eventually select Puerto Escondido, a place believed to have the best weather. Here visitors bask in temperatures in the 80s every day, and enjoy the ocean that is warmer than the Caribbean or elsewhere in Mexico.

Most patrons of Vivo Resorts are retirees, among them majority are Albertans who have chosen to make their homes away from homes in Puerto Escondido due to the friendliness, cordiality and sociability provided by owners and renters who frequent the resort several times a year. The main rush seems to be after Christmas when owners and renters descend on Vivo Resorts for a long haul.

Nic Gray, marketing manager of Vivo resorts, confirmed that 50 per cent of the resort owners would be from Alberta, 80 per cent from somewhere in Canada and Americans primarily make up the rest. Vivo offers discovery trips aimed at giving prospective buyers an opportunity to visit the resort and experience the Vivo Resort's life for themselves before committing to a purchase. There is a qualification process that prospective buyers have to go through with sales team before they are invited for a trip. Guests are charged a fee to come



PHOTOS BY MANSOOR LADHA

Georgious beach views are among the attractions of the Vivo Resort condos at Puerto Escondido.

down and staff based on site will show them around.

One of the first people who bought a condo at the resort in 2012 was Del and Gerry Tobert of Spruce Grove, near Edmonton. After a year, they realized that condo living was not for them, so they bought a three-bedroom villa, with a garage and their own private swimming pool.

"We checked out Maui in Hawaii where prices were astronomical and the traffic was something else. It took two hours to go 20 miles," Jerry explained. They checked out Vivo Resort and liked their business model and reasonable prices. Since then, they have enjoyed the warmth, goodwill and friendliness of the local people.

"We use our villa as a lake cottage but the lake happens to be the Pacific Ocean," he joked. As villa owners, they also have full access to the resort facilities such as the clubhouse, restaurants and bar, and attendance to classes held on cooking, water aerobics, salsa dancing and Spanish lessons.

One of the advantages of living in Puerto Escondido is that they have experienced professional medical and dental services at one-third of what it would cost in Canada. It takes a while before one learns to drive the local way: drive fast and don't follow speed limits. However, numerous speed bumps have strategically placed to



Another Albertan, Gerry Tobert, one of the first people to buy a condo at the resort in 2012, gets around in his red Tuk Tuk.

curb speeders. "Someone said the area has 55 speed bumps around here," explained Jerry, "and they work well without any personnel being involved."

Jerry has become a familiar sight as he travels around in his red Tuk Tuk, which he calls a "non-golf cart," to travel on nearby dusty roads on a sunny day. (Tuk Tuks are a variation of the Indian autorickshaws.)

Del was quick to mention that the cost of living is less than Canada and there is abundant fresh fruits, vegetables, meat, fish and other items at the market, but conceded that imported stuff is more expensive.

Lethbridge couple Suzanne and P.J. Demutiak, who haven't retired yet, are equally impressed with the charm, tranquility, the ocean and facilities at the resort when they first visited as guests of a friend. "We have done a lot of travelling in other parts of Mexico but this place beats them all," explained P.J., a former RCMP officer who owns a home renovation company.

"We are not party people," adds Suzanne, who works for an optical firm. "This place is authentic Mexico and we are impressed with the beauty of the area."

Asked how they pass their time, the couple mentioned they come to the resort to relax, go for walks, swim, read books, play tennis and go to town when they feel like taking advantage of the shuttle service provided or take a taxi to go for dinners. With four couples from Lethbridge and others from various places, they have

formed a social circle.

There are direct flights to Huatulco Puerto Escondido, home to world-class beaches and championship surfing competition.

It's important to note that for most locals, it is a cash-only society where street vendors and shops accept pesos only — credit cards accepted at the city's only supermarket, Super Chedraui, patronized mainly by expatriates and tourists and in restaurants. A money exchange booth is, however, available for those who forget to exchange their funds before departure at the arrival area at Huatulco airport.

Mexico has generally received bad rap associated with safety but it should come as no surprise that Huatulco was chosen among the top eight safest spots to vacation and to travel, according to Lonely Planet.

While in Puerto Escondido, it would also help if one knows a few words of Spanish as the majority of local people, including waiters, do not speak English. My extent of Spanish included hola (hello), generally used for greetings, gracias (thank you), si (yes), no (no), yo no comprendo (I do not understand) and adios (goodbye). But I was able to get by — adios!

Mansoor Ladha is a Calgary-based journalist, travel writer, columnist and author of "Memoirs of a Muhindi: Fleeing East Africa for the West" and "A Portrait in Pluralism: Aga Khan's Shia Ismaili Muslims."



Lethbridge residents Suzanne and P.J. Demutiak are among this who have bought a condo at the resort.