

VIVA



VILLA
VERANO

Puerto Vallarta

“Verano”, the Spanish word for “summer”, aptly describes this secluded hideaway, for here it’s summer year-round.



**Saltillos, cobblestone
and lush foliage.**

This is a fully-staffed private estate in Conchas Chinas, the most elite residential neighborhood of Puerto Vallarta, Mexico.

A high, vine-covered stone wall separates the villa and lush grounds from the cobbled street. A solid gate—with two hammered metal V’s for Villa Verano—glides open soundlessly, revealing a pebbled drive that curves down into this garden oasis.

“It’s like coming home,” says Mary Jo Langdon from her pool float. She and husband Bob are joined this week by sixteen friends from Omaha, Nebraska. In the afternoon, Mary Jo and Bob and their friends lounge around the swimming pool reading, sunning, floating, visiting and enjoying margaritas. This is their third year vacationing at Villa Verano.

Next to the swimming pool is a circular palm-frond palapa bar that seats 24. Canvas-curtained casitas await for poolside massages or just relaxing. Hammocks stretch between trees among lush flowers and foliage. At a small tented table children can play while the adults sit nearby at the palapa bar.



Villa Verano is a jungle hideaway on Banderas Bay.

The main house at Villa Verano feels like an extension of the grounds and pool area. It's as if there's no formal "front door" through which to pass. Outdoor areas morph into indoor rooms. Indian throw rugs, potted ferns, original art, overstuffed sofas and chairs and round glass coffee tables inhabit this space between you and the sea.

"We're trying to keep old Vallarta alive," says owner and American entrepreneur Burt Hixson of Hixson International, gesturing to the tasteful décor. "This is all Mexican art we've collected over the years."

Tropical hues offset the villa's natural woods, sandstone, marble and tile.

Pebbles inset in square-designed saltillos mark the expansive floor. Stretching across the entire bay-side length of the house is a covered veranda dotted with lush, striped couches and oversized pillows. Villa Verano commands an outstanding view of the old town, beaches, and tranquil Banderas Bay. Here you can relax and peruse the view or enjoy a sit-down lunch at a blue-cloth-covered dining table, in the center of which rests a bowl of fresh-cut hibiscus and daisies.



In season, migrating whales are seen from the veranda.

Twenty-four years ago, Hixson purchased Casa Verano from Margaret Macy— H.R. Macy's great grand-daughter—who built the villa. With a smile Hixson says, "When I took possession, there were three Macy's nightgowns in the closet with the price-tags still on them."

Renovation and modernization followed, and every three years the décor is redesigned.

"This is the last of the beach-front jungles in all of Vallarta," says Hixson, "and we're trying to keep it." Two full-time gardeners make sure the lush foliage thrives, but doesn't encroach.



Furnishings are tropical and tasteful.

There are five bedrooms in the main house, four exterior “jungle” bedrooms, two in the casita, and one in the beach house. All bedrooms have private baths, safes, and spectacular views, most in two directions. Because of the way each bedroom is situated in relation to the other, you feel like you have “the only room in a jungle facing the sea.”

Most of the corner rooms have two walls of glass that slide open like pocket-doors to extend the rooms onto tiled balconies. Coastal breezes and overhead fans keep temperatures cool and comfortable, though all rooms are equipped with air-conditioning. “We only need to close the walls maybe two times a year,” Hixson says.



Sliding pocket “windows” extend the bedroom to the balcony.

Seven of the bedrooms have twin Queen beds and five have King-size beds. "Some people just throw the room keys in a hat and draw," Hixson says. "Others like to assign the rooms."

A courteous design of each private bathroom is that toilets and showers are separately enclosed, "so one person doesn't tie up the bathroom." Hixson points out the largest shower in room number five: "We call it the 'party shower.' Seventeen guys from the University of Arizona Swim Team had their picture taken together in there."



**All bedrooms have
spectacular ocean views.**

A sprinkling of small, hidden patios provide spaces where corporate groups can break into smaller groups, or one person can quietly relax on a chaise and read. It's easy to imagine a remake of *The Night of the Iguana* being made at Villa Verano.

A one-bedroom bungalow separate from the main house is called the Beach House or the Honeymoon Cottage. It has its own private entrance to the street and the beach. It's complete with its own infinity swimming pool, barbecue, fax, internet, copier, and fully-equipped kitchen. You'll even find binoculars on the bookshelf. When the Beach House is rented separately from the villa, a vine-shrouded separating iron gate is locked.



Lunch is served.

Villa Verano is the only rental villa on the Mexican Riviera with two full-time American-trained chefs, Jesus and Felipe. The latter is an artist who has created several of the original pieces found in the villa. Originally from Compostela in the state of Nayarit, Felipe says, "In my spare time I enjoy painting, sculpting, and gardening."

The villa's modern kitchen is all stainless steel and marble. Menus are selected by the guests, and all the shopping is done by the staff. All fruits and vegetables are immediately immersed in a purifying bath for thirty minutes before being refrigerated. The estate has its own 30,000 gallon underground cistern and water purification system.



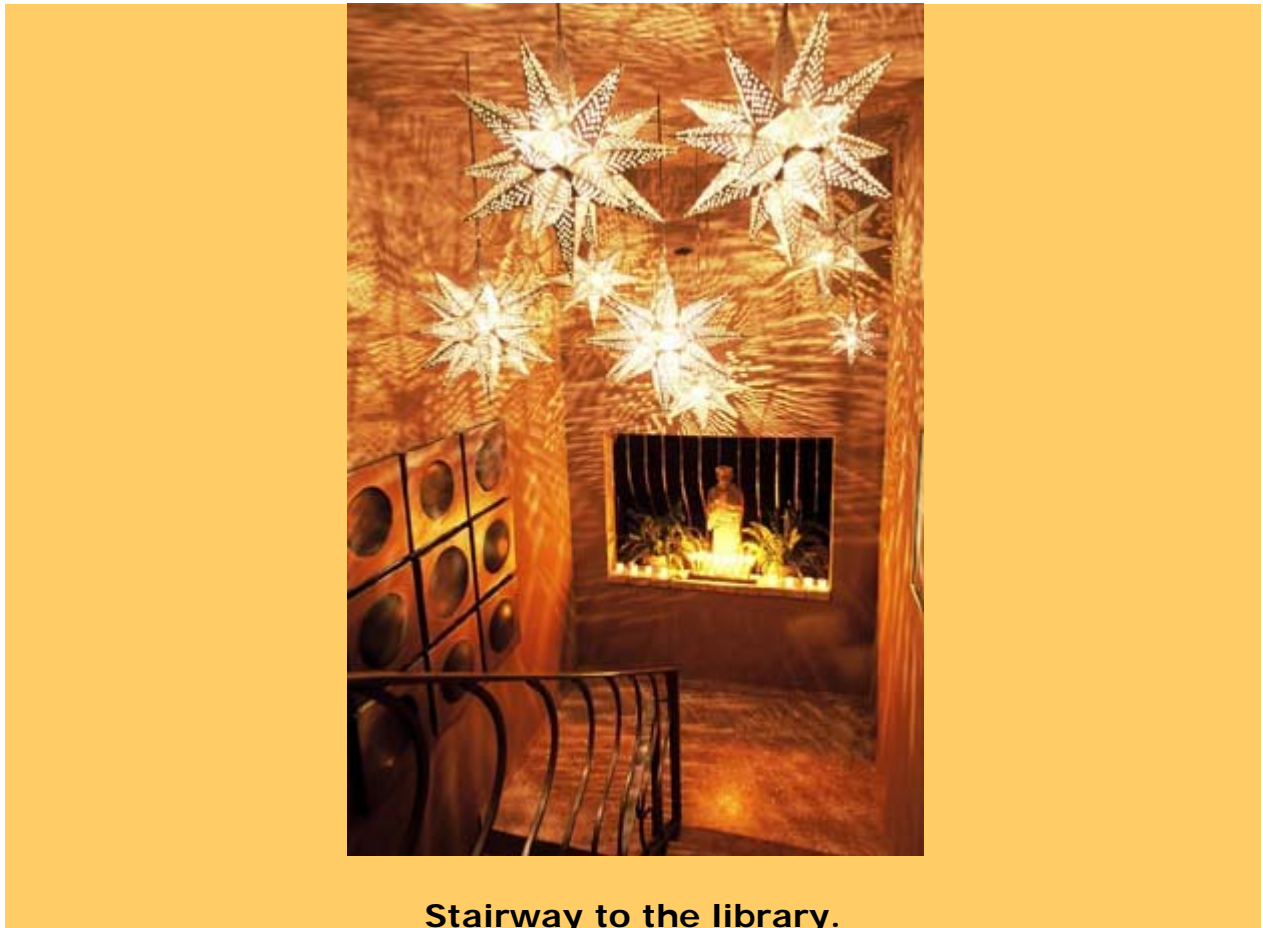
Chef Felipe's art.

Hixson says, "Every six months we check out Puerto Vallarta restaurants to provide up-to-date recommendations for guests," but Mary Jo says, "These cooks are so fabulous. There's no reason to dine anywhere else. We dream of their banana pancakes all year." Breakfast is served buffet-style and lunch is served by the pool.

Villa Verano's staff is charming, well-trained, and eager to please. In addition to two gardeners and two chefs, there are three housemen, two maids, and a laundress. Angel—pronounced "An-hel"—the head housekeeper, has been with the villa for fifteen years.

As part of his employee compensation package, Hixson provides English lessons. "The teacher comes at three or four in the afternoon," says Mary Jo. "Even the gardeners get English lessons." She notes a big advance in the staff's English skills since she was here last year.

Paco Casillas, the handsome personal concierge, has worked at Villa Verano for Hixson International for ten years. Originally from the village of Talpa, Paco devotes himself to the needs of his guests. Like palapa bartenders Reuben and Freddie, he wears a colorful flowered shirt tucked into belted, crisp, white Bermuda shorts, with white socks and white tennis shoes. Paco likes to play soccer and tennis, which he says is "more than a game; you must focus to be successful."



Stairway to the library.

Paco and his staff make it their goal to quickly learn their guests' likes and dislikes. "The main reason we keep coming back here is the service," says Mary Jo. "They really take care of you. You say you want a bottle of scotch, and the next thing you turn around, it's there."

The air-conditioned library contains hundreds of books, over 400 feature films, a piano, house computer with free unlimited high speed internet access, and DirecTV from the USA with hundreds of channels from which to choose. There is also wireless high speed internet access throughout most of the estate for those bringing laptops or other internet devices.

Five of the staff of ten lives on the property, so there's never a problem with theft or break-ins. They're joined by two resident *gatos*—cats. George and Gracie, born the day George Burns died, were named by guest Fay Resnick. "Gracie sleeps around," Hixson says with a laugh, "so we have to tell guests to close their windows if they don't want to find her on their bed."

"We walk into town only for exercise and shopping," says Mary Jo. "They take such wonderful care of us, there's no need to leave." But while it's perfectly safe to walk in the neighborhood, leave your high heels at home; these streets are all traditional Mexican cobblestones. If "town exercise" isn't your thing, there's a private stairway right down to the beach.



Your own private swimming pool.

A number of famous people vacation at Villa Verano, away from the demands of their celebrity lives. This is one of the most famous and celebrated villas on the Mexican Riviera, and Robin Leach has called it, "Hollywood's best-kept secret." We're sure Richard and Liz and Ava would have loved it. Other than the website, there's no advertising and 95% of bookings are by word-of-mouth.

Mary Jo says, "I heard about it from my sister-in-law, Kathy, who heard about it from a neighbor in her card group." Kathy and husband Tom first came to Villa Verano in 2004. The Villa's signature guest book "goes back quite a few years."

While Villa Verano is available for vacations, family reunions, weddings, and business retreats, bachelor parties and package tours are not accepted. "We're strictly for private groups who know each other," says Hixson. Because the villa is privately owned—not open to the general public—it accommodates only one group at a time. There is a minimum rental of eight bedrooms for five nights, and the average stay is one week.



The exercise room opens to the jungle.

In this jungle hideaway the sound of the ocean's surf is muted, friendly. You feel hidden, like a child peeking out into the world from the safety of a treehouse hideaway. This is the season of migrating whales, and from the veranda a humpback and baby are seen breaching the ocean's surface. Off the edge of the veranda grows a Papelillo Tree with red and peeling bark—no relation to the madrona tree—overlooking Los Muertos Beach, Punta Norte, parasailers and sunbathers.

VILLA VERANO
689 E. Arenas
Palm Springs, CA 92262
Attention: Kevin Crain
tel: (760) 416-3366
fax: (760) 322-5559
vverano@aol.com
www.villaverano.com

"That tree's over a 100 years old," says Hixson. "In the Caribbean it's known as the Gumbo Limbo tree." He gestures at a glorious, fuchsia-colored bougainvillea on one wall. "This is the closest tropical living to the U.S."

Puerto Vallarta, full of vintage architecture and ancestral charm and cradled in the curve of Banderas Bay, is just two hours from the U.S. We're sure the former governor of Jalisco after whom the town is named never envisioned today's art galleries and fine dining and fusion cuisine.

"Good friends, good food, and the view—what else could you want?" asks Mary Jo.

Ava Gardner, perhaps?

—Feature by Carolyn Proctor, [Jetsetters Magazine](#) Adventure Editor. Photos courtesy of Hixson International.