

Viva Vallarta! Impacts of the re-definition of a tourist resort in Jalisco/Nayarit, Mexico

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Abstract: Puerto Vallarta is a coastal resort in the state of Jalisco that depends upon what Pearce has termed “sunlust tourism”. Vallarta is located at the head of Banderas Bay (the “Bay of Flags”), and its recent growth and development has been dominated both by tourism and by the local physical geography. This paper looks at two major features that have characterised these changes. First, recent rapid growth has led to the opening of a huge opportunistic resort, in Nayarit State, known as Nuevo Vallarta. This may transform tourism in the Vallarta region over the long term, and we discuss this potential. Second, the growth of tourism in a restricted physical environment has meant that the population that works within the industry is constrained in its residential opportunities. Thus some residential areas within the city have been turned over to tourism, and some nearby towns act as dormitory settlements for tourist workers. We evaluate some of the impacts on one such town, Ixtapa, which was once the largest settlement in this region. It is concluded that continued growth in tourism may be inevitable at the head of “The Bay of Flags”, but that much care is needed in order to reduce the negative economic, social, and environmental impacts of such development.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to identify internal variations within a particular destination in Mexico, and to begin to explore the

impacts of the tourists upon this destination (McIntosh and Goeldner, 1990: Chapter 15; Pearce, 1989: Chapter 6). We will also show how a resort develops as a result of these changes - and in this case transforms into a series of quite different destinations.¹ It is hoped that this case study, apart from being of inherent interest, may lead to the development of more and better models of tourism, and thus provide a stronger base for its related sub-discipline within geography (Pearce, 1995:3). Mexico has been chosen because of its growing importance as a destination for Canadians. This importance is likely to increase (perhaps dramatically) as the value of the Canadian dollar remains low (Rafferty, 1993: 188), curtailing visits to many conventional sites in the USA, and as the perceived advantages of Mexico become more widely known.²

In this paper we shall discuss the case of the “leisurisation”, as Hoffman (1992) calls it, of the region around, and including, Puerto Vallarta, a major destination point near Guadalajara (Fig. 1). “Coastal resorts are perhaps the most common and distinctive form of tourist development” (Pearce 1989: 270), but in the case of Vallarta the characteristics that made this resort distinctive in the past are currently subject to change and the region may be transformed in the relatively near future. This dramatic change is occurring, in large part, as a result of a specific attempt by various levels of government in Mexico to use tourism as a mechanism for economic development (Clancy, 1999).

Coastal Resorts

Although the Romans frequented coastal settlements for recreational purposes, the coastal resort of today has its roots in 18th and 19th century European seaside towns (Pearce, 1995: 136; Hugill, 1975). And although we commonly associate the Mexican tourist experience with such places as Cancun, Cozumel, Acapulco, and Puerto Vallarta, such areas are also relatively recent tourist resorts, and as in many other places are clearly associated with recent developments in the leisure and transportation industries.

Coastal resorts may be quite recent, but they are also very important. First, they are based upon, as Pearce puts it, “sunlust



Figure 1: Location of Puerto Vallarta.

tourism” (1995: 136), and as a consequence have a morphology which differs, often markedly, from other tourist areas. Second, there are different kinds of tourist resorts which reflect different local factors, and which can give important insights into local cultures, and the challenges of and to these cultures. Although tourist promotion in Vallarta is not significantly based upon ethnicity, there are elements of what van den Berghe (1995) calls “ethnic tourism” in the local area. Third, they are located in geomorphological areas which are commonly more fragile, but still less understood, than other physical environments. Fourth, and as a direct result of the first three points, coastal resorts are often confronted by a series of contentious issues, are usually associated with planning nightmares, and are often areas where ecological conflicts and confrontations are continually coming to the fore. Many of these issues have arisen -- as have many of the resorts -- more-or-less overnight.

Puerto Vallarta

Puerto Vallarta officially became a city in 1918, and although it was associated with sport fishing at an early date, its first important connection with tourism is often dated to the opening of its first true hotel, the 'Hotel Rosita' in 1948. In 1954 the beginning of air transportation made the city more accessible to the rest of the world, but the next major event that brought Vallarta to the attention of the rest of the world came a decade later. To quote a Vallarta web site: "In 1963, with the filming of "The Night of the Iguana" in nearby Mismaloya (south of town), Puerto Vallarta was mentioned on the world news and quickly became one of the most popular destinations in the Mexican Riviera." In the 1970s, government policies to increase population in this Jalisco coast area coincided with a rapid increase in free time and disposable income for Anglo Americans, and Puerto Vallarta began to grow as a resort.

Tourism has been critical to the overall growth of the Vallarta region. The local physical geography has been a major factor in shaping this growth. Puerto Vallarta is located at the head (east end) of Banderas Bay -- the "Bay of Flags" (Fig. 2).³ It is located in the northwest corner of the State of Jalisco, but is adjacent to the border of the State of Nayarit, the boundary of which runs along the valley of the Rio Ameca. However, this "natural boundary", like so many of its kind, has recently proved to be a source of political and social challenges -- particularly associated with the tourist industry. The townsite is backed by a series of highlands (up to 2000 metres in height) which give considerable scenic value to Vallarta, as well as affecting the local weather and climate. However, these mountainous areas also complicate the process of urban growth by restricting the amount of easily serviceable land that can be used for building construction, as well as for transportation. These site characteristics are particularly important to the understanding of recent growth patterns in the Vallarta region. At one time poorer housing was concentrated in these hills, but recently expensive tourist villas have been taking over this scenic landscape, and the indigenous - or at least local - population has been impelled to move elsewhere, along with newer in-migrants. As might be expected, an understanding of the changing tourist



Figure 2: Bahía de Banderas.

elements is also critical to an understanding of the development of tourism in the Banderas Bay region.

The Leisurisation of the Vallarta Region

Originally Vallarta was an agricultural centre and a fishing village, and even after its incorporation of a town it retained these functions, with tourist activities being grafted onto the original settlement. Despite the influence of air travel, Hollywood, and tourism, growth has been (until recently) quite slow. From only 12,500 in 1964, by 1970 the population of the settlement had risen

to only 24,115. However by 1990 the population of Puerto Vallarta had grown to 111,457 and that of the Jalisco coast, which can be viewed as “greater Vallarta” now has an estimated population of over 350,000 (Jiménez Martínez, 1998; <http://www.pvconnect.com/map.html>), has at least 15,000 hotel rooms (<http://www.puerto-vallarta.com>), and receives two million visitors annually. Puerto Vallarta now receives about 30% of the total tourism of Jalisco State. Between 1970 and 1990 the tertiary sector of the economy (principally a tourist-oriented sector) increased in value from 59% to 82%, with the primary sector dropping from 10 to 2%, and the secondary sector from 24 to 16% (Jiménez Martínez, 1998).

The relatively slow and recent growth, has meant that the retention of “character” has been part of the charm of the settlement, and contrasts with manufactured resorts such as Cancun -- and as we shall see, the “opportunistic resort” that is being built at Nuevo Vallarta. One result is that the core/downtown of the city (Viejo Vallarta) still retains many older buildings, of traditional architectural style, although many of these have been converted from (e.g.) upper status housing to (e.g.) restaurants, art galleries, and cyber cafés. Despite these recent changes, which include the “popularisation” of the town with the standard fast food chains and clubs (McDonald’s, Hooters etc.) of Anglo America, Puerto Vallarta is considered by many to be the “most Mexican” of all the beach destinations in Mexico. Its home state of Jalisco is known as “the most Mexican” of all the states, due to its rich traditions and folklore.⁴

In part the retention of this character may also reflect the position of Vallarta within the Mexican urban system. For the Vallartan urban area is clearly dominated by the primate city of Guadalajara as this latter centre is itself dominated by Mexico City. Several million people live in and around Guadalajara, and many Puerto Vallartans access this urban area on a fairly regular basis for many traditional urban functions (such as shopping and entertainment, and even now higher education). As a consequence the Jalisco coast area has not taken on some of the urban functions that might otherwise be associated with a centre place for 350,000 people, and the CBD is still noticeably low-rise and non-metropolitan in form, and has become in essence an RBD

(Recreational Business District) with true CBD functions being few and far between.

Today the greater Puerto Vallarta region can be seen as a series of zones (Fig. 3). Traditionally three have been recognised within the city, although nowadays some others can be identified within the larger region. First there is the southern hotel zone, which lies south of the Cuale River. Second there is the central town or Viejo Vallarta (Old Vallarta), which lies north of the Cuale River, and third there is the northern hotel zone which has seen the greatest recent growth. Arguably it begins at the site of the still extant Hotel Rosita, and extends northwards as far as the Marina, which itself exemplifies recent developments in maritime tourism.

The Marina, constructed in stages since the mid 1980s, consists of a variety of hotels, mini-resorts, condominiums and restaurants along with a golf course and extensive area for pleasure boat docking (Fig. 4). For better or worse, it appears to be reminiscent of, if not modelled upon, the Marina del Rey area of Los Angeles. Marina Vallarta represents the development of a natural/physical area (a river estuary), and as such illustrates a dramatic transformation of the local environment. The Marina is a recent growth pole, and constitutes, in essence, a separate (fourth) sector of the city at the northern end of this hotel zone. At its eastern end is the cruise ship dock which has welcomed an average of nearly 200,000 passengers a year over the past decade. To the north of the Marina, the International Airport and a naval base fill most of the territory north to the state boundary, which has traditionally represented the northern boundary of the urbanised area.

Nayarit, the adjacent state to the north, recently used a massive influx of Federal funds to develop Nuevo Vallarta (which makes up a fifth regional tourist sector), a marina and resort area which extends some ten kilometres north of the political boundary with Jalisco. This resort area is one of the foci of this paper.

South of the southern hotel zone (and constituting a sixth sector) of Vallarta extends a belt of new construction (South Vallarta), consisting largely of expensive villas and condominiums - many of which are rented/owned by Anglo American expats or snowbirds. This zone terminates at Mismaloya - the site of the old movie set which is now a tourist destination. A number of fringe settlements,



Figure 3: Puerto Vallarta.

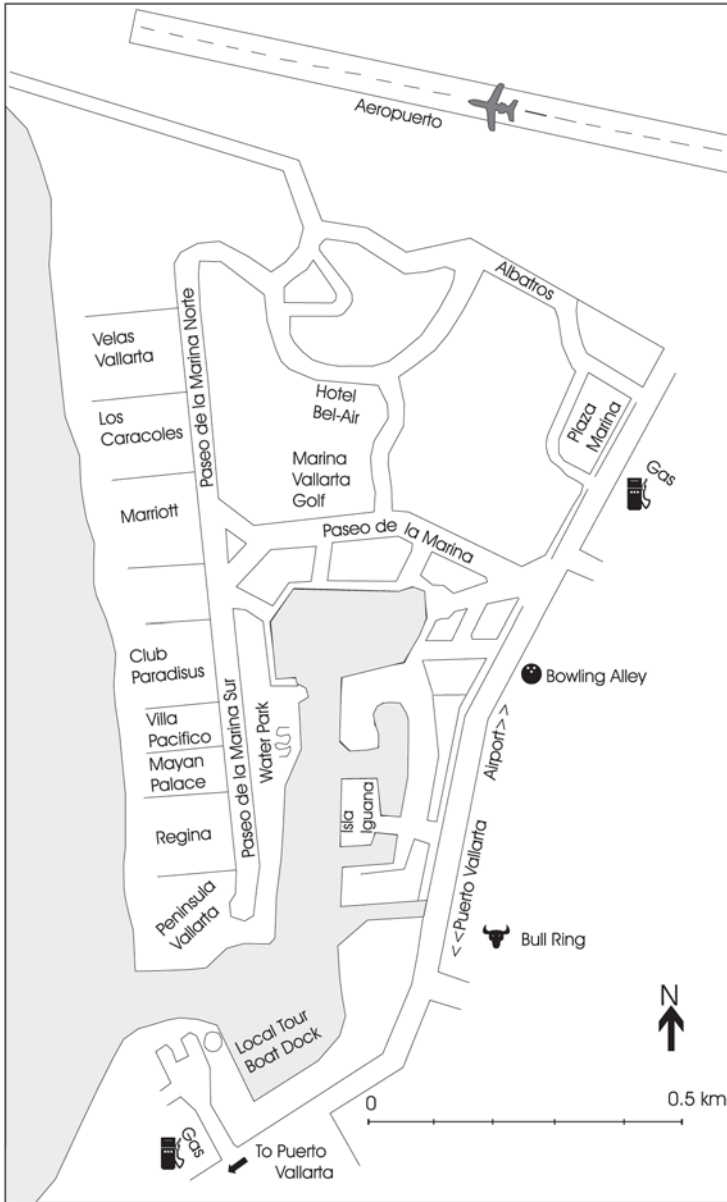


Figure 4: Marina Vallarta.

usually based upon pre-existing villages, have also grown in recent years. Most commonly these settlements such as El Pittillal and Ixtapa provide housing opportunities for people who cannot afford, or do not wish to, live in tourist-oriented Vallarta. Many of these in, for instance Ixtapa (another focus of our research), are recent in-migrants to the Jalisco coast, and have been attracted by opportunities in the tourist industry.

Some Consequences of Growth

a) The Cultural Landscape:

Arguably the most noticeable recent developments along the Jalisco coast have been the cultural landscape changes which, as is often the case, provide primary sources of information which enable us to understand the evolution of a region. Over the past twenty years the urban area has grown dramatically, and what was once a Mexican centre with tourism grafted onto it, has become a popular resort with Mexican character. Many new hotels, condominiums, and villas have been built, and the tourist landscape has been extended both to the north and to the south of the old centre. This has led to massive functional changes within the downtown itself. The old centre of the city is becoming noticeably less residential -- for non tourists -- and many of the old upper status dwellings are being converted to new commercial uses (such as restaurants, art galleries, and cyber cafés). The poorer dwellings in the hills behind the town are being commonly replaced by tourist-residential structures. The previous inhabitants are relocating elsewhere.

The more affluent people have, of course, a greater choice and are locating to a variety of sites along the coast. The poorer people have a more limited choice and are often being pushed inland -- if the environment is suitable -- or into pre-existing inland villages such as El Pittillal or Ixtapa. El Pittillal, now a town in its own right a few kilometres inland from the Marina, is more-or-less an extension of the Vallarta urban complex, although it retains its political independence and its town-like services for its inhabitants. Ixtapa, which lies about twenty kilometres northeast out of the centre of Vallarta, was once the major agricultural centre of the

region -- larger even than Vallarta. Although still retaining many central place functions for the surrounding agricultural area, it is now economically tied to the tourist industry. The local agriculture itself has now become more tourist oriented, and Ixtapa also plays host to many workers in the tourist areas along the coast. Some resorts (such as the Mayan Palace) run their own fleet of buses to allow the workers to commute from Ixtapa to Nuevo Vallarta.

Nayarit shared to only a limited extent in the tourist boom in this part of Mexico during the 1970s and 1980s. Although no study has been found which explains this state of affairs in any detail, it does seem to be a result of some predictable factors. Transportation was, and is, less advanced in coastal Nayarit. Services were poor or non-existent -- particularly for the more 'sophisticated' tastes of the Anglo American tourists now being attracted to this "Mexican Riviera". Nayarit had little money to spend on tourism. And, perhaps most importantly, demand was not great enough to generate self-sustaining growth, with Vallarta being able to absorb all of the necessary expansion until the mid 1990s. However, as "consolidation" occurred and the coastal landscape from Mismaloya to the Marina became filled up with tourist outlets, choices were limited, and there was the possibility for "stagnation" (Butler, 1980). Vallarta could have gone to another stage of the "resort cycle", with an increase of vertical scale in order to compensate for the limited seafront space available. However, the Mexican government took a hand and funded new development in Nayarit. The growth of the tourist landscape in this area has since been stimulated by what Gill (2000) terms a "growth machine" made up of local landowners, realtors, speculators, entrepreneurs and business persons who have allied themselves with local elites and governments in order to pursue economic development.

This development took place between the political boundary of the Rio Ameca and the town of Bucerias, along beaches such as the Playa Flamings (Fig. 5). It was designed to stretch between five and ten kilometres, have a north (Boulevard Nuevo Vallarta) and south (Boulevard de Nayarit) access road, its own water and sewage system, its own electricity (and other services). The access roads connect to a new four-line highway which itself connects the overall development to the Puerto Vallarta complex to the south,

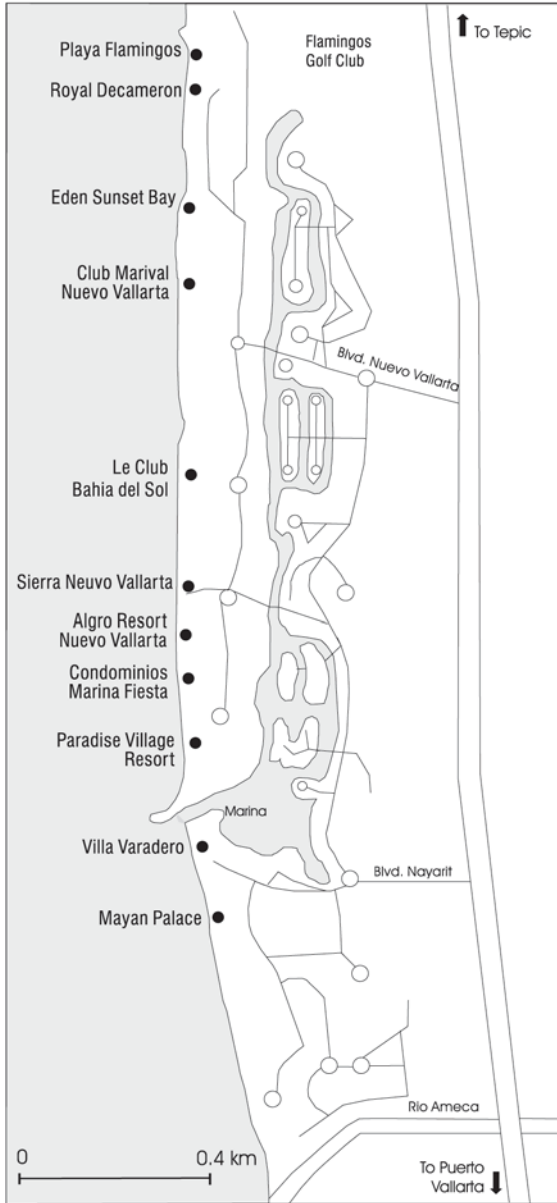


Figure 5: Nuevo Vallarta.

and Guadalajara and Mazatlan, via other routes, to the north and east. Nuevo Vallarta is planned to contain self-contained resorts (such as the huge Mayan Palace development), hotels, condominiums, golf courses, villas and other housing complexes, a marina and shopping areas. At present most of it is still under construction -- at best. Although some residential structures have been built and are being built, much of the area is still uncleared bush and mangrove swamp. It is likely to be many years before Nuevo Vallarta becomes anything like a continuous stretch of tourist services. The plan is clearly a grand one, providing as it does for many thousands of new visitors and residents. A question remains as to whether it will be, or remain, economic long enough to reach its optimum, and whether its existence will threaten Puerto Vallarta, the growth pole that spawned the whole series of developments to begin with.

A major issue with Nuevo Vallarta (as it was with Marina Vallarta) is the environmental impact of this development upon a landscape that may not be able to cope with it. Mangroves are being cut, canals dug, low spots filled in, and artificial landscapes substituted for natural areas. Massive golf courses and residential subdivisions are being built, or are in the planning process. Such developments threaten the overall ecology of the region, and their impact is, as yet, poorly understood.

b) Social and Cultural Effects:

As usual tourism has had major social and cultural impacts on the Vallarta region. These effects are both small and large, and arguably both good and bad. Only a few can be summarised in this paper. Although a focus will be made at this point upon Nuevo Vallarta and Ixtapa there is little reason to suspect that these results are not applicable to the rest of the region around Banderas Bay.

Clearly, the people in this region have been dramatically affected by tourism in general and more recently by Nuevo Vallarta in particular. It is hard to examine these effects, in part because it is difficult to decide who has been affected. The indigenous Indian groups have been impacted, but they may have had little historical coastal presence. Many of the Mexicans who have been affected are later arrivals -- many of whom may themselves be a product of

tourism. Vallarta has many immigrants and they are by no means all Anglo Americans. Cultural integration of these different groups has not, of course, been equal, and various social strata have been produced. To a large extent these appear to be reproductions of social sectors found elsewhere in Mexico -- with the tourist/snowbird/expat groups as an added ingredient to the mix.

Although Indians can be found in the Vallarta area they tend to be less affluent, and less well integrated than other groups. They are commonly represented as street or beach sellers of goods that may be commercially made, or may even have been made in traditional ways and using traditional techniques. Other less well-educated groups act as taxi drivers, construction workers, and service workers. Most of these occupations are relatively poorly paid, and are clearly affected by the seasonal nature of tourism.

Our study town of Ixtapa is a particularly clear example of these changes (Fig. 6). Although it still exhibits many signs of its origin as a 'central place' for the surrounding agricultural areas, acting as both an economic and social centre for the local populace, it is also showing signs of recent growth that are clearly a result of "non-local" circumstances. Thus new housing is being constructed to serve both recent in-migrants, and other Jaliscans who have chosen, or been impelled to move out of Vallarta. These inter-urban moves have resulted from both social and economic circumstances. In some cases Vallartans have chosen to live in a more rural setting, away from what is now a very busy urban centre -- especially during the tourist season. In other cases the spread of the tourist landscape has eaten-up previously residential areas populated by local Mexicans, and replaced them with commercial areas or residential zones devoted to Anglo Americans and/or non-local Mexicans (from Guadalajara, Mexico City etc.). Thus the working population of the urban area has begun to seek shelter at a greater distance from the central city.

c) Economic Characteristics:

Economically tourism has had a major impact upon the land bordering the Bay of Flags. This impact is continuing, and expanding in all directions, but particularly along the coastal zones. Our field research revealed that this impact can be seen as more



Figure 6: Ixtapa.

and less obvious. More obvious are the tourist developments such as Nuevo Vallarta which have pumped a large amount of money into the local economy as the result of infrastructure construction alone. Further huge influxes of capital will accompany resort development. However, how much of this will remain in the coastal region is unclear, as many of the larger developments are owned and/or funded by Mexicans living in other parts of the country, or by foreign capitalists.

Less obvious are changes in agriculture, settlement patterns, and even education -- for the new university of Puerto Vallarta can itself be seen as a result of the package of economic and social developments that are characterising this region. Agriculture has changed in its extent, with land being lost to urban development close to the city, but replaced by land carved out of less-intensively exploited areas inland -- with little thought being given to the consequences of growth in these fragile environments. Cultivation has also changed in its intensity, with new tourist-oriented truck crops being grown, often literally in place of the traditional maize and beans. Some older agricultural settlements have been transformed by recent growth which is largely tied to the tourist economy. Our study settlement of Ixtapa has grown significantly

in recent years. Although some of this reflects “natural growth” of the pre-existing population, a significant amount is a result of migration -- from both relatively local and long distance sources. This new immigrant population is likely to have different values and ideals from the original inhabitants, and if not allowed for, this could be a source of social conflict.

Conclusion

Although the leisurisation of in the Bahia de Banderas region has been proceeding for some time, the establishment of Nuevo Vallarta has probably led to more critical debate than did the earlier developments. This partly reflects the fact that tourist developments are being questioned and scrutinised to a greater degree in general nowadays, and partly reflects the magnitude of the Nuevo Vallarta development, and thus its potential impact locally, regionally, and even nationally. Much of the distinctiveness of coastal resort developments arises, of course, from their physical geography and, in particular, their proximity to beaches and the seashore. In the present case study, the distinctiveness that is now evolving is also a function of the local political geography of the area. Growth has been limited by site characteristics, but has been promoted by political considerations. As Ryan indicates, it is to be expected that tourist zones change over time (1991: 64), as the tourist experience is bound within a psychological, social and cultural milieu that is always changing (1991: 204). In addition, as Pearce (1989) has pointed out, although tourist expansion is likely to continue, this is a cyclical pattern and there are likely to be both “ups” and “downs” in the overall process over time. The big question is whether this probable growth and change can be maintained and sustained, and what form that this might take.

Following Butler’s (1980) model of the evolution of a tourist area, growth might be seen to prove to be beneficial or deleterious to pre-existing developments. It could be seen as beneficial if it allows Vallarta to retain the character that has been part of its essence, and leads to reduced negative impact, or even to a positive, planned, rejuvenation of the older area.. It could be negative if it

drains investment from the areas of original growth, and leads to stagnation or decline. It is vitally important to strategically assess how many tourists are wanted in the Vallarta region, and how many can be sustained, socially, economically, and environmentally within this area (Ryan, 1991).

Although data limitations remain, and are likely to continue into the foreseeable future, it has been possible to identify a number of general patterns and the processes that underlie these patterns. It is thus possible to at least hypothesize some of the implications of recent tourist developments in the Vallarta region. However, as major developments are still in an embryonic stage, scope exists for important research in this area. In particular there is a need to monitor the changes in morphology that are currently taking place so that the processes involved can be better understood, and further developments in this area can be better planned in order to allow for social, economic and environmental carrying capacities (Pearce, 1995: Chapter 9). It is hoped that such research will enable us to better understand the impacts and challenges of tourism in the Vallarta region, as well as give clues to similar activities on a larger national and international scale.

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Websites

<<http://www.pvconnect.com/map.html>>

<<http://www.puerto-vallarta.com>>

Endnotes

¹ The term resort has most commonly been applied to tourist settlements - such as Cancun, or Vallarta. However, there is a growing tendency for this word to be applied to individual hotels - especially where these latter developments are extremely large, and are essentially self-contained service modules. The Mayan Palace development cited in this paper is one such development that is still under construction.

² The PCGNP of Canada in 1995 was \$20,670; for the USA it was \$20,750; for Mexico it was \$3,750. However, it is likely that visitors to the Vallarta region are wealthier than the average Canadian and American, with many of their hosts in Mexico being possibly poorer than the national average for that country.

³ Banderas Bay was first explored in the early 1500's by Francisco Hernández de Sanbuenaventura, a nephew of the famous Conquistador Hernan Cortez. He named the bay because he was received by 20,000 Indians bearing feather flags. "Banderas" is the Spanish word for "flags". The town itself which was founded in 1851, is situated in the southern part of Banderas Valley, facing west over the bay with the same name.

The town was named after Ignacio L. Vallarta in 1918 and declared an official city on May 31st, 1968 (<http://www.pvconnect.com/map.html>).

⁴ Among other things, it has given to Mexico its traditional costume, that of the charro; its national beverage, Tequila; and its most representative music, that of the Mariachi (<http://www.puerto-vallarta.com>).