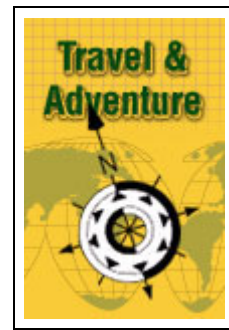


Puerto Penasco: bountiful port on the Sonoran Desert

By John Blanchette
Copley News Service



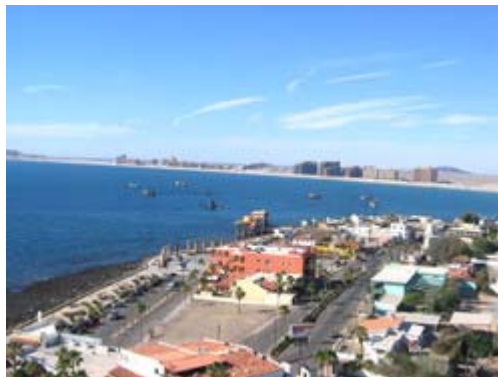
SONORA, Mexico - Just 65 miles south of the Arizona boarder, the sleepy little fishing village of Puerto Penasco hugs the edge of the great Sonoran Desert alongside the fertile waters of the upper Sea of Cortez.

Once only poor fishermen labored in the nutrient-rich waters, harvesting giant prawns, huge grouper and halibut, crabs and piles of oysters and clams. Migrating birds still gorge themselves in the brackish waters fed by the Colorado River Delta and dolphins and whales cavort in the warm tides that can vary up to 23 feet, forming enticing tidal pools for human exploration.

Life is lush here. Puerto Penasco is the first inhabitable beach south of the delta. Two stony promontories mark the boundaries of the town and contributed to its nickname, Rocky Point, coined by 18th century British explorers.

The weather is consistently beautiful, seldom warmer than the mid-80s or cooler than the low 60s, and there are only eight rainy days a year on average. The largest desert in Mexico inserts itself into the town, forming sandy streets that lead from the desert to the sea - only the major arteries are paved.

Puerto Penasco is a lovely and fascinating mixture of old and new. The fishing boats bring in their loads of fresh fish daily and mongers sell the day's catch in their shops on the beachfront to hungry shoppers and restaurants. What isn't sold that day goes to the freezing plant, which then ships the fish off around the world. You haven't tasted giant prawns until you've had them unfrozen and fresh from this sea.



OLD TOWN, NEW DEVELOPMENTS - The old town of Puerto Penasco looks across the bay, past the fishing boats to the new shore developments. CNS Photo by John Blanchette.

There is great bargain hunting in the handicraft shops along Malecon, the town's main boulevard, and on the street between the resorts and town. This is also a place to purchase high-end tequila at local prices.

Speaking of which, Puerto Penasco is a destination for college students from Albuquerque, Tucson, Phoenix, Tempe and San Diego on spring break. They close down the central street to traffic to provide for the overflow of revelers from bars and restaurants.

I happened to arrive on Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), the unique Mexican holiday that celebrates the Aztec tradition of honoring the dead and the continuation of life.

It is a joyful celebration, with families visiting cemeteries throughout much of the day, cleaning family plots and bedecking them with magnificent floral arrays, preparing feasts of the departed's favorite foods and even entertaining them with their favorite songs, graveside.

Children mock death by eating sugar skulls and fried churros ("bones") dipped in chocolate. Later in the day, tequila and cerveza enter the party, pouring some on the grave markers but most down the gullets of the living. They party like there's no tomorrow on the Day of the Dead.

Recently the pristine beaches north of Puerto Penasco have been discovered by affluent Americans, tourists and speculators, and the beachfront property has all been sold to large developers.



LIFE ON THE BAY - A fisherman casts his net into the beautiful bay of Puerto Penasco. CNS Photo by John Blanchette.

Condominiums and high-rise rental properties are building a skyline along the shore that many think will rival Cancun, including my baggage handler at the Los Angeles airport, who is from the area and was the first to make the comparison to me. Ninety percent of visitors are currently from the Southwest. But that is soon to change.

I was aboard the inaugural flight from LAX to Puerto Penasco on an Aeromexico turbo prop plane. There were four passengers, myself and three developers. An hour and 30 minutes later, we landed on a small, tarred patch of runway about 20 minutes from town, the new international airport. We were greeted by twice as many security officials as passengers, including a drug-sniffing dog. Al Capone had often escaped the Feds in Puerto Penasco during prohibition, so maybe there was reason for so much precaution.

After making it through customs, I was whisked off by my resort driver through the soothing desert heat to the luxury beachfront property, Las Palomas Beach & Golf Resort, a 350-acre community designed by a protege of Frank Lloyd Wright.

Sixteen hundred condominiums, town houses, estates and courtyard homes, a medical plaza, beach club and spa, commercial area, a labyrinth of pools, two 18-hole golf courses and 12 restaurants are planned for the community. Currently, 800 rental condominiums have been

completed, two world-class restaurants, Citron and La Maria Bistro, run by French Executive Chef Patrick Louis, serve the community, and the golf course just held its second tournament.

Located in the area called Sandy Beach, there are a number of other high-rise resort properties stretching down the shore.

North and south of the two rocky points are some beautiful old and new Mediterranean-style homes that are equally spectacular, pitched in white and pastel colors on the bluffs overlooking the clear, blue-green waters of the sea.

Sustainable living is a major concern of the builders and a requirement of the Mexican government to insure the beauty, cleanliness and ecology of the area. New waste-processing plants also protect the beach and waters and some developers have built desalination plants to insure the fresh-water supply.



SAND AND SEA - The Sonoran Desert is also its largest beach, running into the sea. CNS Photo by John Blanchette.

Just south of Puerto Penasco is the watchdog and educational institution CEDO (Intercultural Center for the study of Seas and Deserts), which has a 30-foot whale skeleton on display along with other free exhibits of the local flora and fauna.

Also don't miss the spectacular volcanic formations in the Pinacate Biosphere Reserve, 600 square miles of unique desert plants and animals with a rich archaeological and geological history like nowhere else on earth. Resembling the moon's surface, NASA used the area to test collecting equipment for Apollo missions among the 26 large craters that pock the surface of the desert.

The day I visited El Pinacate, about a 45-minute drive from Puerto Penasco, a group of native Mexicans were performing religious ceremonies on the top of Volcan Santa Clara, one of the great Indian spiritual centers in the Americas. It offers a magical view of the entire Sonoran Desert.

Just driving among the black, purple and white cinder soils on lava and sand roads through endlessly changing colored landscapes of creosote bush, yellow chollas plants and humanlike saguaro cactuses beckoning travelers, the Sonora desert invokes the imagination and fantasy.



REMEMBERING LOST LOVED ONES - On the Day of the Dead, the departed are feted in cemeteries with feasts, drink and music, serenading them with their favorite songs. CNS Photo by John Blanchette.

IF YOU GO

Local restaurants specialize in seafood, including The Point (try the fish basket), Black Dog (fish and chips on Friday), the Lighthouse and the Captain's House restaurants on Whale Hill (great panoramic views). But don't ignore the wonderful and inexpensive Mexican breakfasts and the lean and delicious Sonoran beef, and other local dishes.

The free monthly Rocky Point Restaurant Guide and the well-written monthly newspaper Rocky Point Times are both published in English and are great resources for community activities, dining and clubbing.

El Rey del Mar offers sunset cruises along the coast (includes three margaritas and snacks, \$30).

U.S. dollars are accepted and welcomed everywhere. For daily and weekly rates at Las Palomas Resort, call 866-360-2324 or visit www.laspalomasresort.net.

John Blanchette is a freelance travel writer.

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