

Puerto Vallarta's colourful peacocks

BY CAROL PATTERSON
SPECIAL TO THE ADVOCATE

Love 'em or hate 'em, the peacocks at Velas Vallarta Resort make an impression. Strolling through the lobby, performing X-rated acts in front of the restaurant or waiting for some pampering at the spa, the jewel-toned birds are impossible to overlook.

Their pre-dawn calls of "halp, halp" had lights sleepers at the North American Travel Journalists Association (NATJA) conference calling for a peacock barbecue — in jest (I think). But assistant manager of operations Donald Willis said, "most people, and especially kids, love the peacocks."

I spotted five birds at the luxury hotel and quickly discovered it was possible to take too many peacock pictures.

The first photos were to prove there were peacocks at this beachside resort in Puerto Vallarta. Then I started to learn their habits — perched on the balconies of the third floor as darkness fell or peering through the window at spa staff.

"I think one of the ladies leaves a few crumbs out for the birds," explained Willis, dashing my theory that the birds kept their glossy appearance from spa treatments.

Waiting for a bus shuttle to a conference activity at a nearby spa (yes, travel writers consider spa treatments newsworthy), I watched a peacock strut into the lobby, his neck jutting back and forth like a rooster headed for the hen house. As in so many things while travelling, anything goes; hotel guests regarded the peacock appearance as a normal part of another day in paradise.

Aside from the insomniacs' complaints, the peacocks seemed to be crowd favourites. I spotted one young but enthusiastic bird lover with his air mattress in tow, chasing a peacock. Somewhat shorter than the mattress, the little guy wasn't making much time but the bird took the adoration in stride, slipping into bushes when his pursuer closed in.

One peacock staked out his territory at the entrance to the main restaurant. After a meal, I had to dodge his romantic overtures to the albino peahen — the female of the peafowl species. After spreading his feathers and shaking what his mama gave him, he rushed the surprised female in a very unromantic mating that lasted only seconds as he stood on her back for what scientists call the cloacal kiss.

When the peahens lay eggs, they are gathered by the staff and taken to an enclosure away from predators or bad weather to hatch. "We keep them in the enclosure for two to three months after hatching as some of the older birds can be aggressive to the young ones," explained Willis.

A male peacock with his tail feathers is one of the world's largest flying birds, but they don't travel far. Oc-



Photos by CAROL PATTERSON/freelance

ABOVE: A male peacock courts an albino peahen.

TOP RIGHT: Peacocks were brought to Velas Vallarta eight years ago.

RIGHT: Solar panels heat water for pools and guest showers.

asionally, the peacocks wander onto neighbouring hotel grounds. "We get a call to come and bring the birds back," said Willis, "their guests aren't as fond of them as ours."

I shouldn't have been surprised at the effort that staff at this luxury hotel made to look after birds. The hotel participates in the EarthCheck program of environmentally friendly practices and TripAdvisor's GreenLeaders program, and general manager Luis Angarita is a wildlife lover.

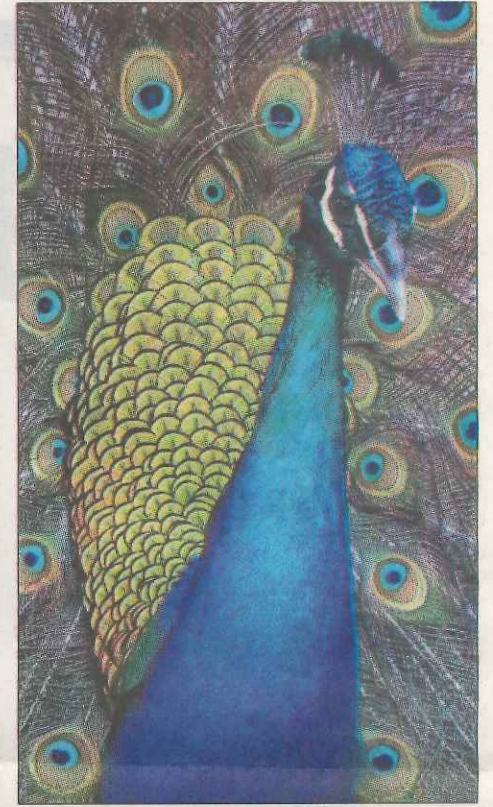
"Mr. Angarita will foster young ducklings or injured birds in the pool on his balcony until they can be released," said Willis.

The Velas Vallarta is located on Puerto Vallarta's Marina Vallarta beach, where sea turtles nest from June to December.

Camping on the beach for weeks in harsh conditions, volunteers come from across the world to help scientists protect turtle eggs.

"At Velas Vallarta, we share their dedication and support them with shower facilities, three meals a day, and a nursery on our property where the eggs are kept for approximately 45 days until they begin to hatch," said Willis.

"Last year, with our combined efforts, we were able to raise and release 23,741 baby turtles!"



As part of their commitment to the local ecology, 340 kg of raw food waste is diverted daily from Velas Vallarta to a local hog farmer.

Compost created from organic waste has reduced chemical pesticide use by one-half and solar panels heat water for the hotel's pools and guest showers.

While it might appear at first glance that the hotel is going to the birds,

there is nothing flighty about staff intentions to be good environmental stewards. I was able to relax in pool-side knowing the environment around me was in capable hands.

Carol Patterson inspires everyday explorers with words and video. When she isn't travelling for work, Carol is travelling for fun. More of her adventures can be found at www.carolpatterson.ca.



Photo by VAL and GEORGE CROOME/freelance

Visiting the Tropic of Cancer was another one of the wonders experienced during the Baja Amigos RV trip along the Baja Peninsula in Mexico.

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BAJA: Friendly

We went through another police/army checkpoint on the highway but they

that their enthusiasm can't help rubbing off on tour members.

It was also a great group to travel with.

We fully recommend Baja Amigos if you are thinking of taking this adventure but, as it says in the literature, this is not designed for RVers who want all the bells and whistles.

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