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JULY / AUGUST 2018

**EXCLUSIVE
INTERVIEW**
**RACHEL
REILLY**

*Life is Awesome
and She's Enjoying
Every Bit of It!*

WEDDING CELEBRATIONS

- **THE VATANA WATTERS
EXPERIENCE
WATTERS
WILLOWBY
BY WATTERS
WTOO BY WATTERS**
- **RIME ARODAKY**
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Tips
*for Smooth
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**It's Our
Fall
Preview!**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ISABELLE RUEN

TODAY'S LUXURY ALL-INCLUSIVE RESORT INDUSTRY HAS NO SHORTAGE OF OPTIONS, WITH AN INCREASING NUMBER OF HIGH-END PROPERTIES AROUND THE GLOBE GETTING IN THE GAME. THE ALL-INCLUSIVE MODEL, WHICH REPORTEDLY ORIGINATED IN THE FRENCH CLUB MED RESORTS IN 1950, IS NOW MORE POPULAR THAN EVER—EVEN AMONG PERSNICKETY JET SETTERS FOR WHOM AN ORDINARY RETREAT JUST WON'T DO.

My most recent trek took me about a 15-minute drive away from Puerto Vallarta to the AAA Five Diamond **Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit resort**, which was (again) recognized among the best in the world in TripAdvisor's 2018 Travelers' Choice Awards. Among other honors, this destination was rated the number one hotel in Riviera Nayarit as well as one of the

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VELAS RESORTS.



"Top 25 All-Inclusive Resorts in the World" and "Top 25 Luxury Hotels" in Mexico—all honors bestowed based on guests' opinions of the property's service, quality and value. Incidentally, in March 2018 the venerable publication U.S. News & World Report also named Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit the number one best hotel in Puerto Vallarta.

The continuous array of upper-echelon accolades doled out to Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit is no surprise to me given my familiarity with the brand's approach to luxe hospitality. The resort continues to reap this industry recognition

due, in great part, to its ingenuity in offering guest-centric experiences that are memorable and meaningful. Below are details on just a few of the distinctive, brand-differentiating initiatives—some as directly excerpted from the property's press materials sent my way—which individually and collectively exemplify why the overtly family-friendly Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit is in a class of its own in the Vallarta region.

Wildlife Adventure

Animal, nature, and culture lovers will thoroughly enjoy the property's "Wildlife Adventure" package that gives guests up close and personal

encounters with native wildlife in the area—an opportunity to learn more about local wildlife through various tours. This includes a guided tour into Estero del Salado—a protected urban estuary comprised of mangrove and marsh vegetation with myriad reptile and bird habitats. Included in the exploration is a two-hour canoe tour, round trip transportation to the estuary and a gourmet box lunch. After the visit, guests will return to the resort for a private session with native birds. Guests learn more about four different exotic Mexican types, including where they come from, what they eat and more. The birds will show different behaviors during



an interactive activity with guests and will be available for a photo op at the end of the session.

Cultural Cocktailing and Insta-Worthy Cooking Classes

To add some locavore-inspired levity, guests can opt to learn how to create a variety of Mexican-inspired beverages during weekly mixology classes that serve up drinks with a twist of local culture. Participants enjoy communal fun and frivolity while learning to make four different Mexican drinks that each feature a tie in-to Mexican history and heritage: Yashu Margarita, Tricolor Cocktail, Sweet Convent and "Pascalles."

Velas Resorts Vice President Juan Vela, who I had the pleasure of interviewing recently, also described the property's exclusive Tequila Tasting Experience—a tour that allows travelers to explore the making of Mexico's finest spirit. "Available exclusively to resort guests, this experience includes a visit to Mexico's oldest tequila

house, Casa San Matías, via private plane or luxury car," he said. "Here, guests learn traditional and modern tequila making processes, enjoy a Mexican picnic in the agave fields, participate in a tequila tasting and more. Concluding the experience, visitors can explore the rest of Casa San Matías and its tequila cellar where they'll receive an artisan Mexican keepsake." Vela also cited that Tequila maker Don julio González, himself, has stayed at the resort so, tour aside, tequila-aficionados can rest assured they'll be well-covered at this locale.

In addition to this spirited excursion and on-site Mexican mixology instruction, Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit also offers cooking classes to help guests learn how to make great food and also capture the culinary moment with a fab photo that's well-suited to share on social media. The classes, led by Executive Chef Guillaume Morancé, take guests to a local-area fish market to help them choose the best food for the recipe they are

preparing. Then, at the resort, guests learn how to prepare their dishes before getting a lesson on tips and tricks to capture the perfect picture.

Family-Focused Fabulosity

Family programs at Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit are top-of-the-line with offerings that include a dedicated kids' and teens' clubs with Xbox Kinect video games, air hockey table, billiards, ping pong table, dance floor, and games; a summer camp; and even a dedicated baby concierge catering to the specialized needs of the littlest ones.

Kids have a ball at this resort as there's much designed especially for them. Certain seasons at the resort feature special activities like zip lines, climbing walls, DIY mandala workshops, kite crafting and other creativity-promoting activities. This includes Piñata making among other arts and crafts. There's also sports like soccer and kickball, feeding the fish, treasure hunts and mini disco complete with a disco ball

and strobe lights. It's also cool that, for teens who want to improve their landscape photography skills, Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit also has a Teen Instagram Photo Tour through which participants learn from the resorts' community managers about lighting, exposure, angles and editing apps to achieve the perfect shot.

Accommodations-wise, families can opt to stay in the resorts' two-bedroom family suites, all over 2,000 square feet. They feature one King bed suite interconnecting with a suite with two queen beds—all with a private terrace proffering fab ocean views. Additional thoughtful amenities for families consist of a stuffed animal of the resort's mascot, bathrobes and slippers in special mini sizes, family photo session, and credit for the purchase of photos, kids' welcome beach kit, and kid-friendly evening turndown. Also notable is that one massage per adult per night and roundtrip airport transfers are also included.

Baby Concierge Conveniences

For those traveling with babies, the resort's baby concierge remains on hand and at-the-ready to help parents stress less with their young ones, coordinating everything from a crib, Mexican toys, baby floats, and baby clothes to nanny service and gentle bath and shampoo gels. And even these tiny tots receive thoughtful spa treatments. For one, to stimulate the baby's senses and central nervous system, a "Sunrise Massage" service is provided to help promote sensory and cognitive development. For

babies one to three years old, the treatment encourages babies to differentiate textures and sounds to the tunes of Mozart. The resort also offers baby's first haircut, which comes with special pampering and a certificate celebrating the milestone.

AAA Four Diamond Dining

The Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit "Beyond All Inclusive, Beyond All Compare" slogan unquestionably extends to its numerous on-site fine dining options, which includes no less than three AAA Four Diamond-rated restaurants. Among these is the Italian-Mediterranean eatery, Lucca, which recently underwent a \$750,000 USD renovation. Changes involved a reimagined menu to complement the chic décor redesign that combines a contemporary wine cellar, glass, marble and plush seating with natural wood, leather and statement light fixtures and chandeliers. The sophisticated space employs shades of teal, taupe, grey, and brown accented with silver, and walls are adorned with original artwork made specifically for Lucca by Mexican artist Lulu Arce. A violinist adds beauty and intrigue to the atmosphere.

The dishes at Lucca are as visually stunning as they are sumptuous. The menu features such highlights Polpo a Genovesa, organic greens, with infusion of octopus potato, and olive infusion, Parmesan cheese foam and pistachio pesto; Tortellini Ricotta e Prosciutto, tortellini stuffed with prosciutto and ricotta cheese, with sage sauce and cherry tomatoes; and Tar-

tufo di Cioccolato, chocolate tartufo and truffle croquant, white chocolate sauce and dried fruit and nuts. Vegetarian and vegan options like a fresh pasta of the day with duck ragout and traditional pizzas help ensure there's something for everyone.

Another of the on-site award-winning eateries is Frida, billed as serving "local artisan cuisine connected with the deep roots of Mexican heritage." Named after one of Mexico's most beloved artists, Frida's colorful food is replete with bold aromas, spices and visual appeal that exude Mexico's creative culinary spirit. This is represented in salad



items like the Freshwater Crab Delight in Chayote with chipotle cream; cold appetizers like the Oven-Roasted Beef Tartare with marinated lobster medallions in Valle de Guadalupe vinaigrette; hot appys like the Crispy Suckling Pig Pibil Tacos with xnipec salsa and avocado; and entrées like the Jalisco-Style Beef Short Rib Birria. Then, for dessert, you can top it all off with the Caramelized Poblano Pepper in piloncillo sugar.

Perhaps my favorite AAA Four Diamond restaurant at the property is Piaf, where French cuisine rises to an exceptional standard not only relative to all-inclusive dining, but fine dining

in general. Here traditional French cooking is the heart of the kitchen, allowing patrons to savor classic dishes like escargot, rack of lamb, duck confit, seafood bouillabaisse, and grilled beef filets that are impeccably sauced. Other of Piaf's fresh fish, seafood and meat dishes are supremely creative while maintaining an elegance and simplicity. Plating, of course, is splendid and a nice juxtaposition to the clean and chic minimalist décor allowing the food to shine.

I did, myself, devour a course of Escargots Bourguignon-style with the snails perfectly cleaned, prepped and

authentically presented in a six cavity white serving dish primed for dipping into the buttery elixir. I then moved on to the Classic French Onion Soup topped with Gruyère cheese, in which the mélange of meat stock, caramelized onions, seasonings and crouton exuded rustic goodness. My entrée, the "Duck Magret to Orange" with white purée of albedo at Grand Marnier, served alongside baby carrots glazed in cumin fragrance with crispy quinoa, was among the very best duck preparations I've ever had. The meat so moist and flavor-rich would have been delightful on its own, sans sauce, although the pairing of the classic orange accompaniment was pure bliss. Finally, in sticking with my array of archetypes, I then indulged in the decadent Crème Brûlée. With the custard texture and temperature perfectly executed, this light and dish had an understated grace all its own.

It's exceedingly clear the resort's food and beverage program makes it a hospitality industry standout and is an extreme point of pride. "When it comes to food & beverage, our food, creativity and presentation are comparable to that of top restaurants in world capitals," notes Vela. "Name your favorite specialty cuisine—Mexican, French, Italian—and it's exquisitely prepared by award winning chefs, including member of Maitres Cuisiniers de France, the Culinary Academy of France and the brotherhood of the Chaîne des Rôtisseurs Executive Chef Guillaume Morancé. Additionally, we offer unique dining events and foodie



experiences such as tastings (hot sauce, taco, tequila, mezcal, and even chocolate), showcase premium liquor brands and custom cocktails in innovative ways (like a margarita trolley) and have been trend setters in vegetarian and vegan menus."

Gourmet Baby Food

Furthering the family and foodie-forward mentality at this resort, even the babies fine dine at this gastro-driven destination. Parents with babies can choose among many gourmet options for their bundle of joy. Upon arrival, parents can select from a list of gourmet purées for their babies that will be prepared by the resort's Executive Chef. Options include things like the Pio Pio Purée, made with cooked chicken breast, carrots, zucchini and chicken broth; and the Vegan Purée, made with white rice, cauliflower, broccoli, carrots and vegetable broth.

Cultural Immersion-Minded Spa

As with most luxury resorts, Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit has its on-site SE SPA that, in typical Velas Resorts form, provides ingenuity in its offerings. With more than 30 treatments available, many are inspired by the native traditions of Mexico. An indigenous-oriented service that I personally experienced is called the "Tequila Cream Massage." This consisted of a unique energizing massage that began and ended with a tasting of tequila cream. You first choose your favorite flavor: coffee, vanilla or chocolate (after tasting all three), before partaking in a lovely spa welcome ri-

tual and ultimately receiving the massage in which herbal aromatherapy is also integrated. After the massage your "favorite" tequila cream is presented for a lovely, lingering sweet finish on the palate. Prior to this wonderful (and tasty) massage service, I also reveled in the spa's signature Hydrotherapy Water Journey service, included with any treatment 50 minutes or more, which has patrons flow from one aqua-feature to another. Modalities include a revitalizing sen-

ty of ailments and needs. Topics include the 60-minute Mandala Coloring activity for groups of 12 or more that's moderated by a spa valet. Coloring mandalas is said to have numerous benefits for the brain, including helping develop mental abilities, stimulating creativity and inducing a state of calm. This activity also is considered a spiritual ritual believed to facilitate an interior illumination, also activating the two hemispheres of the brain,



sory shower, herbal steam and Sauna, a dip in the two-temperature lagoon, reflexology foot tub, time in the Jacuzzi, ice fountain and a final multi-jet Swiss shower. It's rejuvenation for the mind and body in every drop.

Mandala Coloring Group Activity

At the on-site SE SPA various classes are offered that are inspired by local Mexican culture and based upon the principles of ancient Ayurvedic medicine to aid a varie-

furthering cognitive abilities, and aiding in concentration. Firstly, during the service, the meaning and history of the mandala is explained, followed by a relaxation activity and then the coloring of an oversized design for the team. Healthy snacks and spa water are also offered during the activity. At the end, participants are given a small mandala as a gift for a memorable take away. The resort also offers other mindful meeting breaks including



a dreamcatcher workshop, aromatherapy, and even a workshop to create one's own mandala in a bowl of water with flowers.

Bountiful Basics

The above are just a few of the programs and amenities that set Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit apart. But, even beyond its creative range of over-and-above offerings, the setting and the facility, itself, are remarkable. The nature-laden grounds are replete with landscaped gardens, lush greenery and colorful flowers all around. Resident "pets" meandering about include two free-roaming peacocks, dozens of Koi fish throughout multiple ponds (that are very fun to feed), a large bright green iguana, and two hawks that work hard keeping other birds at bay.

A large glistening three-tiered infinity pool with swim up palapa bar overlooks the expansive stretch of beach (entirely seaweed-free

during my visit) where cabanas and loungers allow you to eat and imbibe beach-side to your heart's content. The Sierra Madre mountains in the distance make the already remarkable sunsets even more perfectly picturesque.

Relative to accommodations, the resort features 267 ocean-view suites all over 1,000 square feet, some with private plunge pools, and all with plasma TVs, wireless internet access, fully stocked mini bar, L'Occitane amenities and Nespresso machines. For the health-minded, Vela also pointed out that the property has made a major commitment to "wellness"—an experience that includes everything from state of the art spas and fitness centers, personal training included in the rate, and spa and vegetarian cuisine, to wellness getaway weeks with experts in nutrition and fitness. They even offer a number of specialty "Wellness Suites" that include a personal

training session and massage in-suite in addition to other fitness amenities, such as an insuite Lifecycle Exercise Bike, Vitamin C sprinkler, crudité minibar, wellness snacks, organic soaps, an Alchimia Apothecary Aromatherapy Kit, a Nikken Kenko pillow and comforter, and LED lamp with a clock and timer.

However, rest assured the clock won't be regarded much as, at this locale, unstructured leisure time reigns supreme. Given the all-inclusive experience at Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit includes luxury accommodations, a la carte gourmet meals at a variety of specialty restaurants, premium branded beverages, 24-hour in-suite service, a multitude of fun and informative activities for both kids and adults (did I mention Karaoke night at its Koi Lounge?), a personal concierge amid a staff to guest ratio of 3:1, and more, this is a vacation destination where time is blissfully on your side. ●

Some or all of the accommodations(s), experience(s), item(s) and/or service(s) detailed above may have been provided or arranged at no cost to accommodate this review, but all opinions expressed are entirely those of Merilee Kern and have not been influenced in any way. Sources: www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All-inclusive_resort www.hotel-online.com/press_releases/release/2018-trends-in-all-inclusive-sector