

## MEXICO

# Step away from the buffet

Everything is served à la carte at this all-inclusive, and the menus are extensive

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN

If you're a foodie and a traveller, you may have made a solemn vow to avoid all-inclusives. After being disappointed by flavourless, greasy buffets produced for the masses, frill party booze and limited availability to get into the one token à la carte restaurant, the desire for quality over quantity eventually wins out and the notion of an all-inclusive holiday quickly loses its appeal.

The formula for luxury, fine food and effortless vacations at a good value has largely been a tourism unicorn, so I'm intrigued when I see an all-inclusive resort in Mexico make the top one per cent of Trip Advisor's 2015 Travellers Choice Awards. It seems the people have spoken, lauding the Grand Velas Beach Resort in the Riviera Nayarit as a choice dream vacation.

Industry awards also continue to pour in for the Velas group's four properties located in Puerto Vallarta, the Nayarit and the Riviera Maya not only for the prestigious five diamond cuisine, but hospitality standards, service and luxury spas. The Grand Velas has made history, earning the highest possible AAA five diamond rating — not an easy feat for an all-inclusive. It's not a large European or American chain, but a local native Mexican family's vision for upping the offerings in the all-inclusive game that begs for more investigation.

After hopping a four-and-a-half-hour direct flight to Puerto Vallarta and a short drive to the Riviera Nayarit, I learn the Velas family approach to hospitality is about detail, warmth and individual attention. There is no check-in, but instead feed hibiscus tea, orange flower scented wet towels and a welcome neck massage await new guests.

The word grand is apt at Grand Velas. Everything is, well, on a



Pif restaurant at the Grand Velas Beach Resort in the Riviera Nayarit is an elegant space that serves classical French cuisine.

huge scale. The sprawling, tranquil property includes suites that start at 1,000 square feet with unique personal touches such as monogrammed pillowcases, bottomless in-room snacks and beverages, a luxurious selection of pools and beach front, kids club and a colossal spa, gym and boutique that encourage guests to linger. Butler service is provided, as is 24-hour room service that's all part of the all-inclusive package.

But it's the food that takes the traditional model of an all-

inclusive and spins it on its normally bland head. Dining is all at la carte and is a showcase of international restaurants that have attracted premier chefs. Pif is an elegant space that serves classical French cuisine; Italian Mediterranean can be found at Luca, and Frida is a refined offering of Mexico's culinary history.

Menus are extensive and wines are top shelf. I sample everything from Chilean sea bass with Sicilian crust over mashed asparagus

and light creamy grappa sauce to grilled rib eye steak marinated in smoke oil and bathed in organic tea. An entrade might be a foie gras duck terrine with fig compote and petit leaves, or crispy tacos of suckling candied pig cooked in banana leaves and pico de gallo with pineapple and tomato coulis.

Where Grand Velas gets particularly progressive is the flexible nature of the cuisine. In each restaurant, gluten-free, light and organic items are

## If you go:

Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit is 15 minutes from Puerto Vallarta International Airport and 25 minutes to historic downtown Puerto Vallarta.

vallarta.grandvelas.com

WestJet and Transat both offer direct service to Puerto Vallarta from YVR.

highlighted on the menus and the staff and chef will make every effort to accommodate dietary restrictions, allergies, kosher, vegan, vegetarian and paleo lifestyles.

Being able to offer that kind of diversity and maintain their award-winning status keeps executive chef Claudio Hotter hopping.

Hailing from Austria and cutting his culinary teeth throughout Europe, he's now been at Grand Velas for eight years and says he's stayed because the Velas group has given him carte blanche with his vision for the new kind of all-inclusive diner.

"I've been given a wide plate that encourages my creativity", he says. Hotter adds that he's talking about bringing an Asian restaurant to the resort and is collaborating on several culinary festivals this year.

His enthusiasm for sharing his passion extends to conducting culinary classes open to all guests at Grand Velas, where part of your vacation can mean channelling your inner-chef and trying your hand at a three-course menu.

"I love to get new faces — new people in the kitchen, and show them what we're doing."

After you've devoured your own delicate chocolate fondant and washed it down with a carefully chosen Chilean Sauvignon Blanc, the all-inclusive experience of holidays past promise to be a distant memory.