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Go 2 Guy: On the take in Puerto Vallarta



By [JIM MOORE](#)

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PUERTO VALLARTA, Mexico -- Ninety-nine percent of the time, unemployment sucks. Welcome to my one percent.

I'm sitting on a white-cushioned chaise lounge at the St. Regis Punta Mita in a scene from a travel magazine. The infinity pool is behind me, the Pacific Ocean is in front of me, and Carlos, one of the many attendants here, has just put up an umbrella so I could relax in the shade.

At this moment, the only problems I have are sunburned ankles and miniature ants that keep running in and out of the keys on my laptop. I'm about to summon Carlos for a can of Raid.

In March, I was staying at Super 8s on my last road trip for the P-I, to and from spring training in Phoenix. Now I'm at the St. Regis in a room that costs \$985 a night.

How can an unemployed journalist afford that? I can't. It's a free trip, paid for by really nice people from the Riviera Nayarit area of Puerto Vallarta. Everything's free -- the flight, the lodging, the golf, the meals and best of all, the beers from the beverage cart.

They asked six golf writers from the U.S. and Mexico to come here and write about the beauty of this place to generate positive publicity to revive the lagging tourism industry.

When I worked at the P-I, reporters could never take a trip like this because it was a newspaper no-no -- if someone else paid, it would affect our objectivity and negatively impact our credibility with readers.

Naturally I never liked this rule -- it prevented me from selfishly partaking of free stuff, and since when was the Go 2 Guy objective and credible anyway? Even if I'm on the take, I'll give it to you straight, from start to finish.

THURSDAY: I can't remember the last time this happened -- getting on a plane that's half-full and having a row to myself. Such is the concern about swine flu in Mexico.

As far as I can tell, it's a misperception, a media creation (those damn reporters!). I look around and all I see are healthy people and healthy pelicans and dead ants -- yeah, I squished most of 'em.

But I was concerned, too, to the point that I almost bailed. Talk about a "non-essential trip" -- the kind of which the U.S. Health Department told us not to take to Mexico.

I pictured mourners and non-mourners at my funeral whispering to each other: "Jesus, what an idiot, he got swine flu in Mexico and croaked."

At the Puerto Vallarta airport, they had a guy with a camera who took a reading on all incoming passengers to check their body temperature to see if they had a fever or not.

Apparently I was OK because I wasn't stopped. But it didn't take long for someone to single me out for something else -- a sucker. I had been told to look for a person holding up a "Tukari" sign.

And when I told a group of Mexicans that I was looking for "Tukari," they pointed me to an attractive woman. I thought Tukari was her name, and I thought she was just being nice when in reality, she wasn't Tukari, and all she was trying to do was sell me a time-share.

Tukari, as it turned out, was the name of the management company that was there to give me a ride to the Grand Mayan Resort.

Like the St. Regis, that place was unbelievable, too. Before you get to the lobby, you walk through a darkened room with eerie music and six Mayan dudes that are six stories tall. It's quite impressive, a don't-miss if you have kids because it will scare the heck out of them.

They gave me a ninth-floor suite with a sweeping view of the Pacific and the hotel grounds below -- six pools with water slides and fountains and one of those swim-up-to-bars that was shouting for me to swim up to it, so I did.

This is where I became *el stupido*. The bartender poured what must have been a quadruple margarita, and I gleefully gulped it down.

Later that night we were taken on a tour of the hotel and given champagne and a margarita followed by wine at dinner and a Pacifico before bed.

In Pullman in the 1975, this would have been called "just getting started." In Puerto Vallarta in 2009, it was a disaster.

FRIDAY: I woke up that morning and started to feel queasy on the shuttle ride to El Tigre, the course we were scheduled to play.

Once we got there, it hit me hard, Tatupu hard, and I was so down for the count that I wouldn't have heard the referee. An hour later, I pried myself from the bathroom and got a ride back to the Grand Mayan from Matteo the Tukari guy, missing my tee time.

I slept until 1 o'clock and sheepishly arrived at the Grand Mayan resort course for the next tee time at 4. The other writers greeted me with a barrage of deserved abuse.

At the Grand Mayan course, our threesome had a forecaddie named Ronaldo, who pointed out a crocodile in the pond next to the second hole.

"If I got in the water would he come after me?" I asked

"Si," Ronaldo said, politely answering the dumb question.

The beverage cart drove by twice, and still reeling, I let it go by both times. I'm starting to learn the language -- beverage cart is carro bar in Spanish.

SATURDAY: On the long drive to the St. Regis Punta Mita, I'm in the backseat of the shuttle van thinking, "Ohmigod this is taking forever, and I get motion sickness and there sure are a lot of bumps and curves, and it sure is stuffy in here, and my palms are starting to sweat, but if I heave on these guys, I'll really never hear the end of it."

We got there just in time, Disaster No. 2 successfully avoided. At the St. Regis Punta Mita, even schmoes like us were treated royally. They called me Mr. Moore there, giving me unearned respect and, yes, Mr. Moore would like another cup of coffee while checking in, muchas gracias.

My room did not in any way resemble my room at the Yreka Super 8. This one had an indoor and outdoor shower. The air conditioning went off when you opened the door and came back on when you closed it. A remote control lowered and raised the shade on the windows.

But that's nothing compared to the room's best feature -- every guest got a personal butler, and mine was Joaquin. When I met him on Saturday, he showed me the room and told me he would tend to my every need.

I didn't ask him to do much initially because I felt weird about having a personal butler. That feeling passed. I would get into the swing of things later.

We golfed that day at Bahia, the newest of two Jack Nicklaus-designed courses at Punta Mita. I played with two beginners and Melanie Schneider, St. Regis' director of sales and marketing.

I'm guessing that the beginners, Richard and Diego, took at least 10 strokes a hole, and Schneider had a 114, which meant that I witnessed my playing partners take a total of 474 shots during our six-hours of divot taking.

At one point, Schneider asked: "Do you know what all of that white stuff is on the island?"

I looked out at the little land mass in the backdrop of the 15th green, thinking she was going to tell me it was a special white coral that is only found at Punta Mita or another rare geological formation. Nope.

"It's bird crap," Schneider said.

Later that day I found out that beverage-cart girl is nina de la carro bar in Spanish, which isn't all that cool, but the fact that she kept showing up with free cervezas was. Instead of Pacificos, I've taken a liking to Modelos here, but I wondered if somebody was trying to tell me something when I checked my voice mails that night.

The only one who left a message was Pat O'Day.

SUNDAY: We played Pacifico, the second Nicklaus course that is best known for its third hole, which has the only natural island green in the world. It's spectacular, playing 185 yards from the blue tee box. The hole is called "Tail of the Whale" because that's what the island resembles

At low tide, you can drive your cart to the green over a bumpy path. At medium tide, you have to take a big-wheeled rig through the water. At high tide, you can't play the hole; you have to play an alternate par-3, which precedes the island hole.

I'd like to say that I parred the hole or even bogeyed it, but I took an 11, depositing four balls in the Pacific before finding the fringe with my fifth tee shot.

That night the golf writers got together for their fourth dinner in a row, and these aren't just any old dinners. We are wined and dined, and most people would show restraint, but I struggle with that.

There are appetizers and main courses and desserts and different wines, and if you want some of the country's finest tequila, they'll pour a shot of that for you too. Finally learning, I declined all of those offers.

It's insane, really, because if they were trying to impress me, all it would take is a visit to their Mexican version of Dick's.

MONDAY: We were told that personal butlers would pack for us when we checked out, and I didn't want to bother Joaquin with that, but then I thought, why not?

My bag arrived at the nearby Four Seasons, where I am now writing from a different chaise lounge on a different beach under a grass hut with a similar view of the Pacific. Joaquin was a perfect packer, folding every shirt and wrapping my shoes with tissue paper.

The Four Seasons Punta Mita is another posh joint, which means the Go 2 Guy has no business being here either. After lunch, Claudia Silva, the Four Seasons PR and marketing director, took us on a tour that featured a stop at the Coral suite, a private five-bedroom oceanfront bungalow with its own infinity pool and dual hammocks. Among other celebrities, John Travolta has stayed here.

If you want to stay in the Coral suite, bring many pesos -- it goes for \$16,000 U.S. a night, and most Christmases, the tenant stays for 15 nights, a tab of \$240,000.

We golfed that morning at Flamingos, the oldest course in Puerto Vallarta, and I hacked it up again, playing poorly for the second consecutive day. I noticed that one of my playing partners, Fernando, was also having a tough time and growing increasingly mad.

Fernando lives in a Mexico City and is a well-known golf writer in this country. He's a likable guy who enjoys his tequila. He speaks English very well, but there were two words he had yet to learn, and it was time to teach him.

I tried to calm him down by telling him what I do to feel better. "Hey, Fernando, you gotta say 'Go Cougs,' " I said.

"Go Cougs?" he said.

"Yeah, Go Cougs," I said, and I went on to explain the whole Washington State thing to him. A few holes later, I made a good putt.

"Jeem," Fernando said. "Go Cougs."

My new friend was catching on.

TUESDAY: Greg Norman found enough time to pull himself away from Chris Evert to design a new course here, and we played 12 of the 18 holes Tuesday morning. He was paid a reported \$2.5 million. The course, in nearby Litibu, won't open until next year. It's a top-notch track that will cost in the neighborhood of \$200 for greens fees.

That wrapped up six days in a country I'd never really seen before. Until now, Juarez and Tijuana were the only towns I'd visited. I'll return to Seattle on Wednesday night with a different view of Mexico.

And a vow to never swim up to a bar again.

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