

PUERTO VALLARTA · BAHÍA DE BANDERAS · RIVIERA NAYARIT



Boat and Bay
VALLARTA

THE HONEST GUIDE TO

Chartering a Yacht in Puerto Vallarta

What a day actually costs, how it is composed, and how to recognise the wrong boat before you are standing on it.



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Founder, Boat and Bay · Puerto Vallarta, Mexico · Edition 2026

You relax. We handle it.

A note about what this is

I answer the same questions every week, and I have never had a good place to send people for the answers. So I wrote them down.

What follows is roughly what I would say to a friend who called me in October and said: we are thinking about a yacht day in February, where do we start.

Some of it is arithmetic. Some of it is local knowledge that took years to accumulate and that nobody publishes, because it is neither flattering nor simple. All of it is what I actually know, in the season I am writing this.

You gave me an email address to read it. I am not going to use it to chase you. There is no sequence behind this, no countdown, no offer that expires on Friday. If you want to talk, you know where I am. If you never write back, I hope this still saves you money and one bad afternoon.

A last thing. I am not going to tell you that every day on this bay is beautiful and every operator is careful, because neither is true, and you already suspect as much. What I will do is show you exactly how a day is put together, so that whatever you decide, you decide it knowing what you are looking at.

— *Oksana*

What is in here

Read it in order, or go straight to whichever part you are worried about.

01 What a day actually costs

02 Why everything is included

03 The right vessel is a question of fit, not size

04 Where you actually go

05 The bay itself, and why it matters

06 Food and drink, prepared in a moving kitchen

07 If the weather turns

08 Seasickness, and the one thing I cannot fix

09 Children on board, and the yacht I will not put them on

10 Tipping, without the awkwardness

11 How the booking actually works

12 What is mine, and what is not

13 Before you come — what to bring

♦ *Whether or not it is me*

What a day actually costs

The number most people arrive with is too low. Not by a little.

Here is the real shape of it for a private charter in Bahía de Banderas, everything included.

FROM

1,500 USD

A small vessel — around twenty-eight feet — four hours, three or four guests. This is the entry point, and it is a genuine one.

AROUND

3,000 USD

Where most couples and smaller families land. A comfortable mid-size vessel, a longer day, food and drink composed around the group.

RANGING

3,000–5,000 USD

Most mid-size and larger groups. More deck, more range, more hours, and usually a chef.

ABOVE

10,000 USD

The largest vessels in the bay.

Two things are worth understanding about those numbers.

The first is that the price you are quoted is the price you pay. Fuel, dock and port fees, marina entrance fees, water toys, crew, food, drink — inside the figure. Mexican value-added tax is sixteen percent, and it is inside the figure too, not added at the end. Cards are accepted with no fee attached.

The second is that the crew gratuity sits outside it, and that is the whole of the exception. There is a section further on about how to handle it without carrying cash.

There is a saying here. Lo barato sale caro. The cheap thing turns out expensive.

That saying earns its keep in this market. A day on the water has a real floor cost: fuel, a captain's hours, a crew's wages, food that was bought and cooked and cooled and carried, fees that are collected whether or not anyone mentioned them to you. When a quoted number sits well below that floor, the difference has to come from somewhere. Sometimes it comes from the maintenance. Sometimes from what gets added at the dock. Sometimes from the fact that nobody is going to answer the phone if the day goes sideways.

None of which makes the low number a trap. It makes it an incomplete sentence.

Why everything is included, and what that spares you

Almost everything in this section is a small decision I made not to hand you.

Food and drink are included because I do not want you buying sodas at an OXXO and carrying them through the heat to a dock you have not located yet. You are stepping onto a beautiful vessel. You should not be hungry on it, and you should not be doing errands for it.

Marina entrance fees are included because I do not want you standing at a gate with coins. In Mexico that gate is a small negotiation. Whether a child counts as a person, and at what rate, depends on who is working the entrance that morning. It is not written anywhere you can read it. I would much rather be the one having that conversation. I am from here in the way that matters for it, and I do not mind it in the slightest.

Dock and port fees are included for the same reason. They exist, somebody pays them, and it should not be you at eight in the morning while your group waits.

What this adds up to is not really a pricing structure. It is the removal of perhaps fifteen small moments in a day where you would otherwise have to stop, translate, calculate, and decide — each of them minor, and all of them landing on whoever organised the trip.

WORTH KNOWING

Extra hours, jet skis, a photographer, musicians, decorations, a cake — these are itemised and priced before you confirm anything, never after. You will also have the price of an additional hour in writing before you sail, so if you want to stay out longer, the decision on the day is a decision and not a negotiation.

The right vessel is a question of fit, not size

The wrong boat is rarely a bad boat. It is almost always the wrong boat for this particular group, on this particular day. Four things I look at, roughly in this order.

Capacity is not comfort

A vessel certified for twelve is comfortable for eight. The maximum figure is a ceiling — what is legally permitted and what the crew can properly handle — not a recommendation. I will almost always suggest something rated above your group size, partly for comfort and partly because groups move. Someone's brother turns up. Someone's cousin does not.

Seating decides the day

This is the detail nobody asks about and everybody feels. If there is not enough seating for your whole group to sit together, then somebody eats standing up, or inside, or out of earshot of the conversation. Eleven people on a vessel with a small salon and one narrow bench will have a perfectly good day. They will not have the day they pictured.

When I look at a layout, I am counting seats around a table before I look at anything else.

Children are guests

A three-year-old counts against the capacity number exactly as an adult does. Children also need floor. Where there are kids in the group I steer toward more deck, high railings, non-slip flooring and stability — a catamaran barely moves next to a monohull of the same length. Sailboats photograph beautifully and are usually the wrong choice for small children: more motion, less space, lower rails. If the children are young enough that the day depends on them being content, that single factor can outrank everything else.

A crew has a character, and it does not adjust

This is the part that appears in no listing anywhere. One vessel I work with is lovely, and its crew is quiet, precise and formal. They are excellent at what they do. They are the wrong crew for a bachelor party, and I do not send one to them. Another crew is quick and loud and genuinely delighted by a group that wants music at eleven in the morning. Also excellent. Also entirely wrong for two people who came out here for silence.

You cannot see this in a photograph. You learn it by being on the water with the same people, repeatedly, for years.

Which is why, when you write to me, I ask what looks like a lot of questions. How many of you, what ages, are there children, is anyone nervous on water, what is the occasion, what do you want the day to feel like. Then I send two options, sometimes three. Not thirty. By the time a vessel reaches you, most of the choosing has already happened.

What actually ruins a day on the water

In my experience it is almost never the boat.

It is eleven people on a vessel sized for eight. It is an itinerary that looked reasonable on paper and did not account for the run time between two beaches, so the day becomes a transit schedule. It is a group that wanted to celebrate loudly paired with a crew that celebrates quietly. It is one person seasick at minute forty, which changes the day for everyone else. It is nobody having told the chef about the shellfish allergy.

And it is the thing underneath all of those: nobody who is clearly accountable when something needs to change at eleven in the morning.

*A charter goes wrong in the planning, then reveals it
on the water.*

Every section that follows is, in one way or another, about the planning.

Where you actually go

Short answer: wherever you decide, including after you have left the dock. The longer answer — the constraints are real, and they are what an itinerary is actually made of.

Your departure point sets your range

Leaving from La Cruz de Huanacastle with four hours, the options are genuinely limited. With six or eight, the Marietas Islands open up, or you can run south. From the Los Muertos pier, four hours reaches the southern beaches comfortably, and eight reaches hidden ones most visitors never see. Where you are staying quietly determines a great deal about your day.

The month changes which beaches are worth it

Some coves work in summer and not in winter. Water clarity moves week to week, and a beach that was extraordinary in March can be ordinary in August.

The hour changes what you see

During whale season, most vessels leave at nine or ten. By mid-morning a single whale can have a considerable audience. A different departure hour is often the whole difference between watching a whale and watching boats watch a whale.

Your captain knows more than the plan does

Whatever I compose in advance, your captain is reading conditions in real time and has been doing so on this water for a long time. Some guests want the day composed to the hour. Some want to leave and decide as they go. Both work — and the second works far better with somebody aboard who knows the water.

And then there is what happens after you leave

The captain will accommodate essentially anything that is safe and physically possible within the time. What sits behind that flexibility is straightforward: on the day of your charter, my calendar has one thing in it. I am at the marina, reachable from shore for the length of your trip, and rearranging things is what I am there to do.

-
- Stay two hours at the first beach and skip the second entirely. Plans are not binding.
-
- Decide, arriving at Las Ánimas, not to go ashore at all – lunch comes from the restaurant out to your deck instead. One group did precisely this and never left the boat. It is still one of my favourite days.
-
- Leave later than planned, if you let me know in advance and the vessel has no other booking. A slow breakfast is a legitimate reason. This is different from a no-show: once we are at the dock waiting for you, the clock has started.
-
- Come back early. The charter is not refunded, but the day is yours to end.
-
- Stay out longer, if the vessel is free. You will already have the hourly price in writing.
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- Get off somewhere else entirely. One group boarded at La Cruz, ran south, fell for the town past the Malecón, and disembarked at Los Muertos. We arranged a water taxi and moved their transport. They spent the evening in the city.
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FIVE

The bay itself, and why it matters

That depth is not trivia. Deep water close to shore changes how swell behaves: less of the short, sharp chop that shallower bays produce, and a smoother ride nearer land. If anyone in your group is prone to motion sickness, this is a meaningful difference and not a marketing sentence. It also lets a captain anchor safely close in at a beach, rather than leaving you a long tender ride from the place you actually wanted to be. Day charters stay inside the bay; occasionally we board from Mandarin on the Pacific side.

December to March, there are whales

Humpbacks arrive to breed and to give birth. The males sing, sometimes for twenty minutes without stopping. There is a required distance and captains keep it. Every so often a whale disregards the arrangement entirely and comes to look at you, at which point the engine goes quiet and nobody moves. No one can promise you that in advance. It is a reason to be out there in February.

Food and drink, prepared in a kitchen that moves

This is the part of the day that looks effortless and is not.

Before your trip I send you a short form. It asks what you would like to drink, whether anyone has allergies, and what kind of day you have in mind. It is not a formality. A vessel has very little storage, and I cannot stock everything in case. One group is mostly vodka. Another does not drink at all. Another cares seriously about tequila and can tell the difference between bottles. All three are easy, if I know beforehand.

What a galley can and cannot do

Not every vessel can carry a chef, because not every vessel has anywhere to put one. Some have no oven. Some a microwave and nothing else. On some, the electrical system will not run a blender — the difference between a full cocktail list and a shorter one. For a large group, a proper menu takes a chef and an assistant, and there are galleys where two people physically cannot stand at the same time.

And a chef cannot be prone to seasickness. This sounds like a joke and it is not. It is one of several reasons a chef often comes with an assistant.



So the food is often made on land, before dawn

Where a chef aboard is not possible, our catering is cooked by our own chefs on shore in the hours before you board — they start very early, so that what reaches you is an hour or two old rather than a day. Everything travels cold, in insulated bags, in a climate that undoes cold quickly in July. There is no parking in front of the marina, so a good deal of it is carried on foot, occasionally bottle by bottle.

Once in a while we spend a morning driving around town looking for a single bottle, because somebody wrote it on a form and we said yes. Certain things are genuinely hard to find in Mexico, and some I import from the United States — which is the real reason an unusual request needs a few weeks of notice rather than a few days.

None of this is visible from the sundeck. That is more or less the point of it.

It is also the honest answer to why food and drink on a yacht cost what they cost. You are not paying for a charcuterie board. You are paying for a charcuterie board that arrived cold, intact, and presentable, on a moving platform, in thirty-four degree heat, having been assembled at five in the morning by someone who was told about the almonds.

ONE THING THIS MEANS FOR YOU

Please do send the form back. It takes four minutes and it is the whole difference between drinks and your drinks. If there are children, their names and ages change what goes in their lunch boxes, and often which vessel I recommend in the first place.

If the weather turns

Rain here is local in a way that genuinely surprises people.

There is a well-known clip filmed in town of a two-lane road where one lane is wet and the other is dry. That is not an exaggeration of the phenomenon. That is the phenomenon.

In summer it can rain hard for half an hour and then clear entirely. A grey eight o'clock tells you very little about eleven. And on the water you can move — no traffic, no roads, no single direction you are obliged to take. A captain can go left, right or straight and often find a brighter sky within a short run. Over years of charters, the days that never cleared at all were the days a hurricane was passing offshore.

If it does rain on you, my honest opinion is that the day still works. You are going to be wet regardless; that is rather the arrangement. There is shade, there is inside, there is music and something cold, and the bay under rain is closer to itself than the bay under a hard midday sun. I would not file it as a loss.

What I cannot do is undo the preparation

By the time anyone is thinking about cancelling, the food has been bought and cooked, the drinks sourced — sometimes weeks earlier — the crew briefed, the vessel held, and other enquiries for that date turned away.

The four or eight hours you spend on the water are the last part of the work rather than the whole of it. Something close to eighty percent of a charter has already happened before anybody steps aboard. That is why the cancellation terms read as they do, and why you will have them in writing, in plain language, before you send any money at all.

Seasickness, and the one thing I cannot fix

Of everything in this guide, this is the section I would most like you to read twice.

I can move a departure time. I can find a brighter sky. I can send lunch out to a boat whose guests would rather not come ashore. I can change a vessel, a bottle or an entire itinerary at short notice, and I have done all three. I can do nothing at all about seasickness once it has started. Neither can the crew, the captain, or the ocean.

It is the only part of your day I cannot fix, restyle, renegotiate or reschedule. It is also the easiest thing on this list to prevent.

The guests who get seasick are, with real reliability, the same guests who told me that morning that they never get seasick. They arrive confident. Somewhere around minute forty they go quiet, then pale, then spend several hours sitting very still, looking hard at the horizon, while everybody else quietly decides not to mention the second beach. It is not one person having an unpleasant hour. It is six people rearranging an entire day around somebody who is suffering. Nobody says anything about it. Everybody feels it.

I am not permitted to hand out medication, and I do not. What is on board are acupressure bands and adhesive patches. They help some people, and they are a second line rather than a substitute for the first — which is a tablet you take before you board.

Take something, thirty to sixty minutes before boarding

The first line is a tablet, and you take it before you board. Dimenhydrinate or meclizine — Dramamine, Bonine, whatever your pharmacy at home stocks. Take it at the hotel, not at the dock, and certainly not at the first flicker of feeling odd. It needs time to be in your system before the lines come off. Take it even if you are certain you will not need it: a small tablet against the possibility of losing a day you planned for months. If you forget, pharmacies here carry it — ask me which is nearest your marina.

THE MORNING

- Eat something light first — crackers, toast, a banana. An empty stomach is worse than a small one; a heavy greasy breakfast is worse than both.
- Go gently with alcohol on the run out. The first hour is when your body decides how it feels — let it decide undisturbed.
- Sleep, if you can. Tired people are more susceptible than rested ones.

ONCE YOU ARE ABOARD

- Stay on deck, in the air. The cabin is where it gets worse — you lose the horizon.
- Sit toward the middle of the vessel, and low. Far less movement there than at the bow or flybridge.
- Look at the horizon — not your phone, not a book.
- Say something early. There are things that help at the first flicker; nothing helps at minute ninety.
- If it starts anyway, get in the water. Swimming works far more often than it has any right to.

If anybody is genuinely worried, tell me while we are still choosing the vessel — it changes my recommendation more than almost anything else. A catamaran barely rolls next to a monohull of the same length. Three weeks out, this is a solvable problem. At eleven in the morning, it is simply the rest of your day.

Children on board, and the yacht I will not put them on

I am a mother. This chapter is less a description of a service than the thing I would want somebody to tell me.

The narrow side deck, and why it costs you half the boat

On a great many yachts, the route from the main deck up to the sundeck runs along a narrow passage outside the cabin. A foot or so wide. A handrail on one side. An adult does this without registering that they did it. Now do it holding a three-year-old. Now do it holding a three-year-old and a plate.

You will do it once. Then you will stop. And a family that booked a vessel with two beautiful decks spends the whole day on the lower one, while the sundeck they are paying for sits empty above their heads.

A yacht with two decks and only one reachable by a four-year-old is, in practice, a yacht with one deck.



So for families I look for a proper central staircase to the flybridge. Wide, protected decks with room to move. Railings high enough that a leaning child is not an event. Non-slip flooring. And somewhere shaded to put a sleeping toddler that is not the same surface everybody else is eating from. A catamaran barely rolls, and on a mixed-age group that single fact can be the difference between a good day and a long one. Sailboats are usually the wrong answer for young children: more motion, less deck, lower rails.

The things that actually make a parent's day easier

- A nanny on board, so the adults get an afternoon rather than a shift.
- A crib and a shaded place for naps — we plan around baby sleep.
- Lunch boxes made for each child by name.
- Fishing — every crew is delighted to teach a child to cast.
- A lifeguard, if the water is the specific thing keeping you awake.
- Child-sized life vests, already on board. Bring your own if you prefer.
- Activity boxes for the twenty minutes between one beach and the next.
- Snorkelling, jet skis as a passenger with an adult, jumping off the back forty times.

AND THE PART THAT IS RARELY OFFERED

On family charters with grandparents, several children and genuine moving parts, I come on board as host and coordinator. Not to hover — to carry the logistics: the timings, the crew, the chef, the moment somebody needs to be somewhere with a towel. Traditionally that job falls to whichever parent organised the trip, who then spends the day working an event they paid to attend. That is the thing I am really offering families.

The vessels I recommend for families, and everything that can be arranged for children, are at boatandbay.com/kids

Tipping, without the awkwardness

Not mandatory. Customary. Usually 10 to 15 percent of the charter, and not included in the price. You do not need to carry cash, and you certainly do not need pesos — dollars are welcome. There are three ways to handle it.

- I Cash, directly to the crew, at the end of the day. Straightforward, if you like doing it that way.
 - 2 Transfer it to me afterwards and I will pass it on. The crew is told in advance, so nobody is standing at the gangway wondering.
 - 3 Add a flat ten percent to your invoice before you sail and stop thinking about it. I distribute it evenly.
-

Crews generally share tips among themselves, though it varies. Some junior crew — *pavo*, locally — work without a salary while they are learning, and live entirely on tips. If a crew member ever pressures you or makes you uncomfortable about it, tell me. That is something I need to know, and it affects who I work with next season.

How the booking actually works

Simple, sequential, and written down at every step.

- 01 You write to me. Email or WhatsApp. Dates, group, occasion, roughly what you have in mind.
- 02 I ask questions. Numbers, ages, anyone nervous on water, what the day is for. This is where the vessel selection genuinely happens.
- 03 I send a written proposal. Two or three vessels, a suggested itinerary, the price, exactly what is included, and the terms. Nothing verbal, nothing implied.
- 04 Fifty percent reserves the date. The remaining fifty is due 72 hours before departure. The minimum between deposit and departure is 24 hours.
- 05 Before you sail you receive the preferences form, the itinerary, the price of an additional hour, and the meeting point.
- 06 On the day I meet you at the dock.

ON TIMING

Twenty-four hours is the technical minimum, but not the useful answer. Two weeks gives room to compose the day properly. For a specific vessel, an imported bottle, a chef or musicians, give it three or four weeks. December through March books furthest ahead — for a milestone in whale season, months rather than weeks is not excessive.

ON INSURANCE

Bring your own travel insurance, as you would anywhere abroad, from a provider at home whose process you understand and can use from a phone. Ordinary advice for any international trip, worth following on this one. You will receive a proper invoice with IVA, from a registered Mexican business. Cards accepted, nothing added for using one.

What is mine, and what is not

Mine

The selection of the vessel, from operators I have worked with for years. The inspection before you arrive — I am on the boat about an hour ahead of you, going through the bathroom, the linens, the towels, the soap, whether there are actually enough forks. The styling. The chef, the bar, the photographer, the musicians, the decorations, the cake, the jet skis: these are people I hire, brief and pay, and I answer for them directly. The briefing of the crew, in Spanish, before every charter. The itinerary. The coordination on the day. Being reachable while you are out there, with a contingency already thought through.

Not mine

I do not own the vessels and I do not employ the crews. I select them, I brief them, and I have been on the water with them long enough to know how each behaves on a difficult day. But I am not standing over anyone's shoulder, and I am not going to tell you that on-board service is something I control minute by minute, because it is not mine to control.

Nor is the sea. Nor the weather. Nor the whales. Nor what any given day decides to do.

What I can promise is that everything that could be prepared has been, and that there is one person, with a name and a phone, on the other end of it when something moves.

That is the actual product. Not the boat — the boat is the straightforward part.

Before you come — what to bring, and what to leave

The practical version. Worth a screenshot.

BRING

-
- ☐ Motion-sickness medication, taken 30 to 60 minutes before boarding. First on this list for a reason.
 - ☐ Any personal medication, and tell me about anything I should know.
 - ☐ A hat and sunglasses. The bay is brighter than it looks from a balcony.
 - ☐ A light layer for the way back. It cools quickly after four.
 - ☐ Your swimsuit already on, under your clothes. Changing on a moving boat is a skill, and not one you want to acquire in front of your in-laws.
 - ☐ Soft soles, or bare feet. Heels do not board well.
 - ☐ Cash for the gratuity — only if you would rather hand it over yourself.
 - ☐ Travel insurance from home — from a provider whose process you understand and can use from a phone.
-

ALREADY ON BOARD — LEAVE IT AT THE HOTEL

- ✓ Reef-safe sunscreen. It is there, and there is plenty of it.
- ✓ Fresh towels, soap, and everything else a bathroom needs.
- ✓ Child-sized life vests.
- ✓ Seasickness bands and patches — the second line, not the first.
- ✓ Ice, water, food and drink. All of it, for the whole day.
- ✓ Coins for the marina gate. There is no gate for you.

SEND ME, RATHER THAN PACK

- The preferences form. Four minutes, and it is the whole difference between drinks and your drinks.
- Children's names and ages. They change the lunch boxes, and often the vessel.
- Anyone nervous on water, pregnant, non-swimming, or with mobility needs. All workable with notice. Considerably harder without.
- The date, before you fix the rest of the plan. The whole months go first.

Whether or not it is me

If you have read this far, you now know most of what I know. You do not strictly need anyone to have a good day on this bay. If you speak Spanish, enjoy coordinating, have time to spare and a comfortable tolerance for a plan rearranging itself in a language you are still translating, you can absolutely assemble this yourself. Some people find that genuinely satisfying, and they should do it.

Most of the people who write to me are not looking for a second job on their holiday. They want to arrive at a dock at ten, be met by name, and stop thinking for eight hours — particularly if they are the person who organised the trip and will be quietly held responsible for how it goes.

That is the thing I actually sell. Not a vessel. The fact that none of the rest of it reaches you.



— Oksana

No sequence, no follow-up, no pressure — as promised on the first page. Write when you want to, or do not. Either is completely fine.

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A registered Mexican business · Proper IVA invoicing · No card fees · A limited number of charters each week, by design. Working with the operations and concierge teams of leading resorts across the region, including One&Only Mandarin. Prices and practices described here reflect the 2026 season and are reviewed annually.

