

Publication: The Oregonian; Date: Feb 9, 2014; Section: Living & Travel; Page: L4

# Have some fun, get some sun, do some good

Puerto Vallarta remains a vacation hot spot, but philanthropic opportunities also abound

**By Katherina Audley Special to The Oregonian**

Puerto Vallarta is safe, warm, sunny, on the water and full of happy, smiling people. The food is delicious. Bars and nightlife are plentiful. The town sits on Banderas Bay, which is a nursery to dolphins year-round and whales in the winter.

After hard workweeks, running our homes and caring for family and pets, we long for beach chairs, icy drinks, an azure horizon and oblivion. And the direct flight from Portland to Puerto Vallarta makes it an easy, affordable place to go for sun, fun and relaxation in the winter.

But one can only belt out so many renditions of “Don’t Stop Believing” from the bar top before it begins to feel a little empty. So on your next trip to Puerto Vallarta, consider stepping off the tourist trail and into the less worn path of the traveling philanthropist, even for a few hours.

A shining example are Matt Messner and Neil Sechan — an Ashland couple who overwinter in Puerto Vallarta each year. Fervent animal lovers, they fundraise, volunteer and donate to Peace Animals, a local nonprofit that provides free spay and neuter services to cats and dogs in Puerto Vallarta and beyond.

Since I always miss my dog when I’m on vacation, it helps to donate some of my vacation time “flipping” dogs and cats for Peace Animals.

Anyone who has been to Mexico has noticed the street animals. Nothing kills a holiday buzz like a mangy, starving street dog dying at your feet. Peace Animals sterilizes an average of 4,500 cats and dogs each year. Given that only one out of five dogs in Mexico have an owner, sterilization is the most effective way to reduce feral dog and cat problems. The cost to spay or neuter an animal through Peace Animals is free to the owner; it costs the organization \$17 per animal.

Gretchen DeWitt, president and director of Peace Animals, is a go-getter from San Francisco. When she moved to Puerto Vallarta in 2006, the sad state of the street animals and lack of a good SPCA prompted her to first co-found the Puerto Vallarta SPCA and then focus her efforts on free spay/neuter clinics through Peace Animals. Portland resident Amy Welch serves as secretary and treasurer of Peace USA, headquartered in Portland, and she gets to see first-hand the fruits of her labor during her winters in Puerto Vallarta.

It used to be that volunteers for Peace Animals went door to door in the villages and neighborhoods of Puerto Vallarta offering pet owners the opportunity to spay or neuter their pets for free as well as get treatment for fleas, worms and other common ailments. Fifty percent of pet owners agreed to the procedure. Eight years later, word has spread, and people now line up at the clinic 31 days each week to have their pets spayed or neutered.

Which is where the cat and dog “flipping” comes in. When owners drop off their pets at the clinic, the animals become part of an efficient lineup that enables three people to spay and neuter 45 animals each day. Seasoned volunteers assist the vets by checking in animals, guiding pet owners through the process and teaching new volunteers to take vitals. And you, the newly trained volunteer, are then assigned a table full of sedated, newly spayed and neutered pets. You will need to track and turn over each animal every 15 minutes, lest the blood pool too heavily on one side of an animal’s body. If one of your charges is running cold, you cover it with blankets or put it in the sun. Cat flipping is a very gratifying way to spend the day.

Should you wish to do a little more with animals, the animal adoption organizations need couriers to accompany pets to the U.S. and Canada, where foster owners and permanent owners will be awaiting them at the airport. And should you be in the position to take on a pet of your own, Puerto Vallarta offers several dog and cat fostering and adoption programs that will guide you through the relatively straightforward process of bringing a dog or cat home.



Volunteers help Peace Animals spay clinics in Puerto Vallarta keep pet populations down and pet owners happy.

GRETCHEN DEWITT

## Get involved

Other philanthropic ways to spend some of your vacation in Puerto Vallarta include: Ride a bus around town on the International Friendship Club tour to check out gorgeous houses and end up in the botanical gardens. All the all funds raised from this tour are donated to charitable organizations, such as providing cleft palate surgeries to people in need.

Choose Ocean Friendly Tours or Ecotours de Mexico as your Banderas Bay whale watch company. Your tour dollars will support whale research and conservation, and you'll get one of the best and most informative tours in the Bay. There are other whale watch companies, too, which work in strict compliance with Mexico's federal whale watch regulations and participate in whale research. Check out the Puerto Vallarta Whale Watching website for alist of such companies. ([http://www.puertovallartawhalewatching.org/html/book\\_a\\_tour.html](http://www.puertovallartawhalewatching.org/html/book_a_tour.html))

There are orphanages full of children aching for interaction. Organizations for children with Down's Syndrome or autism have opportunities for you to support and volunteer with these organizations.

Bookish? Delve into helping atthe local library.

Sporty? The kids in Puerto Vallarta need team sponsors and equipment for a baseball, which they love to play.



OSCAR FREY/OCEANFRIENDLY.COM

Puerto Vallarta's Banderas Bay is a nursery to whales in the winter, but the stray dogs in the town need an awful lot of nursing, too. Ashland couple Matt Messner and Neil Sechan go to Puerto Vallarta every year and volunteer to help the stray pet population.

---

LAURENCE ILIFF DALLAS MORNING NEWS/2008

When you've had enough beach time in Puerto Vallarta, you can get to know the town through charitable pursuits.