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Jewel by the Sea

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During a recent trip to Mexico for a friend's wedding, my husband and I decided to leave the resort for some local flair at the nearby town of Puerto Morelos.

The small fishing village impressed me immediately as we drove up to see children playing in the town square.

Bustling with activity, the city's downtown offered a variety of restaurants, a few tourist shops and a lot of native people enjoying the Oceanside views, breezes and food on a Friday evening.

Puerto Morelos definitely lives up to its nickname "La Joya del Caribe," which means "Jewel of the Caribbean."

Although we didn't spend much time there — only a couple of hours — we walked around the quaint little town and chose a local hot spot to try some fresh cuisine at El Pirata. Even though it is described as an open-air snack bar and a great place to people watch, the place had more people eating dinner there than the bigger restaurants nearby so we decided to give it a try.

The freshly made guacamole, grilled shrimp and steak torta were wonderful, but the scenery was even better. The owner greeted us as soon as we walked up and made sure we were taken care of for the night.

Only a few feet away from the beach, where scores of small, colorful fishing boats were docked, we caught the beautiful sunset as we dined. It was a nice, quiet night and escape from the much busier nearby resort.

After catching a quick glimpse of Puerto Morelos, a town steeped in history, I'd like to go back some day for a longer visit to catch more of the sights and attractions offered there.

Its natural wonders include a coral reef 500 meters from shore, according to www.visitpuertomorelos.com. The community, a mix of locals and foreigners, works hard to protect Puerto Morelos' status as a National Marine Park and keep development to a minimum.

As a result there are rules and regulations imposed for its protection. By prohibiting motorized water sports, they have managed to ensure protection for the reefs. Puerto Morelos has instead become popular for other non-motorized water activities such as snorkeling, diving and windsurfing.

Whether on land or in the water, Puerto Morales is home to hundreds of marine, plant and animal species.

The town offers tour guides who specialize in personalized tours to local area cenotes (natural swimming holes formed when the roof of a cavern collapses), or jungle tours to uncharted ruins. There are also horseback riding trails, a crocodile and reptile zoo and Botanical Gardens featuring a variety of indigenous birds and animals. It is also a great place to stay to visit nearby Mayan ruin sites, the website states.

On the weekends there is an open-air market where arts and crafts can be purchased from the makers and we saw a few of these vendors when we visited on Friday.

Because it's on the water's edge, Puerto Morelos gets the ocean breezes and is always a few degrees cooler than the bigger cities such as Cancun and Playa del Carmen. Puerto Morelos is in the northern part of the Riviera Maya just 20 minutes south of the Cancun International Airport.

At night, the town lives up to its affectionate nickname of Muerto Morelos, which means "Dead Morelos," according to www.visitpuertomorelos.com. With a population of about 2,000, the town has no late night discos, clubs or bars.

Nighttime activity entails dining at one of the restaurants, meeting people in the square or visiting friends at home.

There are monthly dances held with live bands that last until the wee hours and almost all major holidays are celebrated with some kind of fiesta, such as the Carnival's five-day non-stop party.

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