

# Welcome to flavour country

BY CHRIS JOHNS

A few hours ago, this massive yellowfin tuna was happily swimming about in the Bahia de Banderas. Now, a pair of burly fishermen haul the glistening, glassy-eyed creature up from the dock and on to an industrial shopping buggy. We're in the bustling Mercado Del Mar Market on the outskirts of Puerto Vallarta. What makes this scene especially exciting for me is that, today, I'm not a tourist, I'm a customer—and I can't wait to take this beautiful specimen home with me.

Or, home away from home, to be precise: specifically, a sprawling, five-bedroom villa that's part of the Exclusive Resorts luxury holiday collection. Exclusive Resorts is one of the originators of the luxury vacation club concept; its members are afforded year-round access to incredible properties around the world, from Aspen to Vienna, Bali to Barcelona, beyond to even more beyond.

But the villas are just one of the benefits of membership; experiences are another altogether. The company offers a host of bucket-list worthy things to do: soaking in the thermal hot springs of Iceland, cruising the Virgin Islands on a private yacht, getting an inside tour of some of Champagne's finest Chateaux. They also have the capacity to customize experiences to meet a guest's particular desires.

My dream of simply having access to a great market and a fully stocked kitchen might seem humble by comparison, but it's no less thrilling for me.

Markets have always drawn travelers. These days, in my humble opinion, a lot of us want to go beyond simply tasting a few local delicacies in a Michelin-starred restaurant. Hungry travelers want to get in to the markets, both fresh and super, to rub elbows with the locals and see how they feed themselves every day. This authentic culinary tourism is now playing a big role in the evolving definition of luxury travel.

A recent report by the World Food Travel Association (WFTA) revealed that 75 percent of American leisure travelers consider a culinary activity to be a motivating factor when deciding on destinations. And more than 90 percent of those people want to experience something other than simply eating in a restaurant. For millennial travelers, the numbers are even higher with 88 percent of them having participated in food-related experiences, a cooking class or a market tour while traveling, according to AAA.

For anyone who's visited a market in a country known for its food, this shouldn't be any surprise. Great markets allow visitors to get a look into the real lives of the locals who frequent them. The sounds, the smells and the tastes of a new city are gloriously captured in its markets.

But if you're someone who loves to cook, visiting a market can be a frustrating experience. Wandering around all the stalls, food lovers are struck by an insatiable desire to bring home every perfect tomato, oversized artichoke and exquisite piece of fresh fish they see. What's a traveller-slash-food lover to do, then?

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You can try to “cook” in hotel rooms, as I have many times. I’ve cracked oysters with a corkscrew, assembled a pretty respectable charcuterie platter and even turned the room’s iron into an impromptu panini press. Overall, though, the results have been mostly depressing. Airbnb has helped things along to some degree, but the kitchens in most places are Spartan at best, an unfortunate combination of bubble glass cutting boards and rusty old Ginsu knives.

This is another area where Exclusive Resorts stands out from the crowd. The kitchen in my villa is huge and beautifully equipped. There’s a massive, six-burner Smeg gas range, industrial Sub-Zero fridge, top of the line cookware, and even proper, sharp knives. The bar is also fully stocked and there’s an abundance of useful gadgets, making the entire set-up a food lover’s dream.

As excited as I was to stay in a villa with a proper kitchen, I’m not a masochist. That’s why, after a long day of travel and a dip in the private pool overlooking the Bahia de Banderas, I’m happy to leave the cooking to a pair of private chefs reserved for the night, another perk of travelling with Exclusive Resorts.

The next day, to gather inspiration for my own cooking, we take a road trip up to the happening little surf town of Sayulita. We stop in at the renowned Petit Hotel Hafa and get into a conversation with the owner, Christophe, who is just back from his daily surf session. He tells me that the best ceviche in town is a bit off the beaten track, but worth seeking out.

This is how I end up on a rickety little chair beneath a decorative piñata at Estrella de Mar Mariscos devouring the finest tostada de ceviche mixto I’ve ever come across: tender, buoyant fish set off by a sharp acidity and just enough heat from the chili. I can’t wait to try to recreate my own version back at the villa; before leaving the shop, I manage to persuade the server to sell me a little bottle of their homemade mango salsa.

I’m up early the next morning to hit the market. My driver, Marco, has the foresight to bring a cooler to keep my fish fresh. Since my grasp of Spanish is almost wholly linked to menus, I actually make a pretty decent showing of getting just the right ingredients: fresh tuna, of course, as well as thick swordfish steaks, freshly made tortillas and plump avocados. I thought my grasp of numbers in Spanish was just as strong, but I do ask the friendly abuela ringing up my purchase to repeat the total—I can scarcely believe how affordable everything is. (My entire shopping list costs less than a single tuna steak in Canada.)

Back at the casa, I crack a cold cerveza Bohemia, crank up some beach-worthy jams and get to work. The tuna is “cooking” in its bath of chillies and limejuice, on its way to becoming ceviche. The swordfish steaks are marinating in orange zest, cilantro, jalapeno and olive oil. I mix the avocado with tomatoes and habaneros, creating a spicy, smoky guacamole. The sun is setting as I finish the swordfish on the grill. There are three kinds of salsa left over from the chefs who cooked the night before, along with my bottle from Sayulita.

My traveling companions pitch in to set a beautiful table. Soon, we’re all tucking in to fresh fish tacos and dipping chips into a ceviche that, thanks to the luxurious setting, is every bit as good as the one at the restaurant the day before. We don’t even have to clean up: The villa turndown staff arrives and the kitchen is sparkling before we have the chance to finish dessert. A great home-cooked meal and no dishes? That should be the new definition of luxury travel.