

Puerto Escondido

The visitor's complete guide to Puerto Escondido, Oaxaca

Story and photos by Susan Lundy

Vivo Foundation aids orphanage, turtles and more!

Vivo Resorts general manager Walter Guillermo Ríos blows through the conch shell and people of all ages hurry to the nearby sunny strip of sandy shoreline, gathering around Roberto Ibañes and Eleuterio Ríos Laureano.

The two men, who run the Palmarito Turtle Camp located just up the beach, have a big blue bucket filled with a mass of clampering, two-inch-long, baby turtles, recently hatched and now ready to return to the sea.





Their survival to this point is thanks to the Vivo Foundation, launched by Vivo Resorts owner Cary Mullen three years ago, the largest supporter of the camp and source of the funds for the two men who run it.

Ibañes and Laureano release turtles several times a week at different spots on the beach. Today, they ask viewers to stand behind a line drawn in the sand as they tilt the bucket and release the bounty.

Watching the fledgling turtles scramble towards the waves elicits pure joy — a feeling Mullen well remembers from his first trip to Puerto Escondido with his family.

“Our kids were enamoured,” he recalls. “And my wife and I were enthralled at the wonder of these little babies making their way to the ocean for the first time.”

Learning that the turtles are often subject to illegal poaching was one of the motivators that inspired Mullen to form the Vivo Foundation and financially support Palmarito Turtle Camp, as well as several other initiatives.

“We knew that we wanted to live on the beach just outside of Puerto Escondido, and we knew we wanted to help the environment. After experiencing the local culture and meeting more local people, we also knew we wanted to help with some community initiatives as well.”

He adds: *“Last year the turtle sanctuary saved and released 98,000 baby sea turtles . . . in one year! I want us to grow that number to eventually save over a million.”*

The foundation provided materials to build the camp, including a large, enclosed area that protects the turtle eggs. It also supplied radios, headlamps and a gas lantern for use during nighttime beach patrols — Vivo offers 24-hour security with a direct link to the turtle camp in the event of poachers — and various other items. People who visit the turtle camp or watch the releases are encouraged to purchase wristbands, with their donations further benefiting the camp.

The foundation isn't only about saving marine life: it supports an orphanage and kids' sports programs. It also meets immediate, one-time needs such as hurricane assistance. In the aftermath of Hurricane Carlotta in June 2012, for example, the foundation provided enough plastic laminate to help 100 homeowners in nearby Chila fix their roofs.

“Chila was hit hard and many of the workers at Vivo are from there,” notes Clinton Demers, director of resort services at Vivo Resorts.

Foundation funding originated with Mullen but has since spread to the full Vivo team.

“Our owners and vacationers at Vivo Resorts have come on board with donations in a significant capacity as well,” says Mullen. *“This has been wonderful as it has helped us to scale more, so we can help more.”*

He says the foundation's aid to a local orphanage has been popular among Vivo owners, many of whom are grandparents. The foundation recently donated two large dining room tables to the orphanage, allowing the children to sit together during meals. It also gave some children's clothes and books to the orphanage, which houses 18 children.

Demers says one inspired Vivo owner, who won a movie pass for 30 people, donated it to the orphanage, and also collected money to pay for a bus to transport the children.

“The foundation is very new still,” Demers adds. *“We want to find out what owners are passionate about — if it's something they want to do, we hope they will go and organize it.”*

Another important area of support is youth sports, and the foundation has purchased uniforms for several local soccer and basketball teams.

"We already sponsor a few local teams, but would like to support even more. A donation of \$50 can support an entire kids' soccer team," Demers says.

Mullen, who is a two-time Olympian, a World Cup champion skier and avid supporter of sports, hopes eventually the foundation will sponsor an entire soccer league.

"I envision on their jerseys 'Niños en Vivo,' which translates to 'Live Kids,' as opposed to the next generation just playing video games and watching TV. We want to promote active healthy lifestyles for kids [and allow them to] gain leadership and life lessons from training and competing in sport," he says.



Mullen can cite numerous tangible achievements of the foundation but says what is also significant is that it has nurtured pride among Vivo staff, who see the work being done locally.

Ríos agrees, adding that the foundation has given Vivo Resorts credibility in the community, as it *"fulfills its mission and vision."*

"The ideology of the people has successively changed, seeing all the positive aspects that this resort and the Vivo Foundation have brought to the community."

Adds Mullen: *"We have fostered a wonderful, mutual respect."*