

# The Night Of The Iguana

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For Chinese people, according to their calendar, 1963, was the year of the rabbit and those born under that sign will have good luck, wisdom, and wealth. For Puerto Vallarta that was the year of the Iguana. The quiet town was suddenly flooded, in broad daylight with trucks, electric lights and stars. Technicians, workers, residents of the American colony hired as extras and bystanders moved like ants among cameras, reflectors and a web of cables that covered the silent cobblestones. On the street, further down near the park, the electric generators puffed and roared to produce probably more electricity than that that was needed to illuminate the whole town. The commotion was due to the making of a movie, The Night of the Iguana, an event in the history of Vallarta that brought in 1963, la creme de la creme of the movie people into town. There were directors like John Huston, Emilio (El Indio) Fernandez and Gabriel Figueroa, an actor like Richard Burton, and actresses like Debora Kerr, Ava Gardner and the young Sue Lyon that attracted, like nectar to bees, a swarm of reporters from all over the world. The movie, based on a drama written by Tennessee Williams and directed by John Huston, presents the conflicts of a group of refined losers; the alcoholic renegade cleric (Burton), the anguished old maid (Kerr), the sensual owner of the hotel (Gardner) and a fiery young girl (Lyon), all together on an excursion to old Mexico. The film was shot at Mismaloya except for a few scenes that were taken at the Hotel Paraiso and in one of the streets in town. Most of the personnel working for the movie were living on the site. Only the main characters had rented elegant villas in town and every morning they met at Los Muertos Beach where speed boats waited to take them to the set since there was not a road to Mismaloya at that time. John Huston says in his book "An Open Book" that while he was looking for sites for the movie he met Mexican civil engineer Guillermo Wulff in Los Angeles, Ca. and he was the one who suggested that the movie be filmed in Mismaloya since he (Wulff) had a concession from the community to build in that area. Huston, who had already been twice in Puerto Vallarta, decided to make the movie in Mismaloya after visiting the site. The company invested 18 million pesos to build the set on top of a hill overlooking the bay. The set was designed by Steve Grimes and was made to look like an old hacienda. Bungalows were built to house the crew, a restaurant-bar, a small floating dock, and paths connecting all the areas. They also installed a generator, water tanks and pumps thereby providing the set with electricity and running water. The set and the buildings around it were beautiful but even more so were the surrounding views: the mountains, the sea, the deserted beaches, and the sunrises and sunsets, all framed by the jungle still untouched by axes and bulldozers. The original specifications for the buildings were changed to make them more comfortable and attractive. Wulff's idea was to turn the site into an exclusive resort once the movie was finished and so it was during a short period of time until problems began to arise among the parties involved and as the years went by only ruins and memories were left.

The making of the movie was the event that captured the attention of the world and turned Vallarta into the "in" place to be at that moment. In our society, movies are almost a religion and actors and actresses have acquired a quasi sainthood status that attracts a great number of fans and when one of these idols is seen in person like any other mortal, it is considered like a miracle. In "The Night of the Iguana" just the cast would have been enough to attract the attention of reporters, but the inclusion of Elizabeth Taylor in the Vallarta scene, but not in the movie, was an added bonus for the media. The widely publicized romance between Liz and Richard that had started during the filming of "Cleopatra", brought Ms Taylor to Vallarta just to be close to Burton. She bought Casa Kimbeley from Mr. and Mrs. Wilson in Gringo Gulch and settled there. Later Burton bought the property across the street and connected both houses with the famous bridge over Zaragoza street. As if this were not enough, the relations that existed among the rest of the cast would have guaranteed the presence of reporters from the Enquirer. Michael Wilding, Ms. Taylor's ex-husband, was in Vallarta as Burton's publicity agent. Deborah Kerr was accompanied by her husband, Peter Viertel, who at one time, had been romantically involved with Ava Gardner who was herself, being courted assiduously by two deeply tanned beach boys. Sue Lyon, who had risen to fame for her role in (Nabokov's) "Lolita" was behaving like a mischievous little girl. She attracted the attention of many young male Vallartans who kept their distance since she was constantly accompanied by her mother and her very tall boyfriend. The possibilities for a juicy story were endless and the reporters kept hoping for a scoop that would have more of an impact than the movie itself. However every one behaved in a civilized manner and no scandals occurred, but Puerto Vallarta still benefited since each one of the newspaper stories, and there were many of them, mentioned the tranquil, picturesque town. Huston says: "There were more reporters than iguanas on the set." Free publicity was not the only direct benefit Vallarta received during the filming. Local people were employed for the construction of the set, grocery stores increased their sales (there were many extra mouths to feed), small boat owners made money transporting materials and food supplies and the few local bars filled to capacity whenever one of the actors came in for a drink. Some families even managed to sell, termite-ridden furniture to be used as set decorations. Even thirty years later, "The Night of the Iguana" continues to maintain a fictitious reality among the tourists that come to Vallarta (many of them have never seen the movie). There is a statue of John Huston on the Rio Cuale Island and a park dedicated to Richard Burton but no one ever asks about them. Most people, following the modern idolatry, want to see Liz Taylor's house although she is no longer the owner, take pictures of it and have their picture taken standing under the bridge. The irony is that people remember and idolize a person only indirectly connected to the movie that was a very important episode in the life and future development of the town and have forgotten about Mismaloya and the actors in the movie. "No one - other than an old man who passes there on an occasional trip - between Las Caletas and Vallarta seems to give a damn what happens to the place. He would like to see it torn down and given back to the

iguanas. The old man is me of course". (Huston, John. "An Open Book", Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1980).