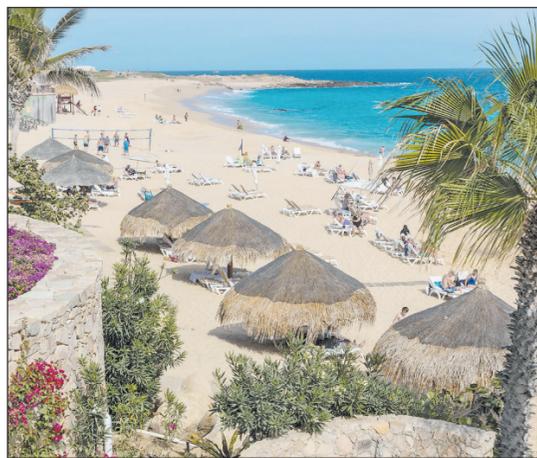




Sunny days in Todos Santos deserve umbrellas, and the brighter the better, in Todos Santos.



Tourists can't resist Mexico's colorful ceramics and dogs that don't bite, for sale in Todos Santos, Los Cabos, Mexico.



Enjoy sand, sun AND shade by choosing a beachside palapa at Hacienda del Mar Resort in Los Cabos, Mexico.

Calling Los Cabos

Richness of Mexico more than just luxury

BY ANNE Z. COOKE
TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

LOS CABOS, Mexico — When Adina Lopez moved back to Los Cabos, at the southern tip of Mexico's Baja California Sur, she didn't expect to find hidden treasure.

After a decade abroad, living and traveling in Europe, France and the United States — and fluent in English and French — she assumed that her hometown hadn't changed. An exclusive vacation destination when she left, it was certainly still a millionaire's playground.

Then she joined the Los Cabos Tourism Board and discovered the real Baja Sur.

Exploring the mountains and desert, guiding tourists and absorbing the region's unique cultural heritage revealed the unexpected: Centuries of human history, ancient cave paintings and isolated villages and ranches.

"Tourists see beach photos and think of Acapulco and Cancun," said Adina, as Louis, our Baja Jeep driver, turned onto another dirt road, heading for the Sierra de la Laguna mountains, a UNESCO biosphere reserve. "It's different here," she said, turning to point out a Lombay tree.

We hadn't been to Los Cabos for years. So when my cousin, Eric, invited us to join him and his wife, we jumped at the chance. An airline pilot with connections, he wrangled last-minute reservations at two different resorts — the Esperanza-Auberge Resort Collection and the Hacienda del Mar — and reserved a TransCabo car — the leading transportation service — to get us at the airport.

"My name is Ruben," said the driver, shaking hands. "I'll be taking you to the Esperanza," he said, holding the door. "I've got bottled water if you're thirsty," he added, nodding at the cooler. "Los Cabos well water comes from the mountains, but I don't drink it either."

For four decades and more, hotels and resorts of every size and type have been nudging up Baja's ragged east coast, built on cliffs overlooking the Sea of Cortez. Even the cheapest have pools and beach access. But exclusive five-star resorts like the Esperanza-Auberge, on 17 carefully manicured acres, are a horse of a different color.

Checked in at the gate, you enter a private village, clusters of buildings connected by winding paths and framed by flowering bushes and leafy trees. Some are condominiums owned by residents or time-share owners, mostly Americans, called "club" members. Others are ordinary hotel rooms.

For some guests, a brisk walk through the Esperanza's gardens and an open-air lunch at La Palapa makes the day. But for others it's all about fun-in-the-sun, from swimming pools to beach-side bars and cooking classes to golf courses and pickleball courts. You're as likely to meet a Hollywood celebrity as a lawyer from Indiana. Eager to explore, we woke up early and jogged for a half-hour



STEVE HAGGERTY / TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

There are no bad days at the La Palapa pool, Esperanza Resort, an Auberge property in Los Cabos, Mexico.

If you go

A word to the wise: Mexico is one of the countries where some medicines, including over-the-counter drugs, look safe but are made illegally and contain fentanyl and other poisons. If you need medicine, bring it from home. Be smart and don't take a chance.

When to go: Los Cabos is famous for sunny weather all year. Travel in May and June, and September and October, when winter visitors have gone home, is less crowded and more affordable.

Staying there: With 82 hotels and resorts on the peninsula's east coast, booking a room isn't difficult. But finding one you like, in a good location, will affect the price and your experience. Fishing, whale watching, art museums, golf — study a detailed map, and look for things that interest you.

Planning: For a map and brochures, go to visitloscabos.travel. Request the visitors guide, titled "Visit Los Cabos, Where the Desert Meets the Sea."

before Eric arrived with a rental car. Heading for Cabos' signature feature, El Arco, at its own Land's End, we walked along the water's edge, then drove downtown, noting the older buildings and looking for new ones in the neighborhood, said to be a favorite with Gen Z tourists.

Passing the Nick-San restaurant, in its 29th year, we spotted the owner, Angel Carbajal, who remembered us. Invited back for dinner, we all sat down together to sample Nick-San's signature meal: delicious Japanese-sized bites of fish, shrimp, chicken or vegetables, flavored by Mexican spices and secret sauces.

Next on our list was San Jose del Cabo, founded by missionaries in 1730. Bigger and newer, it mixed historic sites and places with contemporary shops, art galleries, restaurants and a huge modern shopping center.

Farther on was Todos Santos and its historic arts district, crowded by tourists ducking in and out for a look, window shopping and lounging at outdoor cafes. A refuge



Shardon and her mother, Adarsha Benjamin, share a cooking class at Tamarindos farm, Los Cabos, Mexico.

for surfers and free spirits, the town was alive with street art, colorful flags and music.

Trailing behind "Eagles" fans we didn't wait to hear those "mission bells" ring before following them to the "Hotel California." The front door was open, but the rooms were closed and locked and the desk manager pointed us to the adjacent bar-and-grill, still open.

"We're hoping for a renovation," she said, "if only they can find a new owner."

At dinner time we headed to Eric's favorite restaurant, YaYa, a year old and a rising star. Created by owner-chef Eliana Godinez, who studied in Italy, her recipes infuse Italian recipes with farm-to-table produce. What with waiters running, diners chatting, beer drinkers toasting, wine flowing and dishwashers hustling, the place buzzed.

Why "YaYa?" we asked. "YaYa is my grandma's nickname," she chuckled, embarrassed. "I learned from watching her in the kitchen. That's why my kitchen is open to the dining room. You can watch us cook!"

On our last night at the Esperanza we ate at the Cocina del Mar, at a table near the water.

Talking with Chef Alexis Palacios when he circled the room, he explained that his recipes depend

on the season's fresh, local ingredients. And the fish have to be fresh; he buys them daily from local fishermen.

"Our farmers and fishermen supply almost everything," he said. "And we want to support them. I wouldn't buy anything shipped three days earlier and refrigerated unless I absolutely had to."

As the sky darkened and the candles flickered on, the stars came out. And as we left, the Cocina's weekly fireworks exploded into the sky.

It was time to move to the Hacienda del Mar, a Spanish colonial-style resort on 28 acres. Designed and painted traditional reds, tans and yellows, it felt like Mexico. Hosting both time-share owners and hotel guests, the Hacienda offered the usual "activities," from restaurants and bars to sports and dance classes. But the swimming pools were adjacent, in a wavy line overlooking the Sea of Cortez. And the view of the sea, a shimmering blue, made a difference.

By 9 a.m. every day, every beach chair was taken, occupied not only by people who simply sat there and gazed seaward, but by couples sunning, sisters on vacation, women with friends, men talking football and parents with kids. Some actually stayed through lunch and into the afternoon.



The hike to the waterfall is the highlight of a trip to the Sol del Mayo biosphere reserve, near Santiago, Los Cabos, Mexico.

But we weren't among them, at least not every day. Los Cabos' famous outdoor sports beckoned, from sailing and deep-sea fishing to paddle-boarding, windsurfing and snorkeling.

Guided hikes to the barren, needle-sharp summit of 6,857-foot Mount Picachos, in the Sierra de la Lagunas. Jeep trips through the desert, like ours with Adina (not her real name).

"Next stop is the Oasis, and after that, the waterfall," she said as we parked on a hill and climbed out for a look.

"Where?" I thought. And there it was, a meandering lake in a quarter-mile long hollow, flanked by thousands of green palms.

Another 20 minutes, turning at the "Sol de Mayo Ecological Reserve" sign, and we reached the trailhead. Descending into the gorge, picking our way between the rocks, two Canadians passed us, hurrying. Moments later we saw them in the water, laughing and screaming, "It's freezing cold." Then we arrived and saw the waterfall and the pond.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" said Adina as we sat on a rock and watched the ribbon of water pour over the rocks. "You know," she said, "the ranchers living around here raise cattle and horses, and they water their gardens and they don't waste a drop," she said. "And your cab driver was right. The rest of the water fills Los Cabos' wells."