



DESERTED BLISS

A short drive from George Town takes you to the beach at Smith Barcadere.

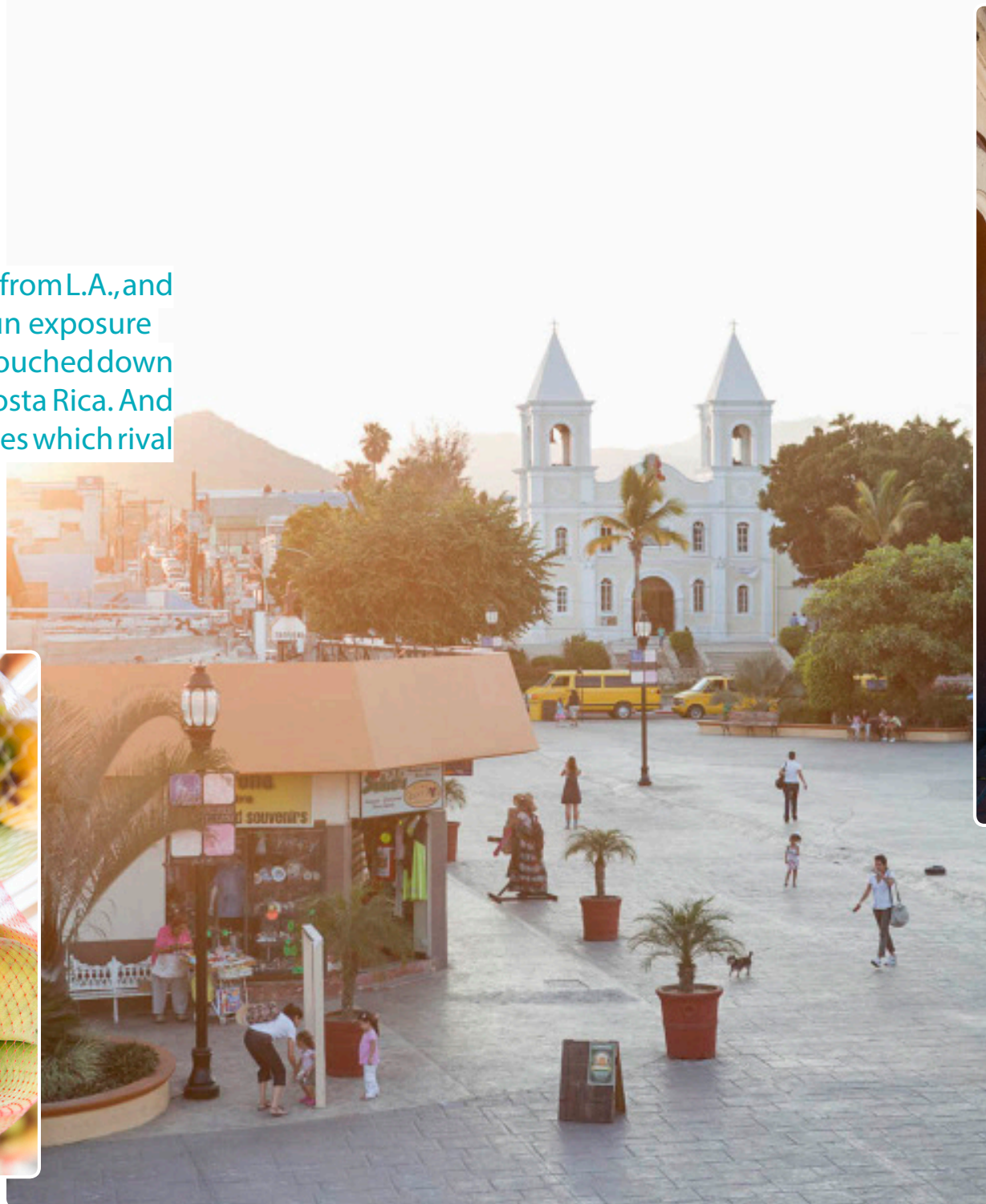
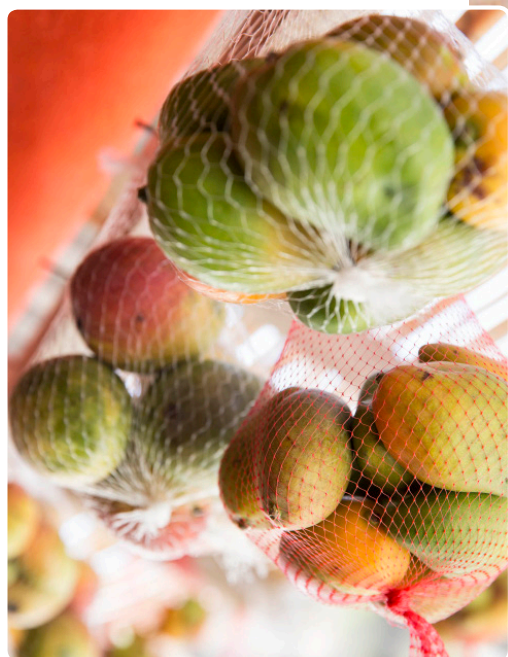


THE END

From the gauche to the sublime, the southern tip of Baja, Mexico offers a juxtaposition of characters, attitudes and geography that make it unlike any other destination in North America. No wonder visitors can't get enough.

BY AARON GULLEY PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEN JUDGE

"Hop a flight from L.A., and you can be pink from sun exposure before you'd have even touched down on flights to Hawaii or Costa Rica. And then there are the beaches which rival the Caribbean."



OCEAN'S BOUNTY
(Above) A starfish in the shallows. (Right) The tide comes in at the Blow Holes, a 15-minute drive east from George Town.

She steps aboard the catamaran in floral-print, aquamarine shorts that barely cover the tops of her tan-line free thighs, and almost every man on the ship immediately believes that the sunset jazz cruise was worth the price of admission.

I'm not so easily convinced. From where I sit on this "luxury sailing excursion," I can see pale tourists onshore posing with two caged lion cubs at a pop-up photo stand. And across the bay, at Jack's Bar & Grill, the faux-swaggering, paste-on mustachioed Captain Sparrow accosting tourists is hardly the exotic character I travel to meet.

This crassness is precisely why I have never before ventured to Baja's Cabo San Lucas, which I've long associated with everything base about Mexican travel. Like its Nevada doppelganger, Vegas, this tourist town at the tip of the Baja peninsula is so hip that it goes just by Cabo. But while the place might be as graceless as the border towns of Nogales and Laredo, it still attracts some 1.5 million visitors each year. And judging by kitsch Cabo San Lucas proper, they're not coming for the culture.

Proximity is surely an appeal. Hop a flight from L.A., and you can be pink from sun exposure before you'd have even touched down on flights to Hawaii or Costa Rica. And then there are the beaches, which rival the Caribbean. On the 18-mile-long corridor of coastal highway stretching to the northeast, hundreds of hotels and resorts have carved out pristine space on rocky headlands and sugary strands that are inarguable stunning.

That's where I'm staying, at a resort called Esperanza that's part country club, part beach hideaway, the sort of place you could settle into for a week and never leave. "Many of our clients eat here, sleep here, sun here, and then fly home," says Lucas Williams, my destination concierge. And while that sounds perfectly anaesthetizing, I'm curious to know if there's more to Baja California Sur.

That's what led to the evening jazz cruise, which at first doesn't give me much hope. But then the local Kool-Aid starts to kick in. The boat motors into Bahía Cabo, where the Arch of San Lucas, a natural limestone passage cut from the sea, is backlit in golden God-light,



and everyone quiets in genuine awe. The moment is legitimately stirring—though it's not completely clear to me whether the men are moved by the glorious view of the arch or Ms. Coppertone's cutoffs. But I realize it doesn't matter. There's authenticity to be found in Cabo if you're willing to look for it.

I go searching up the west coast the next morning on a day trip to the village of Todos Santos. The Cabo circus act disappears as soon as I crest the first hill out of town, and I'm suddenly speeding through desolate high desert scratched with thorny acacias and topsy-turvy cardón cactus reminiscent of Arizona's saguaros.

Little more than a pocked double track a couple years ago, this stretch of road has lately been paved and widened to a divided four lanes. The hope is that once the bypass around Cabo San Lucas is complete, developers will be more inclined to build on this stretch of coast since travelers will be able to reach it from the international airport in about an hour. For now, though, it's just open highway with

the occasional dusty side road trailing off to the Pacific.

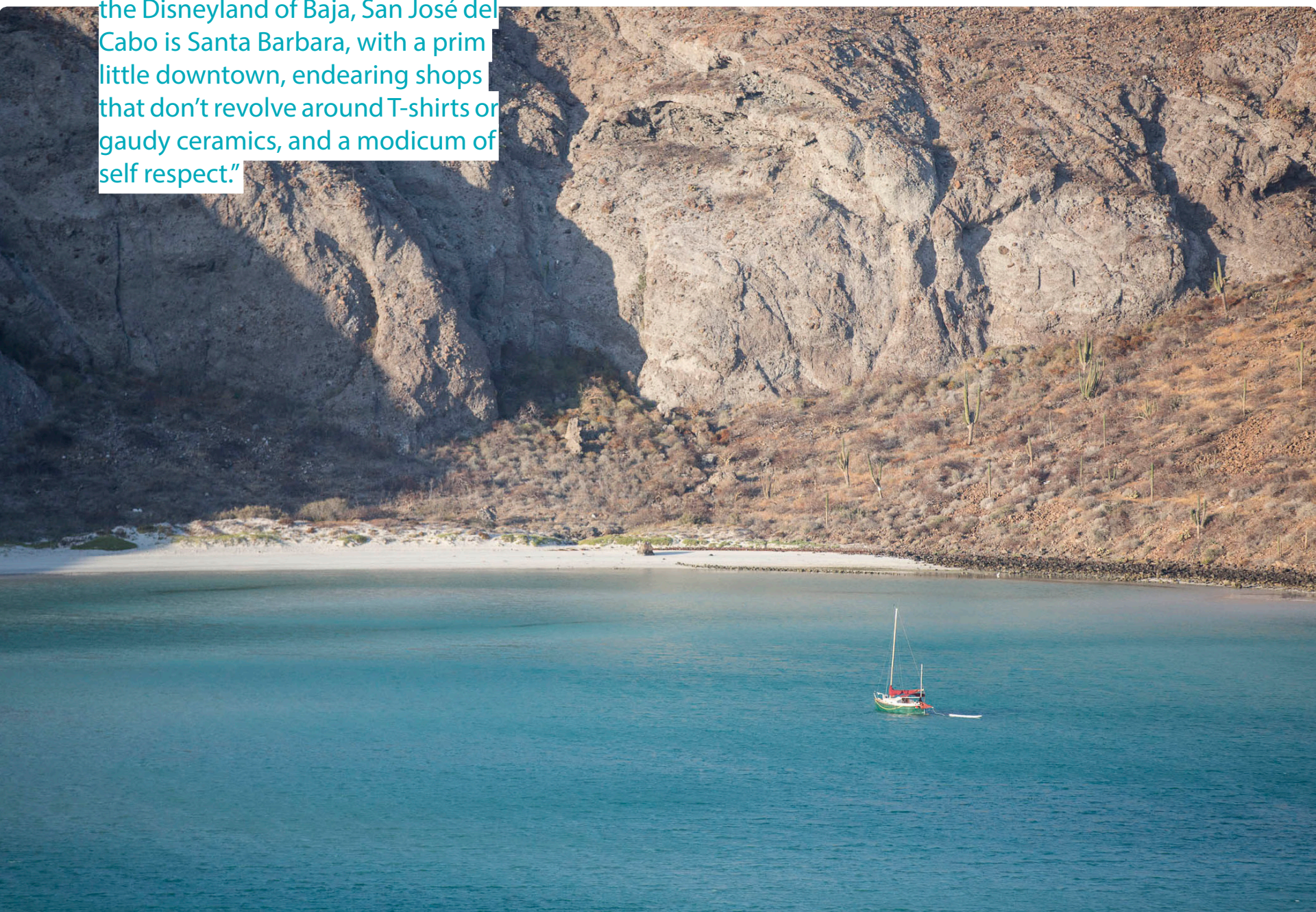
Todos Santos is dozy, too, with a single strip of pavement through town and a quaint little Catholic church the color of whipped egg yolks overlooking a cobble plaza. Three wrinkly old men in scuffed boots and battered cowboy hats sit so still on a palm-shaded bench that I have to walk closer to make sure they're not statues.

The only real action is down the street at The Hotel California, which owner Debbie Stewart tells me is the establishment that inspired the song, though she's quick to emphasize that's where the connection ends. "We're not selling the Eagles. We're selling real Mexico," she says, explaining that Todos Santos is part of a Mexican tourism initiative called Pueblos Mágicos to promote the country's most culturally compelling towns. The plaza was recently spruced up, several new boutique hotels have opened in renovated, hundred-year-old buildings, and a few art galleries have popped up in anticipation of the increased traffic. "Mostly though people still just come here to surf and relax," Stewart says.

CARRIBEAN DREAMS

(Clockwise from top left) The island is known for its kitschy signposts; prim and proper cottages dot the quieter residential areas; fresh catch; the famous Blow Holes in full effect.

"If Cabo San Lucas is the Disneyland of Baja, San José del Cabo is Santa Barbara, with a prim little downtown, endearing shops that don't revolve around T-shirts or gaudy ceramics, and a modicum of self respect."



COLONIAL ROOTS
(Clockwise from top) Pedro St. James is the oldest structure on the island. Interiors of Pedro St. James recreate the building's 200-year-old origins.

She suggests a trip to Playa Los Cerritos, 10 minutes down a sandy track from the highway. When I arrive, 30 or so cars are parked beside a thatch-roof bar, with a dozen white umbrellas facing the sea. I take my place under a free umbrella among the crowd of mostly Mexican families, and a waiter is soon plying me with margaritas, icy bottles of Sol beer and totopos and guacamole. He keeps up a steady flow of refrescos as I read, nap and listen to the thrum of the sea, and before I know it evening has come.

Back in town, the trio of gauchos on the plaza hasn't moved. I take their cue and settle in on the covered, street-front arcade to watch life go by. Stewart tells me that if I'd come a month ago, I could have watched whales steaming past town from shore, but they've already moved north for the summer.

A stooped old man leads a donkey down the opposite side of the road by a frayed rope. Then a procession of churchgoers singing hymns in Spanish tread slowly the other direction toward the church. It's nothing but everyday life here in Baja, but to me it's both exotic and deeply quieting.

"Cabo is about the party. La Paz is about the water," Stewart says.

"We're just a quiet little town with history and a sense of place." This laidback vibe is exactly why Todos Santos is seeing an increase of both development and visitors. And the sublime mix of vast desert and sea helps, too. It's the same trifecta—sand, sea, culture—that has always drawn people to Baja, long before, and perhaps in spite of, the development of Cabo.

On the dark desert night's drive back, I roll down the window to get the cool Pacific wind in my hair and feel as if I'm motoring through the Eagle's 1972 hit. Cabo San Lucas might be only an hour down the road, but it feels decades away.

The next day, I drive the other direction up the highway to San José del Cabo. And I'm glad I do. If Cabo San Lucas is the Disneyland of Baja, San José del Cabo is Santa Barbara, with a prim little downtown, endearing shops that don't revolve around T-shirts or gaudy ceramics and a modicum of self-respect. Even the local tequila shop, Los Barilles de Cuervo, forgoes the overbearing eat-the-worm bravado and pours up tequila tastings from its 260 varieties.

THE END





COLONIAL ROOTS
(Clockwise from top)
Pedro St. James is the
oldest structure on
the island. Interiors
of Pedro St. James
recreate the building's
200-year-old origins.



"I stop at a taco shop called Rossy's and gorge on fresh tortillas stuffed with smoked marlin, tempura fried fish and marinated octopus. The seafood is so fresh I back for a second serving."



In the midmorning, I walk down quiet avenues admiring pink bougainvillea that climb up whitewash Spanish revival façades and stop to pet the occasional cat—even the strays here feel approachable. I like to think that it's just this charming, small-town atmosphere that brings so many foreigners to Baja, both as travelers and expatriates. I start to notice galleries all around, full of paintings that make you stop and look, such as the mod, mixed-media piece at the O Gallery that depicts, among other things, an anthropomorphic Easter Bunny on a crucifix. It's weighty stuff, especially in a country as Catholic as Mexico, and I can't resist going inside.

The owner, a stubbly, ponytailed Parisian transplant from Los Angeles who goes only by François, describes a nascent art scene in San José del Cabo. "We still get the tourists coming here looking for cheap ashtrays, but there are more and more proper buyers," he says. "Most of Baja is just stunning physically. The desert next to the sea... it's like another planet."

In that sense San José is still catching up. With the art and the investments in the place, it's becoming beautiful. He invites me back in two days for the monthly Thursday-night art walk, promising cocktails, good conversation, and a handful of openings.

Around the corner, artist Frank Arnold's airy home is part of his gallery, and it's not until I'm leaning across a bed staring at a dark interpretation of a bull that it occurs to me that I might be intruding. Then Arnold's assistant, a short little Mexican fellow who speaks

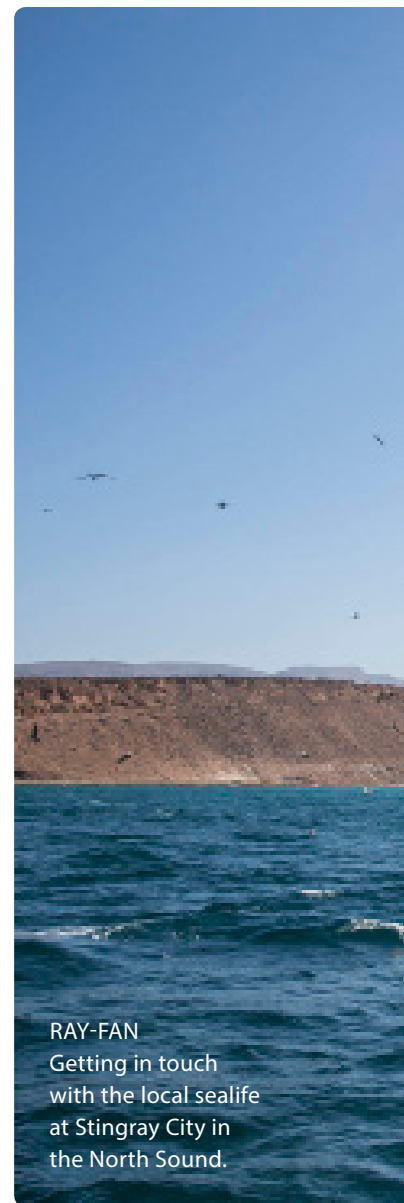
so fast I never catch his name no matter how many times I ask, appears from around a corner and assures me that I'm welcome to traipse all over the home and admire the artwork. Arnold has stepped out, though a palette sits waiting on a side table and the canvas he's painting is still wet. His assistant introduces me instead to his Bichon Frisé poodle named Picasso, and encourages me to sample from any of the decanters of tequila (Granada, almond and regular) around the studio. When I try to beg off because of the early hour, he acts almost wounded. "It is past 11 o'clock," he says.

In the end, what I appreciate most about San José isn't the friendly reception or the significant artwork—though both are a pleasure. What's nice is coming across something unexpected. For me, travel is about experiencing things I couldn't otherwise at home: François' story of driving a moving truck down the Baja peninsula, sipping fine liquor in the morning, simply knowing that Los Cabos isn't only about spring break hedonism and tropical escape. You can find something true here if you're willing to scratch around for it.

After my tour of town, I stop at a taco shop called Rossy's and gorge on fresh tortillas stuffed with smoked marlin, tempura fried fish and marinated octopus. The seafood is so fresh I go back for a second serving. I also order an Ojo Rojo, the classic Mexican cocktail I've always wanted to try that blends Tecate and Clamato, that strange-sounding mix of tomato and clam juices. When it arrives, I'm as expectant as a serious buyer waiting for a new piece from my favorite

PELICAN BRIEF

A pelican takes a break on the rocks at the Blow Holes.



RAY-FAN
Getting in touch
with the local sealife
at Stingray City in
the North Sound.

ISLAND LIFE

(Clockwise from top, left)

At Captain Herman's East Side Fish Fry; diving down to the Kittiwake; sample of the day's menu: curried stew and fried barracuda.

painter. I taste it, and I almost spit it out.

Authentic, it turns out, isn't always a good thing. The only thing left is to experience Cabo as most visitors do: From the comfort of an all-inclusive resort. And it's easy at Esperanza, where a concierge caters to everything.

When I mention that I'd like to go kayaking, Williams, the Desination Concierge, selects a nearby trip and has a guide waiting for me at 9 o'clock the next morning. We put in at a limestone-protected cove ten minutes east of the resort, and though I imagine that waters this close to town will be turbid and denuded of any marine life, I see fish flash like sun-catching prisms below my hull as soon as we push off.

At Bahia Santa Maria, another calm bay, the corals are vibrant shades of blue and green, and schools of striped grunt flicker in the morning sun. I follow a pair of bumphead parrotfish as big as dorm-room refrigerators and try to catch up with a sea turtle, which easily fins away. "Jacques Cousteau didn't call the Sea of Cortez 'the world's aquarium' for nothing," the guide says. It's a line he must use often.

After a few hours on the water, I'm ready for lunch and Williams encourages me to try the resort's beach club. I'm convinced I'll get a better meal if I drive back to San José and seek out a local joint,

but the sun has made me lazy. So I order lunch at the resort club and settle into a fluffy, bleach white towel under a thatched palapa. And if I'm honest, the grilled fish and shrimp tacos turn out to be more succulent and mouthwatering than Rossy's. They are, with the exception of the dinner I have at Esperanza's signature restaurant, Cocina del Mar, the finest thing I'll eat all week.

I wouldn't trade my meal at Rossy's—nor the tequila with Picasso the poodle or my classic rock desert sojourn to Todos Santos. But neither would I give up a single bite of these luscious, Esperanza tacos, not even if my wife begged. Baja is a place of sharp contrasts—the craggy, little-explored desert peaks of the Sierra de la Laguna mountains tumbling straight into crystalline seas—and no trip here would be complete without those juxtapositions.

After picking over the taco plate for every last morsel, I order a margarita. And as I'm lingering on the sun-splashed, cloudy-brain edge of a nap, I'll be damned if I don't see three whales breaching a few hundred meters out at sea. I consider rushing back to the villa to get my binoculars. Instead, I just watch them steam away to the south until I can't keep my eyes open any longer and drift asleep.

Aaron Gulley was born in Africa and has traveled the world on



FINDING PEACE

Less than two hours from Cabo San Lucas, La Paz is doable as a long daytrip. But if you have the time, it's better to spend a few days.

Most people come for the diving and snorkeling, and the full-day excursion to Isla Espíritu Santo is worth the two hours of motoring on open waters that it takes to get there. At the northernmost tip of land, on a subsidiary island called Isla Partida, it's possible to swim among the colony of sea lions that inhabit a craggy basalt spit of land.

The animals will dart and slither all around you in the water and may even playfully try to nibble at your fingers if you goad them. It's an unusual opportunity to interact with wild animals in their environment, and though some operators will encourage you to take dive gear, snorkeling with the beasts is just as breathtaking.

The other big attraction in La Paz is the Malécon, a boardwalk that stretches the length of the city's waterfront. Most evenings around sunset, especially on weekends, families gather at the seafood restaurants along the sea to eat dorado, octopus, and lobster tacos, then spend hours strolling, usually with at least one stop for ice cream. Bismark-cito probably has the best tacos, while La Fuente ice cream parlor has a constant line out the door for its exceptional homemade flavors. —A.G.

INSPIRATO RECOMMENDS

Baja

Several miles east of Cabo, Inspirato member can choose from an extensive collection of luxury homes within the spectacular Esperanza Resort. Signature Residences range from

the four bedroom, 3,300-square-foot condominium, Casa Gardenias, to the sprawling, oceanfront Villa Buenaventura, a five-bedroom, 8,027-square foot mansion with private cliff-side pool. Members interested in visiting La Paz and exploring the Sea of Cortez can settle into either of the three-bedroom, 2,800- to 3,300-square-foot, Signature Residences available within the exclusive, waterfront CostaBaja golf resort.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT INSPIRATO'S BAJA SIGNATURE RESIDENCES, TURN TO PAGES TK (LOS CABOS) AND TK (LA PAZ).

Quentin Olivarez's picks Inspirato Personal Vacation Advisor

EAT: Find out why the Lahaina Grill has been voted Best Restaurant on Maui for 21 years. I consider the breathtaking oceanfront view from Merriman's Kapalua to offer the best sunset dinner on Maui. Ninety percent of their farm-to-table menu comes from the island.

DAY TRIP: The Hula Girl catamaran is the best luxury sailboat in Maui. Book it for snorkeling trips, whale watching or a sunset cruise.

Take a trip over to Lanai for a round of golf at "The Challenge at Manale," the Jack Nicklaus course considered one of the best in the islands. Bring your camera for holes 11, 12 and 17.

Friday Nights
ART NIGHT IN LAHAINA
From 7–10 p.m. Front Street comes alive as the art galleries open their doors, offering wine and live music.