

Calling Los Cabos

Richness of Mexico's Baja California Sur is more than just luxury

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Esperanza resort in Los Cabos, Mexico

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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 and the Hacienda del Mar — and reserved a TransCabo car to get us at the airport.

"My name is Ruben. I'll be taking you to the Esperanza," said the driver, shaking hands and then 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."

Seaside indulgence

Hotels and resorts of every size and type have been nudging up Baja's 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 manicured acres, are a horse of a different color.

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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 timeshare owners . Others are ordinary hotel rooms.

For some guests, a brisk walk through the Esperanza's gardens and an open-air lunch at La Palapa make the day. But for others it's all about fun in the sun, from swimming pools to beachside bars, cooking classes, 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 before Eric arrived with a rental car. Heading for Los Cabos' signature feature, El Arco , we walked along the water's edge, then drove downtown .

For dinner at Niko-San, we sampled the restaurant's signature meal: delicious Japanese-sized bites of fish, shrimp, chicken or vegetables, flavored by Mexican spices and secret sauces.

Modern Mexico

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. The town was alive with street art, colorful flags and music.

At dinnertime, we headed to YaYa . Owner-chef Eliana Godinez's recipes infuse Italian recipes with farm-to-table produce.

"Why 'YaYa'?" we asked. "YaYa is my grandma's nick-name," Godinez chuckled. "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.

Chef Alexis Palacios explained that his recipes depend on the season's fresh, local ingredients. "Our farmers and fishermen supply almost everything," he said. "And we want to support them .

Enjoying the outdoors

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.

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 6,857foot Mount Picachos, in the Sierra de la Lagunas.

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

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, we were passed by two Canadians, 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 our guide 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. And your cab driver was right. The rest of the water fills Los Cabos' wells."

If you go

A WORD TO THE WISE:In Mexico, 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.

WHEN TO GO: Los Cabos is famous for sunny weather year round. Travel in May, June, September and October is less crowded and more affordable.

STAYING THERE: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, **visit-cabo.com** or **visitloscabos.travel** and request the "Visit Los Cabos, Where the Desert Meets the Sea" visitor's guide.