



Calle 16 de Septiembre No. 15
Col. Centro 23000 La Paz, B.C.S.

Los Angeles Times
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The unsung charms of La Paz

La Paz, Mexico — Under the beachside *palapa* of La Posada de Engelbert, a bougainvillea-covered inn owned by crooner Engelbert Humperdinck, the leathery bartender shrugged when asked about modern La Paz.

"La Paz used to be the place to go, and Cabo San Lucas was nothing," said Mario Carrasco, who has been mixing drinks and entertaining La Paz visitors with his baritone voice for 27 years.

Before La Posada, Carrasco sang the old songs and served margaritas at the Grand Baja, a hundred yards down the beach. Once a center for the yachting community, it is now a burned-out shell, its twin 11-story terra-cotta towers covered with graffiti, windows broken, the roof collapsed on the once vibrant nightclub Caracol Coco.

"In Cabo they build a new hotel every week. Here, nothing," Carrasco said.

The prosperity of Cabo San Lucas is only the latest twist in the saga of La Paz, for centuries the center of commerce and culture in the relatively untamed desert regions of southern Baja California. The city's history is laced with dramatic turns of fate and fortune, flirtations with glamour and wealth, all revolving around its role as guardian of a huge bay, a legendary oasis guarding the south entrance to the Gulf of California (known in Mexico as the Sea of Cortez).

English and Dutch pirates once patrolled the entrance to the bay, hoping to pounce on Spanish galleons laden with treasures from the Orient. Four hundred years later, La Paz was developing into the pearl capital of the world when the oysters disappeared in the 1940s, victims of overharvesting or a mysterious disease, depending on which story you believe.

On a recent trip, I came across the sun-bleached remains of thousands of huge oyster shells strewn across a beach on an uninhabited island off the coast, a vivid reminder of the riches once yielded by the sea. I've visited La Paz three times in the last three years, each time discovering new evidence of the tides that have shaped the city.

La Posada, where Carrasco tends bar, is a throwback to the days when John Wayne and his cronies flew to La Paz for fishing trips. Cabo may draw hordes of spring breakers, but La Paz is still a place where grizzled sailors swap stories over bowls of fresh fish stew and cheap tequila.

On a Saturday night, the Malecón, the main drag along the bay, is dominated by young couples dressed in their Sunday best, chastely holding hands and enjoying the warm breeze off the bay, a few grabbing a kiss in the shadows of the street lights. There is no Hard Rock Cafe or Planet Hollywood on the Malecón. Nor is there McDonald's or Starbucks. La Paz is a place forgotten by the international franchisers.

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Nor is there a golf course, which is one reason some travelers prefer Cabo. There has been a plan for many years to build a course on the north end of La Paz, but there are few signs of progress, even as new golf courses sprout like ivy along the coast in Cabo. The lone sign of new development on the Malecón is the stark glass and metal Hotel Seven Crown, which stands out like a Palm Pilot in a Bogie movie. The main drag is still dominated by the Old World styles of Hotel Los Arcos and Hotel Perla, the oldest in the city, which offers an open-air restaurant perfect for sipping a *cerveza* and watching the passing world.

A lure for adventurers

More than anything, La Paz is a working city, home to universities and the state government. Ferries run daily between the city and Topolobampo and Mazatlán, making La Paz a primary connection between Baja and the mainland. In another flirtation with riches, La Paz was once a duty-free zone, and the ferries were crowded with the families of wealthy ranchers and businessmen from the mainland. However, as is often the case in La Paz's history, the law changed, and new resorts in Puerto Vallarta and Zihuatanejo lured mainland travelers, once again snatching the dreams of La Paz businessmen.

But the elements that have attracted centuries of explorers and adventurers remain an integral part of the city's life and culture. First and foremost is the Gulf of California, inspiration to John Steinbeck and Jacques Cousteau, a twinkling mirage in the middle of the area's blistering heat, which usually hovers around 90 from March through October.

La Paz is still considered a sportfishing port, rivaling the better-publicized Cabo and the legendary east cape of Baja, just to the south of La Paz. During the prime fishing season from May to September, almost every boat returns with marlin and dorado.

For non-fishermen, the sea is an aquarium filled with exotic life. Several large desert islands, home to crystal-clear coves, provide unique and fertile breeding grounds for marine life. The coves and reefs harbor stories, mysteries and generations of sunken ships.

My wife and I discovered one of La Paz's legendary spots on our first trip. We booked a half-day snorkeling excursion, expecting little more than a pleasant outing.

In a panga, one of the long, narrow fishing boats that are a staple in Baja, we skimmed across the glassy bay toward Isla Espíritu Santo, a 14-mile-long wasteland pocked with secluded coves. As we passed through the bay, we saw splashes in the distance. Moving closer, we realized the splashes were caused by manta rays jumping toward the sky, a mysterious ritual often seen in the area.

After about two hours, we approached a collection of barren rocks jutting out of the water, covered with birds. The sounds of barking drew our attention to the isthmus connecting the two main rocks, where we could see dozens of sea lions squabbling and sunning themselves. The rocks are Los Islotos, home to a seal rookery protected by the government. Donning our snorkeling gear, we hopped into the clear water of the bay, where we were soon joined by a dozen playful seals, clearly accustomed to the daily invasion of tourists. The seals would dive to the bottom and shoot toward the surface, teasing us and our cameras.

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On the way back to La Paz, we pulled into one of the coves on Santo, where we ate lunch on the hot sand, our feet cooled by the water slowly lapping onshore.

Not for the resort crowd

The trip was a vivid lesson that La Paz rewards travelers willing to make an extra effort to explore. It is a staging area for trips to secluded islands and the surrounding desert, not a destination for lying out on sandy beaches. For the resort crowd expecting wide stretches of glistening sand, the beaches around La Paz will be disappointing. Bahía de La Paz is notoriously polluted, and the few accessible beaches near the center of the city are often crowded and covered in trash on weekends.

The most developed beach is Tecolote, on a windy point about 30 minutes outside town on the peninsula of Pichilingue. It is the closest Baja gets to the Riviera. Small *palapare* restaurants with plastic chairs on the beach serve nachos and cold beer.

Just to the west of Tecolote is Puerto Balandra, where the desert heat beats down on a shallow bay of cool water, far removed from the industrial side of the city. Balandra is home to Mushroom Rock, which has spawned a thousand postcards. Situated at the mouth of the bay, the mushroom-shaped formation is perched precariously on a thin spire that appears barely able to support the larger rock.

On a Sunday afternoon, the parking lot for Balandra is often strewn with litter, and locals have pulled speakers out of their trucks and set them on the beach to play music.

But my wife and I visited the bay early on a weekday morning, using a taxi to make the 30-minute drive. The driver dropped us off and promised to return in two hours, a common practice.

We had the cove to ourselves, free to wade through the shallow water in the cool morning air. We wandered the beach, collected shells and took our pictures next to the rock formation without seeing another soul. Our taxi returned just as the crowds started arriving.

Taxis are part of the adventure in La Paz. On the way back from Balandra, the driver suddenly pulled off onto a dirt road and screeched to a stop. Leaping out with an *un momento*, he strolled over to a taco stand to pick up his lunch, leaving us waiting in the back of the car.

A rental car changes the experience in La Paz, offering the opportunity for your own quick stop at a roadside taco stand and the freedom to explore the stark desert landscape surrounding the city. The most common day trip is to Todos Santos, near the west coast about an hour's drive from La Paz. The dusty village's popularity for American travelers is a bit mystifying, because its lone claim to fame appears to be the large number of American expatriates who have settled there. Many people miss the main draw, a variety of secluded beaches nearby, accessible only by dirt roads, where some of the world's best surfers work on their moves.

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On my most recent visit to La Paz, a trip to the rugged Pacific Coast was not on the agenda. I was just passing through for a few days on my way to sailing on the Gulf of California with friends. During the day we lived at the pace of a culture steeped in the traditions of siesta, wandering the streets before the afternoon heat shut down the city. At night we ate seafood in the open-air restaurants and drank cold beer.

There were few hawkers on the streets, none of the relentless selling found in most Mexican resort cities.

One morning we drove down the dirt roads paralleling the bay near La Posada. We came out on a small beach where an abandoned sailboat lay on its side a few hundred yards offshore, run aground in a storm many months ago. Wandering over to the wreckage, we tried to imagine the owners and the past adventures of the scuttled boat.

On our way back we stumbled on El Serpentario, a reptile farm in the midst of a residential neighborhood, just a few blocks from La Posada de Engelbert. It is home to a wide assortment of turtles, lizards and snakes, as well as "spiders, scorpions, centipedes and other arthropods," a brochure assured us.

The center was empty on a weekday, except for a few bored-looking attendants. We explored the tidy exhibits, tortoise ponds to lizard pits.

La Paz may not feel like a boomtown anymore, but it is still a place of mystery and adventure.

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Island Paddling in Southern Baja

By Rick Hudson / gorp.away.com

Pichilingue is cold before dawn . . . surprisingly cold. The wet sand below the high tide line chills our bare feet as we carry the kayaks down to the water's edge. To the east the sky grows increasingly bright; in a short while the sun will burst over the horizon, chasing away the damp cool of early morning.

Tranquil green waters surround us as we set out 18 miles north of the capital city of La Paz on the southeastern side of the Baja peninsula. Many of Baja's wonders are accessible only by boat, and the kayak provides the perfect vehicle for navigating this wonderfully diverse coast.

We paddle in calm seas as we head across the Canal de San Lorenzo toward the fabled Isla Espiritu Santo. There, the Sierra de la Laguna Range, which begins at the southern tip of the peninsula, appears above sea level in a series of deeply crenellated bays before finally disappearing into the Sea of Cortez.

Overhead, the predawn sky is already filled with life. As we glide out past Sea Bird Island, we marvel at the multitude of frigate birds, their M-shape black wings slicing the air in effortless arcs. There is no wind, no ripple on the water, yet these remarkable creatures (which have the largest wingspan-to-body ratio of any bird) fly at dizzying heights without a flap.

Brown pelicans gather at the shoreline, their ancient faces and awkward postures belying their elegance in flight. Some bob offshore in small clumps, fishing in the channels as we slip past.

The brown pelican is tolerant of humans. In harbors and beaches along the Sea of Cortez they are great opportunists, quick to grab a discarded fish head. You can approach within a few meters of them. Zoom lens not necessary.





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In Baja, Where Bing and Desi Once Partied

BACK in the 1960's, La Paz, which lies along the Sea of Cortez, in Baja California, seemed poised to become the next great Mexican getaway. Its white sand beaches were less crowded than those of Acapulco, while its sport fishing was as good as anything you could find at Cabo San Lucas. And it acquired a brief fame when Bing Crosby bought a home in a nearby fly-in resort, as did Desi Arnaz, who swam in a pool built in the shape of a flamenco guitar.

But the tourist boom never came. Perhaps because the topography didn't easily lend itself to the kinds of megaresorts and golf courses that are a staple of today's upscale vacation spots. Or maybe La Paz, with its workaday citizens and smoke-bellowing Pemex refinery on the edge of town, has always been too functional to be the kind of idyllic escape many travelers look for when they head off for a warm-weather vacation.

Whatever the reason, La Paz, with its fine beaches and dependably sunny weather, today remains a sleepy city of 200,000 residents largely unknown to most Americans.

And that, perhaps, is the best reason for going there.

A visitor to modern La Paz, whose name means "peace," will find a casual and untrampled city drowsing peacefully along the bay under the fierce Mexican sun. During a marine expedition he took to La Paz in the 1940's to collect marine life, John Steinbeck described the city as "a

Hollywood production, the fine, low buildings close down to the water and trees flanking them and a colored bandstand on the water's edge."

La Paz is only 90 miles to the north of Cabo San Lucas, but it is so strikingly different as to appear to belong to another Baja. For starters, La Paz is a working city, the capital of southern Baja, not a resort town, and there are few big hotels or spring-breaker clubs serving tequila to tourists. You will not find a branch of Cabo Wabo, the famously (and proudly) tacky bar in Cabo San Lucas owned by the rock singer Sammy Hagar, which in and of itself makes La Paz an appealing destination.

Many residents of La Paz speak only Spanish, and the downtown, with its Mission-style architecture and its sun-baked avenues leading down to the bay, is distinctly Mexican.

One day, at Playa del Tesoro, a cove-like beach a few miles from town, a visitor swam lazily while tractor-trailers buzzed by. They were heading to the ferry, which sails from a port up the road called Pichilingue and transports everything from cigarettes to a circus to and from the mainland.

While La Paz is off the beaten track to most Americans - the name tends to conjure images of the city in Bolivia - its beaches have made it a vacation spot for middle-class Mexicans, who fly in from [Mexico City](#) or drive from northern Baja.

At night, they crowd the Malecón, a pretty tree-lined promenade that skirts the bay. Fronted by

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a row of shops and noisy restaurants, and running along Alvaro Obregón, the main road to the beaches, the Malecón is the center of life in La Paz, part boardwalk and part drag strip. On a balmy evening there in early July, Mexican families bunched near the entrance of La Fuente, a popular shop that sells helados, which, in this case, are ices made of fresh fruit.

Pickup trucks rolled by with groups of children standing in back, peering over the cab at the crowded sidewalks. The music from the passing cars was wildly diverse. Beyoncé's "Baby Boy" would blare from a souped-up compact filled with rowdy teenagers, and then two men would slowly drive past in a farm truck, listening to mariachi music. All night, a group of women prowled the Malecón in a beat-up Jaguar with [California](#) plates, yelling "Guapo!" ("Handsome!") to passing men.

Like most coastal cities, a large part of life in La Paz revolves around the water. Daylight reveals the pleasure boats that have anchored in the bay during the night, and restaurants supplement quesadillas or tacos with a menu of fresh crab, shrimp and fish. The beaches extend along an arid peninsula that curves like a bent thumb around the coast. At the tip is Playa el Tecolote, a wide, rugged, open beach dotted with thatch-roofed bars and taquerías and crowded on weekends.

There, you can rent a fiberglass skiff called a panga and go to Isla Espíritu Santo, an uninhabited island where there is good snorkeling and an abandoned pearl works, a

remnant from the days when La Paz was known as a pearl capital and a target for marauding sea pirates.

Of course, there is also the fishing. David Jones, who owns the Fishermen's Fleet, which offers guided trips, said the variety of fish in the Sea of Cortez and the great depth of the water so close to the shoreline are what make the region one of the best places to run a line. Clark Gable used to come here to fish for marlin, and an old photo of him posing with one as big as a beer barrel hangs in the bar at Los Arcos, one of the 1950's-era hotels along the Malecón.

There are other places in the world where the fishing is this good," said Mr. Jones, sitting in his tiny office downtown, "but you and I aren't good enough and we don't have the money to get there. La Paz is accessible and the fishing is both easy and plentiful."

Mr. Jones moved his family to La Paz a decade ago from Silicon Valley, and he has since developed the wizened and salty manner of another expatriate to the city, Ray Cannon. A screenwriter and director in the early days of Hollywood (his credits include Buster Keaton's "Go West"), Mr. Cannon decamped to Baja in the 1950's, grew a scruffy beard and remade himself as a "Vagabundo del Mar," a sea-going gypsy. When he wasn't fishing or drinking at Los Arcos, which was often, he acted as a one-man tourism board, celebrating life on Baja in a travel book, "Sea of Cortez," now out of print.

At Playa el Tecolote, the beach on the tip of the cove, a series of dirt roads snake through the

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mountains and wind along the rocky coastline for miles. At the end of one of them is the Club de Caza y Pesca Las Cruces, the hunting and fishing club that counted Bing Crosby and Desi Arnaz as members.

These days, the resort, which had its heyday in the 1960's, is a faded relic - "like something out of 'The Shining,' " as one local described it. The buildings still stand and there is an active member roll, but the surrounding land is as rugged and undeveloped as it was a half century ago.

That may soon change. Once again, someone has discovered La Paz: In 2003 Money magazine named the city one of the best places to retire to. Mr. Jones has heard rumors that new resorts and condos will soon follow. But knowing the history of La Paz, he has reacted with caution. "You hear a lot of talk about that sort of thing down here," he said. "Sometimes these things pan out, and sometimes they don't."

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