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TRUTH IN TRAVEL

JUNE 2005

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## BAJA

ULTIMATE GUIDE TO  
MEXICO'S COOLEST COAST

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AIRFARES WORLDWIDE

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AFRICA'S NEWEST NATIONAL PARKS  
DRIVING INDIA

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A vibrant photograph of a tropical garden. In the foreground, a swimming pool with blue water is visible. To the left, a large blue pot holds red flowers, and a smaller blue pot contains a cactus. In the middle ground, two wooden lounge chairs with purple cushions are positioned under a large yellow umbrella. The background is filled with dense greenery, including a large palm tree on the left and a large tree with red flowers on the right. The scene is bathed in bright sunlight, creating strong shadows.

Lush life: The 1950s  
Hotel California, in  
Todos Santos. The ho-  
tel reopened in 2002  
with a Marrakech-  
meets-Mexico decor  
and its own brand of  
tequila.

Once upon a time in Mexico: A room at the hacienda-style One&Only Palmilla.



Farley. "Oh, and remember to use your flashlights to watch out for rattlesnakes on the steps."

Lauren is the writer daughter of Idaho cattle ranchers; her husband, Michael, is an underwater cameraman who once worked with Marlin Perkins, host of the TV show *Wild Kingdom*. They are self-sufficient, convivial people who spent twenty-five years leading Baja scuba expeditions. When Baja land became available to foreigners, they sold everything they owned to open Danzante in 2001.

From the water, the lodge looks like a tail curved over a tawny cat's back, so naturally does it fit into the contours and colors of the landscape. Inside, azure-painted floors and cactus-wood furniture echo the sea-meets-desert surroundings.

Our fellow guests include a San Francisco sculptor and a fourth-generation descendant of Cornelius Vanderbilt, both bird-watchers eager to see blue-footed boobies.

Disappearing separately into the landscape, we compare notes over sunset margaritas and communal meals of fish stew, mole chicken, and paddle-cactus omelets prepared by fishermen's wives from the nearby village of Ligui.

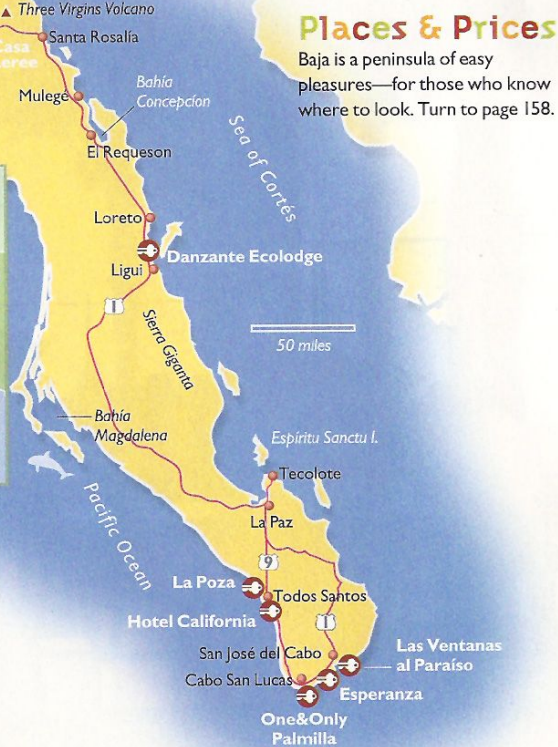
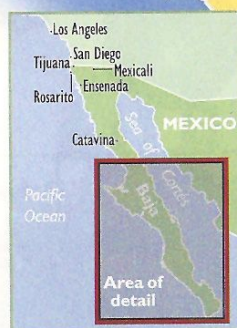
Though subject to sudden storms, the Sea of Cortés has none of the Pacific's artillery-loud pounding. We awaken to sunshine and a mirror-flat sea, perfect for kayaking. Michael insists that we don't need a guide. This attitude seems a bit cavalier, given the sharks, sea snakes, and scorpion fish lurking out there, and the fact that he and his wife have asked us to sign liability waivers. But as it turns out, this wild landscape, approached with common sense, poses far fewer hazards than a big city.

The kayaks are the sit-atop kind, in principle unflippable. We hug the edge of the shallow bay's shore to gain confidence, then paddle past a deep drop-off to the closest small island. One tiny beach occupies us for hours as we sift for perfect turban snails, frilled clams, jewel box cockles, and coffee bean cowries from the infinity of seashells. Spiny and poisonous, the desiccated bodies of pufferfish litter the beach; seabirds, even flies, refuse to eat them. Alison finds hammerhead sharks' heads, complete with multiple rows of teeth. We've stumbled upon an old butcher beach, where local fishermen process sharks for their fins.

The Mexican government has proclaimed the sea in this area a marine park, off-limits to industrial fishing boats and with strict quotas for locals. The Farleys have started a scholarship fund and built a dormitory so that fishermen's kids from Ligui can complete high school in Loreto, the nearest town, and hopefully go on to university and another life. "There are only so many fish, and each year there are more fishermen," Michael says, adding that since they first came to Baja three decades ago, large groupers, manta (Continued on page 182)

## Places & Prices

Baja is a peninsula of easy pleasures—for those who know where to look. Turn to page 158.



Map by Joyce Rendola

[BAJA]

Traveler's Gold List (January 2005).

People who enjoy nightlife might prefer the **Hotel Finesterra**, poised on a cliff between Cabo San Lucas Harbor, which is within walking distance, and a vast beach at Land's End (624-143-3333; finisterra.com; doubles, \$135).

Locals in San José del Cabo book patio tables at **Damiana**, in a restored 18th-century merchant's house on the main square, for lobster, abalone, and its name-sake herbal liquor, reputedly an aphrodisiac (624-142-0499; entrées, \$11-\$42). A tiny one-story building in the shadow of a radio tower, **El Chilar** is more upscale, with an excellent 150-vintage wine list (624-142-2544; entrées, \$10-\$54).

LORETO TO SAN IGNACIO

Mass tourism has yet to colonize the towns and wilderness of central Baja. The allure of this region is its combination of history, adventure travel, and innumerable untrammeled beaches.

The nine-room **Danzante** ecolodge, 31 miles south of Loreto Airport, offers scuba, snorkeling, kayaking, and horseback riding, and is ideally located for touring mission towns. Given the views, it's also tempting to just swing in your hammock. Bring reef walkers to protect your feet from the volcanic rocks and sea urchins (408-354-0042 in the U.S.; danzante.com; doubles, \$290, all-inclusive).

The Farleys arrange whale-watching day-trips and boat drop-offs on desert islands in the Loreto Bay Marine Park. For longer scuba, snorkeling, and kayaking excursions, they recommend **Baja Expeditions**, a 25-year-old American-run company based in La Paz. It also offers eight-day Sea of Cortés cruises aboard the 14-passenger *Don José* and has a tented camp on Bahía Magdalena, the other main gray whale cradle (800-843-6967; bajaexpeditions.com; five-day fly-in safari, \$1,950, including airfare from San Diego).

Whale-watch at Laguna San

Ignacio, which gets just 1,500 visitors a year compared with the 25,000 people who pass through the larger Scammon's Lagoon, near the town of Guerrero Negro. **Ecoturismo Kuyimá** can suggest an itinerary combining a stay at its spartan ten-cabin whale camp with hikes to see rock art in the mountains (615-154-0070; kuyima.com; multi-activity packages from \$165 per person per day, all-inclusive).

Depending on the weight of your vehicle, it can take anywhere from 90 minutes to six hours to drive the 40 miles between the lagoon and the little oasis town of San Ignacio, which has Baja's most beautiful mission church: San Ignacio de Loyola. The blue-painted **Casa Leree** is a century-old adobe guesthouse situated just off the church square. Its bookstore/gallery has a good bilingual selection of works about the region (615-154-0158; doubles, \$35-\$65). The biggest hotel in town, **La Pinta** has 28 simple rooms, the usual amenities, and a pool (615-154-0300; lapintahotels.com; doubles, \$75). A five-minute walk from the church, **Tota's Restaurant Bar** serves yummy lobster omelets (615-154-0230; entrées, \$6-\$12).

With all the sand crescents along Bahía Concepción, you'll be enticed to stop many times on the four-hour drive between San Ignacio and Loreto. In Mulegé, visit **Restaurante Los Equipales** for seafood and barbecued quail (Calle Moctezuma; 615-153-0021; entrées, \$6-\$10). But Santa Rosalía, 38 miles north, is a more intriguing base because of the restored **Hotel Frances**. Built by the copper mining company El Boleo in 1886, it has antiques from the mining era, a parking lot full of old copper train cars, a pool, and second-story veranda balconies overlooking the sea. The wood-paneled sitting room recalls Miss Kitty's *Guns* smoke saloon (615-152-2052; doubles, \$35). Desert 4x4 racers fuel up on cheese quesadillas and seafood at **Restaurant Bar El Muelle** (at Avenida Constitución

and Calle Plaza; entrées, \$5-\$9).

Loreto's first luxury hotel, the 15-room **Posada de las Flores** occupies an 18th-century courtyard house and has a rooftop restaurant with views of Baja's oldest mission church, founded in 1697 (613-135-1162; posadadelasflores.com; doubles, \$140; entrées, \$8-\$21). Families gather in the big garden at **Mexico Lindo y Que Rico** for chicken with cilantro sauce and chipotle pork chops (at Paseo Hidalgo and Calle Independencia; 613-135-1175; entrées, \$6-\$11).

TODOS SANTOS AND LA PAZ

In the mission town of Todos Santos, the 1950s **Hotel California** reopened in 2002 with a Mar-rakech meets Frida Kahlo decor and a souvenir shop selling the house brand of tequila (612-145-0525; doubles, \$100-\$195). On a lagoon at the end of a dirt road outside town, the **Posada La Poza** has seven huge suites facing the Pacific, whose wild beaches provide surfer thrills and throw up bleached pelican skulls and other objects for Baja still lifes (612-145-0400; lapoza.com; doubles, \$140-\$250). The expat colony praises the lobster ravioli at the upscale Italian **Café Santa Fe** (33 Calle Centenario; 612-145-0340; entrées, \$16-\$35) and the *chiles rellenos* at **Miguel's**, a palapa hut (at Calles Degollado and Rangel; entrées, \$4-\$6). Fashion-shoot crews hang out at the wine bar of the **Todos Santos Inn**, an 1870s hacienda (612-145-0040; todossantosinn.com; doubles, \$95-\$135). The setting of the Posada La Poza's **El Gusto** bar and restaurant was less





chic, and the 9 P.M. closing hour inconvenient, but we nonetheless preferred the selection of Mexican vintages, including a 1999 Château Camou Fumé Blanc.

La Paz, whose *malecón* (sea-front) has a 1950s retro feel and whose gulf beaches are safe for swimming, has a small **Anthropology Museum** with well-curated exhibits on Aztec art and Baja's history (in the Agora Cultural Unit on Altamirano and Cinco de Mayo; 612-125-6424). The **Posada de las Flores** chain opened a hotel on the *malecón* in 2003 (612-125-5871; posadadelasflores.com; doubles, \$140-\$230). The town's seafood is memorable, especially when eaten al fresco. The **Super Tacos de Baja California Hermanos González** serves crab, lobster, dorado, shrimp, octopus, and smoked marlin tacos with an even larger choice of accompaniments (on Calle Esquerro, across from La Perla department store; \$1 each). For seafood with a view, drive 30 minutes north to Tecolote Beach, which faces Espíritu Sanctu Island. There, **Palapa Azul** serves cold beer, fish platters, and humongous shrimp cocktails (612-125-2596; entrées, \$6-\$13).

Reading

 In *Eye of the Whale*, Dick Russell intersperses his own journey between Baja and Alaska with the history of whaling and the story of the American captain who discovered the gray whales' hidden birthing cradles (Island Press, \$22). **Moon Handbook's** *Baja* is the most comprehensive guidebook (\$20).

—Susan Hack

TRAVEL PLANNER					
		 afternoon temperature (F)	 daily hours of sunshine	 number of rainy days	 per diem
Brooklyn	JUNE	80°	9:38	10	\$251
	DEC.	42°	4:34	10	
Budapest	JUNE	78°	9:02	13	\$218
	DEC.	39°	1:20	13	
Cabo San Lucas	JUNE	89°	7:53	0	\$296
	DEC.	77°	5:47	2	

BEACH PARTY

The Festival Mexicali en la Playa lures thousands of visitors to Ensenada annually (July 14-17, 2005).