

NORTH AMERICA

Baja California guide: sunsets and shrimp tacos on Mexico's west coast

New flights make it easier to reach the sun-kissed beaches, cool bars and chic hotels of Baja California, says Sophie Hares

Sophie Hares

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Balandra beach near La Paz

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Sliding off the boat into the Sea of Cortez, where plump sea lions barked to each other as they basked on rocky outcrops, I kept a nervous eye out for sharks. Below the surface I felt as if I were in an episode of Blue Planet, the sea lions gliding gracefully through a vast cloud of undulating silvery sardines — a welcome distraction from the gnawing fear of becoming shark bait.

Sharks never menace this part of Espiritu Santo island, Daniela Muniz, a marine biologist, assured me, but sea lions don't always abide by the rules. "They might bite your flipper, but don't start playing with them. You can't get rid of a 200lb sea

Our group snorkelled alongside a raft of these amazing marine mammals, which watched us with puppy-dog eyes while lazily twirling in the water, flippers held nonchalantly in the air. One pair scratched their backs on the rocks as we headed over corals and through flocks of iridescent parrotfish.

Dubbed the “aquarium of the world” by Jacques Cousteau, the Sea of Cortez teems with life. Dolphins surrounded our boat, green turtles emerged from impossibly turquoise water and flying fish skedaddled past. The big-ticket whale sharks, humpbacks and colossal blue whales arrive later in the year.



Sea lions playing off the coast near La Paz
GETTY IMAGES

Once a long slog from the UK, Baja California, with highlights such as the Unesco World Heritage-listed island of Espiritu Santo, is about to get easier to reach with the launch of direct Tui flights in November from Gatwick to Los Cabos, Mexico’s second-biggest holiday destination after Cancun. Which means you can dip a toe into the big beach resorts before hitting the desert highway. Miles of empty beaches, boho-chic Todos

But first sun-kissed Los Cabos itself. A short hop by private jet from Los Angeles, this has long been a favourite paradise playground for A-list celebrities, from Steve McQueen to George Clooney and Beyoncé, thanks to its white-sand beaches, private villas, swanky spas and golf courses.

A fresh crop of high-end hotels are opening their doors, which started with Nobu Los Cabos this year. A Four Seasons resort opens this month, with St Regis and Aman hot on its heels.

My budget didn't stretch to a night at Nobu Matsuhisa and Robert De Niro's hotel, but the restaurant is perfect for a splurge; I can vouch for the sashimi. I tried it on the terrace, with views out to the Sea of Cortez. There was a laid-back beach vibe with Ibiza-style beats, while the executive chef, Manuel Padilla, brought out bite-sized slices of seared tuna with a punchy pasilla chilli salsa and a delicate curl of sea bass with the tiniest cubes of mango and jicama salsa.

It was signature Nobu, but with a fantastic Mexican twist and definitely worth a detour to the hotel, which is just outside Cabo San Lucas. Perched at the tip of Mexico's 760-mile-long Baja peninsula, Los Cabos is a tale of two cities — Cabo San Lucas and San José Del Cabo, just 30 minutes apart.

Home to exclusive mansions and the Land's End arch that dips into the sea, Cabo San Lucas was too much of a brash party town for my liking. "Stay calm, you're on the fun side of Trump's wall," read the slogans on T-shirts hanging outside gift shops. Back-to-back restaurants and sunloungers covered its Medano Beach, where sellers swelter as they try to flog knock-off Cuban cigars to tourists drinking beer in the sea.

Its non-identical twin, San José, with its genteel colonial charm, thriving contemporary art scene and clutch of organic farm-to-

reigns supreme. The whole building is a blank canvas for artists who stay free to paint huge colour-filled works and abstract murals in the bedrooms and corridors.



A church in the old town of San José Del Cabo
ALAMY

A giant spray-painted *Star Wars* stormtrooper loomed ominously on the wall as I floated in the deserted rooftop infinity pool, watching waves smash on the beach beyond. A sign on the glass hot tub reminded guests to wear clothing in its transparent box.

Down in the bar a rough-hewn trapdoor leads to a basement recording studio. Up-and-coming musicians check in to lay down tracks in return for gigs on the rooftop stage, where the Guns N' Roses guitarist Slash strutted his stuff.

Outside, even after the sun went down, it was roasting in San José's softly lit colonial plaza, where a dozen artists set up their paintings for sale as children ran outside the church and a street-corner band played Bruce Springsteen covers. It felt safe too, after a crackdown on the wave of violent cartel crime that recently rocked the region.

street party breaks out each Thursday in high season when its galleries and restaurants open their doors for the Art Walk.

I wasn't there that night, but I did want to try some of the restaurants, which are helping to gain both parts of Los Cabos a reputation as a foodie paradise, with everything from street food and taco joints to celebrity chefs and places such as Flora Farms, which grows its own. I had been told to go to La Lupita for the best tacos in town (as well as grasshoppers), but getting a table was impossible as a band played in the courtyard, where people followed pork and cactus tacos with smoky mezcal.

Instead, at the low-key El Toro Guero, I skipped the menu's "run-over octopus" for a spicy raw shrimp aguachile. The waiter added a couple of salsas to the 15 on the plastic table, keeping an eye on a football match as he served ceviche to off-duty police. Under a huge straw roof on a street corner, it's not exactly a glamorous option on the foodie hit list, but for authentic Mexican seafood from £6 a plate, it more than fits the bill.



Nobu Los Cabos is one of a number of high-end hotels in the area

San José may have retained some original appeal, but it's still Mexico-lite; to get a better taste of Baja you need to leave the

around, you hardly need to rough it.

So I set off into a crimson sunset that threw silhouettes of giant cacti along the highway. It's only an hour north, but tiny Todos Santos, with its laid-back artsy, surfer vibe, is a world apart from Los Cabos.

Mexican flags flutter between sugar- almond-coloured colonial houses, and galleries and quirky shops fill the streets of town that began life as a Jesuit mission. More recently it found fleeting fame as the location of the first Instagram snaps — a dog and a taco stand — and has its fair share of #picoftheday places to eat.

Winged wooden hearts and Frida Kahlo portraits hang on the distressed pink walls of the Caffe Todos Santos. At Hierbabuena the menu changes according to what's fresh in its organic garden, while the Baja-style shrimp tacos at the dirt-floored El Compa Chava give upmarket Los Cabos restaurants a run for their money.

Few leave without a trip to Todos Santos's biggest landmark, Hotel California, which for years claimed to be the inspiration for the Eagles' 1976 hit of the same name and does a roaring trade in T-shirts and own-brand tequila. In keeping with the song, the town is off a desert highway and I heard the mission bell ring all night from my four-poster bed at the colonial Guaycura Boutique Hotel, with its rooftop pool. But the Eagles deny any link to this Hotel California, which opened 30 years before their song hit the airwaves, and sued for trademark infringement a few years ago before finally settling with the owners.

Todos Santos is one of more than 100 destinations Mexico has deemed to be its "magical towns" owing to their unique history, food or festivals. It's inevitably changing, but has managed to cling to its charm, Erin Wheelwright said when I called in to look around her Bohemia Baja hotel, where sun-bleached bull



“It’s still the Wild West,” the Texan said as her Mexico-born children climbed trees barefoot.

Passing a post marking the Tropic of Cancer, I took a day trip to the windswept beaches that drew American surfers to town years ago. At Cerritos beach, where a few rode thumping waves, the instructor Juan Ramos offered to give me lessons, insisting that it’s great for everyone from beginners to experts. I was almost tempted, but made my excuses when he mentioned the two people he had earlier rescued from the undertow that makes much of the coast too dangerous for swimmers.

I would have liked to have stayed longer at Todos Santos, but it was time to cross the Baja peninsula to La Paz and head on to Espiritu Santo island and those lovely sea lions.

the nearby Balandra beach is ranked among Mexico's most beautiful. Families ambled in the sticky evening heat along the sculpture-filled seafront that's the heart of the city, while children played volleyball in the sand. The hip terrace bar was packed at Harker Board Co, where I stopped for a pizza and a couple of Baja Brewing's craft beers as the sun went down.

The next morning we took a trip with the sustainable travel company Red Travel Mexico, powering in its boat across the Sea of Cortez to Espiritu Santo, passing colonies of blue-footed boobies. Hungry after exploring the coastline and snorkelling with sea lions, we drew up on a deserted coral beach for lunch. "It's not rinse and repeat here — you never know what you're going to see," Red's Chris Pesenti said about Espiritu Santo and its spectacular sea life as we ate ceviche on the sand.

You could probably say the same for the rest of Baja, I thought as we drove by Balandra Bay's postcard beaches on the way back to La Paz. However, if it's adventure you're looking for, you'll need to put down the margarita, get off the sunbed and hit the desert highway.

The best of Baja: where to stay and eat

San José Del Cabo

Stay Hotel El Ganzo is an arty boutique hotel in San José's marina with a rooftop infinity pool and a recording studio. No children are allowed. Doubles cost from £125 (elganzo.com).

Eat La Lupita Taco y Mezcal serves tacos, grasshoppers and smoky mezcals with mains from £5 (lalupitatym.com). El Toro Güero (Calle Ildefonso Green) is a busy fish restaurant with mains from £6. Flora Farms is a farm-to-table restaurant serving salads, pasta and dishes using produce grown on its 25-acre plot, with mains from £16 (flora-farms.com).



Guaycura Boutique Hotel

Todos Santos

Stay Guaycura Boutique Hotel has a roof-top pool, terrace restaurant and a nearby beach club. B&B doubles cost from £155 (guaycura.com). La Bohemia Baja is a chic whitewashed hotel with a small pool, big breakfasts, a beach club and glamping options. B&B doubles cost from £115 (labohemiabaja.com).

Eat Hierbabuena uses local fish and organic produce from its gardens to produce mains from £7 (hierbabuenarestaurante.com). Mariscos El Compa Chava serves Baja-style fish tacos and generous plates of ceviche, with mains from £3 (Calle Del Huerto).

La Paz

Stay Casa Al Mar is a boutique hotel with spacious suites overlooking the seafront. Doubles cost from £105 (casaalmar.mx). Hotel Catedral La Paz is a modern hotel with a rooftop pool and bar overlooking the city. Doubles cost from £52 (hotelcatedrallapaz.mx).

Eat Harker Board Co, with mains from £4, is a hip restaurant overlooking La Paz's seafront, serving burritos, pizzas and craft beers. Mc-Fisher serves seafood every way, with mains from £4 (Calle José Maria Morelos y Pavon).

Need to know

Sophie Hares was a guest of Visit Los Cabos (visitloscabos.travel), Visit Baja Sur (visitbajasur.travel), Visit La Paz (golapaz.com) and Budget Car rental, which charges from £33 a day.

November 7. Return flights cost from £479pp. Flights plus seven nights' all-inclusive at the Riu Santa Fe in Cabo San Lucas starts at £791pp (tui.co.uk). Day trips to Espiritu Santo cost £130 (redtravelmexico.com).



Nobu's first hotel in Latin America

Nobu brings a taste of Japan to Mexico's Baja

By Sophie Hares

If you don't mind spending north of £360 a night on a room, take a look at Nobu's first hotel in Latin America, which blends Japanese zen-like calm with exuberant Mexican hospitality.

At the tip of Baja California, the sleek marble oasis isn't just a place where the chef Nobu Matsuhisa's signature dishes take centre stage — although the restaurant, with its sweeping sea views, is excellent — as a hotel it also has much to offer.

The 200 minimalist rooms feature stylish Mexican handcrafted wooden furniture, stone-wall panels and a neutral palette that suits the desert surroundings. The bathrooms feature similar Japanese-style teak baths to the one Nobu has at home; some have high-tech toilets with sophisticated control panels that you never knew you needed. While about half the rooms are

If you don't have a private pool, there are infinity pools and chic private cabanas in the grounds, as well as a huge luxury spa and a Tiger Woods-designed golf course.

Staff say that “Nobu-San”, who has opened a dozen hotels from Marbella to Manila with his business partner Robert De Niro, is very hands-on. When he recently brought his grandchildren to Los Cabos, he was back of house testing new dishes and meeting housekeepers rather than just lounging in his eponymous oceanfront suite.

It's a hotel with a grown-up feel. I'm not sure I'd risk my rowdy children disturbing the ambience, but it does have a kids' club and family-friendly rooms, and its relaxed Malibu Farm restaurant serves pizzas and quesadillas.

Bringing a touch of Japan to Mexico may seem like an unlikely fusion, but in Los Cabos, Nobu has made it work.

Details Rooms start at £267 a night (loscabos.nobuhotels.com)

South America

Food and drink



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