

Retreat to ... MEXICO

Revive your spirit and connect with nature in Los Cabos area

KATE KENNEDY
QMI Agency

Sandy beaches and crashing waves only a flight away — it's no surprise Mexico is a top choice for vacationers.

But if slushie cocktails and sun bathing are all Canadians think this sun destination has to offer, they are sorely missing out.

Too often travellers return from a resort sunburned, bloated and ready for another vacation. That's what a strict cycle of sugary drinks, afternoon sun and late nights will do to you. So this year, it's time to turn the stereotypical Mexican vacation on its head — connect with nature and renew your spirit.

OUTDOOR ADVENTURES

Surrounded by two bodies of water — and with protected desert inland — Cabo San Lucas on the tip of the Baja California peninsula is a prime spot for adventurous travellers who want to explore the environment away from their resort.

Cabo Adventures, based at the Cabo marina, offers an array of "bucket list" experiences with friendly guides and trainers who double as local historians. Options include snorkelling, scuba diving, mountain biking, zip-lining, "outback" hiking, camel riding and swimming with dolphins — and many are family friendly.

The outback hike is a little more "outback" than one might think. It begins with

forest," as our guide Polo calls it. Thanks to an exceptionally heavy rainfall the week before, the desert is green, full of fauna and in bloom.

On our 30-minute hike down a hill and into the river bed, Polo describes the local wildlife in view — stink beetles, lizards, opeyres and tiny frogs — as well as the vegetation. He points out atropa belladonna ahead of us and two trees to the right, whose red pigment was used to colour the 8,000-year-old paintings in nearby caves.

Some trees look ghostly, as if they crept out of a Tim Burton film. Polo explains these are skeletons of cardon cacti, which can live more than 300 years.

At the bottom of the river bed we encounter a Mercedes Benz Unimog truck — the kind with open sides and rubber loops that hang from the roof. Our bumpy trip to the beach is an adventure in itself, as giant cacti brush the truck sides.

The beach is a fitting backdrop for the next part of our adventure — a camel ride with guide Sidi-Amar from the nomad Tuareg tribe of the Saharan region of Niger. Each of us is fitted with a bicycle helmet — thankfully covered in white headscarves — before ascending wooden stairs and climbing (two to a camel) atop the furry beasts. Our camel, Pickle, calmly plunks heavy legs along his path around the beach. An assistant holds the reins, just-in-case, while we take in the view.

Afterward, Sidi-Amar serves loyal of animals but be trusted fully to lead riders to water.

The final part of our outback adventure is a traditional Mexican lunch with refried beans, beef and vegetable dishes, chicken mole, freshly made tortillas and a sweet hibiscus beverage. A tequila tasting finishes the experience on a cheerful note, and is most welcome after our day in the sun.

Visitors looking for a cooler, less strenuous activity can sign up for Cabo Adventures' dolphin swim, which includes a lesson about the uber-friendly animals, a belly or dorsal-fin ride, plenty of petting, and a few kisses. Children as young as one year old can take part

In a natural rock garden overlooking Los Cabos and the Sea of Cortez lies Playa Grande Resort & Spa's Temazcal sweat lodge. Its white dome — about as high as a tall man — resembles an igloo made of rock. A narrow opening invites visitors to crawl into its dark interior, where they will each find something different.

The spa menu has everything travellers have come to expect from a luxury resort spa — facials, massages, bridal and mom-to-be packages, treatments for men and couples (including a massage class). But it's the holistic mind-and-body treatments

in steam-lodge sessions for about 30 years, explains the enclosed quarters mimic the womb and the ritual is to help us let go of our worries and pain, remember our love for others and ourselves, and re-emerge spiritually and physically cleansed.

Chanting in her smooth voice, Marlen pours water from her bowl onto the coals, which raises the room temperature rapidly and signals the beginning of prayers for the Fire-Hispanic bath. The ritual involves placing wet leaves on different points of the body, while taking a moment to reflect and cleanse each area.

Marlen pauses now and again to pour water on the

Even though it's 30C outside, the heat inside the lodge is startling. As herb-infused steam fills the lungs, a shadow of doubt flickers across my mind: Can I go through with this? It feels about 10 degrees warmer than a hot yoga class, but the coal-filled circular pit in the centre of the room promises this is just the start.

Participants are invited to sit around the pit in front of individual water bowls filled with freshly plucked leaves on twigs. The water is lukewarm

to ease breathing, and even leave the lodge if we need to.

After our bodies are blessed, guests are invited to talk about their loved ones and the things in their lives for which they are most grateful. Although the heat is unpleasant at times, finding strength while surrendering to the ritual is part of the process of spiritual renewal.

We leave the lodge with pride — not to mention clear sinuses — knowing we did not give up. Emerging from the lodge, the Mexican heat feels almost cool. Our "bath" is followed by a quick shower, a nutty snack and several gulps of water before a relaxing massage that helps bridge the gap between the steam lodge and real life.

Other traditionally inspired treatments include the 75-minute Flindas-



CABO ADVENTURES PHOTO



SOLAIMA HOTELS & RESORTS PHOTO



KATE KENNEDY/QMI AGENCY

SOLAIMA HOTELS & RESORTS PHOTO

CABO ADVENTURES PHOTO

and kneaded into sore muscles, and the Exotic Frangipani Body Nourish Wrap (\$120), which uses a combination of soaked Tahitian coconut and frangipani flowers.

STAY AND PLAY

Nestled between jagged rocks and the Pacific — on a strip of private white-sand beach at the southern tip of Cabo San Lucas — lies Grand Solmar Land's End Resort and Spa. From the moment guests check-in at the open-air lobby, which gives a glimpse of the ocean and backs onto enormous sandstone rocks, they know they are in for a true retreat. Land's End was built with the dazzling scenery in mind, and offers stunning views. Even behind closed doors, crashing waves can be seen in sleep in

The resort's two restaurants serve international cuisine with Mexican flair, and use fresh local produce in dishes such as red peppers stuffed with spicy meat and dried fruit. Light lunches are served at Brasserie Snack & Sushi bar, one of two swim-up infinity pool-bars overlooking the beach.

Along the beach, Playa Grande Resort & Spa is a quick walk from Land's End and also connects to The Ridge resort. The marble entrance makes a grand impression at the all-suite hotel, which includes the spa, two restaurants and a general store for guests who want to make use of their kitchens or buy extra sunscreen. Playa Grande has two categories of suites and two penthouses, all decorated with vibrant style with balconies and

villas with fully equipped kitchens, living rooms and extra cots, making it an option for groups or families interested in staying a week or longer. Other family friendly features include mini golf, a tennis court and a kids club.

Situated on the Pacific side of Cabo, all three resorts strongly advise against ocean swimming, but with several infinity pools (many with adult-only swim-up bars) and a wide array of water activities, guests won't miss out on water fun.

Those who want to experience the thrill of scuba diving without spending valuable vacation time training, can sign up for Sea Trek's underwater helmet dive for a walk along the floor of the Sea of Cortez.

For more information on resorts and activities, visit solmar.com/.

An aerial view of Land's End Resort and Spa, main photo, shows the private beach and ruggedly beautiful landscape around the property in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. Guests take a bumpy beach-ride on a camel, above, during an outback adventure tour. Kookal the dolphin takes her new friend for a ride, top left. Spa-goers take part in a ceremony in the Temazcal sweat lodge, top right, at Playa Grande Resort & Spa. Cabo Adventures' guide Polo holds up a tiny frog, left centre, for his group of "outback" hikers to see. An infinity pool at Land's End, top left, the resort was designed to take advantage of its