

TRAVEL



TWEET OF THE WEEK
Moonlight shopping at the Philadelphia Christmas Village, Saturday, Dec. 15: Browse, eat and drink until 10 p.m.
@uwishunu

DISPATCHES



DENNY HENRY

The National Children's Museum opens its facility in suburban Maryland today.

Museum gives kids the world

After operating for eight years as a "museum without walls," Washington's National Children's Museum has finally landed a home of its own — just down the Potomac River at suburban Maryland's National Harbor entertainment complex.

The mission of the 18,000-square-foot facility, opening today, is to "inspire children to care about and improve the world." At an airport luggage carousel in the Our World section, kids ages 3-8 learn that people travel for various reasons and what they pack is determined by the environment they'll be visiting. Youngsters can learn to make a traditional Tanzanian food called *ugali* and hop aboard a three-wheeled *tuk-tuk* from Thailand. Infants and toddlers will be greeted by Big Bird and other *Sesame Street* characters.

The museum is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; standard admission for adults and children over 1 is \$10. Information: 301-392-2400 or ncm.museum.

Laura Bly



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Mike Tyson checks out Muhammad Ali's boxing robe at the interactive exhibit.

SCORE! this on your Vegas visit

Vegas has scored another attraction. What's billed as a "multi-sport interactive exhibit" has just opened in the Luxor Hotel and Casino.

The 10,000-square-foot SCORE! features memorabilia from the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame, Pro Football Hall of Fame, Hockey Hall of Fame, Boxing Hall of Fame, U.S. Soccer Federation and more. On display: gear worn by stars such as Michael Jordan, Sammy Sosa, Mia Hamm, Richard Petty, Wayne Gretzky and Muhammad Ali.

Visitors can participate in challenges including an NHL-themed stick-handling drill, baseball speed pitch, NASCAR-style pit stop and vertical-leap test. Fans can sign with a virtual agent and become a pro in their favorite sport. They can see a rundown of their "career" and buy a magazine cover highlighting their induction to their chosen hall of fame.

Tickets are \$28, adult; \$20 for Nevada residents; \$15 for children under 12. For info, visit scorelv.com.

Kitty Bean Yancey

No slump in holiday travel

Even with the fiscal cliff looming, many are taking a leap and traveling for the holidays.

TripAdvisor surveyed more than 1,300 U.S. travelers online and found that 45% plan to be away from home, up from 42% last year. And 42% say they will spend more on travel than last holiday season.

Here are survey highlights:

- ▶ 63% who travel will be on the road for Christmas, 4% for Hanukkah and 31% for New Year's; 61% will see family, and 23% will visit friends.
- ▶ 48% plan to drive to their destination; 46% say they'll fly.
- ▶ 42% expect to be stressed by holiday travel — 27% say airline delays or cancellations are the most aggravating, and 20% are most irked by bad weather.

A whimsical part of the survey: While traveling, the song of choice to hear is *White Christmas*. The most annoying holiday ditty: *Santa Baby*. Humbug.

Kitty Bean Yancey



In Los Cabos, paradise comes in many contours

KITTY BEAN YANCEY, USA TODAY

The signature rock formation in Cabo San Lucas known as "El Arco" is a must-see. The waters are inviting but not always safe for swimming.

Natural beauty, A-list luxury, full-on partying

Kitty Bean Yancey
@thebeanlitty
USA TODAY

CABO SAN LUCAS, MEXICO Under the thatched roof of open-air Cabo Blue bar, sunburned tourists are pounding margaritas as if there's no *mañana* — and it's barely noon.

At the \$500-a-night-and-up Capella Pedregal resort, guests get complimentary afternoon guacamole, chips and Corona beer while they lounge on balconies with private mini-infinity pools overlooking the Pacific and Cabo's craggy in-water rock formations.

Next door at the less expensive Hotel Finisterra, a salsa teacher with the enthusiasm of a cruise director urges guests to "shake-ee, shake-ee."

Los Cabos, a vacation destination at the southern tip of Baja California about 1,000 miles from San Diego, has a split personality. It encompasses the cantina-packed, raucous Cabo San Lucas, the quieter San José del Cabo and "The Corridor" — a 20-mile highway between them lined with value all-inclusives and luxury resorts, where a night's lodging can cost \$1,000 and skyward.

Ever since John Wayne and friends discovered the area as a chill-out fishing spot, Los Cabos has been a getaway for Hollywood, hosting stars such as Jennifer Aniston, George Clooney, Gwyneth Paltrow and Kim Kardashian. Justin Timberlake brought his golfing bachelor party here in September.

The area also got a boost this year from the G20 international economic summit, hosting President Obama and Hillary Clinton, and by being named a "Travelers' Choice" destination by TripAdvisor.

Unlike some other parts of the country, Los Cabos is viewed as a safe destination and not included in the U.S. State Department's Mexico travel warning. The summit meant that U.S. and Mexican authorities chased away "cockroach" criminals, making the area even more secure, says Alberto Coppola, president of the Los Cabos Convention & Visitors Bureau.

This morning he's sipping coffee at Mama's Royal Café on a side street in Cabo. Mama's caters to tourists, but it lures locals for its *pozole* (a soupy stew said to ease hangovers) and egg dishes incorporating everything from avocado to potato and chile. Romantic Mexican pop hits play as servers circulate with coffeepots.

THE PARTY GOES ON

Coppola, lean and tan and unusually candid for a Mexican tourism promoter, acknowledges that tourism — the USA is Cabo's No. 1 market — took a hit since the world financial meltdown, swine flu outbreak and Mexico's war with drug cartels.

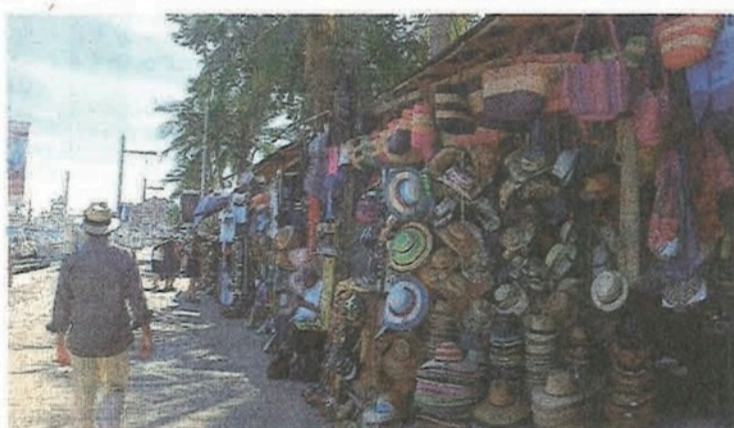
Discussing the aggressive timeshare touts who pester tourists at Los Cabos airport, he acknowledges that they draw "a lot of complaints" from visitors who mistake them for transportation agents and get caught up in a frenzied pitch to view a property.

The latest trend in Los Cabos:



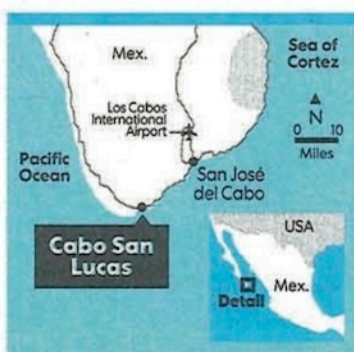
LAS VENTANAS AL PARAÍSO, A ROSEWOOD RESORT

For guests at the luxury villas of Las Ventanas al Paraíso, or "windows on paradise," the name says it all.



KITTY BEAN YANCEY, USA TODAY

Rows of souvenir vendors vie for tourists' attention — and dollars — by the marina in Cabo San Lucas. The USA is Cabo's No. 1 market.



USA TODAY

more all-inclusives for value-conscious visitors, which upsets restaurant owners and lowers the average daily hotel rate, he says. At the same time, more upscale brands, such as a Ritz-Carlton Reserve villa, golf resort and a Montage property, are coming in.

After breakfast, as the temperature in this generally sunny spot climbs toward 80, Coppola leads a walking tour. Here's the rowdy Cabo Wabo bar, from rocker Sammy Hagar of Van Halen fame, and three-story El Squid Roe, where servers pour shots down the throats of partiers.

"In the United States, if they drink like that, they go to jail," says Cabo boatman Pedro Guadalupe Castillo, 28, who has lived in the USA.

Dusty streets of this former fishing village now teem with souvenir stalls whose vendors yell, "Yo, gringo!" or

PARADISE IN PICTURES

TRAVEL.USATODAY.COM
Check out a gallery of images from laid-back Los Cabos.

"Hola, amigo"; pharmacies selling Cipro and Viagra; and massage parlors where comely *señoritas* touch up their makeup while awaiting customers. A Carnival cruise ship is in, which makes cab drivers and menu-waving restaurant skills happy. Cruise traffic, however, is down in the wake of safety concerns in other ports on Pacific itineraries, such as Acapulco and Mazatlán.

Coppola points the way to the marina, where tourists can score a better deal on fishing and sightseeing by bargaining with boatmen. For those lacking the hundreds of dollars needed to cast for marlin, there are "booze cruises" on catamarans, whale-watching outings in winter when the giant mammals are migrating, or a glass-bottom boat tour of the coastline, including a sea lion colony and Cabo's signature arch rock formation. Though the aquamarine waters are inviting, the area has only a few beaches without currents that make them unswimmable.

What Los Cabos does have, though, are outdoor adventures galore and resorts with spectacular pools and landscaping, including world-class lodgings dispensing over-the-top pampering. The Big Four, according to L.A.-based luxury vacation specialist Stacy Small, president of

Elite Travel International: Capella, Esperanza, One&Only Palmilla and Las Ventanas al Paraíso.

How over-the-top? For one thing, VIP service at the airport, with staffers whisking guests through baggage check-in and security into a special lounge with a hostess and Wi-Fi.

Esperanza, An Auberge Resort, sheltered President Obama and secretary of state Clinton during the G20 summit. Actress Paltrow married rocker Chris Martin on one of its beaches. Staffers arrange creative proposals, such as one in which a ring was reeled down via fishing rod to a woman having cocktails with her beau, says general manager Marc Rodriguez. Esperanza also offers a popular al fresco dining area with waves crashing below that's open to non-guests.

NO DETAIL LEFT UNDONE

Capella Pedregal, the new kid on the block near the heart of Cabo, boasts an entrance driveway blasted through a rocky hillside to form a dramatic tunnel. Violinists play *My Heart Will Go On* in its dimly lit Don Manuel's restaurant, where menus are presented with reading lights attached. One&Only Palmilla, which has a swimmable beach, offers custom cushioned beds for pets and a Market restaurant from Michelin-starred Jean-Georges Vongerichten. Families love it.

Las Ventanas al Paraíso, A Rosewood Resort, on The Corridor near San José del Cabo is considered by many insiders the best for romance. Every detail is perfection, down to in-room fireplaces, tequila-tasting sets, telescopes for whale-watching, butlers who pack and unpack — even sewing kits customized to the color of clothes hung in closets.

In Spanish, the resort's name means "windows on paradise." And watching a rosy sunset from a tranquil terrace overlooking a long, near-deserted stretch of beach is indeed a slice of Eden — which might take the sting out of that \$200 dinner or double-digit cocktail.

Meanwhile, the "wish you were beer" sign glows at Squid Roe, where bleary-eyed partiers from college kids to grandmas order six brews for \$13, boogie to the oldie *Brick House* and call for yet another round.