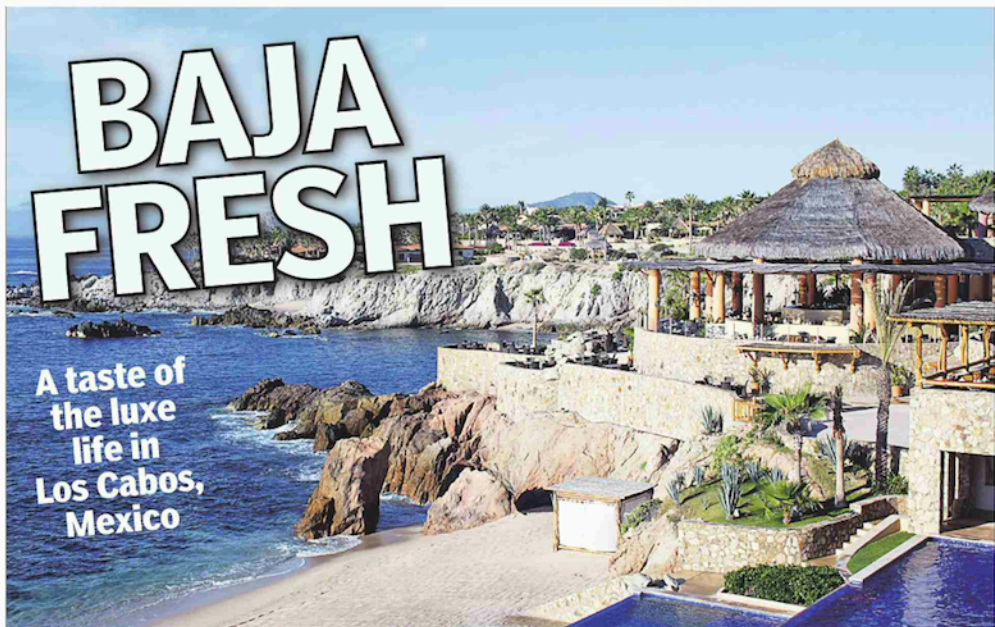


BAJA FRESH

A taste of the luxe life in Los Cabos, Mexico



HIGH TIMES: The Esperanza resort is built into the rugged Baja coastline and boasts amazing ocean views.

SPRING TRAVEL PREVIEW

By JENNIFER CEASER

THERE is the Los Cabos, Mexico, that is Sammy Hagar's Cabo Wabo Cantina, where sunburnt tourists suck down "Waboritas" made with his signature tequila and rock out to '80s cover bands. Then there is the Los Cabos that is the five-star variety — chic oceanside

resorts favored by privacy-seeking celebs and featuring gourmet restaurants.

And sometimes these two very different Los Caboses overlap: On my visit last fall, a tattooed group in Van Halen T-shirts lounged poolside at Esperanza, an Auberge Resort (esperanzaresort.com), where rooms start at \$575 a night. (They were there for Hagar's birthday celebration at Cabo Wabo that promised, in one guest's words, to be "epic.")

But make no mistake, Esperanza is a very grown-up,

super-luxe resort.

Take our top-floor suite, where everything we could ever want was at our beck and call. Another round of expertly mixed margaritas? *Si!* And maybe another carousel of that super-tasty ceviche? *Claro que si!* One phone call summoned our 24-hour butler, who promptly arrived and prepared fresh drinks in the living room's wet bar. We carried them out to the spacious private terrace, hopped in the outdoor Jacuzzi and soaked up views of the Sea of Cortez.

Still, on this hot day, the sparkling seaside infinity pool beckoned. It's one of four pools at this expansive resort (which has 57 rooms, 96 private residences, four dining options, a spa and fitness center, a game room and tennis courts, set on 17 tidily manicured acres) — just big enough to require a map and a ride in a golf cart if the day becomes too sweltering.

And it does get toasty

in Los Cabos — from late May to October, temps regularly soar into the 90s (springtime weather is ideal, hovering in the mid-80s). All those pools will come in handy, too, because the ocean in much of Baja is, sadly, unswimmable year-round because of strong currents.

What the sea lacks in swimability, it makes up for in drama, with waves crashing into the craggy coastline. It was best experienced from on high, at the resort's signature *Cocina del Mar* restaurant, with open-air terraces carved into the cliffs. While dining on chef Gonzalo Cerda's seafood-centric menu, paired with surprisingly good Mexican wines, the pounding surf made the ideal vacation soundtrack.

Next up was Las Ventanas al Paraiso, a resort just 10 minutes away, but one that could not have had a more different aesthetic.

In place of lush green grass, flowering plants and warm earth tones, Las Ventanas was all chalk-white stucco, rigidly raked sand and spiky cacti — very stark, very Zen and very cool. Interconnected, twisting pools tumbled down the hillside, ending at the seaside bar and indoor/outdoor restaurant.

This 71-room Rosewood resort (rosewoodhotels.com/en/lasventanas) offers garden-view junior suites with fireplaces and private patios (from \$595) all the way up to

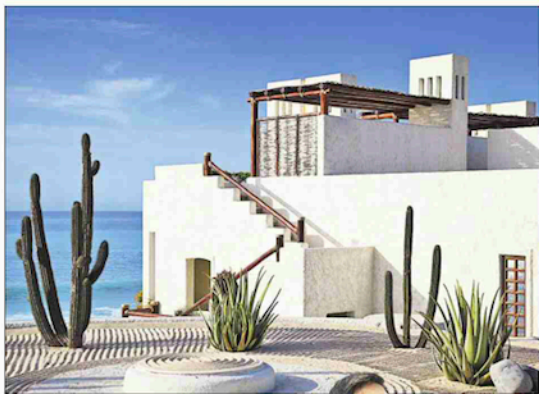
a sprawling 3,900-square-foot three-bedroom spa suite with ocean views (from \$6,000). There's also a spa, tennis courts and two boutiques.

It was on the wide, white-sand beach (again, no ocean-swimming) that my friends reserved a half-day at one of the resort's new cabanas — which comes with a private plunge pool, an iPod player and, best of all, a butler who brings you drinks and food at the touch of a button.

I opted instead to take a cooking class with the resort's chef, Fabrice Guisset; it began with a drive to Los Tamarindos (huertalotamarindos.com), an organic farm outside of San Jose del Cabo. There we filled up a basket with herbs and veggies plucked straight from the earth: eggplant, zucchini, arugula, all sorts of beans and hot peppers and *epazote*, a Mexican herb that's almost as popular in this region as cilantro.

Back at Las Ventanas, Guisset dumped out our bounty in the herb garden's open-air kitchen and got to work slicing and dicing. The chef whipped up a ceviche using half-moon scallops (native to Baja), with a dash of lime and thin slivers of a jalapeno we'd picked, and a salad of fresh beans atop a bed of peppery arugula.

Our final evening in Mexico, it was necessary to indulge in some serious tequila-drinking. How ideal then that Las Ventanas offers a special private tasting of the agave spirit at its outdoor Ceviche, Tequila and Sushi Bar. We sipped blancos, reposados, añejos, super añejos — some well-known tequilas, some rarely seen outside of the region. We even tried a Baja margarita, an odd mix of herbal *damiana* liqueur and tequila. By the end of the tasting, we pretty much would have drunk anything. Except that bottle of Cabo Wabo.



WHITE HOT: Chic Las Ventanas offers fun excursions to a local farm where you can pick organic veggies.

