

LUXE CABOS

The southern capes of the Baja Peninsula, or Los Cabos (*visitloscabos.travel*), are some of the world's most fabled shorelines—and for good reason. The aquamarine crossroads of the Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Cortez dazzle with astounding natural beauty and a handful of resorts that flawlessly capture an extraordinary union of desert, sea and modern opulence.

Between the 20-mile corridor uniting the towns of Cabo San Lucas to the west and San José del Cabo to the east, several exalted resorts battle for the title of Mexico's "it" hotel, each delivering a bespoke incarnation of paradise. Stellar service, dreamy vistas, showstopping design and refined accommodations are givens. It's the fine details that set these juggernauts apart, leaving jet-setters and glitzers with multiple definitions of heaven on earth.

Near Cabo San Lucas' iconic Land's End, **Capella Pedregal** (capellahotels.com/cabosanlucas) is the newest of the ultraluxe hotels and embraces the apex of taste and style, while imparting an unwavering ambience of utter romance. Cover to cover, a stay at Capella Pedregal reads like an epic fairy tale. The prologue: the grand entrance through Pedregal Mountain by way of tunnel, whereupon a vision of light reveals a postcard-perfect image of tropical paradise, while impeccable modern architecture mingles with sleek reflection ponds, and low-lying cacti flush towering date palms



Clockwise from top right: The pool bar, exquisite interiors; El Farallón restaurant at night; and The Atrium Spa pool at El Capellito Pedregal

exposed to a brilliant blue sky and cerulean waters. The narrative: the porpoise of paths along swathes of virgin beach with Land's End in the horizon, whale-watching by day and stargazing at night from the en suite infinity pool, sipping guava margaritas and fine wines with new friends at the hotel's larger swim spot, and enjoying unabashed pampering in a private over-water pavilion at the 100,000-square-foot ocean-view **Auriga Spa**.

The 66 rooms, suites and family villas in all nine of Capella's rock-hewn low-rise structures overlook the ocean—there's not a bad view anywhere in this high-design enclave. Intricately unadorned and etched, mesquite wood doors open up to elegantly designed Mexican sanctuaries. Framed by



exposed wood trusses and panoramas of sea and sky, spaces are decorated with custom-made hardwood furnishings, exquisite candelabras, hand-embroidered lampshades and artistic textiles revealing colorful journeys through the country's diverse regions.

You'll spend far too much time at **Auriga Spa**, likely indulging in one of the cleansing or revitalizing signature treatments inspired by the lunar cycle. Despite its mammoth size, the spa intentionally keeps its number of treatment rooms to 10; each one is like a lily pad where you enter from land and can exit directly into the pool's shallow ponds.

Experiential eats also add to the Capella Pedregal high. Tucked into the cliffs of the property's western perimeter, **El Farallón** is a new take on an old-fashioned outdoor fish market, where selections of fresh-caught seafood change daily. At **Crudo**, lunch light on fresh sashimi, sushi and ceviche to save room for complimentary

guacamole and chips delivered to your room every afternoon. At signature restaurant **Don Manuel**, a Mexican gastronomic tour de force may include octopus aguachile, lobster tamales, tamarind- and coconut-glazed duck breast, and macadamia-crusted sea bass. Or, amp up the romance factor and dine on the beach. Under starry skies, the resort transforms its stunning shore into a private open-air dining room (fiki torches and rose petals included), with Champagne at the ready and a decadent



multicourse meal to be savored at your leisure. It's just another example of how every whim is accommodated to perfection.

Facing Land's End from the opposite vantage point, **Esperanza, An Auberge Resort** (esperanzaresort.com) offers a front-row seat to the desert-meets-the-sea majesty of Los Cabos. This hillside Relais & Châteaux property capitalizes on its natural surrounds, with view-heavy infinity pools along the ocean's edge and a romantic outdoor hot tub, sheltered by vaulted palapa ceilings, on the terrace of each 1,200-square-foot unit. The resort's two wings mark a clear division between the family-centric villas on one side of the property and the adults-only hotel on the other, ensuring that kids and honeymooners don't mix.

Esperanza's principal approach for distinguishing itself is an extensive roster of activities. The resort's fitness masters plays

out through complimentary daily classes of beachside yoga, boot camp, TRX and Zumba. The Spa at Esperanza offers a bevy of Mexican- and Asian-inspired treatments, with a hydrotherapy circuit that includes steam caves, a warm spring soaking pool and a cool waterfall. Wildlife enthusiasts love the sea-life adventure experiences, which include swimming with whale sharks, watching humpback whales and releasing sea turtle hatchlings. Come evening, you'll be well on your way to becoming a certified tequila aficionado after an informative (and intoxicating) tasting course with Master Tequilero Christian Moya. On Thursdays, Esperanza's La Palapa restaurant transforms into an all-out fiesta under the stars during Mexicanismo, featuring live music, fireworks, local vendors and taste sensations from around the country.



The infinity pool at Esperanza, An Auberge Resort.

Overseas Junior Suites overlook the pool at Las Ventanas al Paraíso, A Rosewood Resort.



Further east, toward San José del Cabo, **Las Ventanas al Paraíso, A Rosewood Resort** (rosewoodhotels.com/en/lasventanas) dutifully merits the illustrious reputation it has gained the world over. At any moment, warm and smiling staff stands eager to deliver stellar service that never feels forced or required. The iconic, whitewashed buildings, enveloped by color-splashed cacti gardens and scintillating sculptures, exude a constant "wow" factor. In the alfresco lobby, handcrafted mirrors reflect ocean blues, while bare branches from Baja thistledisks spring to life with handblown red-and-pink glass bears. Seven quieter boutique pools surface as resplendent oases from the core beachfront pool, where you'll share far too many Micheladas and margaritas with fellow jet-setters.

This all-suite grande dame has remained at the top of her game, never forgoing utmost excellence in all facets of design and operation, or forgetting that a little nip and tuck never hurts. In 2011, Las Ventanas al Paraíso added a sumptuous new spa, replete with Zen-inspired indoor-outdoor treatment rooms. And earlier this year, the hotel announced a new chapter in its history. By the end of 2013, there will be a few more "windows to



paradise," as the resort unveils its new luxury beachfront villas.

Just down from Las Ventanas al Paraíso is celeb fave the **One&Only Palmilla, Los Cabos** (palmilla.oneandonlyresorts.com)—where top-to-bottom bespoke treatment comes standard. However, it's anything but a standard hotel. Threads that match your wardrobe appear in your closet; fresh fruit arrives daily, as does an afternoon snack; a bedside aromatherapy menu allows you to pick an evening scent to lull you to sleep; and that's just the beginning of the seemingly endless parade of gratis hospitality menus provided.

Perched above the beach along the Baja Peninsula's edge, Palmilla boasts 172 guest accommodations housed in single- and three-story buildings with red-tiled roofs, whitewashed walls and breathtaking beach vistas. Unique

in layout and design, guest rooms vary in category, but all are jaw-droppingly impressive: Think a spacious 1,100-square-foot one-bedroom suite, with separate living room, wet bar and huge outside terrace. In the bathroom, an immense picture window streams in sunlight, highlighting an open shower (with rainhead, naturally) and stand-alone tub. Here, extravaganzas include luxe trimmings, sumptuous "Mediterranean" cuisine, an ESPA-stocked spa and exquisite service.

ON OUR RADAR

Close to San José del Cabo, the sleepy town of Puerto Los Cabos is wide awake, now that **Hotel El Ganzo** (elganzo.com) has made its much-hyped debut. The 72-room boutique hotel, whose name translates to "the goose" in English, channels a vibe that's part *Soho House*, part *Standard Hotel* and 100 percent cool. Look forward to live music from indie artists downstairs and libations in the see-through rooftop swimming pool upstairs.

Away from the buzz, a private

enclave on the western tip of the Baja peninsula is where you'll discover the quiet, posh digs of **Pueblo Bonito Pacifica Resort & Spa** (pueblobonito.com). Settle into one of the resort's 154 luxury suites (each one has an ocean view and a terrace for sunset-gazing), and leave your cash and tykes at home—this exclusive haunt hasn't been all-inclusive and adults-only. Begin working on your sun-kissed glow at one of Cabo's only resorts with private beach access and an expanse of beachfront swimming pools. Lounge on a swinging feather-top

bed in a private cabana, or order up a frozen top-shelf libation at the swim-up bar, before heading to the award-winning holistic Armonia Spa. Saunter over to one of five on-site restaurants, such as *Horizons*, where a different themed cuisine experience is executed on the beach each night. Or you can always venture out to one of the four sister properties' culinary offerings, and you'll still enjoy all-inclusive status. If you want to work off all those indulgences, let the hotel arrange a wellness program, or activities such as a desert safari, horseback riding or a canopy tour of the jungle.



EAT + DRINK

► Bar Esquina

A diamond in the rough within Cabo San Lucas' zona turística, Bar Esquina is an urban-chic eatery serving eclectic international cuisine with a Mexican flair. Local A-listers frequent this joint, renowned for its grilled prawn pizza, spicy tuna tartare and blackboard of ever-changing artisan cocktails. bahicaboo.mx/restaurantbar

► Flora's Field Kitchen

Perfectly manicured and visually stimulating, Flora Farms is a California-style organic farm outside San José del Cabo, headlined by the wildly popular Flora's Field Kitchen. This restaurant exudes rustic elegance, and the simple-yet-fresh California cuisine is a delectable respite for those who've had one tamale too many. flora-farms.com

► Los Tamarindos

A working organic farm at the foothills of the Sierra de la Laguna Mountains, Los Tamarindos features a fabulously fun cooking school, where students gather ingredients from the field and explore the intricacies of contemporary Mexican cuisine in the alfresco

kitchen. After preparing an exquisite four-course meal with a local top chef, eat and imbibe under the dining room canopy, enjoying Napa-esque vistas. It doesn't get better (or more loveable) than this! aventalostamarindos.com

► Mi Cocina

This intimate restaurant in downtown San José del Cabo peppers farm-to-table freshness with gastronomic prowess. Dishes like the sweet roasted chicken with chocolate and the spicy fraidada shrimp (prepared with chipotle, orange juice and white wine) are mouthwatering masterpieces. Save room for the hot dulce de leche lava cake, dripping with dulce de leche ice cream. casanatala.com

► Tequila Restaurant

A top Los Cabos eatery for 17 years, Tequila Restaurant does more than just a few things right. Everything from chef Enrique Silva's seafood-centric menu wows the senses, but it's his sublime tequila shrimp that's a best-seller year after year. The dimly lit, verdant outdoor dining area guarantees an incredibly romantic evening in picturesque downtown San José del Cabo. tequila-restaurant.com

MARINE SCENE

From the Gulf of Mexico to the Sea of Cortez, Mexican waters teem with enchanting marine life. A short day trip from any of Mexico's major resort towns leads to a likely encounter with celebrity aquaculture, from 35-foot whale sharks and 100-foot blue whales to 80,000-pound humpback whales and giant manta rays.

Whale Sharks

They're in fact sharks, not whales, but these majestic sea giants are actually completely harmless. Swimming alongside them with only mask and snorkel is a true once-in-a-lifetime experience. From May to September, make personal history by swimming off the islands north of Cancun with **Whale Sharks Cancun** (whalesharkscancun.com), among one of the world's largest seasonal congregations of whale sharks. From October to February, relish this magical experience in La Paz Bay on daily expeditions from Cabo San Lucas through **Cabo Expeditions** (caboexpeditions.com.mx) or through the sea-life adventure experience program at Esperanza, An Auberge Resort.



Swimming with a whale shark in La Paz Bay over Cabo.

Humpback Whales

The big-boast days of humpback whale-watching in Mexico are long gone. Nowadays, motorized zodiac rafts allow wildlife enthusiasts to come practically face to face with these impressive 40-ton creatures. From mid-December to late March, visitors to Puerto Vallarta and Riviera Nayarit snap prize humpback photos on the **Whale Watching Photo Safari** with **Vallarta Adventures** (vallarta-adventures.com). During these same months, whales also congregate to mate off the coast of Los Cabos, engaging in amazing displays of courting and dominance. On the **Zodiac Whale Watching Adventure** with **Cabo Expeditions** (caboexpeditions.com.mx), savor what will probably be the best whale sightings of your life, as you can expect to see breaches aplenty.