

San Jose del Cabo (Baja California), Mexico

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The Iglesia de San Jose presides over the town square. (Claire Walter photo)

Los Cabos Without Cabo San Lucas

*For a more authentic Baja experience,
go to smaller, quieter San Jose del Cabo*

By Claire Walter

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If you're looking for a vacation spot with a non-stop spring break ambience, complete with promises of cheap *cerveza* and all-day happy hour, Cabo San Lucas is the place for you. It promises (and delivers) non-stop partying. It also feels about as Mexican as San Diego, what with made-in-the-USA eating places from Dunkin' Donuts to Ruth's Chris Steakhouse and a daily invasion of hundreds of cruise-ship passengers.

Cabo San Lucas is the larger and better-known of twin towns on the southern tip of the Baja California peninsula, separating the Sea of Cortes from the Pacific Ocean, that

collectively promote themselves as “Los Cabos.” For an escape that offers more tranquility than action, head eastward toward San Jose del Cabo, which still feels like a corner of provincial Spain.

Jesuit missionary Nicolás Tamaral founded the Misión San Jose Estero de las Palmas de San José del Cabo Añuiti in 1730 to convert the indigenous Pericú and serve as a distant outpost of the Spanish empire. Fortunately for tourists and correspondents who must fit a town name on a postcard or an envelope, it has been shortened considerably since then.

The Pericú were more or less content to be converted until Padre Tamaral tried to ban polygamy. The Amerindians then rebelled, burned the mission, and killed the priest for his efforts. The Iglesia de San Jose, a classic twin-towered church on the site of the original mission, was built in 1940 but looks older. A mosaic over the entrance depicts the Pericú dragging the martyred Padre Tamaral off to his death more than two centuries earlier.

For much of the 20th century, Los Cabos remained isolated, with a modest economy based on fishing, cattle ranching, and agriculture (sugarcane, mangoes, avocados, citrus, and other tropical produce). Los Cabos’ catapult into modernity came with the completion of the 1,055-mile-long Transpeninsular Highway in 1973 and an international airport soon thereafter. These two projects rocketed Cabo San Lucas from sleepy fishing village to big-time party destination in less than three decades.

San Jose del Cabo has eased more gracefully into modern times. The downtown retains its traditional look and feel. In front of the church stretches the Plaza de Mijares, which is somnolent in the heat of the day and comes to life when the sun sets. Musicians play from the wrought-iron bandstand, street vendors set up shop selling snacks and trinkets, and locals come to dance and socialize.

Small side streets carry on the traditional look of an old Mexican town. Many of the low-slung buildings that line the narrow sidewalks are painting in arresting combinations of colors – eye-popping primary hues on one façade, a subdued palette of adobe-brown with subdued trim of dark blue or red on another, sun-country pastels on yet another.

Behind modest storefronts are shops, galleries, and restaurants, often smaller branches of Cabo San Lucas establishments. Some styles of rustic pottery were developed in nearby hillside settlements, high-quality pewter comes from a nearby foundry, and art glass is also made locally. Many of the other interesting goods come from elsewhere in Mexico. You can find a fine selection of silver from Taxco, fire opals and beadwork from Jalisco, carpets from Oaxaca and Michoacan, and colorful tiles and ceramics in the Talavera style, all at attractive prices. Bargaining in better shops is considered poor form.

A tidal estuary, where fresh water from the Rio San Jose meets salt water, forms the core of a small nature preserve. In low water, take a short walk along a flat path called the Paseo de Estero, and in high water, rent a kayak and paddle through the preserve. Birders flock to this lagoon where more than 250 species have been sighted, including herons, cranes, and pelicans.

Nearby is Cacti Mondo, a lovingly tended cactus garden with 11,000 plants representing more than 600 species of these prickly plants from around the world. A couple of bumpy, unpaved miles east of downtown is Pueblo la Playa, a funky backwater

hamlet favored by surf-casters, just plain surfers, and those who simply like to camp along the beach rather than in an air-conditioned hotel room.

For the majority of travelers who do prefer a solid roof over the heads and room service at their beckoning is “the corridor,” a strip of large modern hotels and condominiums (most quite luxurious), half-a-dozen golf courses, and long sandy beaches that stretch 18 miles between San Jose and Cabo San Lucas. FONATUR, Mexico’s tourist-development agency, spurred development along this strip, but the properties tend to be spread-out, low- to mid-rise, and more low-key than in some other Mexican resorts.

The addresses of properties located along the corridor are designated not by street addresses, but rather by the nearest kilometer marker along the Transpeninsular highway. The hotels look toward the sea, with their backs to cactus-studded mountains that form the peninsula’s spine. The Transpeninsular Highway hugs the coast, with frequent vistas of bays, beaches, golf courses, and hotels. Local buses ply this route, but a rental car or a taxi makes it easier to visit the towns on either end.

Popular diversions include horseback riding, hiking, or taking an all-terrain vehicle tour in the nearby cordillera. This mountainous desert is dramatic, rugged, and hot, so be prepared with drinking water, a hat and sunscreen any time you leave the relatively cool shoreline. Remember that this is a land of searing heat and burning sun just a few miles south of the Tropic of Cancer, which geographers call “the torrid zone.”

The corridor’s beaches, which are beyond beautiful, invite long leisurely strolls, especially early in the morning or late in the afternoon when slanting sunlight casts a golden glow on natural and man-made features alike. Strong currents and a shoreline that in many spots drops steeply into the sea make swimming dangerous, so the resorts’ large and lavish pools are the order of the day. What’s dicey for ocean swimmers makes for great surfing, notably at Playa Costa Azul – known locally as Zipper’s Beach.

The bigger resorts all feature fine dining, gyms and spas, tennis courts, nightspots, and other amenities. These gated properties are awash with all the amenities that many tourists need to feel secure, comfortable, and catered too, but the closer you stay to San Jose del Cabo, the easier it is to escape to a town that could only be in Mexico – traditional old Mexico at that.

IF YOU GO

Los Cabos International Airport (SJD), with non-stop service from Los Angeles, Houston, Phoenix, and other U.S. cities, is 7 miles from San Jose del Cabo. If you rent a car, it is advisable to buy insurance, even though it seems over-priced, because your U.S. policy will not cover you so far from the border, and even minor scrapes can cause immense complications. Weigh that against taxis, which can be expensive (US\$35 or more between the airport and the hotel zone).

Where to stay

Rates in effect through spring (which can be as early as Apr. 1 or as late as May 31) drop considerably thereafter. Some properties also offer substantial discounts if the entire stay is paid at the time of book, and some can be booked in conjunction with airline tickets at

attractive prices. For additional values, search of San Jose del Cabo on the web and check several discounted rates for the time you wish to travel.

Luxury

El Presidente InterContinental, Blvd. Mijares S/N, San Jose del Cabo; reservations: 888-303-1758; local phone: +52 (624) 142-0211; www.ichotelsgroup.com/h/d/ic/1/en/hd/sjdha. Closest luxury property to downtown, with 395 well-appointed, ocean-view rooms, six restaurants, and fine sports facilities. From \$229 nightly.

Hotel Twin Dolphin, Km 11.5 Carretera Transpeninsular, San Jose del Cabo; reservations: 800-421-8925 and 213-386-3940; local phone: +52 (624) 145-8190; www.twindolphin.com. One of the corridor's classics. Fifty rooms with excellent sea views. Located just south of Santa Maria Bay, which boasts excellent snorkeling. Restaurant known for local cuisine. From \$350 nightly.

One & Only Palmilla Resort, Km 75 Carretera Transpeninsular, San Jose del Cabo; reservations: 866-829-2977 and 954-809-2726; local phone +52 (624) 144-5000; www.palmillaresort.com. Tasteful low-rise hacienda-style buildings contain 172 luxurious units, all with ocean views, butler service, and twice-daily housekeeping. Located on scenic bluff. Beautiful spa and 27-hole, Jack Nicklaus-designed golf course segmented into the Arroyo Nine, Ocean Nine, and Mountain Nine. Recently reopened following an \$80 million renovation and expansion. From \$349 nightly.

Royal Solaris Los Cabos, Blvd. San Jose Lote 10, San Jose del Cabo; reservations 866-8-SOLARIS; local phone: +52 (624) 145-6800; www.hotelessolaris.com. Luxurious all-inclusive resort with 400 Mexican-style rooms and suites, ample entertainment, and fine children's facilities. Multi-day packages including such activities as diving, golf, and sport fishing available. From \$360 nightly for two, including meals, beverages, sports, and entertainment.

Moderately Priced

El Encanto Inn, Calle Morelos #133, San Jose del Cabo. Reservations: 512-465-9751; local phone: +52 (624) 142-0388; www.elencantoinn.com. Hacienda-style inn located on a quiet street in downtown San Jose. Twenty-six well-appointed rooms, including 14 poolside suites. From \$75 nightly.

La Playita Resort Hotel, Estero Road, Puebla La Playa; reservations: 888-288-8137; local Phone +52 (624) 142-4166; www.loscabosdirectory.com/sanjosedelcabo/accommodations/laplayita/laplayita.html. Ideal for anglers, this off-the-beaten-track resort is ideal for anglers. Simply decorated, spacious accommodations, one of Los Cabos' best-known fishing fleets nearby, and a beach where the swimming is usually good are featured. Continental breakfast included.

Tropicana Hotel, Blvd. Mijares #30, San José del Cabo; local phone: +52 (624) 142-2311. Forty rooms in hacienda-style hotel a short walk from downtown shops and the

beach. Rooms face attractive courtyard and pool. The adjacent Tropicana Bar and Grill is a favorite San Jose restaurant and nightspot. Continental breakfast included. From \$65.

Budget

Hotel Posada Señor Mañana, Alvaro Obregon #1A, San Jose del Cabo; local phone: +52 (624) 142-0462; www.srmanana.net. Small inn with clean, simple rooms with private baths. Good location on the edge of downtown. Communal kitchen. From \$30.

Dining Out

C, One & Only Palmilla Resort (see above). New signature restaurant under the imprimatur of über-chef Charlie Trotter. Regional seafood plus the finest meats, poultry, game, and produce from around the bend and around the world get the Trotter treatment. Exceptional international wine list. Bottom line: C has raised the bar for fine dining in Los Cabos.

Da Giorgio San Jose, Km 25 Carretera Peninsular, west of San Jose del Cabo; phone +52 (624) 144-53-04. Perched on a high headland, this sizable restaurant offers splendid view of the sea and, in the evening, the sparkling lights of San Jose and the stars overhead. Known for designer pizzas, pasta, seafood, and a delightful ambience. Serving from mid-day through late dinner.

Damiana, Plaza Central, San Jose del Cabo; phone: +52 (624) 142-0499. Romantic restaurant in an 18th-century hacienda in the heart of San Jose. Courtyard dining is especially atmospheric. Mexican specialties prevail. Also known for fresh seafood. Service from lunch through dinner.

Morgan's Restaurant & Cellar, Manuel Hidalgo and Doblado, San Jose del Cabo; phone: +52 (624) 142-3825; www.loscabosguide.com/morgans-restaurant/. A taste of Tuscany at the tip of Baja California. Elegant downtown restaurant known for fresh fish, house-baked breads, and excellent pasta. Morgan's Cellar is a clublike spot with overstuffed leather chairs and, improbably, a fireplace to enjoy after-dinner drinks and fine cigars (including Cuban stogies). Dinner only.

Tropicana Bar & Grill, Blvd. Mijares 30, San Jose del Cabo; phone: +52 (624) 242-1580. Mexican fare with a light contemporary touch, plus international specialties from a large menu. Something for everyone: sidewalk café, out front, sports bar inside, and candlelight dining after dark. Service from breakfast through dinner.

Zipper's, KM 28-5, Carretera Transpeninsular, Playa Costa Azul. No phone. Inexpensive and informal beachfront eatery popular with surfers, surfer wannabes, and visitors looking for American-style burgers, mesquite-grilled steaks, sandwiches, and oh yes, the occasional Mexican specialty too.

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