



# Los Cabos at the Tip of Mexico's Baja California



Cabo San Lucas Mexico - Images by Lee Foster

by Lee Foster

The Baja peninsula of Mexico presents one of the most remarkable natural environments a traveler will encounter. In many ways the area parallels the Galapagos Islands.

Baja (or the “lower” part of California when the Spanish named it, contrasting it to “alta” or upper California) has evolved in relative geographical isolation since the peninsula drifted off from the Mexican mainland some 6 million years ago.

Cave paintings by humans living in this harsh, arid environment have been carbon dated to between 5,000-10,000 years old.



Baja, one of the longest peninsulas on earth, is surrounded by waters alive with sea life. Warm sunlight and currents that cause an upwelling of the nutrient-rich ocean bed coincide to create an explosion of life.

Biologists estimate that Baja has more than 4,000 species of plants, more than 30 percent of them endemic. Approximately 600 species of birds inhabit Baja or fly through on migrations. Over 800 species of fish thrive in the waters around Baja. Some individuals from over 80 percent of the marine mammal species on earth either live in Baja waters year around or swim through periodically.

## **Los Cabos Region**

Most travelers to the southern tip of Baja, the Los Cabos region (meaning the Capes), leave without being fully aware of these natural treasures. Snorkeling on a reef, such as at Chileno Bay, is a start. A whale-watch outing in winter offers a probable encounter with humpback and gray whales. A hike around the freshwater lagoon in San Jose del Cabo will alert a visitor to the abundance of bird life, from osprey to herons. One of the local “nature tour” companies can lead a visitor on informative tours of the riches of nature or the hard-to-find cave paintings.

Most of the modern “tip of Baja” story is not about nature, but about resort development. A traveler to the Baja peninsula capes encompassing the towns San Jose del Cabo and Cabo San Lucas will find dramatic development in the region’s tourism infrastructure. Those who find tourism development congenial will be delighted. Among the new major resorts, the Westin Regina Resort makes a world-

class architectural statement, for example, celebrating the design talent that Mexico has in abundance.

Travelers who long for the “good old days” of the 1970s when the Los Cabos region was a sleepy area of ranchos and pueblos may not want to return to discover it “ruined” today. Growth began after the thousand-mile Baja highway was completed in 1973.

The Los Cabos region seems destined to develop even more in the future, primarily because of its strategic location. Los Cabos is the sunny, warm-weather, seaside, Mexico destination closest to the huge population of the U.S., especially California. Canada is also a source for a substantial number of visitors to Baja.

Some superlative reasons for going to Los Cabos remain unchanged. Here a traveler encounters white-sand beaches with dependable warmth and 360 days of sun per year, first class tourism hotels on idyllic ocean-side settings with seafood restaurants, and a near-shore fish life savored by anglers, snorkelers, and scuba divers.

There are several golf courses, including some with holes right next to the ocean, a kind of Mexican Pebble Beach. Cabo now aims to position itself as the premier Latin American golf capital.

FONATUR, the Mexican tourism investment agency, nurtured the investors who wanted to build along the 23-mile strip of sand and rock between the two towns at the end of the thousand-mile peninsula. Existing hotels continue to improve their service, as personnel become more experienced and the nuanced investment required for each major hotel becomes complete.

Today a half-dozen carriers provide service to the area. Some travelers also drive the Baja peninsula highway, arriving by car or RV. A small percentage of travelers arrive, with or without vehicles, on the ferry boat that connects La Paz with Mazatlan.

A side trip can be made from the cape on a paved road to the village of Todos Santos. A visitor can make an interesting loop trip clockwise in the region—Cabo San

Lucas to Todos Santos to La Paz to San Jose del Cabo. Allow a full day for this loop, with stops to see the ocean surf of the Pacific, the village of Todos Santos, and the relative metropolis of La Paz. You can rent a car at the airport or at the hotels.

All visitors here will delight in the small boats that take visitors from the marina at Cabo San Lucas to the arch rock, El Arco, the signature land form at the tip. On these rugged rock outcroppings birds and sea lions rest. Be sure to make the 45-minute trip. Besides the small boats, called pangas, you can ride in glass bottom boats that give a snorkeler's view of the copious fish life. A traveler can also be deposited on shore at Lover's Beach, near the tip, for a walk to the arch. The waters are chilly for swimming. Snorkeling is less productive here than at more sheltered areas, such as Chileno Bay. The ponga or glass-bottom boat can be engaged to return for a later pickup.

Fishing boats of sufficient size can carry four anglers comfortably to the offshore reefs, where some 40,000 marlin are hooked each year. The main style of marlin sport fishing amounts to playing the trophy, then releasing it, tagged and unharmed. Tagging assists in overall fish research. Some Los Cabos-tagged marlin have later been hooked as far away as Australia.

Other fish are of equal interest to anglers here. Roosterfish, albacore, and yellowtail swim through a hallowed litany of fish-filled stories. There is a Fish Museum in downtown Cabo San Lucas displaying mounted specimens of all the major sport fish of Baja.

Travelers who don't fish may well enjoy snorkeling. Superb snorkel sites, such as Santa Maria Bay, show numerous and varied species of rock fish. Dorado and cabrilla are two colorful entrants in the passing parade.

Serious scuba divers, close to the Land's End rocks at Cabo San Lucas, can witness an unusual ocean phenomenon known as "sand cascades." The upwelling ocean currents cause sand to spray in the manner of a waterfall. This entire performance occurs under water, beyond the view of all but the scuba diver.

Destination resort hotels in the luxury category form a major part of the travel picture in Los Cabos. There are some budget hotels, but the main demand is for

luxury hotels. Fiesta Americana Grande and Hacienda del Mar are examples.

The best way to book a hotel here is with an air package through a travel agent. The agent can usually offer a discounted rate far lower than the “rack rate” paid by an individual who walks in off the street and orders a room.

What could you expect of a Los Cabos luxury hotel? Each presents its own flavor, but Hotel Palmilla can serve to illuminate their distinctiveness. Palmilla is sited on Palmilla Point jutting into the ocean. Coconut palms surround the white-washed, red-tile roof, Mediterranean architecture. Rooms are spacious, with large bathrooms, views of the ocean, and terraces for sunset and sunrise watching. Each of the major hotels sponsors a capable restaurant emphasizing local sea bounty, both fish and lobster. Breakfasts may be buffets celebrating tropical fruit, such as papaya, which grows locally year round.

All sports activities, such as scuba, fishing or snorkeling, can be organized from your hotel. Horseback riding and dove shooting are also offered. Taxis are available to take you everywhere.

## **Two Towns**

The two towns at Los Cabos present contrasting styles.

San Jose del Cabo is the older and more established town. San Jose grew up around a mission, founded in 1730 by the Jesuit Nicolas Tamaral. The local Indians sent Tamaral to his reward prematurely over a dispute concerning the merits of their polygamous lifestyle. Visit the mission church and then stroll the plaza, which includes a prominent statue to town founder, Jose Antonio Mijares. Small restaurants are tucked into 18th century homes on the plaza.

Downtown San Jose benefits from having attractive colonial architecture, all one-story high, creating courtyards, in which there are shops or restaurants, such as Morgan's. Beyond shopping and dining, San Jose del Cabo has one other major resource, its Estero, or wetlands area adjacent to the El Presidente Hotel. The Estero is pleasant as a walk through a palm-fringed oasis and as a place for the birdwatcher to see many species. Only at two other sites in Baja, Mulege and San

Ignacio, will you find similar, large, freshwater biosystems.

The less sedate Cabo San Lucas, by contrast, is a brash and brassy boomtown. Cabo San Lucas is right at the tip of the peninsula. As you approach the town a vista point allows an excellent distant glimpse of the famous rock known as El Arco, the arch, at Land's End, as the tip is called. Pounding waves have carved the arch in the rocks.

The main activity in Cabo San Lucas centers around the harbor. Ferryboats, cruise ship launches, fishing boats, and tour boats come and go. At the bustling open-air market you can buy a variety of Mexican crafts, especially fabrics. The town includes numerous curio shops. Be sure to see the major craft of Cabo San Lucas, glass-blowing, at the Glass Factory, a taxi ride from the downtown. Cabo San Lucas even boasts a lively nightlife at Squid Roe, Cabo Wabo, Giggling Marlin and other such clubs.

The pace of change in Los Cabos is rapid, reminding a visitor that tourism is a critical part of the Mexican economy, second only to manufacturing as a foreign income producer. Mexico attracts about 22 million foreign visitors annually, placing it 10th in the worldwide ranking among the most popular tourist destinations.

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## **Los Cabos, Mexico: If You Go**

Some useful sites for Mexico and Los Cabos trip planning are [www.visitmexico.com](http://www.visitmexico.com) and <http://visitloscabos.travel>.