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Miles of sandy beaches, craggy coves, coral reefs, waterfalls, tropical fruit trees and medicinal herbs suggest Hawaii or perhaps Tahiti, but this tropical paradise is Mexican.

PARADISE FOUND

By Camilla McLaughlin

—SOUTH OF THE BORDER

"I was expecting a very arid area. Once I got there and saw this amazing emerald water, all the fantastic flora and fauna, the lack of crowds and wonderful restaurants, I couldn't believe it," says David Walker, recalling his first impression of the Sea of Cortez. Soon, like many who visit and then come to love the region, Walker found himself owning a second home in Mexico.

Now, 15 years later, Walker is in process of developing an upscale community in San Carlos, a seaside village of about 4,000 on the west coast of Mexico's mainland. As is typical of many retirement and second home destinations here and on the Baja peninsula, a sizable majority of the San Carlos population is American and Canadian.

"A lot of people have no idea about the

opportunities here," says Hector Garcia, founder of Cornejo y Cooper International Realty, which brokers land nationwide. Garcia expects to see many more American buyers heading south, particularly to waterfront areas around the Sea of Cortez. Beautiful beaches are only part of the draw of this region for buyers who also weigh accessibility, cost of living, and quality of life.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, Americans and Canadians increasingly look for resort destinations that offer the possibility of driving back home if there's a catastrophic event. Escalating prices in the U.S. and new laws in Mexico designed to facilitate purchases by foreign buyers are other catalysts. Most importantly, it's simple economics, Garcia says. "You get more bang for your buck."

Beautiful homes, miles of unspoiled beaches and dramatic views have given the southern end of the Baja peninsula around Cabo a well-deserved reputation as Mexico's Gold Coast. Prices for water-view properties, depending on the location, begin at more than \$500,000 and run as high as \$12 million for a singular estate that would easily fetch twice as much in the U.S.

For a long time, the area was mainly a refuge for "West Coasters in the know," says Jose Luis Mogollon, project director for Quivira Los Cabos, but the addition of direct flights from major U.S. cities now brings visitors from all over the U.S. and Canada.

Although the market in some price

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PARADISE FOUND — SOUTH OF THE BORDER

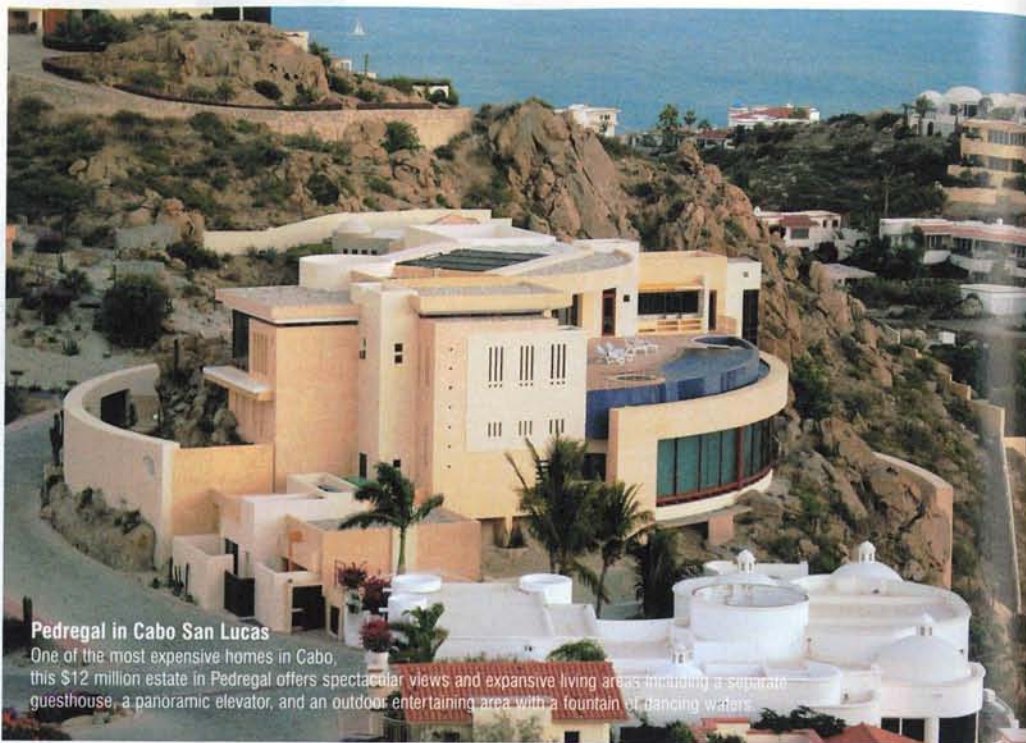
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brackets has slowed a little, high-end properties are in demand, says Leticia Diaz Rivera, developer of Pedregal and broker with Coldwell Banker Riveras Realtors. "The amenities of a specific area" are also important to buyers, she says, with gated and private communities that offer security, views, underground utilities and added amenities a top choice.

Raising the Ante for Luxury

A number of new developments are pushing luxury standards even higher. One of the first upscale residential communities, Pedregal in Cabo San Lucas, recently added an exclusive neighborhood of only 24 oceanfront villas, El Rincon del Pedregal. Each home has unstopable views of the Pacific and is bundled with a high level of personal service, a 24-hour concierge, a clubhouse designed to promote wellness and a private beach club. Another addition to Pedregal, Capella Pedregal, a luxury hotel offering fractional and full ownership, is slated to open in December.

The first Ritz-Carlton Hotel on the entire peninsula is under construction at Quivira Los Cabos. Situated on 1,850 acres at the tip of the peninsula where the Pacific meets the Sea of Cortez, Quivira offers a landscape of intimate coves, spectacular dunes and



Pedregal in Cabo San Lucas

One of the most expensive homes in Cabo, this \$12 million estate in Pedregal offers spectacular views and expansive living areas including a separate guesthouse, a panoramic elevator, and an outdoor entertaining area with a fountain of dancing waters.

three miles of pristine beaches. New facilities including Ritz-Carlton Residences, two Jack Nicklaus signature golf courses and approximately 1,000 residences that will complement the Pueblo Bonito Pacifica, a noted holistic spa and retreat, which is already on the site. A multinational design team promises to create a truly authentic Mexican experience, while substantial infrastructure, including an onsite fire department and a 24-hour medical clinic, bring peace of mind.

Also nestled between the rugged desert mountains and the sea is Querencia, a 1,800-acre deluxe gated community, which was the site of Cabo's first private golf club. The cliff-top 320-acre Tom Fazio-designed masterpiece includes a 2-acre practice facility and 11 target greens. Golf isn't the only game here and the second heart of this community is a village offering multiple dining venues, an extensive wine cellar, an infinity pool, waterfalls, a spa and wellness pavilion, a kids' club and concierge service. Under construction is a second course designed by Gil Hanse as well as a beach club positioned in a secluded natural cove and connected by a tunnel to the main property. The club will offer beachside dining, another pool and spa as well as new ocean-view residences, including waterview lots, club villas and condominiums. Querencia's low-density land plan offers homesites priced from \$550,000 for one-half of an acre to an acre with a water view to \$3.5

million for an expansive custom hacienda. Condos begin at \$1.3 million. The lifestyle is indulgent thanks to a general manager who comes from the hospitality industry.

On the rise is the coastal city of La Paz, where a revamped town center will include upscale retail. New restaurants are also sprouting up all over. La Paz has appeared on lists of top places to retire, but Garcia says people are just "beginning to figure out that this is a beautiful destination." One upscale community is Pedregal de La Paz, which, like its sister property in Cabo, settles into the natural landscape of the mountains offering an aesthetic that combines the rough Baja desert and the aquamarine waters of the Sea of Cortez. Notable here are villas clustered into groups of four to seven homes sharing a common garden and pool. Each villa also has an additional 1,721 square feet of terraces and pergolas.

On the opposite shore of the Sea of Cortez, Walker is building San Carlos' first truly upscale community, Costa Bella Living, where both custom homes and condominiums have water views. The community offers a full complement of amenities and a high level of personal services, ranging from airport pickups to having all the bills paid. "We baby the owners big time," Walker adds. The development also includes a 3,000 liter reservoir of fresh water, its own waste water treatment plant and grey water recycling.

And what about the flora he found so captivating? "We've moved them all to a special greenhouse and will replant them when the development is complete," Walker says. **UH**

Querencia

The cliff-top, 320-acre Tom Fazio-designed masterpiece includes a 2-acre practice facility and 11 target greens.

