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**AT-HOME
SPECIAL**
LIVING LARGE
IN MALIBU,
PARIS AND
SCOTLAND

Hollywood's
New Favorite
Mexican Getaway

The Fatted Calf:
When You Can't
Fit Into the
Season's Boots

Plus: Jean Paul Gaultier,
Carolyn Roehm, the
College Coed With
The \$10 Million Condo
& the Woman the
Whole Art World Is
Talking About

Janet Jackson

She's slimmed down and fallen in love, but can she get her rhythm back?



Baja Fresh

Between the desert and the deep blue sea, Baja's Los Cabos coast is Mexico to the max.

Photographs by **BEN HOFFMANN**

At Las Ventanas, your butler coordinates with your second full-time minder, the spa butler.

Amazing are the extremes to which the human animal can adapt. Within 24 hours of arriving at One & Only Palmilla, the oldest of three service-obsessed luxury resorts near Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, it seems perfectly natural to return to your suite after a day of snorkeling to find that your butler has drawn you a bath and laid out a set of freshly ironed clothes. Or, a few days later, to return to an even larger suite at Las Ventanas al Paraíso, perhaps the top luxury hotel anywhere in Mexico, after a day of marlin fishing to find that your butler there has coordinated with your second full-time minder, the spa butler, to arrange a sports massage in your private in-room spa, which is equipped with an infrared sauna and an aquatherapy shower.

La Palmilla, Las Ventanas and a third resort, Esperanza, are the most exclusive outposts at the cactus-studded southern tip of Baja California, where the placid Sea of Cortez meets the deep Pacific Ocean. (A new contender, Capella Pedregal, is now under construction.) While the Mexican peninsula was perhaps once best known as a destination for surfers in rattletap VW buses, in recent years Cabo San Lucas has attracted a new breed of visitor. Over a few days this August, Courteney Cox and David Arquette, Sheryl Crow, Nicole Richie and a Saudi prince with his entourage of 46 reportedly were all in the area. And it's easy to see why they go: Cabo is an easy two-hour flight from Los Angeles, and while the language difference lends an air of the exotic, U.S. cell phones and electronics work seamlessly. The actual town of Cabo San Lucas doesn't offer a lot more than margaritaville nightclubs, but much of the rest of Los Cabos (the Capes), as the entire stretch of coastline is more properly known, is rugged wilderness. Forested mountains soar to nearly 7,000 feet and hide remote waterfalls, while the Sea of Cortez shelters giant manta rays, gentle whale sharks and the only coral reefs on the west coast of North America.

Just south of the Tropic of Cancer, the region was settled by missionaries in the 18th century and rediscovered in the 1950s by Hollywood celebrities, including John Wayne and Bing Crosby. Still, Los Cabos was largely an insider's secret prior to the 1997 opening of Las Ventanas. That year, the new hotel, charging an unprecedented rate of \$375 a night, offered Oscar presenters free visits,

On the beach at Las Ventanas, near Cabo San Lucas at the southern tip of Baja California



Baja Fresh



Last winter, St. Barths loyalists including Jay-Z were at the Los Cabos resorts.

From top: Las Ventanas managing director **Andrés Araya** in the hotel's open-air reception area with a telescope to watch migrating whales; at Esperanza's seaside restaurant, table 60 is the best seat in the house; One & Only Palmilla's Agua restaurant was designed by Adam Tihany.

and the area has been a celebrity playground ever since. Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston became celebrity mascots for Los Cabos while he shot scenes for *Troy* nearby—a role more recently usurped by Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin—and other famous visitors have included Sean Penn, Nicky Hilton, Jennifer Lopez and Usher. (While the resorts officially refuse to name names, their on-the-ground staff are proud to reveal the Hollywood stars they've cared for.)

Los Cabos has recorded a sharp uptick in East Coast visitors since direct flights from New York City began in 2000, and during the winter holidays, a number of St. Barths loyalists including Jay-Z and Beyoncé Knowles were at the Los Cabos resorts, prompting some speculation that it is becoming the new St. Barths. (Maybe, maybe not—as Los Cabos lacks megayachts, French cuisine and an Hermès boutique.) High-end development is booming: a golf and beach club called El Dorado is selling residential lots for as much as \$5 million, and the Four Seasons is rumored to be seeking a toehold along the wild beaches of the East Cape. Luxury travelers from as far away as Europe and Japan have been filling rooms even during the summer low season, and during the winter peak, the three top resorts are booked solid, even with basic rooms at Las Ventanas starting at nearly \$700 a night. (And that's before meals, spa

treatments, excursions, "incidentals"—\$150 tequila shots, anyone?—and an additional 28 percent for gratuity and tax.)

Andrés Araya, managing director of Las Ventanas, says he isn't surprised by the boom. He argues that Los Cabos offers better service than the Caribbean, has great weather, is cheaper than Europe and is far closer than the Indian Ocean resorts. Where else in the world, he asks, can busy Americans slip away for a three-day tropical vacation?

"Now if only Los Cabos could keep up with demand," he says, sighing.

"Over Christmas last year," recalls Araya, "the airport manager called to ask how many more guests would be arriving in private jets. The airport, he said, was collapsing. They didn't have any more room."

ESPERANZA

Situated on a low bluff at Punta Ballena (Whale Point), with the most gorgeous ocean views in the area, Esperanza, an Auberge resort, opened in 2002 with 50 rooms and six luxury suites. The first view of the property is discouraging, with the just-finished look of a San Diego condo development. But once inside the open-air reception area, the sunny vibe of Esperanza is noticeably younger and hipper than those of the other resorts. Rooms (*casitas* in the company lingo) have urbane polished concrete floors and the top-floor *palapa* rooms have soaring thatched roofs and private infinity Jacuzzis on the balcony. Esperanza's spa and fitness center are impeccably clean and offer the latest cardio and weight equipment as well as morning yoga classes (the resort's A-list yogis have included Paltrow and Martin), while an open-air restaurant sits on the bluffs just above breaking waves and offers a menu heavy on local fish. Esperanza also has an art gallery on the property and a fleet of convertibles to rent for the dramatic hour-long drive up the Pacific Coast to the dusty trading outpost of Todos Santos, best known for its Hotel California.

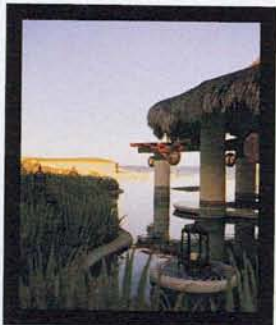
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esperanzaresort.com

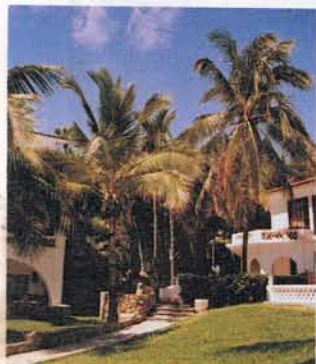
High-season rates: \$575 to \$5,750

ONE & ONLY PALMILLA

Originally opened in 1956 as a small hotel in lush tropical gardens, La Palmilla was recreated in 2004 after South African hotelier Sol Kerzner (founder of the Sun City resort and Paradise Island's Atlantis in the Bahamas) spent \$90 million to turn it into a full-service



Capella Pedregal's spa will feature healing sessions with traditional *curanderas*.



From top: One & Only Palmilla's adventure guide **Marco Peña** at a waterfall in the Sierra La Laguna mountains; the sunbaked minimalist style at Las Ventanas; the gardens at One & Only Palmilla; a view from Capella Pedregal, site of the newest luxury resort in Los Cabos.

Baja Fresh

One & Only-brand resort. With 172 rooms, One & Only Palmilla is Los Cabos's largest luxury resort, but its Fantasy Island landscaping hides the expanse. (Guests are shuttled around in golf carts.) The three in-house restaurants include the terrifyingly expensive fine-dining establishment C, by celebrity chef Charlie Trotter. Other amenities include a private golf course designed by Jack Nicklaus and a spa specializing in couples' treatments in outdoor spaces. There is also a quiet cove beach—a point of distinction since most local beaches have treacherous undertows that limit swimming. Beyond the resort gates, One & Only Palmilla can arrange Hummer excursions to the mountains to swim in the Sol de Mayo waterfalls or to snorkel in the Sea of Cortez. Guide Marco Peña, a naturalist and outdoorsman who may be the most likable character in town, took Steven Spielberg and family sea kayaking and showed Adam Sandler the best local surf breaks.

52.624.146.7000

oneandonlyresorts.com

High-season rates: \$900 to \$2,600

LAS VENTANAS AL PARAISO

With its signature pebble-mosaic terraces and starkly beautiful gardens of native cacti and succulents, Las Ventanas has the hushed feel of a billionaire's private villa. And indeed, the resort was originally built by an heir to Mexico's



Televisa fortune before being bought for more than \$100 million by Beanie Baby creator Ty Warner in 2004. Its 71 suites are clustered along an endless beach (too dangerous, alas, for swimming), and all have serene views of sand, sea and sky—sunbaked minimalism at its best. Three new Spa Suites have raised Cabo's top-end stakes with their palatial size: Each is nearly 4,000 square feet, with two bedrooms, a full kitchen, multiple terraces and its own private spa with a spa butler on call. These rooms are truly impressive, with *conchuela* stone floors underfoot and beautiful Mexican furniture, such as massive trunks covered in intricately stamped leather. Las Ventanas has two open-air restaurants—the hotel can also arrange a private table on the beach—and though the fitness facilities are a little dank, the hotel generally outdoes itself on the details. It's the only one of the three resorts, for example, to provide luscious tropical fruit in rooms instead of standard-issue apples and bananas. As for outings, the concierge can charter private boats up to 60 feet long to ply the deep currents of the Pacific, where fishermen catch trophy marlin that grow to 1,000 pounds and whale watchers often spot gray whales and pods of porpoises that cover acres of ocean.

52.624.144.2800

lasventanas.com

High-season rates: \$650 to \$5,000

CAPELLA PEDREGAL

(opening mid-2008)

Unlike the other three resorts, which line the Sea of Cortez side of Los Cabos, the \$150 million Capella Pedregal will sit atop dramatic cliffs overlooking the Pacific. The site, which can be reached only via a tunnel blasted through solid rock, is being developed by the second and third generations of Cabo San Lucas's Diaz Rivera family. Twenty-nine-year-old Juan Diaz Rivera—sensitive to the region's indigenous cultures and natural beauty—envisioned the resort as an ecofriendly introduction to the real Mexico. That means the spa will feature healing sessions with traditional *curanderas*, or healers from the mountains, and guests will be able to take overnight horseback riding excursions on a remote 2,000-acre ranch near Todos Santos. "If you leave Cabo and drive 30 minutes in any direction," says Diaz Rivera, "you're in places that are as Mexican as you can get. We want to bring in some of that earthy feel to the hotel."

capellahotels.com

—KEVIN WEST

