

## Luxury travel

# From blissful island solitude to glitzy Los Cabos

The Mexican region of Baja California Sur is home to rare wildlife and chic resorts. **Helena de Bertodano** jets in

**T**here is no turning back now. We have been abandoned on a desert island off the coast of Mexico that has no running water, no electricity ... “NO WIFI!” exclaims my teenage son, appalled — he can cope with almost any other hardship.

He looks longingly towards the departing panga (boat), now no more than a distant speck on the horizon of the Sea of Cortez. A giant turtle pops its head above the water and sighs deeply, as if in sympathy, before sinking back beneath the satin surface.

We have landed on Isla Espiritu Santo, reached by boat from the state of Baja California. Home to an extraordinary range of endemic and rare species — including the turtle we have just glimpsed — it is known as the “Galapagos of Mexico” and is a protected national marine park. We are greeted by several friendly staff, dressed in turquoise shirts, yellow scarves and beige shorts, co-ordinating perfectly with the colours of the island.

For, despite the lack of modern comforts, we are not exactly roughing it. We have arrived at Camp Cecil, a fabulous glamping venture recently set up by the adventure travel company Todos Santos Eco Adventures (Tosea), which has managed to create luxury out of thin air. White safari tents, planted in the fine sand, are beautifully furnished with big comfortable beds, sisal flooring, colourful rugs, wicker armchairs, solar fans and hurricane lanterns. There are even showers, filled with hot water from a solar tank.

We are a party of ten, including myself and two of my children, aged 16 and 11. Five staff cater to our every need, keeping tents immaculate and preparing excellent three-course meals

that taste as if they have come out of a high-tech kitchen. Meals are communal, which is fine by me — after a week travelling on the mainland, I’ve had quite enough of just my children, and they of me.

Over our first lunch — a vegetable quinoa salad topped with fresh crushed mango, followed by a stunning ceviche made by the Italian chef Giovanni, from fish caught that morning — Sergio, our guide, takes us through the inherent dangers of the island: stingrays and stone fish in the water, scorpions on the land, and the sun in the sky. “No hats, no kayaks,” he tells my son and daughter firmly. In fact, all the older guests agree, the happy-hour margaritas are probably the biggest danger. Strong, but very good, they mean that almost everyone looks the worse for wear the next day.

Sergio, who runs Tosea with his American wife, Bryan, was once a professional clown in Mexico City — conjuring magic out of nothing is clearly his thing. He is practical and very funny, keeping my children rapt with stories about stars and tides and the hunt for pearls in centuries past. John Steinbeck’s *The Pearl* was inspired by a story from here. Now it attracts those seeking the luxury of nature.

Sergio tells us he arrived at the camp one day to find two smartly dressed men sweeping the beach. A member of the British royal family was in a yacht near by, they explained, and wanted to come ashore for a picnic. “Apparently that means sweeping a perfect beach,” says Sergio drily. Unimpressed, he sent them on their way.

During the long, dreamy days, we kayak, paddleboard and snorkel amid multiple shoals of tropical fish. One afternoon we swim with playful sea lions, another with whale sharks, which can grow up to 40ft long. “Don’t worry, they have no teeth,” we are told. “I don’t particularly want to be gummy to death,” mutters one of our group. I dive in, then someone motions to me to look down and I see that I am directly above a massive whale shark. I let out what would be a shriek, except it is muffled by my snorkelling equipment, and scramble quickly back out. My children are braver and thrilled to swim alongside it.

We don’t need to be swimming in the perfect viridian waters, though, to see rare species; as night falls the island’s unique black jack rabbits dance among the rocks by the pink-tinged cliffs and



Gwyneth Paltrow and George Clooney are fans of Los Cabos



The Cape hotel, Cabo San Lucas



the babisuri, a harmless ring-tailed cat not found anywhere else in the world, scampers out. One night, at 3am, when I forget to close my tent properly, two of them zip in and chase each other round my bed. "They have a real sense of humour," says Sergio delightedly when I tell him the next day.

Otherwise the nights are blissfully peaceful, the tide lapping just a few inches away, the full moon shining so brightly that you can see the manta rays leaping out of the water.

Our glamping venture was the culmination — and highlight — of several days of expeditions with Tosea elsewhere on the mainland, ranging from galloping on horseback beside the crashing waves of the Pacific to hiking through the mountains, past towering elephant cacti. Everywhere we travelled was within a two-hour radius of the main Los Cabos airport.

If one wants true luxury, then instead of renting a car, the easiest way to get around is with CaboGo, a private car company. Apparently most road accidents in Baja occur when tourists in rental cars actually stop at the stop signs; the locals aren't expecting it, and slam them from behind. So we book every drive with CaboGo.

Our driver, David, is a fantastic source of quirky information, from possible local UFO sightings to the unearthing of pterodactyl skeletons. He names almost every celebrity who has passed through Los Cabos, from Lucille Ball and John Wayne, who frolicked at One&Only Palmilla, the first resort in this exclusive area, to Julia Roberts and George Clooney, who own homes here. Jennifer Aniston is part of the present Cabos craze and recently celebrated her 48th birthday here.

At first it is hard to see what the area has to offer that Los Angeles does not; Californians are not exactly deprived of beaches, luxury hotels and a perfect sunny climate. But Los Cabos, which is only a two-hour direct flight from LA, has a hint of the exotic: more dramatic scenery, excellent Mexican food and arguably the world's best deep-sea fishing. The 20-mile stretch of coastline is studded with lavish resorts, called "The Corridor", which links the two "Cabos": charming San Jose del Cabo at one end and ebullient Cabo San Lucas at the other.

We stay at The Cape, a sleek Thompson hotel (the company behind the Beekman in New York). Overlooking the distinctively hewn Arch of Land's End, it's saturated with Beautiful People, and I feel out of my depth. But my son is in his element, sauntering around in his shades, searching for celebrities or pretending to be one himself. He and my daughter spend hours composing the perfect Instagram shot at the edge of the infinity pool.

There is a rumour that Bella Hadid is

staying, but he cannot find her. We know Gwyneth Paltrow is near by because she has just posted a picture of herself drinking a "farmgarita" (organic carrot juice and tequila) in San Jose del Cabo. It is not until the airport that my son spots Delilah Belle Hamlin, a new IMG model from LA, with her actor parents. Not exactly A-list, but it more than makes his day.

Anyone feeling more adventurous, but still wanting to maintain the luxury, can head straight to the pretty colonial town of Todos Santos, which has the advantage of actually feeling like a part of Mexico (whereas the Corridor hotels could be anywhere with sunshine and glamour). Only 45 minutes north of Cabo San Lucas, Todos Santos is one of the country's so-called *Pueblos Magicos* (magical villages), chosen for their religious or cultural significance. "They call it Todos Santos [all saints]," jokes one local, "but in reality there are *muchos diablos* [many devils]."

We stay first at Hotel California, which feels like a cross between a museum and a funky church. That night the waiter in the lovely courtyard restaurant helpfully informs us that our room is haunted by a woman who drowned decades earlier. I quickly reassure my alarmed daughter that he is only joking. Luckily it seems to be the ghost's night off.



A sea lion

The most luxurious hotel in town is the Guaycura Boutique Hotel & Spa. For a hotel with only 14 rooms, it has a staggering four restaurants, including the cliff-top El Mirador, set under a huge palapa and serving creatively prepared fresh seafood. But the best

meal we have is at the new El Refugio Mezcaleria, which specialises in mezcal (tequila is, apparently, so yesterday) and has Monty Python-esque tasting notes: "Velvety like the antlers of a maturing reindeer." I have a chile relleno stuffed with almonds and meat, which I could happily eat every day for the rest of my life.

The truth is that Baja California has so many exquisite hotels that you're spoiled for choice. But for us, Camp Cecil, with the luxury of nature that surrounds it, beats anything the Corridor has to offer.

Need to know

Helena de Bertodano was a guest of Camp Cecil, which costs from \$275pp (£213) a night. The price includes all meals, activities and transport to and from the island (tosea.net).

**How to get there**  
Virgin Atlantic flies from London to Los Angeles from £549 return. American Airlines flies from LA to Los Cabos from £224 return. In Baja California, use CaboGo luxury private vehicles (cabo.com.mx); the transfer from the airport to Todos Santos costs £62.

**Where to stay**  
**Todos Santos**  
Guaycura Boutique Hotel & Spa (guaycura.com) costs from \$148 (£114) #a night. Hotel California (hotelcaliforniabaja.com) costs from \$150 a night.

**Los Cabos**  
Rooms at the Cape cost from \$439 a night (thompsonhotels.com).



A room at The Cape