



The rooftop view from Villa Cortez at the Only&Only Palmilla in Los Cabos, on Mexico's Baja California peninsula. Opposite, riding a wave off Cabo San Lucas

ROCK AND HIGH ROLLERS

IT'S WHERE GWYNETH HONEYMOONED, AND CHARLIE SHEEN CAME TO OPEN A BAR. THERE ARE MANY SIDES TO MEXICO'S PARTY-LOVING, MARGARITA-SWIGGING CABO. BUT HOW DO YOU FIND THE GOOD TIMES WITHOUT THE HANGOVER? BY DANIELLE PERGAMENT. PHOTOGRAPHS BY SQUIRE FOX







THE FIRST TIME I SAW CABO WAS 15 YEARS AGO. Back then it was sun-drenched, relaxed and under-the-radar in the way that all the world's best hideouts are. Since then I have dropped in on the Mexican beach hotspot as I would an old friend. It is still sun-drenched, still relaxed, just a lot more popular, and more populated. But the isolated pockets of glamour, the honey-hued hideouts with private views of a cerulean sea, are still there if you know where to look.

There are many Cabos. And not just in a rhetorical way. There is Cabo San Lucas, a homing beacon for cut-off T-shirts and sunburned skin. At The Office, a beach restaurant in the thick of things, the manager Rodolfo Rosas tells me, 'People come to Cabo San Lucas to party and play golf.' One abbreviated visit was enough to see a grown woman clutching a wine glass fall backwards on her chair and not bother getting up. That's one Cabo.

Another is San José del Cabo, a charming town 30 minutes' drive away, with little cantinas, jewellery shops, pottery studios and art galleries. This is the Cabo I know: the one with a connection to its past, the one with soul. This is where people live all year round. It has schools and grocery stores and a community. It has La Lupita, a new taco and mezcal dive bar that is well worth the drive along the coast. It also has an unlikely oasis of organic, farm-to-table authenticity, down a dusty track in the countryside. Cabo stalwarts will tell you, protectively, not to visit Flora Farm. Ignore them. Opened in 2010 by two Californians who also live on the property, it has since grown into a small settlement of boutiques, mango groves, well-tended gardens, a handful of private homes and a knockout restaurant. It is almost impossible to get a dinner reservation, so go for lunch: delicious kale and wheat-berry salads, gooey Margarita pizzas, and bloody Marys that could easily serve as two of your five-a-day.

Then there's Los Cabos, which is the name for the whole area. If you hear just plain Cabo, that's usually shorthand for 'I'm going on vacation on the southern tip of the Baja peninsula to hole up in a hotel.'

The hotels here are seriously smart, clustered along the cliffs and coves between Cabo San Lucas and San José del Cabo. And it's on the water, in the early hours of the morning that the

Above, from left:
Las Ventanas al
Paraíso hotel;
rooftop bar at The
Cape hotel;
Opposite, clockwise
from top left: The
Cape; pizza at
Flora Farm; La
Lupita for tacos;
decorations
at Flora Farm




beauty of the place unfolds. On this trip, I wake up to the sound of fisherman making their way to the beach, heading out to capture the yellow-fin tuna and sea bass that will be that evening's ceviche. Wrapped in my dressing gown, I pad out to my terrace just as the sun is coming up. Forget the sunset: this is the magic hour, when the dawn breaks with its dramatic pink streaks and intense quiet. And it's empty. It's just me and two pelicans resting on the swell. We consider each other and enter into a silent pact. The heady smell of seaweed carries on the breeze, still cool from the night. Eventually, the light brightens from pink to orange to yellow. The waves move faster. Human voices drift down the sand. And when I look for the pelicans again, they're gone.

Cabo has an amazing hold on those that visit. It draws people time and again, year after year. Of course, there are so many hot beachy blasts, so many glorious, sun-soaked spots around the world, and yet... we return. This part of Mexico is not challengingly exotic or full of sights to see. In fact, it's built almost entirely on the conceit that we all need to switch off. Days are filled with three-hour lunches that bleed into cocktail hour. Having two massages before teatime is not deemed excessive. And never actually leaving the manicured grounds of your hotel is perfectly reasonable. There is a laziness about coming on holiday here. It's an unashamed, out-and-out fly-and-flop. Sometimes, often, that's just what is needed.

Hurricane Odile may have devastated the coastline a year ago, but it seems to have spurred a building boom. The old guard have upped their game, too. The One&Only Palmilla was closed for eight months to give it fresh zing. Stone floors, intricately woven fabrics and heavy doors with wrought-iron studs all reference Mexico in the chicest possible way. And New York-based megachef Jean-Georges Vongerichten has opened Seared, his second restaurant at the hotel. The new steakhouse menu is packed with wagyu and Kobe beef, local spiny lobsters and whole red snapper straight off the enormous grill, and there's a wine list to impress even the biggest vintage snobs.

This is good news for Eva Longoria, John Travolta and Tom Cruise, who make a habit of jetting down for a few days of sun and ceviche. And this is the hotel that sealed Cabo's reputation as Hollywood-on-Sea. When Jennifer Aniston has a birthday party here or Scarlet

Above: artwork at The Cape hotel; a spa garden at Las Ventanas al Paraíso and, opposite, the hotel's infinity pool



I WAKE UP TO THE SOUND OF FISHERMEN ON THE BEACH, HEADING OUT TO CAPTURE THE
YELLOW-FIN TUNA AND SEA BASS THAT WILL BE THAT EVENING'S CEVICHE





Johansson rents a villa on the property, they're not doing a lot of sightseeing. The appeal is in the privacy as much as the weather. They come to loll about by their swimming pools. People (celebrity or civilian) don't necessarily swim in the sea, as the currents are strong and dangerous for all but the most experienced surfer. Days pass watching the craggy coastline from a fat-cushioned double sunbed with a Margarita in hand.

Las Ventanas al Paraíso is another beauty, with palapa-covered verandahs, cactus gardens, infinity pools and, when dusk settles, twinkling lights to set it all a-flicker. This place is extremely cossetting. The villas are the hotel's crowning glory, large enough to make you feel like a shipping tycoon. These are where all the big guns stay. There are indoor and outdoor showers, indoor and outdoor living rooms, hot tubs built inside the pools, bathrooms you could drive a Range Rover through, and loos that sense when you're approaching. The kitchens are stocked with smoked salmon, Champagne and midnight-feast temptations such as ice-cream bars and marshmallows.

A seashell's throw away is Cabo's other bauble: Esperanza. This is probably the most rustic of the gang of humdinger hotels along this stretch of coast, which is to say that there's a lot of stone and rooty-tooty wooden furniture. But it doesn't suffer from lack of stellar views (of passing humpback whales between December and April), impeccable service or general lavishness. It feels more Mexican than the others, which is refreshing, and between Pesca, the ceviche bar, and Cocina Del Mar, which specialises in fish, you won't go hungry.

Latest off the blocks is the JW Marriott, which was only a few days from opening when I popped in. Right at Land's End, the very tip of the peninsula, it has been designed by Seattle-based architect Jim Olson, known for his vast, modernist houses, churches and museums. Olson is clearly a friend to right angles, as excluding the 11, yes, 11 swimming pools there isn't a curved surface to be found. The whole place was intended to resemble a framed picture of the Pacific Ocean, and the water seems to be somehow drawn in towards you, yet feels like its span is infinite. It's a feat of MC Escher proportions.

The hottest ticket right now, though, is a room at The Cape. The hotel, part of the Thompson group (Chicago, Toronto, Miami Beach, as well as Belgraves in London), opened last


Above: rambutan at Las Ventanas al Paraíso; One&Only Palmilla. Opposite, clockwise from top left: a shower at the One&Only; off to surf; day bed at the One&Only; La Lupita bar





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August. It's a dashing affair, a low-slung, poured-concrete creature that feels stark and lavish at the same time – a place where it seems perfectly reasonable to wear stilettos to the beach. Manta, the stylish seafood restaurant, has set the town abuzz, as has the rooftop bar with its experimental mixologists and soaring views of the famous El Arco, a natural stone formation jutting out of the sea. There is also the gorgeous glass-box library bar, the subterranean spa and 161 rooms, all with balconies that are perfect for cocktail hour overlooking the Sea of Cortez. It is young, funky and hip. You certainly won't find a kids' club here.

It could also be the set of a post-apocalyptic movie starring Shailene Woodley. Everything is black or grey and concrete or glass and severe, like you could get a flesh wound just by leaning on the bar. Towering floor-to-ceiling windows throughout made it feel like the hotel is suspended a hundred feet above the crashing waves. Just as I start to think I might actually be the last person on earth, a drone rose up on the other side of the glass. It hovered, menacingly, at eye-level for a moment. It considered me, its red and green lights flashing, then drifted away over the water. I later learned that some playful Mexican businessmen had brought their new toy to the hotel for a few days. It's the sort of thing that would have Jennifer and her privacy-loving friends rushing straight back to the high walls of the One&Only. 

GETTING HERE To book a trip or for more information, contact **Visit Los Cabos** (+52 624 143 43 42; www.visitloscabos.travel). **British Airways** (www.britishairways.com) and **American Airlines** (www.americanairlines.co.uk) fly to San José del Cabo, via Dallas Fort Worth. **One&Only Palmilla** (www.pamilla.oneandonlyresorts.com; doubles from about £350); **Las Ventanas al Paraíso, A Rosewood Resort** (www.rosewoodhotels.com; doubles from about £620); **The Cape, A Thompson Hotel** (www.thompsonhotels.com; doubles from about £460); **JW Marriott Los Cabos** (www.marriott.com; doubles from about £340)

Above, from left: cacti around Los Cabos; La Lupita bar. Opposite, a three-bedroom villa at Las Ventanas al Paraíso