

And Now for
Something
**COMPLETELY
DIFFERENT**

*Acre Baja provides
rustic, yet classy
accommodations for
dining & lodging.*

-by Paul Papanek & Joan Tucker | photos by Paul Papanek-

I was minding my own business – playing remote Scrabble with my sister who lives in Florida – at the same moment that Joan was leafing through one of the multitude of travel magazines that the mail delivery person begrudgingly drops on our doorstep week after week. Joan suddenly tossed one my way and pointed to a little writeup about a new boutique hotel in San José that had won the Sexiest Hotel Design award from the trade group LE Miami – before it even officially opened in November of 2017.

She stared at me with anticipation as I read it and I knew what was coming next: “We have to see this for ourselves! Write to Dave!” Dave Leathers, our editor, who by now knows that the path of least resistance is the best way to deal us and the stories that we dream up, gave us the big thumbs-up. Which is why we were now sitting in the airy bar of Acre Baja with Cameron Watt, the co-owner, as the place buzzed all around us and a jazz guitarist played in the background.

We wanted to get something out of the way immediately.

“Is it pronounced ‘acre’ - as in the measurement of land - or ‘ahcray’ - like we’d seen it described on one online site?” I asked him.

Cameron laughed and said “Oh – yes - it’s ‘acre’” as if he’d been asked this a million times before. “But since that word doesn’t exist in Spanish, the locals pronounce it as if it is a Spanish word – ‘ahcray.’”

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(ABOVE) | The entrance to restaurant, bar, and pool areas.



(ABOVE) | Seemingly in the middle of nowhere, the turnoff for Acre Baja. The double tree house is a master suite connected to another bedroom via a bridge going deck to deck. Find the treehouse in the picture. Each one is completely surrounded by lush greenery for total privacy. One of the wonderfully luxurious treehouse rooms. They all have natural wood accents, soft cotton linens, walls made of palo de arco. Entrepreneur and co-owner Cam Watt.

So - acre it is. That freed us up to learn more about where we were: in a lush, beautiful setting a half hour's drive from the SJD airport where 14 ultra-cool individual treehouse hotel rooms, a modern farm to table restaurant, huge swimming pool, and a contingent of wacky farm animals were all spread across 25 acres of Baja Sur farmland – Acre Restaurant and Acre Hotel.

But let's back up a little. After arriving and checking in, we were escorted to our room – lucky number 8 - which we could barely see from the winding path through the thick palm grove and gardens. In fact, we really couldn't see any of the other treehouses at all. We climbed the two flights of stairs which led us to our room. We were close to two stories up, looking out over a dry arroyo,

on a deck that contained two comfy chairs, a table, a retro turquoise cooler full of cold drinks, and the enclosed outdoor shower. It was private, completely surrounded by towering palms. Standing naked on the deck, if one were thinking about doing that (no, in case you were wondering), would not be an issue. We were already pretty amazed and we hadn't even seen the room yet. We opened the sliding glass doors that were the entire fourth wall of the room, revealing a king size bed, reading lamps, bathroom, and a small but ample closet. It was stunning in its sophisticated simplicity – palo de arco walls and ceiling, dark wood everywhere, and beautiful white linens with black accents. A large ceiling fan kept it all cool. We were reluctant to leave the room, but since we had read that the food in the restaurant was

really something special, we decided to head down for lunch.

Executive chef Kevin Luzande, a Los Angeles native who's cooked for some of the best chefs in the city, relocated to San José to develop what's now considered to be one of the most innovative and exciting restaurants in the area. The menu descriptions only give a tantalizing hint of the complexities of the dishes he's designed.

If there was anything new to have been done with a kale salad, he did it: a ginger and kale salad with pickled jicama, spiced peanuts, avocado, and sesame dressing just burst with flavor and was the perfect cool lunch for a warm day.

But of course, we didn't stop there.

We continued with the guajillo and soy tuna poke bowl as well as the one dish that Joan said she could eat every day for the rest of her life: the fried green

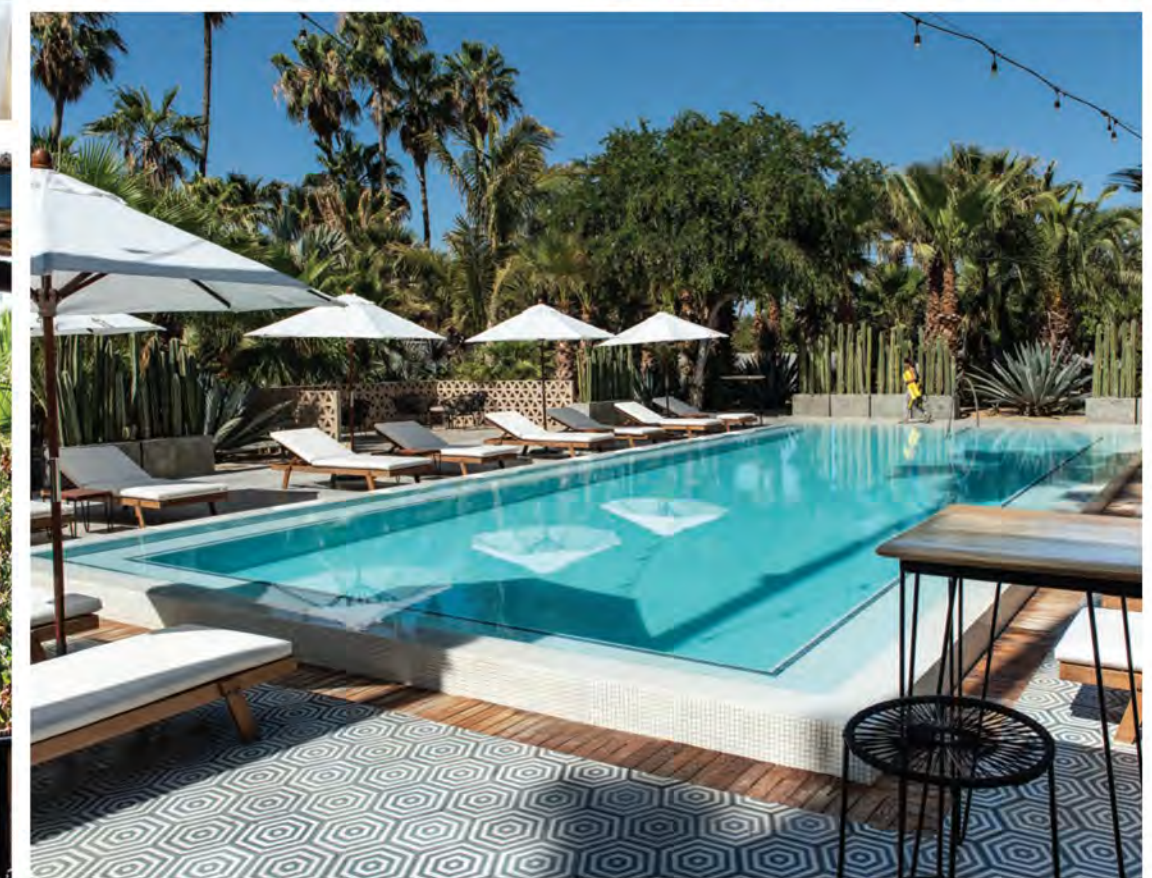
tomatoes with sherry honey syrup, crispy basil, and macerated cherry tomatoes topped with homemade ricotta. This one was revelatory, and we had to stop ourselves from ordering it each time we sat down so we could make our way through as many other dishes as we could.

After lunch, we lazed away the rest of the day pool-side – resisting the urge to play a game of ping pong on the poured concrete table we passed along the way. Sipping *palomas* as the sun was setting, we were paid a very unexpected visit by Acre Baja's six-month old burro – Burrito – who was looking for something to scratch his chin on. As he ambled away, a family of peacocks made an appearance. We suddenly felt like we were at a 4H meeting.

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(BELOW) | The treehouse bathroom. The interior walls are frosted glass that allow the palo de arco on the exterior to make cool patterns that change with the sun. Burrito, the 6-month old rescue burro, makes himself at home at the pool. He wandered by looking for a scratch. It's all in the details. The cooler is replenished every day with bottled water and other drinks. The very private shower on each treehouse deck. The incredibly beautiful and tranquil pool.



As we walked by the bar on our way back to our room, Dani Tatarin, the bar manager, called out to us and invited us into the tasting room for some mezcal samples. Dani is an expat from Vancouver and ran Cam's bar - The Keefer - there. He enticed her to come down to design the drink program and manage the bar at Acre, and she's taken it to another level. They now have their own private label small batch mezcal, made by three families on the mainland. Dani also makes her own bitters and tinctures from herbs, fruits, and flowers grown on the farm. She calls it "farm to bar" which, after tasting three of the six mezcal varieties, seemed hilarious to us.

Having now "tasted" all six mezcals, the path back to our room was a bit confusing,

but we eventually made it up the stairs. We soon realized that, true to the award it garnered, the treehouse rooms are indeed pretty sexy.

The next morning, we wanted to tour the farm and headed down to the restaurant to find someone to take us. Just as we got there, a young woman walked in carrying a huge crate some of the most beautiful straight out of the ground carrots we'd ever seen. The woman was Karen Wilson, the farm manager who, at a petite 5'2", with flowing jet-black hair and a smile that does not appear to have a limit, is a powerhouse. Trained in farming and horticulture, she started the farm from

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(BELOW) | The waitstaff is always standing by to bring refills! The treehouse bathroom. Fried green tomatoes with sherry-honey syrup, crispy basil, macerated cherry tomatoes, and house-made ricotta. We could eat this every day for the foreseeable future. Shelves full of Acre's own small-batch mezcal - hand-made for them by three families on the mainland. Dani Tatarin designed the drink program and also makes all of their bitters and tinctures.



(BELOW) | Goats like to climb, so the owners built a spacious pen for them around a couple of big trees. The Ginger Kale Salad with kale, fresh ginger, pickled jicama, spiced peanuts, avocado, and sesame dressing was a revelation. The perfect salad for a warm spring day. Just-picked carrots from the Acre Baja farm. The communal table is set and waiting as lunch service approaches. The main dining room at Acre Baja abounds in natural woods and poured concrete. All the high stools are made for them by a local welder. Karen Wilson runs the entire farm operation - always with a smile.



(BELOW) | The airy bar is a favorite gathering spot for tree house guests as well as drop-ins. Executive Chef Kevin Luzande relocated from Los Angeles to San José to design the inventive menu and oversee all food service. The best chilequiles we've ever had! A layer of housemade topos bathed in a savory mole sauce, with perfectly done sunny side up eggs on top. A small section of the Acre Baja farm that supplies about 30% of the produce used by their restaurant.

scratch, and it now supplies about thirty percent of the produce used in the restaurant. She was excited to show us what she was growing, so she led us out to the five acres of organic ops where we saw an amazing variety of tomatoes and squash, along with spinach, chard, corn, herbs, lemongrass, and more. "They really, really love that work!" she laughed as she pointed to two young women working on composting heaps. "I don't understand it, but they love it!"

We wanted to get a little more pool time in, so on the way there, she took us through a grove of mango trees that would soon be

heavy with ripe fruit. Joan turned to me and asked "Could we wait?"

But we never made it to the pool. We got waylaid by a tiny baby goat (we named him Puppy Goat) standing in a tree, with his mother – and other goats - close by. They were all in a really large, shaded and divided pen, and we got to witness their sheer ingenuity when the mother kept bashing her horns against a frail wooden door until it opened so she could get into the neighboring pen to visit her friends. When the door slammed shut, leaving Puppy Goat by himself, all hell broke loose. By then, we were late for our food shoot with chef Luzande, so we decided that that was our cue to move on.

Seriously, I don't know what was more fun: photographing the food or eating the food. We did both, if you were wondering. Luzande laid out plate after plate of the most beautiful dishes, and we just couldn't stop ourselves. We were at it all afternoon and by the time we lost the light, the bar was calling. Actually, two gin and tonics were calling and, when there are drinks involved, we always come when called.

The restaurant was starting to fill up, so we thought it best to go back and grab a table and have dinner.

We started with the scallop ceviche, and then Chef Luzande sent over the



(ABOVE) | Cooking shrimps on a hot rock – one of their specialties. Back stage in the open kitchen designed by Chef Kevin Luzande. A gift from heaven. Fresh Catch Tataki – fish with blackening spice, broccoli, peanuts, soy glaze and mango relish. A really unique and wonderful take on Scallop Ceviche. Scallops with aji amarillo sauce, avocado mousse, cilantro, and chicken chicharron. Spiced Abuelita's Hot Chocolate Cake. Valrhona Manjari ganache, candied cocoa nibs, milk ice cream and Abuelita's hot chocolate poured all over it. We ordered this more than once.

whole fire-roasted hen - tender and juicy with a perfectly crispy skin - with roasted veggies, tzatziki, pickled turnips, and za'atar flatbread. It was not only a 'wow' in both taste and presentation but also indicative of how Luzande mixes different cultures on the plate.

And then came the crispy brussels sprouts – something we've had in what seems like a zillion restaurants all over the world. But – we've never had them with lemon aioli, epazote, smoked paprika, and peanuts. Nope – never. But we'd go out of the way to have them again.

The desserts – and yes, we had them all – were insane, but the hands-down winner was the Spiced Abuelita's Hot Chocolate

Cake. Rich, dense spiced chocolate cake with Valrohna Manjari ganache, candied cocoa nibs, homemade milk ice cream, and old-fashioned Mexican hot chocolate drizzled over the whole thing table-side. Words fail us. Seriously. After we finished ours, we watched in anticipation as the guy next to us was taking his first bite of that same chocolate desert. He gave the same eye-roll as we did, and we all had a good laugh about how great everything was.

After dinner, we ran into Cam in the bar, and over a glass of their house-made

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lemongrass iced tea, he told us a little more about himself and the history of the place.

An entrepreneur from an early age, Cam owns a very successful bar in Vancouver called The Keefer, as well as other projects throughout Canada. On one of his many trips to San José del Cabo with his business partner Stuart McPherson, they came across a parcel of farmland a stone's throw from Puerto Los Cabos and made the decision to buy it and start a business.

The restaurant has actually been open since 2015 but, as Cam told us, having a restaurant wasn't even in their original plan. They had an idea that they would build a group of casitas on the property, but shortly after construction began, Hurricane Odile derailed that concept. The



casitas-in-progress sustained considerable damage, so they decided to put them on hold. In the meantime, they needed to come up with an idea that would get them into business quickly and generate some income.

A restaurant would not normally be the first, most practical, or smartest thing someone would think of – especially since neither of them had ever owned or run one. But to them, it seemed like the right thing to do and a challenge they were excited to undertake.

They never gave up on the idea of casitas, though, but by that time, they thought that a hotel would be even better. Cam came up with the basic design of the rooms and they opened for business in November of 2017.

Truly, it really is exquisite. Cam, Stuart,

and their team have managed to create a sophisticated and contemporary Mexican atmosphere that, using the simplest, readily available materials, has defined a new Mexican aesthetic. Rammed earth walls, poured concrete, metal, wood, light fixtures made of palo de arco sticks, tables made of floor tile, retro cone chairs - it's comfortable, friendly, hip, modern, great to look at and be enveloped by, and just a place where you want to hang out. A seemingly endless line of guests appears to agree.

Joan calls it glamour glamping to the max, and I think she's right on the money.

Contact info:

www.acrebaja.com

Acre Restaurant: 52-1-624-171-8226

Acre Hotel: 52-1-624-129-9607

El Fin!

(FAR LEFT AND BELOW) | Opposite page: The winding pathways to the treehouses. The landscaping is amazing. At the height of dinner service, there's a lot of action on the floor and in the kitchen. This page: One of Acre Baja's hostesses on her way to replenish flowers. Every afternoon, the flock of peacocks head out to see what's happening around the property. Here, they're just strolling by the pool. Two flights of stairs took us up to our very private treehouse room. Relaxing on the spacious deck of the treehouse room.

