

# Baja Camel Safari

*Trekking through arid outdoors of southern Baja on the backs of dromedaries makes for an unforgettable experience*

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

The first time we saw a camel on a beach was in Essaouira, a rough and tumble port town on the Atlantic coast of Morocco. Seeing those long-legged, knobby kneed “ships of the desert” silhouetted against the setting sun, children laughing and chasing behind them, left us with a joyous memory. Next, there was the huge camel festival we attended in Pushkar, India, and a year later, the endless camels we encountered everywhere in Egypt. Which is to say, we are now totally enamored with camels.

So - when we heard that Cabo Adventures had imported eight camels from, of all places, Texas, and were offering a camel safari along a private beach in a nature preserve just outside of Cabo, we packed our bags.

It was a gorgeous, crystal clear day when we arrived at the Cabo Adventures

headquarters. Apparently, we weren't the only people intrigued by this adventure, and when we were all assembled, we were loaded onto a large, comfortable transport for the short drive up the coast to the San Cristobal Ranch. The first thing we saw upon pulling through the gates - aside from two frolicking dogs there to greet us - were

*Continued on page 42*





**(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT)** | Guests embarking on the camel safari are transported to the San Cristobal Ranch on Unimog trucks. At the ranch, they are greeted by camel master, Sidi Mamane. The guests mount the camels from a specialized platform, and then experience the stark beauty of the dry environment as they ride the camels to the beach.

three huge, bright yellow Mercedes Unimogs - our real transportation to the camels. As we bumped along the dirt road toward the beach, the scenery took our breath away - an endless variety of exotic cactus and desert plants, hawks and vultures circling overhead (hopefully not for us...), an absolutely pristine white sand beach, and the shining Pacific glistening in the distance. We were on a privately owned nature sanctuary, far from any development or other signs of tourism. It was wonderful. It was the Baja at its finest.

As we pulled up to the camel corral, a tall figure, cloaked in a traditional flowing robe, head wrapped in a white turban, seemed to float toward us. This was Sidi Mamane, a Tuareg Nomad from Niger, Africa. He is the camel master. He was recruited by Cabo Adventures, having been recommended by the camel breeder in Texas. Sidi has a way

with camels - which is putting it lightly. What started as a two-week consultation on the care, feeding, and training of camels and guides has now lasted over a year and a half. When we asked this Nomad how he was adjusting to being in one place for so long, he smiled and said that he loved Cabo but, as a Nomad, when he did get restless, he would take his tent, camp on the beach, and just let himself become one with his surroundings. He went on to tell us that the Sahara - where he was born - and the Sonora Desert of Baja, are very similar, and that he and the camels feel right at home. And he loves his herd of camels - the animals that he and his ancestors have relied on for every aspect of their lives in the Sahara Desert for centuries.

We clambered out of the Unimogs, and were immediately outfitted in bicycle helmets that had been imaginatively transformed into

white, flowing, Lawrence of Arabia turban-like headgear. We formed a line at the corral, making our way up a set of tall steps two by two to climb onto the camels - one person in front, the other in back. Be warned - the hump, and the saddle on top of it, makes for a wide ride.

With each camel being led by a Cabo Adventures guide, stylishly outfitted in a turban and a sand colored robe, we slowly made - more like lumbered - our way from the corral toward the beach. We bounced down a short dirt road, then turned onto the beautiful white sand. From our high vantage point atop the camel's hump, we saw, as if on cue, a whale breaching in the ocean. Perfect. We held on tight for our 20-minute rocking and rolling trip across the beach. We know that that doesn't sound like a long time, and when we asked Sidi about it, he told us

that the camels could have gone on for days. But, as they quickly learned soon after they began the safaris, the riders had a much more limited capacity for being in the saddle than the camels had for walking.

It's been said that camels have a bad reputation for being nasty and aggressive - spitting and biting. However, under the loving care of Sidi, these 8 camels, ranging in age from 4 - 8 years old, are wonderfully friendly, well mannered, and really sweet. They actually like to nuzzle, which was great - as it allowed us a little up close and personal time with them after our ride.

After a hard day (well...20 minutes) in the saddle, we were all ready for Part 2 - the

*Continued on page 44*



nature walk. We were led out onto some of the many nature trails in the desert by our guide Polo, knowledgeable Cabo Adventures guide, who taught us about the variety of desert flora and wildlife on and around the ranch. And there's a lot. He showed us that what appeared to be nothing more than dead twigs and bushes were actually desert plants about to burst into bloom. Some would soon be filled with fruit, others leaves and flowers. He also told us about the turtle program on the ranch, part of the non-profit organization Asummatoma, that protects the Marine Turtles in the area and releases the hatchlings into the sea every year.

It's hard to say which of the next two parts everyone liked best - Part 3 - lunch, or Part 4 - the tequila tasting. I'm going to say lunch, because after sampling a wide variety of tequilas, I don't really remember the tequila tasting.

A beautiful kitchen was set up under a large palapa on a hill overlooking the desert and the beach. We were treated to a delicious lunch of authentic Mexican food, cooked by Nelly Beltran. There were hand-made tortillas, chicken mole, a stew of cactus, onions and peppers, beef picadillo, frijoles, rice, beer and *aguas frescas* - all made with the same meticulous care that Cabo Adventures puts into everything they do. We all relaxed, swapped stories, and steeled ourselves for Part 4: The Tequila Tasting.

We were ushered into another, smaller palapa, where we were seated around a long table that was decorated with several bottles of tequila and stacks of shot glasses (which we later learned were called *caballitos* - so named because, in old Mexico, travelers would wear a small shot glass made of horn around their neck on a string, and as they left the bar, they would always ask for one

more shot of tequila "for the horse.") We were schooled as to the perfect way to drink tequila *blanco*, which is very different than the method of drinking *añejo*. And thanks to the hilarious stories and generous pouring by Polo, our tequila tutor, a great time was had by all.

Reluctantly, we climbed aboard the Unimogs for the drive back to the ranch entrance to head back to Cabo, seemingly a world away. Sidi, resplendent in his robes, white turban, and Ray-Bans, bid us a wonderful farewell - but not before he tempted us with their future plans: a sunset camel safari on the beach, complete with Nomadic tents, traditional music, and dinner under the stars. They're also about to launch a program called Camel Trainer for the Day - an opportunity to work with Sidi and the camels for an entire day. Good thing our bags are already packed!

**El Fin!**

**(FAR LEFT AND BELOW)** | The camel safari includes a Mexican lunch, prepared by Nelly Beltran, and also a tequila tasting. Polo acts as the tequila server for the guests. The camels can be seemingly affable, thus enriching the experience for guests even more.

