



PHOTO BY GABRIELA FLORES, COURTESY OF LA DUNA

STARRY, STARRY NIGHT

Nestled amongst the cardon cacti and the Sierra de la Gigantes Mountains, bordered by the bay of La Paz, is a Baja eco retreat like no other!

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

Paul and I were enjoying a quiet day in our little house in La Paz when an insistent knock on the door broke us out of our lazy afternoon siesta. Our neighbor – and very good friend - Juli, the owner of Se Habla La Paz Language School, was at the door asking us if we wanted to join some of her students on a star gazing trip that evening. We responded the way we usually do when we get invitations like this: “Where and what time?”

A couple of hours later, as the sun was beginning to set over the mountains, we climbed into a van with eight other would-be star gazers and headed north out of La Paz towards San Juan de la Costa. We didn't know exactly where we were going, or what the evening would hold. But – we were more than game.

About 45 minutes later, we pulled off the highway onto an unmarked dirt road, and after a short drive, found ourselves at La Duna Eco Retreat. We tumbled out of the van, and in the pitch dark, with the glow of a million stars helping to guide us, our group bravely navigated the candle-lit pathways past palapa-roofed guest casitas to a small

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clearing where Mariana, an astronomer from La Paz, had set up two high-powered telescopes. As she programmed coordinates into the telescope's computers, we each took turns looking at planets and countless constellations, seeing them as we had never seen them before. There was no light pollution in our middle of nowhere, and the broad, unending Southern Baja sky went on forever. As the night turned a little chilly, our host – Gabriela Flores, the owner of La Duna – appeared with an invitation for us all to join her at the central palapa for some red wine, La Duna-made aged goat cheese, artisan bread, and fruit. We all readily accepted. Bottles were emptied and travel stories were shared. Paul and I were both so

intrigued with Gabriela and La Duna that we made a date to return the next day. We wanted to know more about her and what she had created. And – we really wanted to see it in the daylight.

Nestled among thousands of ancient cardon cacti, between the backdrop of the imposing Sierra Gigantes mountains and the rolling sand dunes bordering the pristine Bay of La Paz, Gabriela Flores and her partner, Miguel Marquez-Tavella, have created a one-of-a-kind destination where guests can reconnect with nature - and themselves.

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(FAR LEFT AND ABOVE) | A short drive down an unmarked dirt road, La Duna Eco Retreat gives visitors a chance to experience the southern Baja desert and the Sea of Cortez with a low impact on the region's ecology.



(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT) | Hammocks abound at La Duna. Waterless restrooms and solar-heated water bags for showering help La Duna minimize its environmental impact. The guest casitas take advantage of the local climate, and as such, reduce electricity needs. With minimal light pollution, La Duna is an excellent place for stargazing. Horseback riding and yoga are some of the activities available to guests at La Duna Eco Retreat.

While walking us through the property, Gabriela told us that La Duna is the only eco-destination in the La Paz area. She has owned the land for 13 years, but it wasn't until four years ago that she was able to bring her concept to fruition: A retreat that creates a minimum of damage and a maximum of sustainability and respect for the land. The careful placement of the eight rustic guest casitas takes full advantage of the cool breezes off the bay. Built in the traditional woven palo de arco style of southern Baja, they remain comfortable all year long making both electric fans or heaters unnecessary. Lit by candlelight, these cozy casitas are wonderfully comfy and welcoming. Water is conserved by the use of solar-heated camp showers (although they do have two beautiful standard-style showers as

well), with the wastewater being recycled for use in the garden. And the bathrooms – free-standing *his* and *hers* – are waterless.

“Nature grounds us,” said Gabriela. “For many of our guests, La Duna reawakens a cellular memory that reminds us of where we come from. On a deep level, we’re all part of the natural universe.” La Duna – in its simplicity and tranquility – helps all of her guests make that very real connection to their surroundings.

Shortly after we arrived, a Swiss family of three were just returning from their morning horseback ride into the canyons of the Gigantes, having been guided by Gabriela’s ranch foreman, an expert on local wildlife,

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PHOTO BY ALEXANDRE DUFOUR, COURTESY OF LA DUNA



vegetation, and medicinal plants, and Miguel's daughter, Yarelli, who also works as a trail guide and interpreter. As lunchtime approached, a newly married couple from Seattle, who had spent their morning snorkeling and kayaking in the bay, joined us.

As we all sat around a large communal table under the central palapa eating the delicious meal Gabriela and her staff had prepared, she talked about everything the ranch has to offer her guests. In addition to the horseback and snorkeling trips, Gabriela and Miguel, with advance notice, will arrange diving trips to Espiritu Santo Island on their own boat, traditional local

ranch life tours, weekend spa retreats with yoga, massage, and reflexology, cooking retreats, Jungian dream workshops, an evening in a sweat lodge built with the help of a Lakota Indian friend of Gabriela's, and almost anything else you can imagine. Or, if doing absolutely nothing more than reading a book or daydreaming in one of the many hammocks that are spread out across the property is your idea of heaven, that's perfect too. "Whether you visit for a day or a weekend or a week," said Gabriela, "La Duna can be whatever you want it to be."

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(BELOW AND FAR RIGHT) | *Massages, goats, kayaking, the desert, the Sea of Cortez, yoga and great food are all part of the La Duna Eco Retreat experience. The goat pens at La Duna are made from recycled wooden pallets.*



PHOTO BY MARIANA FONTENLA



PHOTO BY LISA EZZARD

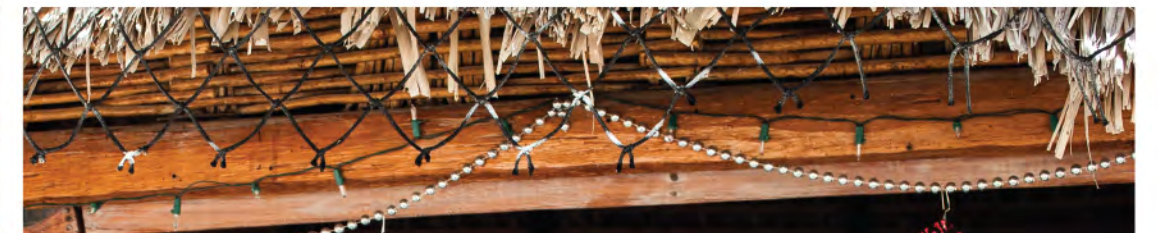


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Later in the afternoon, on our way up to the dunes to watch the sun set over the mountains, Gabriela suggested that we first make a stop to help her and her children, Nathan and Rebecca, feed the 23 well cared for goats that live in hand crafted pens made of recycled wooden pallets. Running around and making the only real noise we'd heard so far were about a dozen ranch chickens and one of the biggest and most beautiful turkeys I'd ever seen. Rebecca assured us that the turkey would only be a guest at their Thanksgiving table next fall; nothing more.

On top of the dunes, we passed the yoga platform that overlooks the bay where sunset

yoga classes take place. "This is where I come every day," Gabriela told us. "It's one of my favorite ways of experiencing La Duna – sitting here quietly, looking out over the horizon." She was soon joined by one of her dogs who settled down with her, happy to share in the peace of the moment – a perfect example of Gabriela's philosophy of the ranch: "La Duna breathes, and we breathe with it."

For more information:
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El Fin!

(FAR LEFT AND ABOVE) | Open-air relaxation and an unhurried pace of life applies to all life at La Duna Eco Retreat, for both humans and animals. Turkeys, horses and goats contribute to and also enjoy the tranquility.