

CABO LIVING®

LA PAZ

*A New Energy and Vibe
Returns to this Capital City!*

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



Joan and I haven't been to La Paz since we sold our house in 2017 and a trip there was long overdue. A lot has changed, and a lot has stayed the same. It's still the quiet sister to Los Cabos with families and friends enjoying a variety of activities along the beautiful beachfront three and a half-mile long malecon. But the addition of new exciting restaurants, hips hotels, and art galleries have brought a long-overdue punchiness to the city. We couldn't wait to see what was happening.

We decided to check into Habita Group's brand-new Baja Club Hotel before venturing out to explore. The hotel, built into and behind a large, classic colonial home on the malecon blends in seamlessly with everything around it. Walking through the towering front doors, you appreciate the genius of the design. The original home has been repurposed into the common areas with a comfy library lounge, beautiful dining room, and an inviting bar. Wrought



iron doors beyond open onto the hotel itself – a lovely, shaded courtyard, outdoor dining, and two modernist-design wings of rooms surrounding it all. The very private pool is tucked into a corner out of view. And virtually none of this is visible from the street.

When we walked into our room, the first thing that made an impression was that the bed faced the courtyard and our private tree lined patio. The room itself was elegant in its simplicity. Dark wood throughout gives a wonderful respite from the sun and the spacious bathroom was beautifully finished with rustic green tiles with a great rain head shower. Joan eased herself onto the bed for

the most important test of all. It passed with flying colors - soft but firm, and wonderful down pillows. We knew that we had made the right choice.

We finally tore ourselves away from the hotel and headed over to El Cortés Golf Club to see what was new. While neither of us are golfers, we can appreciate a great course. Designed by Gary Player and opened in 2010, it has only gotten better and more stunning with time. Overlooking La Paz Bay and the entirety of the Puerta Cortés

(FAR LEFT, ABOVE AND BELOW) | OPPOSITE PAGE: There's no clue as to what's behind the façade of the Baja Club Hotel. The modernist design of the hotel works wonderfully against the historical nature of the original hacienda. Baja Club's outdoor dining - very Mediterranean. The bar at Baja Club - where everyone wants to be after a day in the sun. **THIS PAGE:** A first-floor room - open, bright, and airy! The very private pool is tucked away against original hacienda walls. The beautiful entrance to El Cortés Golf Club. The views throughout El Cortés are amazing.

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(ABOVE AND BELOW) | The front marina at Marina Costa Baja. Restaurant Nemi is cozy and unassuming, letting the food shine through. Local sea scallops, cucumber aguachile avocado, and yuzu at Nemi. Incredibly delicious and inventive deconstructed Key Lime Pie

development and Marina Costa Baja, the 18 holes vary from mountainous to hilly to everything in between and boasts the longest par 5 in Mexico. There's also a 10-hole pitch and putt course which is great for the whole family.

Puerta Cortés, comprised of the Vista Mar luxury condos and villas, the beautiful homes of Las Colinas, the Costa Baja Resort and Spa, and the Beach Club Blue Cortés is a one-of-a-kind concept in La Paz. Nothing compares. Coupled with the golf course and marina, it truly offers everything anyone could ever want.

The marina has been upgraded since our last visit and can host mega yachts up to 220' in length. We're told that Bill Gates, David Geffen, and Steven Spielberg, to name just a few, are regulars – either in slips or anchoring just outside to take advantage of the facilities.

Costa Baja may be the largest marina offering the most amenities, but it isn't the only game in town. Four other marinas combine to give sailors a real choice of where to tie up. For a city whose population is a little over a quarter of a million, that's pretty impressive.

Tempted as we were to hit a few of our



(ABOVE AND BELOW) | Nemi's burrata, rucula, and strawberries with damiano dressing. We always love walking through a central market! In a spice shop on our food tour with our guide Citlali.

old faves for lunch and dinner, we resolved to eat at new places. We were only in La Paz for three nights so that meant skipping the carne asada at Rancho Viejo, the fish tacos at Bismark Cito, ice cream at Fuentes, and burgers at Kiki's.

One of the top new restaurants on everyone's list is Nemi, where Pujol-veteran Chef Alex Villagomez is creating imaginative dishes like the starter of burrata, arugula, and fresh strawberries, and the grilled jumbo shrimp zaraneados with creamy red rice and the wonderfully tender and succulent roasted octopus with pickled baby potatoes over creamy spinach. The place itself is cozy and unassuming and the food and the service was insane.

Food tours are one of our favorite activities in a new city, and since this was our new La Paz, we signed up for one the next morning. We met up with Citlali Sanchez, our guide, at the pavilion on the malecon. The great thing about Citlali is that she's been a naturalist guide in Baja Sur for nine years and is passionate and incredibly knowledgeable about the history and culture of the place. The first half-hour of the tour was spent sitting with her overlooking the Bay of La Paz while she gave us a fascinating short course about the historical and cultural influences that have

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(ABOVE AND BELOW) | *The birria at Toño's was the best! The best fish taco stand in La Paz! Wonderful empeñadas at one of the guide's favorite booths in Bravo Market. We happened upon a beautiful wedding at the cathedral.*

made Baja, and particularly La Paz, what it is today. Then we headed out for food – and she had a great itinerary lined up for us. The first stop was Panaderia Lilia. It's family-owned and has been in business for 40 years. Among all of their goodies, they make a delicious pastry – a wood-fired mini cheesecake with cotija cheese - not found anywhere else in town. Our second stop – which turned out to be the highlight - was Tacos Toño – a little sidewalk birria stand with a line that stretched down the block. They serve one thing – amazing birria tacos

accompanied by a cup of rich consume for dipping. It was the best birria we'd ever had. Then it was burritos and dulce de mango empeñadas at the two main markets – Mercado Madero and Mercado Bravo – and fish tacos at another street stand – Tacos El Estadio. All of this was punctuated by stops in spices shops and other specialty places where Citlali seemed to know everyone as well as everything about, well, everything. As we wrapped up the tour in the zocalo, we happened on the start of a wedding procession about to enter the cathedral. As



Paceños do, everyone walking by – including us - stopped to watch the proud father of the beautiful bride take her arm and surrounded by her bridesmaids, walk her into the church. It was a magical, sweet moment, and the perfect way to end the day!

That evening, we found ourselves walking down a dimly lit alley in downtown La Paz looking for Tatanka Baja Fish and Steakhouse. This is Chef Carlos Valdez's latest venture and, having been to all his previous restaurants, we were excited to see what he was up to. The alley opened onto

a parking lot which is where we found the semi-hidden entrance. The dining room is a lovely tree-filled patio with a small indoor area resembling a little cabin. The place was buzzing – it's getting rave reviews – but we were seated right away. As we looked through the menu, we saw that his usual grilled meats were there, but the seafood side of the menu is what really stood out. The presentation and quality exceeded the descriptions. We did not

(ABOVE) | *Aguachile Tostada at Tatanka. Tatanka restaurant's patio dining. What a beautiful presentation! Tuna Tartar at Tatanka. Amazing. Abalone in its Shell - Local wild abalone cooked in its juice, rosa abalone sauce, tobiko, chocolate chile habanero oil. Carrot cake at Tatanka restaurant.*

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(ABOVE AND BELOW) | The mural "El Elefante Sobre del Mundo." This mural, painted on the side of Mercado Madero, is by Uli Mtz and depicts so much about old and present-day La Paz in the shape of a whale. La Paz is full of murals that were commissioned by the city. The murals in La Paz are everywhere!

expect the tuna tartar to arrive as a multi-layered perfect rectangular block comprised of tuna underneath minced green apple and roe, topped with little slices of serrano chiles in a shallow pool of ponzu. The tostada of sea scallops, snail mayo, and escabeche of marlin was so pretty we didn't want to eat it. But we did! We were taking our time working our way through the menu and the staff did not attempt to hurry us along. It was a relaxed evening – and a great dinner.

We had been given a meeting address for our Street Art LPZ city walk for the following morning—a building on a quiet side street with an enormous mural painted on it. Another couple was already there and shortly, our host, Amélie Padioleau, came zooming around the corner on her bicycle to join us. As she greeted us, her energy was infectious. For the next two hours, she led us through the mural-filled streets of downtown La Paz. Most of them were huge and full



of Mexican iconography and stories of the rancheros, the desert, and cave paintings, but also addressing conservation of the ocean and the effects on local fishermen. All of the murals, Amélie told us, are the product of a project called Ciudad Mural in partnership with Colectivo Tomate – a group of young Mexican artists whose mission is action for social transformation through art. This was city and state-supported and involved a variety of local and international artists – some of them working together on the same mural. One of the many paintings we saw

was one in the shape of a huge whale full of characters that told the story of fishing in the Sea of Cortez that was painted on the wall of the central market. Knowing the social implications of the art made the tour incredibly impactful. Walking back to the hotel through the zocalo, we wandered into what has become our new favorite shop in La Paz – Casa Parra – that specializes in native Mexican art.

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(ABOVE AND BELOW) | Casa Parra in La Paz. The Museo del Arte de Baja California Sur has rotating exhibits highlighting Mexican artists from all over the country.





(ABOVE AND BELOW) | Baja Club's cozy library. Mezze with hummus, beetroot cream, and red pepper/feta dip with house-made pita. Greek salad at Baja Club Hotel. Borego filet cooked in its juice for 14 hours served over organic vegetables. Cheesecake with cream, red fruits, and topped with chocolate flakes.

Meticulously curated by the owner, the shop contains pieces from all over Mexico by old-school and contemporary artists that can't be found anywhere else. This is, decidedly, not a trinket store!

We still had a little more art energy left and luckily, we were close to the newly opened Museo de Arte de Baja California Sur. Located in what was the First Government House in La Paz, and recently renovated by Mexican architect Jose Manuel Velasco, the museum is dedicated to rotating

exhibits of both modern and contemporary art and indigenous culture. It's a beautiful space filled with light and positive energy. Outside the museum is an installation of 72 streetlights of differing heights (not unlike Los Angeles Museum of Art's "Urban Light" display) that's an obligatory stop on any La Paz evening stroll.

We spent the rest of the afternoon relaxing by the pool and, after having enjoyed a few cocktails on the roof bar watching the sun set, we decided to stay at the hotel for dinner.



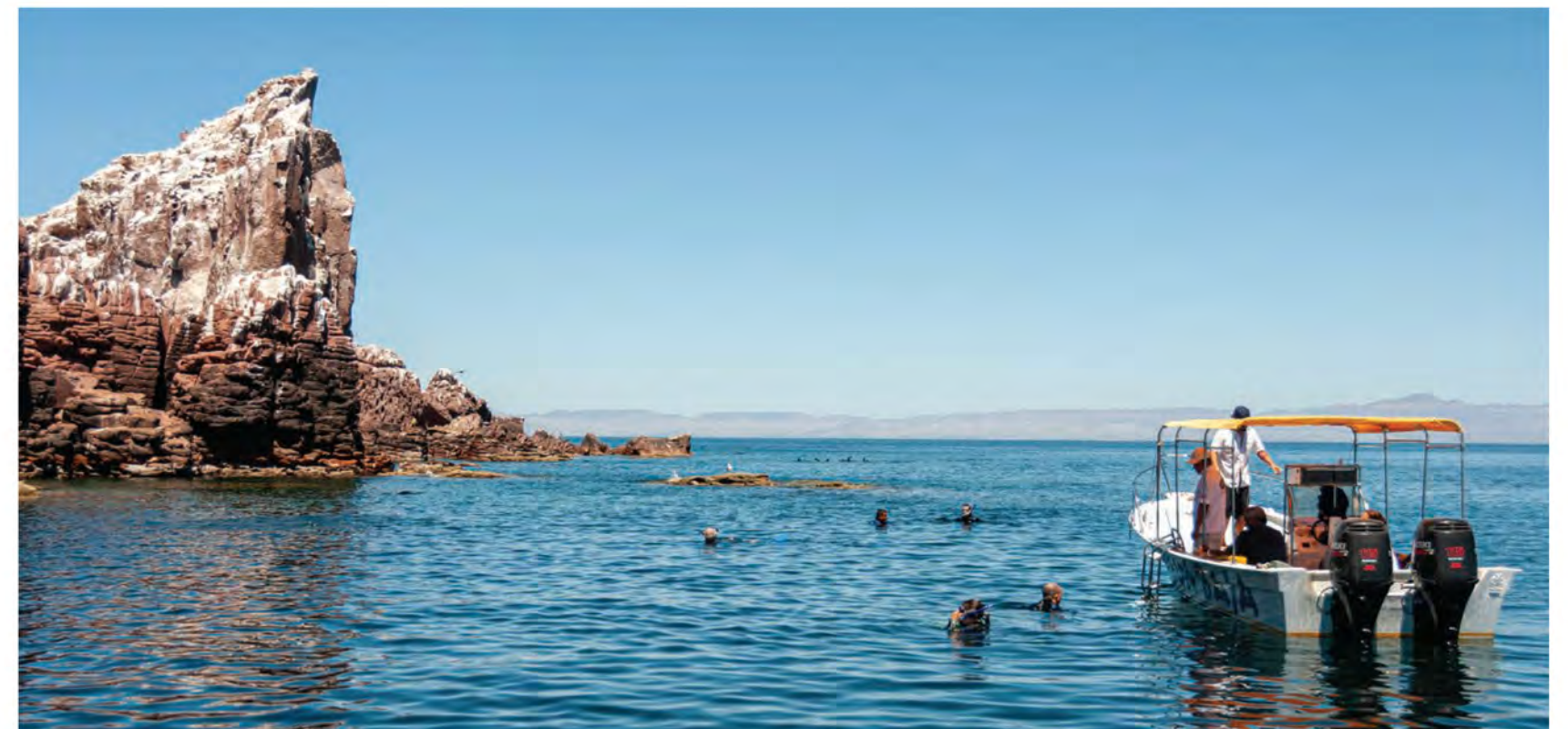
So far, we had only had breakfast there – and it was delicious. We were excited to finally try their modern Greek-inspired menu and we weren't disappointed. Chef Panos Vounos served us a starter of mezze – a beautiful trio of hummus, beetroot cream, and ktipiti (a Greek red pepper and feta dip) accompanied by house-made pita. That was followed by our main courses of grilled totoaba with a sauce of kalamata olives and capers over perfectly al dente veggies, and borego filet slow cooked for fourteen hours. All were out

of this world. Dessert really blew our minds – his take on a cheesecake made with cream and red fruits, topped with chocolate flakes. It was all we could do to not order another. We slept well that night!

Even though we didn't have time for real recreation, no visit to La Paz would be complete without a trip to the beaches, deep sea fishing, or snorkeling with the sea

(ABOVE AND BELOW) | It's impossible to find a better spot to watch the sunset and enjoy a cocktail than the rooftop bar at Baja Club Hotel. Snorkling with the sea lions at La Islotes.

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(ABOVE, BELOW AND FAR RIGHT) | THIS PAGE: Sea lions sunning on Las Islotes, a protected habitat for them. The Sea of Cortez is full of surprises. Our old fave ice cream shop has gotten a facelift! **OPPOSITE PAGE:** La Paz is full of characters! Outdoor cafes are everywhere and buzzing! The Nuestra Señora de La Paz Cathedral.

lions – all things that we’ve done, loved, and photographed before. Quiet and tranquil Playa Balandra – now a national park - has become so popular that in an effort to curb overcrowding and beach degradation, the city sells a limited number of passes which they issue for either a morning or afternoon period. This takes some planning but it’s worth it. A kilometer away is Playa Tecolote with its variety of fresh-from-the-sea restaurants, jet ski rentals, a deep beach, and commanding view of Cerralvo Island.

For us, though, a panga trip out to the

rocky island of Las Islotes to snorkel or dive with the sea lions is a must. The island lies within the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and is home to hundreds of these large mammals who will swim around you and nibble at your fins. It’s a once in a lifetime experience and not to be missed.

La Paz welcomed us with open arms, and it was great to be back. Yes, the city remains the sweet little sister but has continued growing and developing into a fresh and vibrant beauty. It’s a city that has come of age but hasn’t lost its soul and identity.



Contacts:

Baja Club Hotel
<https://bajclubhotel.com>

Golf
<https://elcortegolf.com>

Food Tour
 Live, Love, And Eat La Paz Street Food – an Airbnb experience

Mural Tour
<https://streetartlpz.com>

Sea Lion Tour
<https://www.redtravelmexico.com/en> **El Fin!**

“La Paz welcomed us with open arms... It’s a city that has come of age but hasn’t lost its soul and identity.”

