

CABO LIVING®

EXPLORING Loreto

This continually evolving Baja city has a lot to offer to visitors and residents alike!

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

Sitting in the taxi on our way to the airport to catch our return flight to LA from Loreto, we struggled with how we would approach the article we were writing about our week in this charming and beautiful town nestled between the Sea of Cortez and the towering and imposing Sierra de la Giganta mountains.

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(ABOVE) | We never got tired of the view driving south into Loreto passing the Loreto Bay Golf Resort.

Joan suggested “Loreto – Past, Present, and Future” but we weren’t so sure that it was that simple. And it sounded like the title of a PowerPoint presentation.

Yes – there’s a lot of “past” there and the current Loreto wears it all proudly. The present is ever-changing and, as for the future, we met a handful of people who have a lot of ideas about where it’s heading and what comes next.

What initially brought us here was a press release we received about the recent dredging of the entrance to Marina Puerto Escondito to allow it to accommodate larger mega-yachts. We knew enough about Loreto as a small, quiet, and historic town for that bit of info to be a head-turner. Mega-yachts in Loreto?

We’ve driven through Loreto a number of times, but never stopped longer than one

night on our way to somewhere else. We never got too far past the *zócalo* and wherever we happened to stumble into for dinner and breakfast. This time, we set aside a full five days to see what we missed. As it turns out, it was a lot.

The past is there to see, to touch, and to go inside of, and it flows seamlessly into the present and future almost without you realizing it.

The Misión de Nuestra Señora de Loreto Conchó sits at the beginning of *Camino Real* just off the *zócalo*. The church’s bell tower is visible from just about everywhere and defines the city. The original mission was established by Jesuit missionary Juan Maria de Salvatierra in 1697 and it became the very first mission in the very first permanent settlement in the California’s. That settlement became Loreto. The

(BELOW) | Main municipal building on the *zócalo*. Entertainment and snacks on the *Camino Real*. Nuestra Señora de Loreto Conchó.



beautiful stone church was completed in 1744, and even though the mission moved 16 miles inland to San Javier in search of a better water supply for their crops (more on that in a little while), Loreto remained the headquarters for the Jesuits as well as the Franciscans and Dominicans who succeeded them.

It was from this location that the entire chain of missions throughout Baja and what ultimately became California began. The *Camino Real* – The King’s Highway – connected all of them, and still does.

On our way to dinner our first night in town, we stumbled on a wedding ceremony at the church and watched from the massive wooden doors along with other passersby as the bride made her way to the altar on her father’s arm. It was thrilling to imagine how many brides and fathers have walked on the same stone floor – now brightly polished

with age – in the centuries since the church was built.

We walked across the pedestrian-only street to restaurant Mi Loreto, and as we ate delicious chiles rellenos and perfectly prepared *pescado Veracruzano* while drinking hibiscus margaritas – the first of many - we saw the bride and groom, followed by the rest of the wedding party, emerge from the church, off to start their new lives together as so many had done before them.

Misión San Javier sits at the end of the winding *Camino Real* - the road that links to Our Lady of Loreto - and today, the paved two-lane road is built on the same trail through the mountains that the missionaries traveled on horseback on their search for fresh water. The uncrowded asphalt climbs through the mountains, dives into valleys, passes by open ranches and farmland, and oases filled with giant palms. We watched

(ABOVE) | The classic arch that marks the beginning of the *Camino Real* - the road that links all of the California mission together. The road to San Javier. San Javier Mission.

the scenery change seemingly by the minute from the picture windows of the taxi van that we hired on the *malecon* to make the 24-mile drive.

The mission - the second built in Baja – was established in 1699 but was abandoned in 1710 due to – again – a lack of water and was reestablished a few miles south to its present location. The construction of the church took place between 1744 and 1758, and the resulting building is often called the jewel of the Baja California mission churches. Walking through the doors and

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(ABOVE) | San Javier Mission. The oldest olive tree in North America. Vista del Mar. The "patio" at the "Clam Shack" (Vista del Mar). Shrimp cocktails at the "Clam Shack" (Vista del Mar).

sitting in a pew gave us a quiet opportunity to admire and appreciate what was built so many centuries ago. The wood and stone carvings, the opulent gold leaf, and the beautiful cupola were breathtaking.

The mission was deserted by 1871, but the church - sitting at the foot of the Giganta mountains - was lovingly restored by the National Institute of Anthropology and History who now maintains it. Every year on December 3, thousands of pilgrims from all over Mexico still make their way here - some on foot - to celebrate their patron saint Javier who was one of the founders of the Jesuit order.

Behind the church we followed a path to see what is claimed to be - at 300 years old - the first and oldest olive tree in Baja. A large local dog was wisely lazing in its shade as we approached and didn't move a whisker as we

made a donation to the man who maintains and protects the tree.

At the suggestion of the driver, instead of having lunch at one of the touristy restaurants by the mission, we headed back toward town to the Vista del Mar restaurant - better known as The Clam Shack. It's a small place just south of town right on the sand with an expansive view of the Sea of Cortez and all her islands. We sat under a large palapa and had great *tacos de pescado*, a shrimp cocktail, and the clams chocolates - the dish they're known for. Delicious. If it hadn't been lunchtime, we would've taken advantage of the full bar but, generally, no good ever comes from day drinking.

The setting was perfect, and it was hard to tear ourselves away but it was time for a little more site-seeing. Our taxi driver wanted to take us to see the Loreto Bay Development



and we were curious - having read so much about the once-troubled endeavor.

Visible from the highway, we didn't know what to expect as we made our way towards the entry gates. What we found was a combination of attractive condos, townhouses, and stand-alone homes all painted in beautifully muted hues of blues, greens, yellows, and pinks. There were restaurants, shops, a spa, and various other services. There's also the Loreto Bay Golf Resort and Spa whose course was recently renovated by David Duval.

It had been a big day and we had another on the books for tomorrow - a trip out to Coronado Island for a day of snorkeling with Sara and Juve Orozco's Loreto Sea & Land Tours.

Our driver dropped us at our hotel, the

boutique Rosarito - just a few blocks from both the *malecon* and the *zócalo*. Loreto is full of these small, personal hotels, and the Rosarito is one of the best examples of why they're so popular. With only 15 rooms around a central courtyard and pool, it's hip, really comfy, and quiet with a wonderfully attentive staff. The hotel has an eclectic mix of traditional Mexican and '60's modern furniture including multi-colored Acapulco chairs and loveseats, but what really won us over was the Warhol-esque portraits in the lobby of the owner's mother. Breakfast is served poolside every morning al gusto - omelets, breakfast tacos, fresh fruit, and fresh juices. The perfect way to start the day.

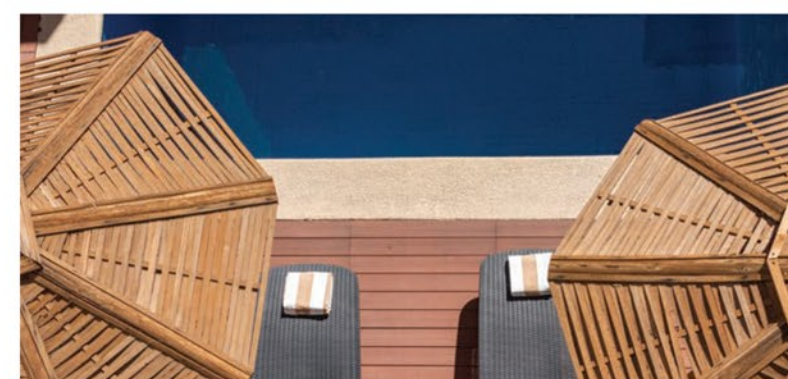
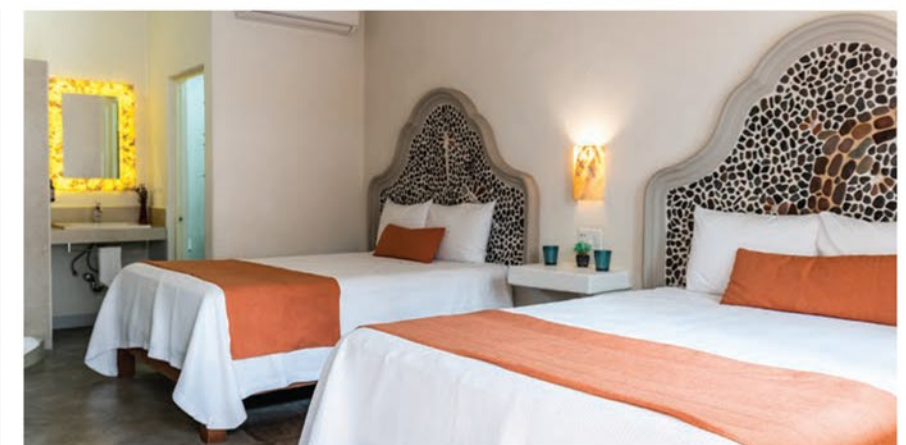
After breakfast, we walked over to meet our day trip group under the blue whale sculpture at Loreto Marina. There were

(ABOVE AND BELOW) | The Hotel Rosarito. The Hotel Rosarito owner's aunt - the namesake of the hotel. The pool and beds at Hotel Rosarito. If one makes a date to meet someone else in Loreto, the Loreto Marina is usually the spot.

eight of us plus our guide and captain, and in short order, we each paid for our permits to frolic in the waters of the Loreto Bay National Park, boarded our *panga*, and headed out into the bay.

The Mexican government's designation of National Park - covering 494,210 acres

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(ABOVE AND BELOW) | Never a dull day snorkeling in the Sea of Cortez. Our cove on Coronado. It's hard to grasp how large a fin whale is as this is just a small part of her. They generally don't breach or spyhop like humpbacks or grays.

and including five rocky islands: Coronado, Danzante, Carmen, Monserrat, and Santa Catalina - happened in 1996, and in 2005, UNESCO declared Loreto Bay National Park a world Heritage site. The islands stunning in their starkness and how their sharp peaks and cliffs stand out against the unending blue sky.

We motored around Isla Carmen on our way to the volcanic Isla Coronado, seeing countless sea birds and several colonies of sea lions. The big event, though, was the sighting of a pod of enormous fin whales - second in size only to blue whales. As the captain

cut the motor, we watched the mothers and their babies diving and surfacing all around us. Their relatively small dorsal fin gives no hint as to their size which averages 75' - 85' in length. They rarely breach or spy hop, and instead kind of roll through the surface on their way to diving again. Not wanting to disturb them by chasing them, we waited until they swam away, then took off in the opposite direction. We couldn't stop talking about the encounter while we made a few snorkeling stops on the way to Coronado. We finally pulled into a beautiful cove on the back side of the island where there were



several large lunching palapas on the white sand beach. Our group quickly claimed one as our own.

Then we hit the clear blue water with masks, snorkels, and fins and right away saw a virtual kaleidoscope of life - needlefish, king angels, tons of barberfish, surgeonfish, balloonfish, leopard groupers, golden wrass, blue chromis, sergeant majors, and so many more. And all of them were right off the beach and around a rocky outcropping close by. Snorkeling was so easy in our little cove that we all stayed in much longer than we planned.

We worked up an appetite and the burrito spread that had been prepared for us by the tour was perfect. Afterwards, Joan and I

took a walk on the raised wooden nature path that, had we been feeling a little more energetic, would've taken us - after merging with a dirt trail - several miles inland and 950' up to the top of the volcano's summit cone. We were content to stay at ground level, looking at the desert flora which were all described with signs right off the path.

One last snorkel and we packed up, climbed into the panga wet and happy, and headed back to town. What a great day!

But it wasn't over yet! After we showered and dressed, we decided that what we really needed now was a massage.

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(ABOVE AND BELOW) | Sea lions. The nature trail on Coronado Island. Coronado Island shore. The nature trail on Coronado Island has signs identifying the flora. A pelican well-camouflaged against the rocks. Rocky outcroppings dot Loreto Bay and provide a home to countless sea birds and sea lions.





(ABOVE AND BELOW) | Spa Las Flores. Stepping inside Curios La Casa de La Abuela was like stepping back in time - and we found a few old treasures amongst the curios and souvenirs. The unlikely duo of a pug and an iguana guarding the curio shop. Loreto is a very colorful town. They love their mailboxes. We met a man who made this alter in his driveway. Pelicans in the bay.

It was only a few short blocks through the cooling evening air to the zócalo and Spa Las Flores. Luckily, they had an opening for both of us and, an hour later, we stumbled into Orlando's for dinner feeling very, very relaxed. It had been a very good massage. A few palomas, cochinita pibil, and a freshly caught fish filet done simply on the grill, and

we were ready to stroll the half a block back to the hotel for an extraordinary night's sleep. The following morning, we headed to the malecon and Los Mandiles for breakfast. We ultimately loved it so much, we went back another day. The chilaquiles were outstanding, and I couldn't think about leaving Loreto without having them again.

After breakfast, we leisurely hit a few of the many curio sellers along the Camino Real and wandered into a shop that was housed in an old adobe building near the church. The owner, who was sitting outside carving little wooden pigs while his unlikely duo of security guards - his pet iguana and pug - gave us the side-eye - told us that the place had been in his family for generations.

Walking inside was like stepping back in time. The hundreds-of-years-old floorboards creaked under our feet as we cleared cobwebs and dust off some treasures we stumbled upon in the dark back corner of the shop. The owner was surprised at our finds, made us a great deal, and we were on our way.

Just around the corner, we found Gecko's Curios - an amazing store that features the high quality, hand-made, and very original work of artisans from all over Mexico. The store is arranged by artist, and each section has a photo and bio of each one. It's an amazing collection, and we were certainly tempted - but - sometimes it's enough just to look and appreciate - especially if one's house is already overflowing.



We decided to wander into the not-to-touristy part of town and immediately met a man in front of his house who had built a large and intricate alter to Our Lady of Guadalupe in his driveway. He welcomed us in to take a look and it was a real work of art and devotion. Around the corner, we found an enormous painted mural that showed people what not to do in the pristine waters of the National Marine Park - no spearfishing, no dumping of garbage, and more. It seemed to us that the locals and tourists alike paid attention and took the warnings to heart.

The day before, we had spied a pretty café called Pepegina's at the Loreto Marina where all of the local fishing pangas were tied up and we made our way there for lunch. As we ate fish tacos and drank refreshing *jamaica's*, we were treated to a never-ending show of pelicans diving head-first into the water, gulls circling overhead keeping an eye out for scraps, and fishermen carefully lowering their trailers down the boat ramp and into the water to pull their pangas out. We watched

with great admiration as a boy who couldn't have been older than 10 or 11 calmly and skillfully maneuvered his father's boat right onto the trailer on the first try.

That evening, Stenson Hamann, Marketing Manager at Marina Puerto Escondito, picked us up at our hotel and drove us out to the marina for dinner at the second-floor outdoor restaurant, Las Brisas, overlooking not only the slips full of boats of every size and shape, but the islands as well. He had invited some friends to join us - Deanna and Rob - who have been living aboard their 60' trawler in the marina for close to two years. The couple, originally from Colorado, packed it all in a few years ago, bought their first boat - this very same deep-blue trawler - learned how to drive it and, along with their two large dogs, ultimately made their way to Baja, spending time in each marina along the way. After dinner, they invited us onboard and over mezcal and salty dark chocolate on the fly bridge, they told us that they truly view Marina Puerto Escondito and Loreto as their

home. We asked them about the difference between Loreto and, for instance, Costa Baja in La Paz. Almost in unison, they said "Look around!" motioning to the giant islands silhouetted against the starry Baja night sky. "It's just so beautiful here!" Deanna said. "There's so much to see and do on the water. We just cruise around the islands, fish, and anchor wherever we want. There's always something new - even after two years here! Rob added "And the people - well - it's such a real community! And - it's so quiet." And if this evening was an example, the marina - and Loreto - certainly was all of those things.

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(BELOW) | There are a lot of rules about what one can and can't do in the Marine Park. This is only one of them. Fishing pangas tied up after a morning in the bay. Fish Tacos at Pepegina's.



The next morning, Stenson met us at the hotel again to take us back to the marina for a proper tour and a day on the water.

We walked through the well-stocked gourmet provisioning shop, checked out the upper deck pool and hot tub, took a peek into the art gallery and the new coffee shop and lost count of the number and size of the vessels in front of us. It seemed that most all of the slips were occupied, and Stenson told us that they were beginning construction of 22 more that can accommodate vessels up to 100'. That will bring the total number of slips to between 120 and 130. Plus, there are 112 mooring balls. The largest yacht they've had at the marina is 255', but they can accommodate up to 300'. And by freeing up space with the new slips, they'll be able to

have five or six 200-footers at the same time – along with the fuel dock and infrastructure to support them.

A hotel is in the works, but the important and ambitious piece of the puzzle is the planned real estate community Waicura on the man-made islands at the marina. The first phase includes 19 lots for custom homes – all facing the water and each with its own dock which can host yachts up to 100'. An incredible model home sits on one lot, with another being built next door, and they have plans in place to begin more custom home construction throughout 2022. The house is jaw-droppingly beautiful with state-of-the-art finishes throughout and as an example, it's not at all difficult to envision what the fully built community will look like.

(BELOW) | Passing a few mega-yachts at the marina. Cruising around Danzante Island. The mega-yachts in Marina Puerto Escondido.



Clearly, Marina Puerto Escondito is an indicator of the future of Loreto.

Stenson's sleek fishing boat was tied up at the houses' dock, and we climbed aboard. As we motored out toward the marina proper, we got to see and really appreciate how beautiful the setting was with the protected bay on one side, and the towering mountains on the other.

On our way toward the newly-dredged entrance to the marina, we passed two massive mega-yachts at their slips, and another one was anchored just off the marina in the bay. Our 30' boat felt tiny in comparison.

Stenson took us for a slow spin around the entire 17 mile-long Danzante Island which is just off-shore. It rises out of impossibly clear turquoise water and, as are all of the islands, is a snorkeler's and kayaker's paradise. It's also

home to a large variety of birds including the Blue-footed Booby.

As we cruised, he told us that the marina not only offers fishing charters, but also arranges bespoke sea and land tours depending on what the guests want. We started to head toward the 37,000-acre Isla Carmen which was home to a commercial salt operation until 1984. From our approach, we could see the natural beauty of the island with its 1600' mountain range rising out of the sea. Stenson said that one of the more popular trips they put together is a day trip picnic to one of the islands. With the details of Carmen coming more clearly into view, we saw two blue pop-up tents on the beach in a little cove, and a bright pink panga pulled up on the sand. He had arranged one of those picnics for us!

We were shuttled to the beach in that pink

(ABOVE) | Cruising around Danzante Island. The incredible model home at Waicura at Puerto Escondido. Home sites across the channel waiting for development. We could get used to this home!

panga and as we jumped ashore, we took one look at the spread that was waiting for us and were amazed. Fresh clams chocolates, ceviche, a whole fish cochinita pibil roasting on a grill, endless guacamole, chips, Topo Chico and beer. We watched the gourmet chef and his daughter finish preparing our lunch and we happily settled into the sling-

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(ABOVE AND BELOW) | The surprise picnic lunch waiting for us on Carmen Island. It's one of the outings that Marina Puerto Escondido offers. What a setting for a picnic! Clams chocolates was the order of the day for our picnic. Fresh-caught ceviche at our picnic. The signature Hole #17 at Danzante Bay golf course at the Islands of Loreto resort. Loreto street vendor on the Camino Real. Every town has one of these but few have a setting quite as stunning.

style beach chairs with plates piled high. The three of us lazed away the afternoon, and Joan took a post-lunch dip in the warm water. I climbed up to the top of a nearby bluff to get a bird's eye view of where we were. To say it was stunning would be putting it mildly. Hours later – and all too soon – we were back on the pink panga shuttling to Stenson's boat for the return to the marina. Joan and I have traveled all through Baja for many years, and have found ourselves in some pretty wonderful places doing some pretty wonderful things along the way – many of

them for this magazine. This day, however, was next-level special and was truly one of the most memorable of them all. Back at the house, Stenson arranged a tour for us of the TPC Danzante Bay golf course at the Islands of Loreto Resort, so we jumped right into his Suburban for the short drive over. The world-class course, designed by Rees Jones, meanders from the water to the mountains, and the beautifully manicured greens stand in stark contrast to the earthen tones and blue water that surround them. We hopped into a cart with one of the golf



PHOTO BY STENSON HAWANN

pros who immediately drove us to their signature hole – 17 – which is on a narrow little spit of a high bluff jutting out over the sea. The tee box that we were standing on seemed impossibly far away on solid land, and we imagined that the ravine that stood between us and the green was filled with the frustrations of many a good golfer. We drove around to see the rest of the course and each hole had its own personality. Some were dramatic, some were calming, and some seemed to be designed fool a player into thinking it was easy. We met a few of those golfers along the way who told us that they book a trip here from the US twice a year and because of the hotel and amenities at Villa del Palmar – the hotel in the resort - they never have to

leave the property during their golf week. It's not a small hotel, but it's a testament to the designers of the resort that it blends almost seamlessly into the landscape – a theme repeated throughout the other developments we visited. We managed one more dinner at Mi Loreto and over several more hibiscus margaritas, we talked about what we'd seen and experienced throughout the week. It was a lot. And the next morning in the taxi, as we got closer to the airport, we finally came to realize that Joan was correct after all – Loreto was indeed all about its past, its present, and its future – but that they have melded together into one exciting and diverse identity that encompasses them all.

- *Marina Puerto Escondido*
<https://www.marinapuertocondido.com>
- *Loreto Sea and Land Tours*
<https://www.toursloreto.com>
- *Hotel Rosarito Loreto*
<https://hotelrosaritoloreto.com>
- *Danzante Bay*
<https://danzantebay.com>
- *Spa Las Flores*
spalafloresloreto.com

El Fin!

(BELOW) | Danzante Bay golf course at the Islands of Loreto resort. Las Brisas restaurant at the Marina overlooks the slips and islands. It's a stunning view. Marina Puerto Escondido before the development began.

