



# RANCHO *Cacachilas*

*Preserving a piece of Baja.*

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

The Cape spiny-tailed iguana was so still that we thought our guide, Jafet, had planted a stuffed one on the most perfect rock in the most perfect slash of sunlight where we would be sure to see it on our hike up the side of the canyon. Suddenly, its eyes blinked, and it turned its head toward us. He continued to pose for a good five minutes and then, tired of all the attention and picture taking, scurried up the hillside, blending into the surroundings, until we lost sight of him.

That would not be the last of the wildlife we saw; lots of jackrabbits, bright red cardinals, turkey vultures, hawks, roadrunners, hummingbirds, and a Cape Striped Racer snake happily swallowing its baby bunny dinner, rounded out the day. And that barely scratched the surface.

We were hiking through a canyon on the 33,000-acre eco-adventure camp Rancho Cacachilas – a short 2-hour drive north of

Cabo nestled between the rugged Sierra de las Cacachilas and the small kiteboarding towns of La Ventana and El Sargento on Ventana Bay.

It's almost impossible to wrap one's head around what 33,000 acres really is. Jafet told us to look around in every direction and everything we saw was just about it. Rancho Cacachilas is the culmination of philanthropist Christy Walton's vision to

*Continued on next page*



(FAR LEFT AND ABOVE) | OPPOSITE PAGE:  
The Cape spiny-tailed Iguana posing for us.  
THIS PAGE: On the Water Hike.



**(ABOVE)** | As far as you can see in all directions, it's all Rancho Cacachilas. The main gate to the Ranch. Our guide, Jafet, knows everything about everything. A Cape striped racer snake warning us to get away from his dinner.

develop a property that researches harvesting water, studies soil regeneration, promotes biodiversity, and preserves ranch culture. Comprised of ten contiguous ranches that she started purchasing 15 years ago - most of them abandoned or out of business or in such bad shape that they could no longer support crops or livestock, her goal was to restore the area's ecological and cultural heritages, keeping the names of the original ranches under the umbrella of Rancho Cacachilas. It opened to the public only six years ago, but since 2013, has been used as a center for research by the San Diego Natural

History Museum. We coined it "the biggest laboratory in the world." Arriving at the Ranch with open minds, we really didn't know what to expect. Prior to our arrival, after a handful of e-mails back and forth, the staff crafted a wonderful 3-day itinerary based on our interests and abilities. We knew we'd be well-taken care of. Turning off the highway onto the property, we were greeted by Jafet who was waiting for us at the gate in his rental SUV. We followed him in our little rental car, bouncing over the well-kept dirt roads ingeniously designed with low bumps, or



topes, that keep rainwater from eroding the surface. Finally arriving at the social center of the property - Rancho Chivato - Jafet showed us to our room - one of four comfortable ranch suites set back under a cool, rustic, inviting veranda. Looking around the room, Joan noticed something missing. She looked at Jafet who seemed to understand before she could ask the question. "Now, I'll show you the bathrooms," he said, leading us out the back door.

A short walk up a path brought us to a chic little complex of wonderfully designed outdoor sinks, and an open-air building with low-flow flush toilets and more sinks and mirrors. The water comes from their own wells, heated by solar, and purified, of course.

He smiled as he showed us the showers. Water in Southern Baja is scarce and one of

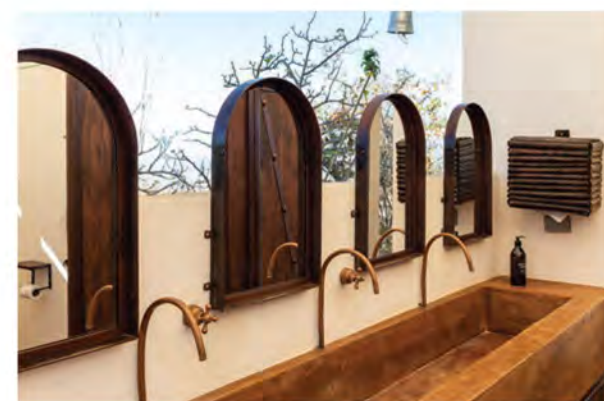
the main goals of the ranch is to use as little as possible. "They're bucket showers," he said, pointing to the five-gallon metal pails and pint-size camping cups lined up like little soldiers around hot and cold spigots. "Fill up a bucket, grab a cup, and carry it into one of the private shower stalls," he instructed. "You'll be surprised at how little water you use to get clean." To top it off, there were bottles of 100% biodegradable, ranch approved, shower gel, shampoo, and conditioner.

Everything was thought of and considered with great attention to detail, style, and ecology.

Continuing a brief tour of the area, we

**(ABOVE AND BELOW)** | One of the four comfy and cozy ranch Suites on the property. The buckets and cupos for the bucket showers are lined up like little soldiers. Poured concrete and copper can be found at all of the open-air bathrooms. The Ranch's pool - sweet and comfortable. One of the ten beautiful glamping tents, each under a palapa.

*Continued on next page*





**(ABOVE AND BELOW)** | The ranch house where all the meals are served. Communal dining at the ranch house. The Ranch supplies hiking sticks for their guests. The fish taco spread was incredible - made with farmed Totoaba fish from iAlumbra's aquaculture fishery in La Paz.

walked by the ten beautiful glamping tents dotting the compound – each one on a raised concrete slab and covered by a palapa – and placed far enough away from each other to insure privacy. He showed us the original ranch house which is a gathering spot and where the communal meals would be served. The small pool and fire pit were a stone's throw away.

After unpacking, Jafet met us on the roof deck of the ranch suite building with ice-cold mojitos and some snacks to watch Ventana Bay fade to a deep blue/black as the sun dipped below the mountains behind us.

The dinner bell rang at 7:00 and we made our way to the ranch house. We shared two long tables on the porch with six other

guests, three guides, and some of the staff. A welcomed breeze drifted through, as Jafet explained that Rancho Cacachilas is part of Christy Walton's iAlumbra, an organization that supports a diverse group of businesses that fall into four general categories – aquaculture, land stewardship, community development, and investment in the future. Employing close to 100 people full time - from researchers to vaqueros, guides, organic gardeners, road and trail maintenance crews - the Ranch also works with local farmers, sharing their knowledge with the goal of helping to save their farms by improving farming techniques and production. iAlumbra is always working to bring environmental, social, and economic improvements to the La Paz area.



As we all chatted and enjoyed the great selection of Mexican wines from the Valle de Guadalupe, Chef Emmanuel Loya treated us to a wonderful chicken pipian – a delicate, rich mole made with pumpkin seeds. The chicken, we were told, comes from a local farmer close by - one of the local producers that the ranch goes out of its way to support. Dinner, served with grilled vegetables and a bright mixed green salad all from the ranch's organic farm was perfect. The desert was a heavenly mocha flan, made by Emmanuel's pastry chef Dulce (yes, that's her real name!).

This was just a preview of the meals to come.

Chef Loya, a La Paz native, went to culinary school in Puebla. As head chef at the Ranch, he creates dishes that take advantage of local ingredients grown on the Ranch, and also the fresh fish and seafood that comes

from Christy Walton's aquaculture open-ocean farms. His imagination runs wild. One day, it was a vegetable poke bowl over rice for lunch, and an exuberant Totoaba fish taco spread for dinner. He has a wood burning pizza oven ready for whenever the mood strikes him and a loyal team ready to help him with every original and off-beat idea he comes up with.

Tired and really happy, we headed back to our room for a much-needed lie-down. The room was dark and silent, and we slept a sweet deep, dream-filled sleep.

The morning bell woke us up in time to enjoy a quick bucket shower and a delicious ranch breakfast of freshly ground coffee, Dulce's tasty banana bread, fresh fruit,

**(ABOVE)** | The Ranch's own farm supplies the kitchen with most of its produce for all the meals served there. Chef Emmanuel Loya, shown here with a wood burning pizza oven, kept us well-fed and lubricated throughout our stay. One of the many gabions constructed throughout the Ranch. Here, you can see the result: runoff from the mountain pooling and sinking slowly into the aquifer.

*Continued on next page*



**(ABOVE AND BELOW)** | Ancient Cardon cacti are everywhere. Sunrise over Ventana Bay. We saw a lot of these jackrabbits everywhere we went. Roadrunners were also everywhere.

yogurt, granola, eggs any style - with or without bacon - beans and tortillas and a rotating selection of *aguas frescas*. Afterwards, we joined the other guests for the morning Water Hike. During the hike, we learned how the Ranch not only conserves as much rainwater as possible, but also protects the land from erosion caused by the rainfall. Those two things go hand in hand and much of that is achieved, Jafet told us, by a series of stepped walls called gabions. Resembling big cages filled with rocks, they slow down the flow of water, allowing it to pool and sink into the underground aquifers. Because 75% of rainwater generally goes to the ocean or evaporates due to heat,

this is a really important step in managing the environment. Months after the last rain, there were still small ponds of water throughout the area. And where there was no visible water, the ground under our feet, typically a hard, dry and unforgiving decomposed granite, was soft and moist. Delicate desert flowers and ridiculously shaped ancient cardon cacti and an unexpected oasis of palm trees brought the desert to life. The hike's grand finale ended on a high ridge overlooking the entire crescent of beautiful Ventana Bay and Cerralvo Island. Magic. Jafet was the perfect choice of guide for us. He's the kind of guy that if you asked



**(ABOVE AND BELOW)** | The entrance to ranch Dos Hermanos - the goat ranch. Mickey showing Joan how to milk a goat. The goats follow Mickey like little puppies.

him what time it was, he'd teach you how to make a watch. If we weren't asking questions every few minutes, he seemed to intuit what we were thinking and let loose with an incredible amount of information about the flora and fauna and geography, climate, and history of the peninsula. He's a great and funny storyteller and very excited to be a part of this amazing project. He loves what he's doing, and it shows. When he talks about the Ranch, he always says "we" and he means it. Everyone who works there feels that they're part of something big and important and take great pride in that.

The next morning, after breakfast, we climbed into Jafet's SUV and drove up to Rancho Dos Hermanos to learn how to make *panela* goat cheese. First on the agenda - milk the goat. Joan stepped right up, grabbed hold, and the bucket was filled in no time. Jafet told us that their 17 milking goats average about three and a half liters of milk each per day. Most of the other local ranches get only about two liters. "It's because we free-range the goats and they just know

*Continued on next page*





**(ABOVE, BELOW AND FAR RIGHT) | THIS PAGE:** The goats found a great place to have lunch. Joan with Jenny (center) and Jessie (left) starting the cheese-making process with the milk Joan just coaxed from the goat. Joan pours the cheese curds into the basket form. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** The Ranch's Queso Girasol in the aging room. Some of the packaged cheeses that Ranch sells at the Adventure Hub. All of the different cheeses made on the Ranch. More of the products made at the Ranch.

to eat what's good for them," he said. "We also take them somewhere different every day to not over-use the land. That protects the environment and keeps the goats very healthy," he continued.

Then it was off to the kitchen to begin the process with Jenny, the Big Cheese cheesemaker, and her assistant, Jessie. The first step, which involved waiting for the milk to reach a specific temperature, gave us time to go on a free-range walk with Mickey, the goat whisperer. He opened the pen, walked toward the road, and the entire herd followed

him like little puppies. About a half-mile away, the goats stopped and began foraging. After twenty minutes or so, they were full and, without a cue from Mickey, just turned around and marched themselves back into their big, shady enclosure. We spent some time petting and being generally awed by how healthy, beautiful, and handsome they all were. The babies were very curious about us and approached willingly. There was definitely some goat love going on here.

After spending more time in the kitchen with Jenny and Jessie, stirring and filtering



and carefully pouring the cheese curds into their molds to rest for about four hours, we were ready to have a nice glass of Valle de Guadalupe chilled white wine to accompany the beautiful cheese board she laid out for us with all of the different types of cheeses they make on the Ranch: Cempasuchil which is a creamy chèvre, a semi-soft cheese with a crust of charcoal ash called Palo Blanco,

*Continued on next page*





**(ABOVE)** | The top of one of the 56 miles of trails throughout the Ranch. The factory-trained bike mechanics keep all the bikes in great shape for the next rental. Gaston, vaquero chief, making last-minute adjustments to our saddles.

another semi-soft one with a hard custard rind called Girasol, and Toronte, a hard aged cheese similar to parmesan. The Ranch doesn't produce these cheeses commercially, but if you look carefully, you can find them in a few select boutiques in the area.

Now it was time to go on a drive to see as much of the rest of the property as we could. Jafet took us to the old silver mine – Las Canoas – where there are still rusty vestiges of the underground mines that populated these mountains since as far back as the 1700's. We drove way up to the top of one of the mountains to get an idea of the 56 miles of world class hiking and mountain bike

trails constructed with the assistance of the International Mountain Bicycling Association and maintained by the Ranch's five-member trail crew. Then we slowly drove down to sea level to check out the Adventure Hub in El Sargento where, if you haven't brought your own bike, you can rent one of their brand-new Specialized mountain bikes - electric or standard. The friendly and super knowledgeable staff made it sound like everything was possible if you just wanted to try it.

The morning of our final day found us face to face with a few saddled mules tied up under the cool shade of a wild plum tree. Rancho Cacachilas's *vaquero* chief, Gaston Amao, was



making the last few adjustments to his own saddle before helping us with ours. All settled in, we started our slow ramble up a wide, soft arroyo close by. It was lush with palo verde, cacachila, cardon cactus, wild plum, and what seemed like most of the close-to 500 species of plants that are endemic to the area. The pace of the mules was perfect and, thankfully, unchallenging which allowed us to really take in our surroundings. Gaston is a man of few words, so Jafet got to show off his knowledge of – well – everything. It was a great way to wrap up our adventure.

With our car all packed up, we drove behind Jafet as he escorted us to the gates by the highway. As we were saying our goodbyes at the Ranch gate, he said to us "Remember, when you write the article, Rancho Cacachilas is a real working ranch with some amenities, not an amenity ranch with a little work!"

It was, we agreed, the perfect definition.

Note: In addition to overnight stays, the Ranch welcomes day trips that can include mountain biking, hiking, mule riding, and the cheeses making workshop.

Contact: [www.ranhocacachilas.com](http://www.ranhocacachilas.com) **El Fin!**

**(ABOVE AND BELOW)** | Our mules waiting to take on a walk through an arroyo. Jafet and Joan at the fire pit after dinner - the perfect place to unwind and talk about the day. Mule riding through the arroyo through endless flora.

