



Happy Trails

Just off the famed Highway 1, Rancho La Venta offers a chance for a getaway that is surprisingly different from the more well-known Baja recreational opportunities

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

The beaches of Cabo are unquestionably some of the most beautiful in the world. The same goes for the hotels and resorts and their luxurious amenities. And the restaurants are some of the best anywhere. But sometimes, you just want something else – another kind of experience.

We're always on the lookout for something surprisingly different. We don't often know where that search is going to lead us. This time, it took us to an amazing place that we've driven past countless times but never saw - Rancho La Venta.

On the winding road that is Highway 1, halfway between San Antonio and San Bartolo, sits Rancho La Venta, one of the

oldest ranchos in southern Baja, dating back to the 1700's – and now a guest ranch. Bob and Liz Pudwill, who bought the rancho in 1997, told us that the name translates to roadhouse, and that's exactly what it was – being the rest stop for people traveling between the missions of La Paz and Santiago. Bob and Liz are continuing that tradition, having transformed the 350 acre rancho

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(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT) Just off of Highway 1, Rancho La Venta is set amidst the mountains, and features an impressive view and a spring-fed swimming pool. Branding irons are among the artifacts to be found at the Rancho. Alaskans, Bob and Liz Pudwill, started with 11 acres, and eventually took the rancho up to 350. Bob has started a vineyard on the land, and they now make their own wine. Liz has an art studio that overlooks the pool.

filled with Cardon and Pitaya cactus, wide arroyos, canyons, and untold wildlife into a wonderful destination for horseback riding, bird watching, and the biggest surprise of all – wine tasting. More about that later.

Bob, a former Alaskan commercial fisherman and salvage diver, and Liz who owned a well-known Mexican restaurant in Cordova, Alaska called Baja Taco, began making the drive from Alaska to Baja in

1988 and in the 90's, built their first home here in Los Barriles. Liz's love of horses spurred them to start looking for a larger piece of property, and that led them to Rancho La Venta. They started modestly, purchasing 11 acres that eventually grew to 350. They're surrounded by history on all sides by some of the oldest family ranchos in Baja. There was nothing on their property except the crumbling remnants of the ancient roadhouse. And, like many of the pioneers of Baja, they had a vision, and soon built their home high on a beautiful ridge overlooking the dramatic Sierra de La Laguna Mountains. As they explored their land, it occurred to them that they had, at their fingertips, the potential for some of the most beautiful and accessible horse trails in southern Baja.

Heading down from La Paz with directions from Bob and Liz, we found the gate to the rancho right off Highway 1. Our first greeters were their mismatched posse of dogs who ran up to us, all tails wagging, as we got out of the car. Liz ambled up the road from one of their barns and gave us each a warm welcoming hug. After we assured her that we had had no trouble finding the place, she showed us to where we would be spending the night – one of three simple but charming and comfortable casitas that they have built for their overnight guests. She and Bob had a lot to show us, she said, so we didn't linger too long inside.

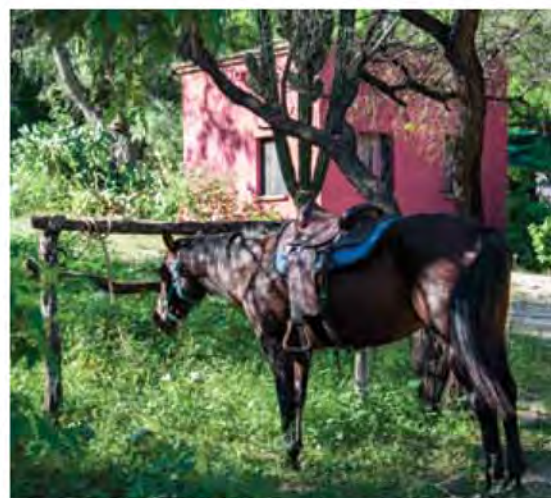
Directly next to the casita is the ruin of the original roadhouse. Bob and Liz stabilized the walls, put a roof on it, and now use it for their wine tastings and other

events. Ancient artifacts – the knives, branding irons, spikes and nails that they uncover almost every day - are everywhere. That's where Bob met us with three bottles of the wine that he produces on the rancho: their round and oaky Chardonnay, a delicious, full-bodied red that's a blend of Cabernet, Nebiola, Zinfandel and Sarah, and a surprisingly dry, crispy white made from mango. We enjoyed all of them. A lot.

Wait - a vineyard in southern Baja? The short answer is yes. The longer answer is that viniculture had always interested Bob, and since they had the land – and water - he decided to learn everything he could about growing grapes and making wine and took

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(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT) | Bob and Liz stabilized the walls of the ruins of the original roadhouse at the Rancho, and have converted it into a wine tasting room. One of Liz's paintings has appeared on the labels for their wine bottles. Cozy casitas have been built to accommodate guests at Rancho La Venta.

the plunge – planting vines and becoming the first vineyard in Baja Sur. As of now, he's only producing for their guests, but will begin selling to the public soon.

But the real attraction of Rancho La Venta are the horses. Over the years, Bob and Liz have designed a wonderful variety of trail rides that appeal to every level of rider. And Liz, a life-long and very accomplished horsewoman, is able to intuitively match any

rider – regardless of ability – to one of their 14 horses. In their tack room, she also has a supply of riding boots and hats for anyone who needs them. There are day rides on back country trails right from the corrals – as short as two hours or as long as you want. They offer an up-country overnight bungalow trip with camp-cooked gourmet meals and three cozy casitas built from local stone and *palo de arco* that accommodate two guests each. It's a two-day ride over open oak-covered hills providing ever-changing views of the vast landscape of the Sierra de La Laguna Mountains. For a real challenge, they also have a three-day guided hike with pack mules over the mountains to Todos Santos.

That evening, we went up to the main house for sunset and a wonderful dinner

that Liz had prepared with vegetables grown in their own garden. Staring out over the terrain, we felt as though we were looking at a part of Baja we had never seen before: endless hills and valleys against the dramatic backdrop of the mountains. After more of Bob's wine and lots of laughs, we retired to our casita to rest up for the next day.

It was a blissfully quiet night and when we awoke, the first person we saw was their ranch hand, Ramiro, who comes to work every day on horseback from over the mountains. He was tending the horses in the cool dappled morning light, and he waved hello as we headed up the path to the

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(ABOVE) | Horses, dogs, artifacts, warm hospitality, and so much more are all great reasons for anyone to pay a visit to Rancho La Venta.

main house for Liz's huevos rancheros, thick bacon, fresh juice, and delicious Mexican coffee. Then, we hit the trails on horseback. Well – I hit the trail on a big brown horse following Liz, and Joan made her way on foot to the idyllic, spring-fed swimming pool – made from locally quarried stone that sits nestled into a beautiful canyon. Liz led me down through arroyos, up cactus-covered

hills, and through forests thick with oak on a two-hour trail ride through their property. I loved it. Meanwhile, Joan was swimming and sunning and visiting Liz's art studio, which overlooks the pool. In addition to being a rancher and chef, Liz manages to find time to work in her studio, painting beautiful landscapes and still-life's. In fact, one of her paintings is the label for the wines produced at Rancho La Venta.

All too soon, it was time to leave. We had an afternoon flight out of La Paz and had to get on the road. Our day and a half at Rancho La Venta gave us a very different insight into the depth and variety of southern Baja. History is everywhere here: a

way of ranching, farming, riding, and living off the land that most visitors to Cabo don't get to see. But because of what Bob and Liz Pudwill have created, that world is readily accessible - only an hour and a half from San José del Cabo.

As Bob and Liz took us to the gate – accompanied by all six of their dogs - to say adios, we knew we'd be back. They wished us "happy trails." And that's exactly what we had just had.

For more information, contact:
Rancho La Venta
 Kilometer 144.5 on Mexico Hwy 1
<http://rancholaventa.com>

El Fin!