

# SANTA ROSALÍA

*¿Habla usted Francés?*



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

Highway 1 is the only road from Cabo to the US border and because of that, Santa Rosalía is a town you can't avoid on any drive up or down the peninsula. Nor should you.

We were planning our drive up the Baja from La Paz to LA and, as always, did our usual massive (some might say obsessive) research about where we were headed. In the case of Santa Rosalía, we had come up with all of the info about the copper mine, the founding of the town, the boom, the bust, and the present boom again. To save you some Google time, here are our Cliff Notes:

A local rancher – José Rosas - discovered copper ore in 1868. The area quickly became overrun with small companies staking out their own claims. Soon, two prospectors -

one Mexican, and the other German - consolidated those claims and constructed eleven mines with a good network of tunnels and galleries. They called their operation *El Boleo* – after the Spanish word for copper bearing pellets. Starting in 1872, they began exporting copper to Europe and in 1883, The House of Rothschild, headquartered in Paris and in control of the world market of industrial minerals, sent two engineers to Baja to see what was going on. They reported back that they estimated there was approximately 700,000 tons of copper in the

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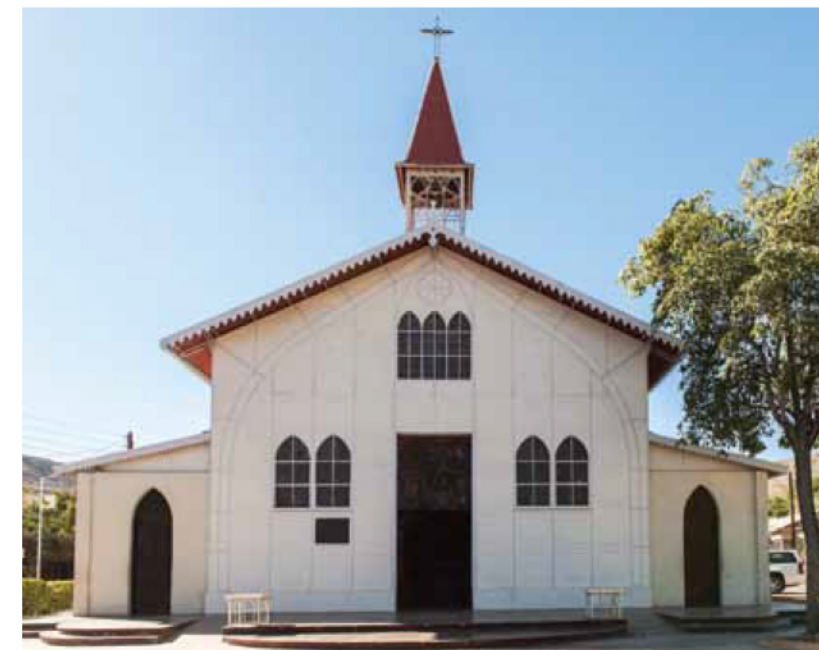


**(BELOW AND FAR RIGHT)** | From the foundry remains, to old photos shown in the Museo Historico Minero de Santa Rosalía, it's clear that mining was king in this area for a long time.

ground that could be mined for the next 50 years. In 1885, Rothschild purchased the mine and formed the *Compagnie du Boleo*, securing a long-term tax exemption from the Mexican government, which was interested in making European connections. By 1886, the French had begun building their massive mining operation on a 3-mile by 5-mile rectangle, and formally founded the town of Santa Rosalía on the site of a mining camp of the same name. Soon, a seemingly endless line of ships from Europe made port there, disgorging lumber, iron,

rails and railway cars, a state-of-the-art electric power plant – and the French. The town began to take shape.

As work progressed, Yaqui Indians, Mestizos, Japanese, and Chinese were brought over to work in the mines. Within five years, El Boleo became the leading producer of copper in Mexico from 1890 to 1899. The mine continued to operate until 1954, when their tax exemption expired. When it closed, the Mexican government took it over in order to provide continued employment for what had become a company



town, and ran it – at a loss - until 1984, when it finally closed for good – on the eve of Santa Rosalía's 100th anniversary. That's the boom and bust part of the story.

If that was all there was to say about Santa Rosalía, we'd just leave it at that and go have a couple of margaritas. But – there's more.

Upon entering the town on Highway 1, the first thing we saw was the massive, hulking remains of the El Boleo copper mine foundry. The ghostly ruins – overlooking the Sea of Cortez - immediately commanded our attention. Getting out of the car, we quickly learned that it was easy - if not a bit unsafe - to poke around the site, since there are no fences or gates to keep people out. Danger is

everywhere. Dangling iron beams, holes in the ground, and sharp objects are just a few of the potential hazards that made us wish we had hard hats. Emerging unscathed, we wanted to learn more, so we got in the car and headed up the hill to the *Museo Historico Minero de Santa Rosalía*, the museum of mining, housed in the beautifully restored landmark wooden building that was the mine's headquarters. We walked from room to room, marveling at all of the artifacts, photographs, and ledgers from the era. But it was the large office with its rows of perfectly placed desks, low-hanging ceiling fans, and rich wood floors that really helped us imagine the day to day

workings of the El Boleo mining business.

Walking out of the museum, we found ourselves in the French Quarter. Looking around, we were intrigued by the large, brightly painted, graceful wooden houses with wide verandas and balconies that populate the streets. We didn't know if we were in New Orleans or the French Caribbean because these are houses that you don't see anywhere else in Baja and they're an integral part of Santa Rosalía's fascinating history. When the copper ships from Santa Rosalía took their loads of ore to the Pacific

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**(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT)** | Cultural aspects of Santa Rosalía's past are evident in things ranging from Hotel Frances, to the structure and colors of the homes, to the pre-fabricated church, and to the 113 year-old Panaderia El Boleo bakery (still in operation).

Northwest, they returned with their holds full of lumber. El Boleo's French employees had their houses built out of that wood, designing them in a style heavily influenced by the French architecture that they loved and missed.

We strolled through the neighborhood, past several original mining locomotives on old pieces of track running up the middle of the street, and ended up at the historic

Hotel Frances. Built in 1886, it began life as a dormitory for the "working women" who plied their trade at the brothel near the mine. It later became the standard of luxury in Baja Sur, hosting dignitaries and mining administrators from Europe, and officials from the Mexican government. The day we visited happened to be the day the owners were waxing the floors, so we were not invited in. But what we saw, peering through the doors of the lobby, was a lovingly restored hotel with amazing fabric-covered walls, dark woodwork and gleaming copper railings that appeared to be straight out of provincial France.

Back in the car, we made our way down the hill and into the main part of town where the French theme continued. First stop was

The Church. If there is one structure in all of Baja that stands alone as the most unique, this is it – the Iglesia Santa Barbara de Santa Rosalía. It's a pre-fab building constructed entirely of stamped sheet metal squares that was shown in the 1889 Universal Exposition in Paris. Most everyone attributes the building to Gustave Eiffel, but others think that it came from another Parisian firm – The House of Duclou. Unfortunately, there's no historical record to support either theory, so we cast our vote with Eiffel. Charles La Forge, the mine's director, found it, long forgotten, in a warehouse in Brussels in 1894. He bought it and had it shipped to Santa Rosalía and reassembled to alleviate the homesickness of the French population there. Though it's gone through several

modifications through the years, its original spirit has been preserved. Despite the all-metal construction, the interior is warm and inviting, and we found ourselves spending more time inside than we thought we would.

Exiting the church we followed the scent of fresh bread being baked nearby. Walking down the main street, we arrived at the 113 year-old Panaderia El Boleo – which, aside from the church and the mine, is perhaps the most important landmark in town. Built in 1901, it's been in continual operation ever since, baking traditional French baguettes – said to be the best in all of Mexico – as

well as standard Mexican pastries. Though it has changed hands through the years, the recipe for the baguettes still remains a closely guarded secret. We tiptoed into the back and watched the magic happen – the baker and his son gracefully working amid racks of pan dulce and other assorted goodies. We snuck a fresh-out-of-the-oven *bolillo* – their variation of the French baguette – and it truly was one of the best we'd ever had - crispy and crunchy on the outside, soft and slightly sweet on the inside. In other words, perfect.

The rest of the town was equally charming – historic houses and buildings in surprising

combinations of tropical colors, old pieces of mining equipment treated like monuments, clean streets, taco and ceviche carts, kids on bikes and skateboards, shoeshine benches, and people just going about their business. But don't think that Santa Rosalía is just a well-preserved ghost town. It's a 21st century city that's the government and business hub for central Baja and home to The Santa Rosalía Ferry that travels to and from Guaymas.

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It was getting late and we were getting hungry. We asked a storekeeper for a lunch recommendation and he suggested Tacos El Paisano – directly across from the small marina and just down the road from the giant copper smelter. We had amazing *tacos al pastor* as we watched pelicans flying low across the water.

Just out of town heading north, we passed the new mining operation – a Korean-led consortium that's now extracting copper as well as cobalt, zinc, and manganese.

It's the beginning of another boom.

So here's what Santa Rosalia is not: It's not a resort. It's not a place with pretty beaches. It's not a place with a great year-round climate. It's not a place that caters to tourists.

What it is, is, a place that perfectly exemplifies the dreams, hopes, sorrows and hard work of the people who settled this area 130 years ago. It's a place that holds on to its fascinating history proudly as it moves ahead. And it's a place quite unlike any other you'll see in all of Baja. **El Fin!**

**(FAR LEFT AND ABOVE)** | Santa Rosalia offers much in the way of Mexican history, particularly in mining, as well as in edible delights from the Panediera El Boleo bakery and Tacos El Paisano.