





# EL TRIUNFO

*There's so much more to this quaint & quiet former Baja mining hamlet than meets the eye!*

*~by Michael Koehn | photos by Paul Papanek~*

So much to see and do in Los Cabos. With its well-advertised luxury, Mexican charm and scenic wonders, this little stretch of southern Baja is justifiably regarded as one of the most desirable locations on the planet. Los Cabos has now become a brand unto itself, promising fun in the sun, world class fishing and golf, 5-star hotels and restaurants and some of the most mesmerizing scenery anywhere. As the saying goes, it's all good.

But there's another part of the area that has its own unique appeal, those off the beaten path treasures that are usually found out where the cattle roam the dusty two-lane roads, places that show up in the back pages of travel guides, but still offer a quiet charm that can't be found in the more well-advertised higher end locations.

Sometimes it comes down to just putting your finger down on the map and wondering about the day-to-day life happenings in places like Las Barracas, La Ventana or Palo Escopeta. But in this case Paul, the photographer, had a lead on some interesting prospects in El Triunfo, a not terribly-obscure little town up Highway 1 as it winds towards La Paz.

(ABOVE AND LEFT) | The El Triunfo Mission is one piece of evidence harking back to the rich history of this small community. The Piano Museum is another.

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El Triunfo has a few key things that make it intriguing right off the bat; the positivity of its name, a pizza place run by the former proprietor of highly regarded Caffè Todos Santos, ruins left over from its 19th century mining exploits and, a little incongruously, a piano museum. All of those attractions come together in a town with a population of less than 400 souls, so it sounded like the perfect spot for a day trip. We pack our gear into the car and head up the road, before long passing through Miraflores, Santiago, the Buena Vista area, San Bartolo and San Antonio,



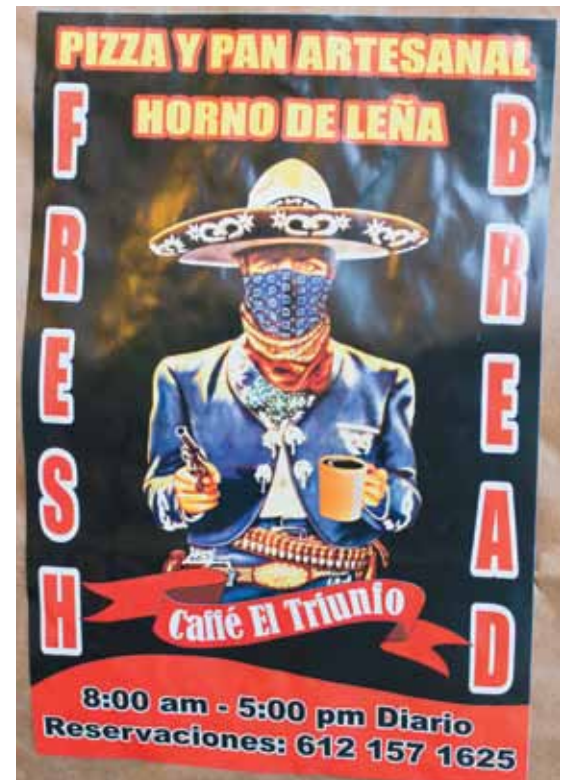
each with their unique character, on the approach to El Triunfo.

First, a little backstory. At one time one of the busiest settlements in Baja, El Trifuno was located on a section of lower northern slopes of the sierra de la Laguna that was originally used for cattle ranching. But after a silver and gold strike in 1862, the town boom and mining operations quickly moved in and established seven gold and silver mines around the village, attracting a number of Mexican, French, English, Italian, German, and American immigrants, and was consolidated with the arrival of the British El Progreso Mining Company in 1878, as the area grew to include some 10,000 eager residents. Currently, the International Mining Registry lists 27 active mines in the El Triunfo region, but most are run by independent prospectors or hobbyists who still find occasional traces of ore.

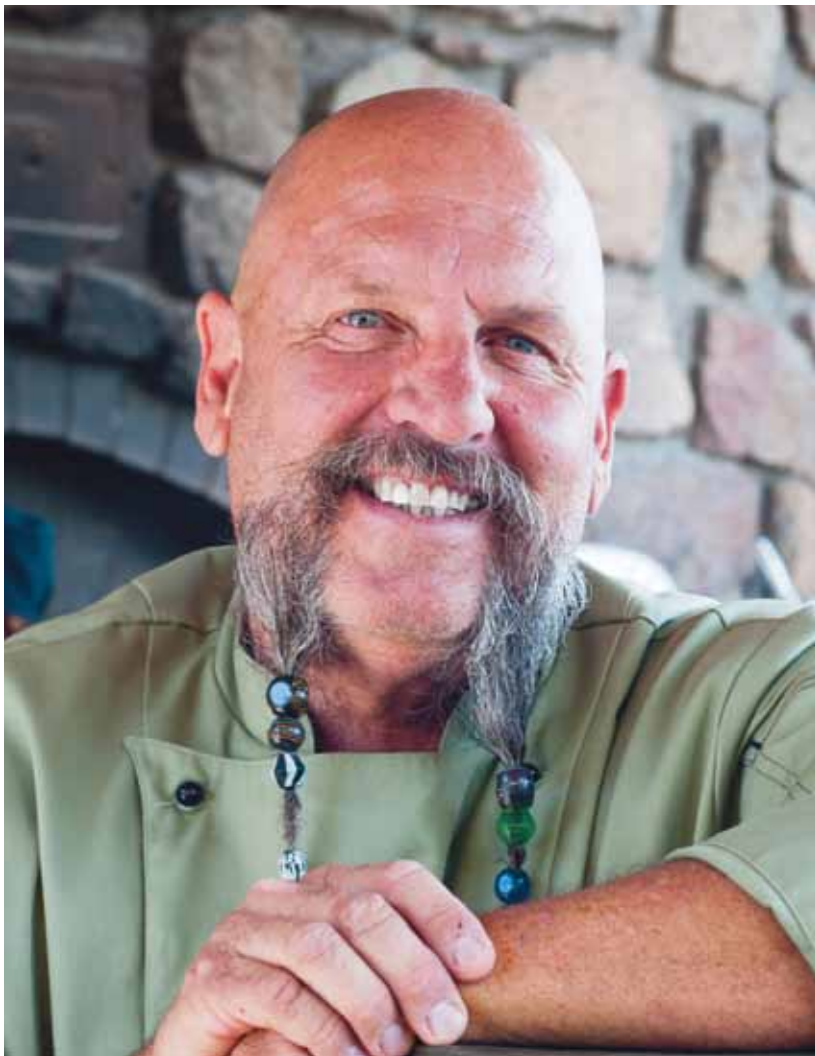


With its booming fortunes, El Triunfo was the first town in Baja to install electricity and telephones, and its cultural life included regular concerts and two competing weekly newspapers. Parts of the old mine installations can still be seen, including two massive chimney stacks, the newest a 35-meter-high smokestack designed by Gustav Eiffel but a little less imposing than his tower, and Baja's first general store, now called La Triunfeña, is still operational in the center of town, with a modest selection of snacks, cold drinks and household staples.

The area of El Triunfo and neighboring San Antonio bustled with gold fever and commerce, but by the end of the 19th century the ore began running out. When a hurricane flooded the mines in 1918 it was the death knell for the mining industry and by 1925 both San Antonio and El Triunfo were virtually abandoned.







All this history can make a person hungry, and luckily the town is home to one of the best restaurants in the region. Caffè El Triunfo is located on the main road through town, and when you see the “Pizza” sign and the sombrero-wearing bandito holding a gun and a cup of coffee, you’ll know you’re in the right neighborhood.

Parking is never an issue in El Triunfo, and in a few minutes we’re entering the bakery part of the operation. Its glass case displays the product of one of the great culinary talents in southern Baja, Marcus Edward Spahr.

Stepping into Caffè El Triunfo, the first thing you see is that display case of fresh baked goods, and, on the antiquated walls, photos of Spahr’s family. It’s immediately both rustic and friendly, with a very old world feeling about it, and one of the patrons tells us the fresh lemonade is to die

for. We get a sense that we’re in very good hands here.

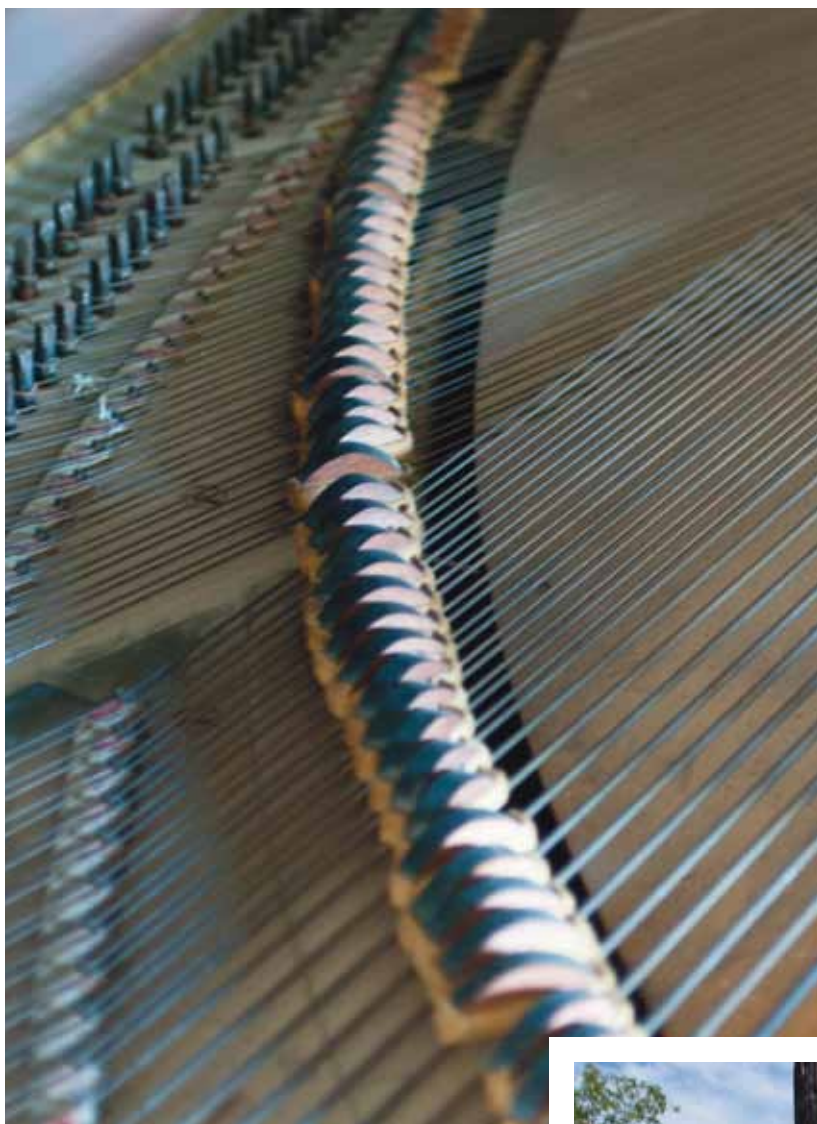
We continue through the retail area to an expansive outdoor patio and kitchen with a view of the mountains, Brick Bridge and smelter ruins. This is also the creative center of the restaurant, where Mark works while a big wood burning oven smolders behind him and perfumes the entire area. As we sit down to talk we’re anxious to hear about Spahr’s background, as his reputation precedes him.

“I’m a northern California guy, and got inspired one day when I saw the cover photo on a bread baking book I had picked up in Berkeley, and I decided I wanted to create something like that,” Spahr says. Once the initial inspiration set in, he did what any good aspiring chef does and headed for

**(FAR LEFT AND ABOVE)** | A 35-meter-tall smokestack stands testament to El Triunfo’s mining past. La Triunfeña, is Baja’s first general store, and is still operational. Caffè El Triunfo is known for its sign that depicts a gun-toting bandito with a cup of coffee. Caffè El Triunfo is the brainchild of Marcus Edward Spahr. Its decor includes photos of Spahr’s family. In addition to great outdoor seating, another thing Caffè El Triunfo is known for is delectable pizza.

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**(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT)** | *The smell of fresh-baked items fills the air of Caffè El Triunfo. The anomalous Piano Museum in El Triunfo gives another unique glimpse into the town's past. Arts and crafts, and local color, can be found in this town of less than 400 as well. The El Triunfo Mission provides yet another glimpse into the town's past, and it's spacious interior offers respite from the hardships of daily life there.*

France, where he schooled at Escoffier and got introduced to the true art of baking and getting passionately involved with old world wood-fired techniques and time-honored bakeries like Poilâne in Paris.

Spahr eventually ended up in Baja, becoming a protégée of Ezio Columbo of Café Santa Fe, and opened up his own restaurant Caffè Todos Santos. There he

earned a reputation for serving well-executed food with an emphasis on fresh local ingredients and, of course, baked goods.

He quickly offers something to eat, a perfectly prepared creamy four-cheese risotto (not on the menu) and a prosciutto and arugula pizza that combines crunchy crust perfection with the fresh savory toppings, the arugula looking like it was just picked.

Over the meal we talk and it turns out that Mark is the true iconoclast that he appears to be. He moved to El Triunfo four years ago, when he thought that *Pueblo Mágico*, Todos Santos, was getting too big for its own good, and Spahr decided to set up shop in this small town backwater. Word got out quickly, and a lot of his Caffè Todos Santos clientele found him and make regular visits, as do patrons from La Paz,

Las Ventana and Los Barriles. With the advantage of plenty of organic herbs and produce from Miraflores and a mozzarella made with local cow's milk, the food here is extremely flavorful and satisfying, and the bakery, which uses only wild yeast, produced 5,000 loaves in the past five months.

Caffè El Triunfo is a true treasure, well worth the drive, and you'll want to take something to go, like one of their rustic loaves of cranberry walnut bread. And the handgun-toting bandito used on their signage? "We had a couple of guys come in and have coffee one morning and then they walked across the street and robbed the bank," Spahr says. In the town this small they didn't get very far, and order was quickly restored, but the sign is an ongoing testament to their ill-fated venture.



If finding a foodie hotspot in the humble environs of El Triunfo is a pleasant surprise, even more unlikely was the prospect of finding a cultural enclave like the *Museo de la Musica*, commonly referred to as the piano museum.

As the largest city on Baja in the 1860's because of the gold rush, the town was flush with wealth, and pianos were brought to El Triunfo from around the world (no easy feat considering the remoteness of the location). At one time El Triunfo had more pianos per capita than any other city in Mexico. Classical music was a favorite of the local citizens and pianist Francisca Mendoza, who studied music in San Francisco, was recruited to teach music to the locals and their children.

But there it was, a quaint, colonial-style white and orange brick building on the east side of the road. The only clue to finding it is the official state "MUSEO" sign and an arrow. Parking was abundant.

Inside, the building is spacious and cool, with displays of various instruments lining the walls. We had hoped to meet Maestro

Nicolas Carrillo Castro, the proprietor, who is always in full makeup and tux, a sort of Mexican Liberace, and personally conducts tours of the museum, but he wasn't there the day we visited.

The first room housed some recent evolutions of the keyboard, including a 1960's Farfisa electric organ. Large, well presented graphics in English and Spanish explain the relevance of the piece on display. In a large performance room, a beautiful concert Steinway stood poised for the next recital. The front rooms house turn-of-the-century Baldwins, Steinways, a J.J. Hopkinson upright and even a very old clavichord, with the oldest keyboard in the collection dating from 1796.

Other exhibits in the museum include vintage stereo gear, boom boxes, some vinyl albums, including the soundtrack to "Jesus Christ Superstar," drums, a harp, thumb pianos, cellos, horns and stringed instruments. It is an eclectic collection to be sure. On your way out through the lobby you can purchase souvenirs of the museum, postcards and even a recording of Sr. Castro's

piano performances. Sr. Castro also teaches and on occasion performs in La Paz, along with presenting regular student recitals.

El Triunfo Mission is another worthwhile stop on your way north out of town. Laid out in the configuration of the Latin cross, the mission dates from 1721 but is in excellent shape and offers a cool, cavernous space that draws you inside to explore. The interior retains the feel of a frontier mission with a utilitarian décor and the aroma of oiled wooden pews, a place where you can envision miners offering up prayers and some hard-earned cash in hopes of greater prosperity.

El Triunfo is a small town that can be easily overlooked but there's lot more here than meets the eye. It deserves much more than just a passing glance, and if you only make one stop and have breakfast or a pizza at the Caffé El Triunfo, you might just find yourself coming back again and again.

***El Triunfo is located at Km 163 on Highway 1, about 70 miles north of Los Cabos International Airport and 24 miles (48 kilometers) from La Paz.***

***El Fin!***





**(ABOVE)** | *The California sea lion is an agile and endearing member of the group of mammals known as “pinnipeds” or “fin-footed mammals.” The term, “pinniped,” comes from the Latin words “pinna,” meaning “wing” or “fin,” and “ped,” meaning “foot.” Divers who tour with The Cortez Club get to become well-aquainted with them.*





# plunging with PINNIPEDS

*Thanks to the Cortez Club in La Paz, one So-Cal writer's bucket list is partially complete!*

*~by Michael Koehn | photos by Paul Papanek~*

When The Cortez Club offered the opportunity to swim with sea lions off the coast of La Paz, I felt like I could put a check next to one of those bucket list experiences some people create for themselves, like learning Italian, meeting Bob Dylan or going skydiving.

Not as daunting as any of those three experiences, swimming with wild sea lions in their natural environment does have its challenges. The Sea of Cortez is Big Animal water, and these qualify as big animals, 300 to 600 pounds being the weight range, with some bulls coming close to eight feet in length and 1,000 pounds. Friendly or not, they can be a little intimidating as they playfully frolic amongst the divers who

venture into the clear waters surrounding their rookery.

Luckily, we were in good hands. We'll be working with a team from The Cortez Club in La Paz to get out to the natural habitat of these pinnipeds, which means that we'll be with a team that has a lot of experience with these sorts of expeditions. *Cabo Living* photographer, Paul Papanek, and I show up at their offices, located behind the La

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**(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT)** | Captain Adrian of The Cortez Club takes guests out to sea lion habitat on Isla Islotes. Guests include Lisa, and her son. The gregarious and inquisitive California sea lions are playful and nimble in the water, zipping around the divers with dizzying turns and graceful speed.

Concha Beach Club, and Ricardo Fifield, the onsite manager, gets us fitted for wetsuits, snorkels, fins and masks as the rest of our group assembled in the dock area. Our dive group includes Lisa, who is from La Paz, but studies jellyfish at the University of California in Merced, and her five-year-old son and French husband. A group of Italians show up with full scuba gear, and there's a couple from Whidbey Island in Washington, by way of Rancho Pescadero, where they are headquartered for their Baja stay.

We're all eager to get started, and Adrian, the captain, fires up the motor. In short order the 225 horse four-stroke Honda mill is pushing us through the water at a good clip, leaving an impressive four-foot plume of water behind us. As we settle into the ride, which typically takes 45 minutes to an hour, intermittent rainbows appear and dissolve in the spray at the sides of the panga. Off to the left a low flying skein of cormorants skim the waves on the way to their next stop and as we pass smaller islands we can see sentinel pelicans perched on the rocky outcropping, surveying their domain.

Before we know it we're on approach to the sea lion rookery, a series of rocks known

as Los Islotes, or the colony. Situated half a mile north of the tip of Isla Espiritu Santo, Los Islotes consists of two large rock islets, one of which has a natural arch. These islets are home to a colony of over 200 California Brown Sea Lions, inquisitive creatures who take great interest in those who stop by to visit. We're told we can expect the friendly pups to be eager to play, showing off and turning acrobatic circles around our comparatively clumsy underwater movements. As we move in closer we can see the colony dozing on the low-lying rocks, sunning themselves, barking and sometimes sliding into the water, but clearly undisturbed by our approach. They've seen it all before.

The boat coasts to a stop opposite an archway in the island, something like a smaller version of El Arco in Cabo. Daniel, the divemaster, gives the group some basic words of wisdom about the behavior of the animals - the pups may nip at you but it won't hurt, and it's always wise to keep your distance from the females and their young if there's a male in the area, as the big guys can get aggressive.

The scuba guys get suited up in full gear





and underwater cameras, and the rest of us pull on mask and snorkels, awaiting our turns. Then it's into the water, and it's colder than it looks. Although we're in late May and the weather is warm, the water is still in the mid to high 60s, and a wetsuit is definitely necessary.

In a minute or two we're acclimated and entering the world of the California Sea Lion, *Zalophus californianus*, an animal with a Charlie Chaplin-like land walk and playfully balletic underwater moves. A few dart around the group of surface snorkelers, but the box seats are forty feet below me, where I can see the scuba divers slowly drifting along with their video camera as sea lions cavort in front of them, almost hamming it up for the appreciative audience.

A couple of sea lions swim in a circle around me. Then one peels off and comes straight for me in a corkscrew, then banks right at the last second. Then another takes a pass, and another, each one darting playfully through the group of divers. It's thrilling



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**(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT)** | *Neither quiet or retiring, California sea lions appear to enjoy visits by human divers, and aren't shy about approaching them. Other marine life, such as sea stars, can be found around Isla Islotes. The Cortez Club also does eco-tours for other marine life, such as hammerhead sharks, at certain times of the year. Captain Adrian later takes the divers to a white sand beach for lunch.*

and a little intimidating at the same time, but the sea lions seem to enjoy the visit, exploring those of us who thought we were the explorers. They are playful and merely curious about us, as we were about them.

What makes this such a unique wildlife experience is that you're entering the natural habitat of the animal, so unlike the swim with the dolphins experience and any wild

animal park or zoo you'd care to name. Still, there's never a sense of danger with these animals. They seem so genuinely friendly and appreciative that you've come to play. Individual members of the group took turns swimming around us, sometimes turning belly up and watching us with large soulful eyes. To one side I could see Paul working on the surface tracking the action with his waterproofed Nikon, and before long another dive boat shows up and we're joined by another group in what is turning into a sea lion swim party.

We spread out and swam under the arch, through the dark, shaded water to the other side where there was coral reef in shallow water about six feet beneath us. It was alive with small fish, and I later learned you can

expect to see dense shoals of silver sardines, blue and gold king angelfish, and yellow surgeonfish amongst the golden cup corals that make up the reef. We could have spent a lot of time just exploring those nooks and crannies, but we were really here to spend time with the sea lions and swam back through the arch to get more time watching them. Jacques Cousteau has been well quoted on the amazing biodiversity of the Sea of Cortez and you can find it at every turn.

Lunch is also part of the package with The Cortez Club, and after a final encounter with the sea lions, we're off to a secluded island called Isla Partida. We pull up and gently coast onto the crescent-shaped white sand beach, our private picnic grounds overlooking beautiful azure-colored water.



Some of the divers wander off to look for shells and other signs of sea life in the shallow waters of the bay.

We have one last stop before calling it quits, and our captain takes us to a spot with transparent water and a reef clearly visible some 50 feet below. There was a chance to see some mantas in the area we are told, but none show up and we spend a half hour exploring that beautiful formation and the brightly colored fish that flit in and out of the reef. Here we don't have to be aware of large animals swimming around us, and leisurely explore the area feeling truly a part of it.

The dive had been a wonderful experience, something unique to this part of the world, an adventure that helps you understand the complexity of life going on offshore.

It's something that has been continuing for thousands of years, and hopefully will continue unchanged as long as the habitat is adequately protected, as it is now.

Back at the office I talk with Ricardo and learn that there are many exciting big animal dives offered by the Cortez Club. "We are lucky to be situated so close to an area which is favored by these animals," he tells me. "In addition to the popular sea lion trips, The Cortez Club also offers excursions with Whale Sharks, both for scuba and snorkeling divers, and they are in the area from November to March. Sometimes they are only ten minutes away. We also run boats out to see the schooling hammerhead sharks, also from fall through the spring, where we can see groups of 50 to 200 of these amazing

animals. This is an exciting place for divers, and you don't have to have any experience to get out there and see nature on this kind of scale. With our experienced crew and divers to help, anyone can do it."

Later on that evening, feeling elated in a way that you can only after experiencing something special and well outside your comfort zone, we walk the Malecon in La Paz remembering the day on the boat and the dive and look forward to a rendezvous with some fish tacos and a few iced Pacificos.

***For more information, contact  
The Cortez Club in La Paz:  
[www.cortezclub.com](http://www.cortezclub.com)  
U.S. toll free: 1-877-408-6769  
Mexico: 52-612-121-6120***

***El Fin!***





# A Woman's Touch

*These boutique hotels, all owned by women, are making their signature on the Baja hotel scene*

*~by Michael Koehn | photos by Paul Papanek~*

There are a lot of places to love in Los Cabos, and while recently making lists of favorite places in the area, we were struck by the fact that many of them were not all that well known. Inspired by Sandra Scandiber, one of an informal group of women from all over the world who own boutique hotels in the area, we decided to do a survey of properties in southern Baja with those credentials. Turns out there were a lot more small hotels that are owned and operated by women here than we had expected.

These are places that don't find you through widespread high profile advertising campaigns; these are the kinds of places that you usually have to find on your own, maybe on the recommendation of a friend. The dozen hotels we visited aren't designed to capitalize on a scenic vantage point or stretch of white sandy beach, the result of corporate planning meetings in other countries. In some cases they've been reclaimed from abandoned properties or expanded from

existing former homes in a way that helps define their local communities. What we also found was a clear defining touch in these special places that could have only come from women, these remarkable entrepreneurs who have decided that they'd rather live in southern Baja than anywhere else in the world.

Centrally located in La Paz are two properties owned by women who hail from the far side of the Atlantic. ***El Ángel Azul***

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(BELOW) | The beautiful, shimmering swimming pool at Casa Natalia is but one attractive aspect of this highly-rated boutique hotel.











PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN HEEB

(ABOVE, BELOW AND FAR RIGHT) | *El Ángel Azul*, started by Esther Amman in 1999, has an entrance through heavy wooden doors that leads to a peaceful courtyard. Cinzia Porro's Casa Verde Inn is a marriage of her design skills with old world structure. Debbie Stewart oversees the richly colored and legendary Hotel California. The innovative dishes of Chef Dany Lamote's restaurant, La Coronela, can be enjoyed there. Hacienda Todos Los Santos rests on property that had once been a summer home, built by Rod Rodriguez for his actress wife, Lucille Bremer, and their children.

is owned by Esther Amman, who arrived in Baja from Switzerland as a surfing enthusiast in 1995. Falling in love with the area, Esther began to renovate an old building in central La Paz and opened El Ángel Azul in 1999 with three rooms, a restaurant and an art gallery. Since expanded to 10 rooms with an upstairs suite, El Ángel Azul has the feel of true antiquity, a beautifully renovated 19th century courthouse with more than 140 years of history and a historic monument certification from the National Institution of Anthropology. Built like a fortress, the building was formerly the town's courthouse and a heavy wooden door opens into a peaceful central courtyard, an oasis far removed from the busy world outside. Entering El Ángel Azul you feel like you've stepped into a friend's country hacienda, and

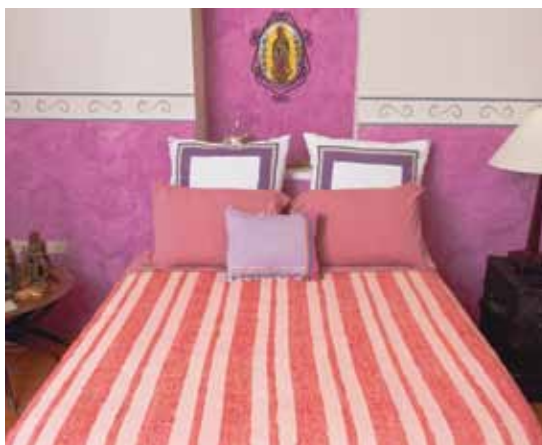
the hospitality provided here matches the feel of her hotel. Mornings begin with a leisurely breakfast served outdoors, and the beautiful landscaping is evidence of Esther's love for her garden and the natural world.

Cinzia Porro spent much of her early life in Kenya and had a successful career in tourism and as a designer of high fashion children's clothes while living in Rome. She met her husband Roberto in Tunisia and the couple first visited La Paz in 1997. The magic of the area kept them coming back, and they decided to move to the area permanently, opening a lounge bar, a "Mediterranean" restaurant, and also began remodeling properties to resell in La Paz and La Ventana. **Casa Verde Inn** combines Cinzia's designer aesthetic with a renovated old world Baja structure in central La Paz. The property

seems fresh minted on many levels, but a part of the original brick structure has been retained on the front wall, lending a touch of colonial authenticity that serves as the backdrop for the courtyard pool.

Offering three rooms, each impeccably appointed in a designer motif based on a color (purple, blue or yellow), the guestrooms here are spacious and appointed with handcrafted artifacts and other treasures that Cinzia and Roberto find on their travels to Mexico City, Puebla and Cuernavaca.

Casa Verde Inn first opened its doors in January of this year, and already has a list of faithful clientele, including Cinzia's daughter who is attending school in the U.S. but frequently visits when she needs the calming influence of a quiet oasis in Baja's city of peace.







One of the more iconic locations in all of southern Baja, **Hotel California**, a charming property in central Todos Santos, was once dormant and badly neglected before Debbie and John Stewart took over after leaving the business world and colder climes in Canada to move to Cabo in the late nineties. They began renovating the property in 2001, and opened Hotel California in December 2002.

Debbie now oversees a lush, richly-hued property with 11 rooms and suites, including a two-story penthouse with rooftop garden terrace and ocean and mountain views. John and Debbie's vision has been realized

in a building now painted with deep greens, dark blues and rich purples, and full of details like handcrafted folk art, sculpture, and whimsical paintings. It's a bold visual environment and has become a tourist destination even for people who just want to step into the lobby and look around.

Debbie's hotel is also home to La Coronela, Chef Dany Lamote's wonderfully inventive restaurant, and the latest addition to the property, Santo Vino, provides a personalized wine and dine experience for just a few tables in an intimate new space. Next door, a new shop now offers artisanal

culinary products - pasta, homemade preserves, and other local delicacies - under the original name of the old hotel's mercantile, La Popular.

Within a short walking distance of the center of Todos Santos lies a property with direct ties to the very first luxury resort in southern Baja. **Hacienda Todos Los Santos** resides on property purchased in 1953 by Abelardo L. Rodríguez Montijo, Baja's original pioneer and creator of Rancho

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PHOTO BY KAMAL SCHRAMM RODRIGUEZ, COURTESY OF HACIENDA TODOS LOS SANTOS





Las Cruces and the Palmilla and Hacienda Cabo San Lucas hotels. There he built, as a surprise, a summer home for his actress wife Lucille Bremer and their children. "I was lucky to have been one of the children and have many lovely memories of my life at our summer retreat in Todos Santos as a young child," recalls daughter Kali Rodriguez.

Kali and her family moved to the United States and the Hacienda was left in the hands of caretakers for many years. Kali eventually returned to the family home in Todos Santos and decided to create something special on the 12-acre property. "In 2001, determined to follow in the family tradition, I decided to restore our old summer home and build three

vacation cottages and four luxurious suites. My architect, Hugo Espinosa, had worked with my father at the Palmilla, so I felt it was fitting that he should be my architect for this project."

The Hacienda Todos Los Santos opened in 2007, offering old world charm, exceptional accommodations, personal service and all of the comforts of home in a naturally beautiful, authentic Baja California oasis. "I feel we have succeeded in improving and discreetly adding on to Hacienda Todos Los Santos while maintaining its original charm," Kali says.

If you'd like to stay at a place that is perfect for exploring the natural wonders

of the area and also has a direct link to one of Baja's most interesting and innovative pioneers, the Hacienda Todos Los Santos will provide that connection, and Kali Rodriguez herself is a living expression of Baja's old world grace and charm.

In contrast to the traditional stands *The Hotelito*, a fanciful compound of bright colors befitting the vision of someone with a designer background and love of horses and goats. Indeed owner Jenny Armit looks a little like a cowgirl as she approaches, but she welcomes us in proper English, the product of her upbringing in London. There Jenny had a busy life as a designer, working on high level commercial accounts and getting her







work showcased in Suzanne Trocme's book, *Influential Interiors - Shaping 20th Century Style*. Working throughout Europe and Latin America, Jenny opened an office in Los Angeles after her kids were on their own, and then made her big move to Baja.

Designer sensibilities are cheerfully on display at The Hotelito. The color palette here uses striking tones of blue, olive, pink and purple set against earthier tones and the rooms are named for colors and appointed accordingly. For larger groups the three-bedroom Casa de Chilicote offers privacy and is accessed by a "floating" pink staircase.

Jenny's designer skills have also been used to great effect in the striking décor and designer accents. A 15-meter salt water pool is a refreshing centerpiece in the outdoor lounge area, and the bar at The Hotelito works on the honesty policy, where guests simply serve themselves and then settle up at the end of their stay. That's in addition to the complimentary margaritas that Jenny serves every night.

And those goats? Jenny is a passionate activist and an animal lover at heart and they add a twist of idiosyncratic personality to The Hotelito.

There's a very special property situated right on Cabo's central plaza that also has

a tie to a Baja pioneer. **Casa Bella** was originally built as a residence for Carlos Ungson, an engineer and early resident of the area who was involved in many of the area's first generation resorts, including the original Palmilla, Hotel Cabo San Lucas, and Hacienda hotels. The home was expanded into a boutique hotel and opened in 2003 offering old world hospitality and an atmosphere reflecting Cabo's early days.

Now managed by daughter Barbara Ungson, Casa Bella has been transformed into the vision that Ungson had for a boutique hotel, and consists of 11 rooms, one junior suite surrounding a central courtyard and two upper level suites. The rooms include beautiful solid wood furniture and folk art decorations that Carlos has collected in his many travels and large, open showers.

"I grew up in Cabo, and it was such a wonderful place for a child. We had the run of the town and everything seemed so wide open, like a frontier town," Barbara says. After completing her education in Los Angeles, she decided that Baja was really her home, and now oversees daily operations at Casa Bella.

**(FAR LEFT AND ABOVE)** | Kali Rodriguez, daughter of Rod Rodriguez, worked with architect, Hugo Espinosa to transform an old summer home property into an exceptional old-world-style retreat. Jenny Armit, designer and goat enthusiast, is the visionary behind The Hotelito. Both goats and bright colors can be found at The Hotelito. Barbara Ungson, daughter of Carlos Ungson, transformed Carlos' Cabo central plaza home into an 11-room boutique hotel called Casa Bella. In doing so, she realized her father's vision for such a hotel. Not far from Cabo's central plaza is The Bungalows, owned by Patricia Hendricks and managed by Estela Alonso. The Bungalows is a 16-unit property that offers gourmet breakfast and more.

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**(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT)** | Sandra Scandiber came to Cabo from New York and started what is now the 12-room Los Milagros Hotel. She describes it as a “refuge away from it all” that gives guests access to everything in central Cabo. Posada Chabela is another delightful retreat, just west of San José del Cabo, that is the product of another former New Yorker, Rose Ann Solazzo. An open-minded individual, Rose Ann maintains Posada Chabela as a place of acceptance, and even goes so far as to serve breakfast herself every day.

“We really feel that our guests are part of the family,” says Barbara. “We get a lot of repeat business from people who enjoy the warmth and personal touches we provide here. They can also get a first-hand history lesson from my Dad if he’s in town, and home cooking from the family kitchen is offered to guests on their room terrace or the pool patio.”

Just up the hill from the central plaza lies another hidden gem of a small hotel called *The Bungalows*. Owned by Patricia Hendricks and managed by Estela Alonso, the original hotel was a rundown property of apartments and timeshares before Patricia bought it in 1993. It was completely renovated in 1996 and opened as a bed and breakfast.

Estela originally ran a popular restaurant business in the area and met Patricia as a client. The two hit it off and have been a great team at The Bungalows ever since, offering personal service in a tranquil enclave under a canopy of palm trees within walking distance from downtown Cabo.

The 16 units on the property are all appointed in colorful folk art and tile, and there are a variety of configurations

from one-bedroom bungalows to deluxe two-bedrooms with a patio, and a honeymoon suite.

A central courtyard includes a salt-water pool, and a cozy palapa area where meals are served.

“We take great pride in the way we prepare meals here,” says Estela. “We offer a full gourmet breakfast every morning to our guests, with fresh ground coffees and alternately a sweet or egg dish in the palapa area as part of the package. We think this is the best breakfast in town, and we complement it with our own fresh squeezed juices.” With its emphasis on healthy organic meals, The Bungalows has now also become a home to special interest groups, including yoga, meditation and specific dietary type retreats.

One of the real jewels in central Cabo is *Los Milagros*, a charming 12-room hotel located just a couple of blocks but worlds away from the Giggling Marlin and Cabo Wabo. It’s owned by Sandra Scandiber who came to Mexico on a honeymoon and eventually decided to leave her high-powered restaurant management career in New York and move permanently to Baja. She opened



Los Milagros with partner Ricardo Rode with seven rooms in 1996 and then expanded the property to an even dozen beautifully-appointed accommodations, each furnished with traditional Mexican folk art and named after a specific miracle.

Los Milagros' elegant white two-level buildings border a tropical garden area and pool, and at night the courtyard and pool area is romantically candlelit. Once inside the gates at Los Milagros, you find yourself in an oasis of tranquility that seems far removed from the nightlife of the neighboring area. "Los Milagros is a refuge for our guests to literally get away from it all, while also having access to everything in central Cabo," explains Scandiber, who has also found it an ideal setting to indulge in her reading habit, becoming a Kindle enthusiast who sometimes gets through several books a week. When she's not at Los Milagros, Scandiber can sometimes be fly-fishing on some of the best steelhead and salmon waters in the world, the only woman

we know who doesn't see a contradiction in wearing pearls while in waders.

High on a hill overlooking Costa Azul just west of San José del Cabo is another oasis with its own distinct personality.

**Posada Chabela** is owned by Rose Ann Solazzo, and includes four charming casitas on a beautifully landscaped hillside adjacent her home.

Originally from Brooklyn, Rose Anne was introduced to the hotel business at an early age by her mother, who owned and operated a local motel, bar and restaurant complex. She married husband Charles at the age of eighteen, and in 1972 the Solazzos relocated to southern California, where they invested in motels and started vacationing in Baja. They eventually decided to invest in the area and purchased the Mykonos Resort outside San José.

What began as an investment is now a career, and after Charles passed away Rose Ann continued the Baja venture when she purchased the former Casa Terracotta

and developed it into Posada Chabela.

Posada Chabela is laid out on tropically landscaped grounds and its private casitas are named after flowers. Two of the units share a detached restroom, and the Damiana and Dahlia casitas have private bathrooms. But apart from the accommodations themselves, which includes a central dining and social area where Rose Ann serves breakfast every morning, the most appealing feature at Posada Chabela may be the free-spirited, open attitude prevalent here. While not specifically a gay bed and breakfast, it is very gay friendly and an enclave where free thinking and individuality are part of its character. "If we have a motto at Posada Chabela, it's 'Be Who You Are,'" Rose Ann says.

In central San José del Cabo, the **El Encanto Inn** on Calle Morelos has developed into one of the real treasures in town. Owner Blanca Pedrin is a native of the

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**(BELOW AND FAR RIGHT)** | San José native, Blanca Pedrin, transformed an apartment complex into the enchanting El Encanto Inn. This hotel features a tropical courtyard and pool area, as well as Joséphine's Chapel. Cielito Lindo, also in San José, was metamorphosed by Gilda Bardillo, from a derelict structure into the muy autentico vision that it is today. Another San José boutique hotel, Casa Natalia, is consistently listed among the top 10 boutique hotels in Mexico. It is owned by Nathalie and Loïc Tenoux, with Nathalie being primarily in charge of the day-to-day operations.

San José area, often swimming at Chileno Bay where she met early pioneer Bud Parr. After attending high school and college in Los Angeles, Blanca visited Mexico City and then returned to Baja, where she got degrees in public administration and political science. She then went to work for Fonatur, Mexico's tourism organization, helping them develop Los Cabos into a world class travel destination, and then spent eighteen years working for Bud Parr at his Cabo San Lucas travel agency in Los Angeles.

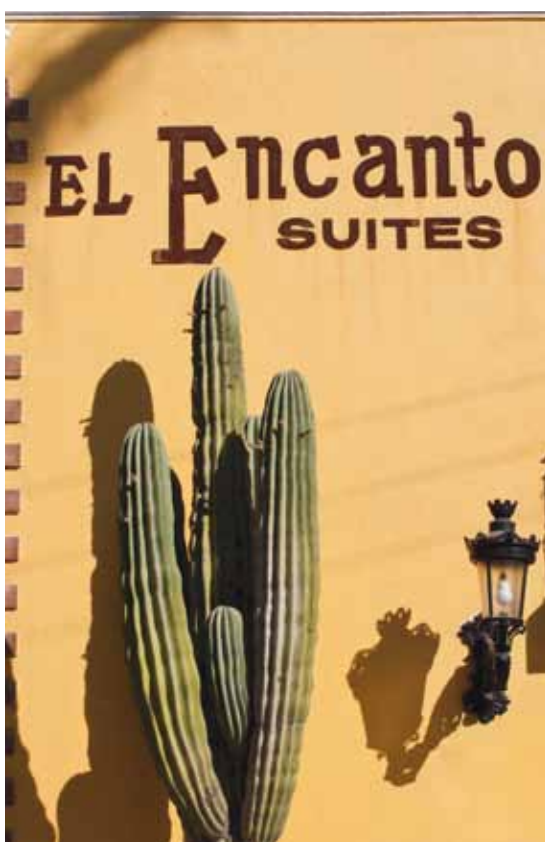
But Blanca eventually decided to make Baja her home and moved back to the area in 1988, developing properties and turning an apartment complex of nineteen rooms and a garden into the enchanting oasis that is now El Encanto Inn.

The grounds include a lush tropical courtyard and pool area with a nearby palapa bar, and Blanca has added a full-scale chapel to the property, Joséphine's Chapel, in honor of her mother, to accommodate wedding parties at the hotel. The Ixchel spa facility is a recent addition to the property, which makes El Encanto's tranquil environment

an ideal place to pamper yourself, and it's easy walking distance to the finest restaurants and art galleries in central San José. Blanca's future plans include adding a third phase behind the property that will include seventeen additional suites, a bistro restaurant and a bar. When not running El Encanto, Blanca is very active in causes supporting cultural and environmental issues in the area.

Also centrally located in San José is **Cielito Lindo**, a bed and breakfast owned by Gilda Bardillo. What was once a derelict building Gilda has now transformed into a colorful, atmospheric hotel that has much of the feel of old Baja in it.

Gilda is a professional photographer by trade and moved to Los Cabos twelve years ago. One day while on assignment she noticed an abandoned building on Calle Obregon that was up for sale. Against the advice of some of her friends, she bought the property and began creating her vision of Cielito Lindo. She has kept the concept of the hotel as close to its traditional Mexican roots as possible, painting it in bold colors







and linking it to the culture, traditions and art of old San José. It also offers all the comforts of home in a two-story complex of single and double rooms, cable TV, air conditioning and wireless Internet.

With Gilda's gracious personality and warm smile, the homey atmosphere (Gilda's mother is one of her hardest working employees) and its rudimentary dining area where guests can also cook for themselves, Cielito Lindo has become a local favorite with backpackers and business travellers,

particularly with Europeans, who are looking to experience something *muy auténtico* as part of their Baja cultural experience.

**Casa Natalia**, on San José's central Boulevard Mijares, is one of the most distinguished boutique properties in the area, and consistently shows up on any list mentioning the top boutique hotels in Mexico and the world.

Owned by Nathalie and Loïc Tenoux, Casa Natalia combines clean, modern design with beautifully appointed rooms, each with

a signature theme and name. The European couple (Nathalie is from Luxembourg and Loïc from France) met while working in the hotel industry in Mexico, and Nathalie's tenure as a sales manager with Westin Hotels and Resorts helped prepare her for the journey that led to opening Casa Natalia.

While Nathalie is front and center on all the day-to-day operations, she says it's

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**(ABOVE)** | Casa Natalia sports a stunning swimming pool. Near Todos Santos, Rancho Pescadero is a warm and hospitable dude-ranch style hotel, owned by Lisa Harper. Extremely environmentally-conscious, as well as being highly sophisticated and casually hip, it also has a shimmering pool, located centrally on its grounds.

really Loïc who is the one with all the ideas. Between the two of them they have continually innovated the amenities at Casa Natalia, offering special promotions, reinventing the menu at the acclaimed restaurant Mi Cocina and supporting the art and culture of the area. At the time of our visit works by La Playa-based artist Francois Paris, whimsically playing with variations on a theme of chickens, were prominently displayed in an alcove.

Nathalie's attention to detail is immediately evident in the beautifully decorated fourteen deluxe rooms and two

suites, the lush grounds, and even the beautiful china and stemware utilized in the hotel's restaurant and bar. "We feel like we've really captured the true essence of San José del Cabo at Casa Natalia," says Nathalie. "It's not something that happens overnight. It happens over time and you become part of the land."

Los Cabos now includes an ever-increasing variety of hotels, both large and small, which have a diversity that is unique in the world. The smaller hotels, and the very special women who run them, turned out to be a revelation, each one a special world, a sanctuary that reflects the personality and tastes of the proprietors who have moved here and decided to share their part of Baja with you.

And it seems the story doesn't end there. We've also covered **Rancho Pescadero**, the well-regarded hotel out near Todos Santos that combines a friendly dude ranch attitude with Lisa Harper's impeccable sense of style, and hear about a little place called El Delfin Blanco out in the village of La Playa run by a woman named Osa from Sweden that also sounds very interesting.

*El Fin!*

### Contact Info: Boutique Hotels

- **El Ángel Azul:** [www.elangelazul.com](http://www.elangelazul.com)
- **Casa Verde Inn:** [www.casaverdeinn.com.mx](http://www.casaverdeinn.com.mx)
- **Hotel California:** [www.hotelcaliforniabaja.com](http://www.hotelcaliforniabaja.com)
- **Hacienda Todos Los Santos:** [www.tshacienda.com](http://www.tshacienda.com)
- **The Hotelito:** [www.thehotelito.com](http://www.thehotelito.com)
- **Casa Bella:** [www.casabellahotel.com](http://www.casabellahotel.com)
- **The Bungalows:** [www.cabobungalows.com](http://www.cabobungalows.com)
- **Los Milagros:** [www.losmilagros.com.mx](http://www.losmilagros.com.mx)
- **Posada Chabela:** [www.posada-chabela.com](http://www.posada-chabela.com)
- **El Encanto Inn:** [www.elencantoinn.com](http://www.elencantoinn.com)
- **Cielito Lindo:** [www.hotelcielitolindo.com](http://www.hotelcielitolindo.com)
- **Casa Natalia:** [www.casanatalia.com](http://www.casanatalia.com)