



WEEKENDER

Baja for Road Warriors

Art hotels, local wine, ocean life—and two newly expanded highways to get you there.

By Jenna Scatena

Buzzards circle overhead as you speed along the black ribbon of highway through the arid finger of land known as Baja Sur. On your right, wild burros thread their way among ancient cacti, while on your left, the cobalt Pacific crashes against craggy russet bluffs. It's a surreally captivating scene—and it's all yours to take in, thanks to a recent expansion and renovation of **Baja highways 1 and 19** that has made driving around here much easier than in the potholed days of yore. In fact, this 130-mile mini-road trip from the Los Cabos airport to La Paz is the perfect excuse to bypass the Cabo San Lucas crowds for a three-day vacation that's more open-road adventure than luxe lounging—though there's some of that, too.

FROM TOP:
The view from Hotel El Ganzo's rooftop lounge; on four wheels is the best way to get around Baja.



DAY 1: Sleep (or don't sleep at all) in an art hotel. Puerto Los Cabos

A 15-minute drive from the airport lands you at **Hotel El Ganzo** (ELGANZO.COM; STARTING AT \$304), a 72-room boutique inn-cum-art gallery hidden at the end of a dirt road. The hotel, which opened in late 2012, has become a playground for those who prefer their nightlife with a shot of culture, not just Herradura: Every room serves as a blank canvas for the work of acclaimed international artists, and the hotel often brings musicians such as Damien Rice in for performance residencies.

By day, lounge on the roof in a white-linen cabana, sipping tequila near the infinity Jacuzzi. Or wander Puerto Los Cabos' new sculpture garden, which serves as a covert outdoor museum for some of Mexico's most

prominent recent artists. Hidden behind a curtain of mango trees just beyond the succulent garden, 45-ton stones that were carved onsite by José Luis Cuevas share space with bronze statues by the celebrated late surrealist Leonora Carrington.

After dark, the hotel's owner, 28-year-old Pablo Sanchez-Navarro (whose family made

its fortune in the Mexican beer industry), throws an epic late-night party that can make the grounds feel like the Hollywood hills—stories abound of rooftop ragers with Charlie Sheen and Slash spontaneously breaking into "Tiny Dancer" on the grand piano. By 3 a.m., the crowds have dispersed to after-parties in various nooks of the hotel—occasionally including an underground music studio accessed through a trapdoor in the bar. In the morning, find your hangover breakfast at El Ganzo's Sunday brunch.

The construction cranes lining the white sand make it clear that Puerto Los Cabos won't be under the radar for long—JMA and hotels from Marriott and Secrets will soon be joining the party. But for now, it's just a dirt track lined with scruffy casitas, the neon "Hotel El Ganzo" marquee welcoming you to the haven at the end of the road.

YOUR WEEKEND ROUTE



DAY 2: Unwind with slow food and slower wine. Todos Santos

Nicknamed Pueblo Mágico (Magic Town), Todos Santos, an hour northwest of Puerto Los Cabos, livens up the surrounding desolate beige expanse with an oasis of colorful stucco casitas, farm-

TOP: COURTESY OF HOTEL EL GANZO; DAVID CUETTER

fresh food, and vibrant art. Driving along the main drag, you're as likely to see an artist painting from his porch as a herd of wild cows sauntering along the road.

For a small town, Todos Santos packs in a lot. You could spend your entire afternoon lingering in one of the many famed art galleries (ARTISTSOFTODOSSANTOS.COM), but reserve some time to explore the town's fringe: stretches of empty beach, intriguing dirt roads, and well-kept organic vegetable farms. South of town is **Baja Beans Roasting Company** (BAJABEANS.COM), the Blue Bottle of Baja. Go on Sunday for a light brunch of single-origin coffee and homemade pastries, as well as a farmers' market and live music.

Those seeking an adrenaline rush can easily find it in the surrounding mountains with **Todos Santos Eco Adventures** (TOSEA.NET)—the company's owner, Sergio Jauregui, is a walking guidebook about the region's natural and cultural history. Or try a longboard at Cerritos Beach with **Mario Surf School** (MARIOSURFSCHOOL.COM).

Unwind at the cozy one-room wine shop **La Bodega** (00521-612-152-0181), which pours and sells wines from Baja Norte's Valle de Guadalupe as well as its own locally made blends. Its owner, McCandless Sutton, co-runs the town's annual food and wine festival, **GastroVino** (MAY 23–25; GASTROVINO.MX). End the day with a fresh-squeezed margarita at the restaurant inside the trendy and affordable **Hotel Casa Tota** (HOTELCASATOTA.COM; STARTING AT \$101), where the herbs are plucked from the rooftop garden and the cheeses are handmade.

DAY 3: Swim with the ocean's giants. La Paz

When you arrive in Baja Sur's capital, make your way to the town's east side to find **Costa Baja** (COSTABAJA.COM; STARTING AT \$149)—a mellow, marina-side coastal resort where the infinity pool is rivaled only by the cerulean **Sea of Cortez**. The sea is where you'll want to spend most of your time here, so fill up with chilaquiles on the patio at **Mosaic**, Costa Baja's poolside restaurant,



then head for the water with charter company **Grupo Fun Baja** (FUNBAJA.COM).

Traveling to **Isla Espiritu Santo** and the surrounding islands feels like entering a distant world. Go there by boat, then swim, snorkel, or scuba dive. The UNESCO World Heritage Bio-Reserve is one of the most diverse bodies of water in the world, aptly deemed by Jacques Cousteau "the aquarium of the world." Swimming here eclipses your typical *Finding Nemo* snorkel outing, especially at this time of year, when the sea attracts whale sharks, blue whales, hammerheads, sea lions, and bottlenose dolphins.

By day the water is pure blue, as if lit from below by a giant pool light. Come dusk, the islands burn a rusty red: That's your signal to charter back to shore and stroll the charming *malecón*, where local families and lovers gather to watch the sunset. □

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Kayaking is just one of the many ways to navigate Isla Espiritu Santo; swim with marine life in the Sea of Cortez; downtown Todos Santos; Tacos Chilakos serves addictive carne asada tacos in Todos Santos; relax in the quiet cove of Playa Balandra, southeast of La Paz.



WHAT TO KNOW BEFORE DRIVING IN MEXICO

1. Vehicle insurance is mandatory in Mexico—however, **your United States auto insurance policy will not cover your rental car in Baja**, so be prepared to tack on an extra \$10 to \$30 per day for insurance when you pick up your car. As always, take pictures of the vehicle and report any damage before you drive off the lot.
2. Repaved roads aside, Baja is still a rural place. Its highways aren't well lit, **so be careful when driving at night** lest you collide with a wandering burro, cow, or horse (among the primary causes of accidents in the area).
3. When a driver in front of you puts on his left turn signal, he's probably asking you to pass him, not planning to make a turn.
4. **Don't drink (at all) and drive:** According to Mexican law, your auto insurance can be declared invalid if you drive after having had any alcohol whatsoever, even if your blood alcohol level is not over the legal limit.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: COURTESY OF COSTA BAJA RESORT (2); JENNA SCATENA (3)