



WEEKENDER

La Paz

CABO IS A QUICK AND EASY JAUNT FOR ANGELENOS, BUT CONSIDER VEERING A FEW HOURS NORTH FOR A LESS TOURISTY TASTE OF BAJA



PEARLS WERE LA PAZ'S first treasure. The lustrous black orbs were once so plentiful along this sheltered coast that they washed up on the beaches—at least, that's what Hernán Cortés reported in 1530. Now *Paceños* realize that the entire Sea of Cortez holds innumerable riches, namely wildlife: Aquatic explorer Jacques Cousteau dubbed it the “world’s aquarium,” with 900 fish species and 32 types of marine mammals wintering here. They’re the headliners, but the capital of Baja California Sur has its own unpretentious charisma, with a beautiful waterfront, excellent eateries, and just enough under-the-radar charm to make it feel like the real Mexico. > KELLY BASTONE

MORNING

» Chances are your room at **CostaBaja Resort & Spa** (\$113-\$458/night) will overlook water—be it the brightly tiled swimming pool, the marina (where Steven Spielberg’s yacht routinely moors), or the placid Bay of La Paz. Roll into the property’s **Mosaic** restaurant for a sprawling buffet of fresh fruit and juices, frijoles, made-to-order omelets, and chilaqui-

les. Or perk thyself up with a cold brew and a picadillo-stuffed empanada at **Doce Cuarenta**, an artisanal coffee-house only a ten-minute walk past the marina’s catamarans and yachts. Guides from the **Cortez Club** will pick you up for a morning wildlife encounter: On the northern tip of Isla Espíritu Santo, one of Mexico’s national parks, sea lions clus-

ter on a group of gnarled rocks known as Los Islotes. Circling seabirds give you the eye as you don snorkels or scuba gear to splash with playful lion pups, who nuzzle swimmers’ hair and expose their bellies in hopes of a scratch. Afterward motor back toward La Paz to swim with 20-foot whale sharks, which often feed near the surface.

KAYAK: STUART WESTMORLAND/GETTY IMAGES; POOL: COURTESY, COSTA BAJA RESORT; SHRIMP: PABLO LUZZARDI



PARADISE FOUND

Clockwise from far left: kayaking off the coast of Isla Espíritu Santo; the kind of pool dreams are made of at CostaBaja Resort; pho with pork and jumbo shrimp at Nim

AFTERNOON

» Paceanos never eat seafood for dinner—only breakfast or lunch to coincide with the morning delivery of fresh fish. So for your midday meal, head to **Biskmark-cito**, a shrine to ocean-salvaged eats located on **Paseo Álvaro Obregón** (the main

strip that hugs the waterfront and **Malecón** walkway). Indulge in fried fish, lobster tacos, and smoked marlin beneath the restaurant's sprawling shade trees, then walk to the public bus station at Calle Cinco de Mayo and **Álvaro Obregón** and catch a ride to **Balandra Beach** (reputed to be Mexico's most beautiful). Wade or paddle in the shallow pool-like bay bordered by white sand; then, after a 45-minute trip back to La Paz, join in the local ritual of

strolling the Malecón. The paved three-mile path is where runners and Rollerbladers log their daily miles, parents let their *niños* burn off energy, and couples bask in the glow of the setting sun. Rent a bike (30 pesos/hour) where the main drag intersects Agustín Arriola M. and pedal to **Casa del Artesano Sudcaliforniano**, a souvenir shop that sells pearls grown near La Paz. Refresh with a cerveza at one of the strip's many watering holes (the roof-

top bar above **Harker Board Co.** serves Baja Brewing on tap), or hit the legendary **La Fuente** for house-made cones and scoops of ice cream flavored with tequila and guanabana.

EVENING

» The Malecón's bars and restaurants trend toward the mainstream (including an Applebee's). If you're looking for more creative fare, head a few blocks inland. Start at **Big Sur**

Side Trip

● Ninety minutes from La Paz is the architectural gem of **Todos Santos**, a town whose buildings—including Hotel California, rumored to be the inspiration for the Eagles song—are nestled amid lush palms. Explore with **Locomotion Baja**, a pedal-powered tour that goes beyond the town's glut of souvenir shops to visit its weavers and tortilla makers.

Café Orgánico, a roaster that specializes in Mexican beans, for an espresso and energy boost (Paceanos eat dinner late, and nightclubs don't close until 4 a.m.). Epicures should dine at **Sorstis**, whose Italian-born chef pairs Baja seafood and steaks with authentic pastas and risottos (don't miss the Iberian ham shaved tableside). Cristina Kiewek, Baja's answer to the California chef-farmer combo, catches much of the fish she serves at **Nim**, where you'll also find an outrageous fine fillet of beef. For a low-key nightcap, claim one of the five bar stools at **La Miserable**, a cozy *mezcalería* where the available pours far outnumber the seats for patrons. On weekends head for the clubs: **Terraza's** alfresco floor appeals to girlfriend groups, while **El Parnazo's** beats keep dancers bouncing well into the wee hours. Once the lights come on, join the exodus to **Rancho Viejo**, open 24 hours near the west end of the Malecón on Márquez de León, to recover with the town's juiciest, beefiest *arrachera* tacos. ●



GETTING THERE Alaska, Aeromexico, American, Delta, and Southwest airlines offer nonstop 2.5-hour flights from LAX to San José del Cabo (SJD). From there, it's a 3-hour shuttle to La Paz (about \$50 round trip with EcoBajaTours.com), or you can rent a car and make the trek yourself. Book through Cactus Rent A Car (cactuscar.com) or Dominic Los Cabos car rental (dominicloscabos.com).