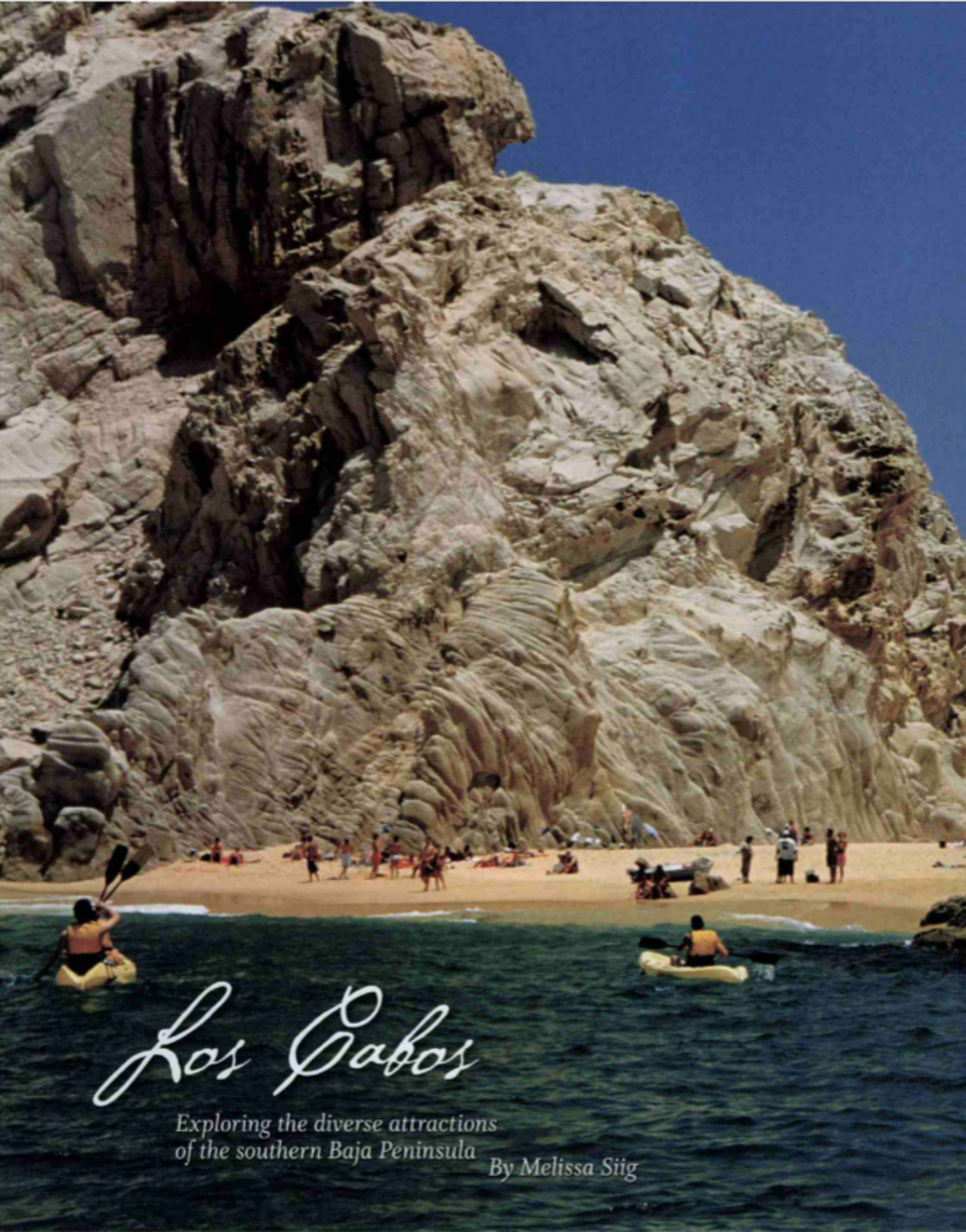


DECEMBER 2010

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Sun and fun along
Mexico's Pacific coast



Los Cabos

Exploring the diverse attractions
of the southern Baja Peninsula

By Melissa Siig

It's our first morning in Cabo San Lucas, and I meet my sister outside our hotel on Playa el Médano, Cabo's popular 2-mile-long beach. We didn't discuss this meeting the night before, but then, we didn't need to—for the past 10 years, we've always done the same thing on our first day in this Mexican resort town. Today is no different. By the time my sister arrives, I have already rented a double kayak from one of the many boat-rental places that line the beach.

When Anna arrives, we don life jackets, climb into the yellow sea kayak and start paddling toward one of our favorite landmarks—El Arco, the famous granite arch that marks the southernmost tip of the Baja Peninsula. Within minutes, we've left behind the beach's sunbathers, volleyball players and vendors for the relative calm of Cabo San Lucas Bay. We stop short of the arch, heading instead for Playa del Amante ("Lovers' Beach"). Staying on the bay side of El Arco is the safest choice, as the arch marks the beginning of the Pacific Ocean's strong waves.

After about 30 minutes, we arrive at the beach, pull our kayaks onto the sand and take a much-deserved swim in the bay's warm, blue-green water. Refreshed, we check out the action on the other side of the narrow strip of sand that separates the Sea of Cortés from the Pacific Ocean. As the name of this beach, Playa del Divorcio ("Divorce Beach"), implies, this is where things get rough—namely, the ocean. It's a great place to sit on the beach and watch the powerful swells crash on the shore, as swimming is extremely hazardous. Each collision sends up a spray of foamy water, like a choreographed symphony from the deep.

MUCH AS EL ARCO has two sides to it, so does the southern Baja Peninsula. The area at the tip of the peninsula known as Los

Cabos ("The Capes") is actually made up of two distinct towns: Cabo San Lucas and San José del Cabo. A small fishing village until the 1970s, Cabo San Lucas has since blossomed into a lively resort town with five-star hotels, gourmet restaurants and world-class golf. Nearby San José del Cabo, Cabo San Lucas' more laid-back, peaceful sister city, attracts visitors with its quaint colonial charm. But there's no reason to choose between the two. Only 20 miles apart, the two "Cabos," along with other nearby Baja towns, offer something for everyone and the promise of a rich Mexican experience.

AMAZING SNORKELING can also be found near El Arco. So the next day, Anna and I, along with my husband, Steven, return to the area with snorkel gear in hand. This



Opposite: Reachable only by boat, Lovers' Beach is a secluded spot with dramatic, towering rock formations. Above: Cabo San Lucas has a bustling waterfront and marina.

time, instead of kayaking, we walk down Playa el Médano to the marina to catch one of the colorful pangas (small, wooden boats) that ferry passengers around El Arco, and to and from Lovers' Beach.

On our journey by boat, we pass huge rock configurations that rise out of the water like giant stalagmites. Our captain calls out the name of each one as we pass by. "Scooby-Doo" bears an uncanny resemblance to the cartoon dog, and "Neptune's Fingers" looks like a submerged Roman god pointing to the sky.

As we approach Lovers' Beach, we spot a group of sea lions languidly sunbathing on some rocks. They barely acknowledge us as we motor by, with only a few bothering to lift their heads to see what's making the sound. As fascinating as the sea lions are, it's not the animals above the surface



Details

LODGING

CABO AZUL RESORT: Paseo Malecón s/n, Lote 11 Fonatur, San José del Cabo; 877-216-2226; www.caboazulresort.com

GRAND SOLMAR LAND'S END: Av. Playa Grande No. 1, Cabo San Lucas; 800-344-3349; www.solmar.com

HOTEL CALIFORNIA: Benito Juárez e/ Morelos y Marquez de Leon, Col. Centro, Todos Santos; 52-612-145-0525; www.hotelcaliforniabaja.com

ME CABO: Playa el Médano, s/n, Cabo San Lucas; 877-954-8363; www.me-cabo.com

POSADA LA POZA: Col. La Poza, A.P. 10, Todos Santos; 52-612-145-0400; www.posadalapoza.com

DINING

GALEON RISTORANTE ITALIANO: Blvd. Marina, Cabo San Lucas; 52-624-145-7576; www.restaurantgaleon.com

THE OFFICE: Playa el Médano, Cabo San Lucas; 52-624-143-3464; www.theoffice-onthebeach.com

LA PANGA ANTIGUA: Zaragoza No. 20 Centro, San José del Cabo; 52-624-142-4041; www.lapanga.com

ACTIVITIES

CABO SNORKELING: 888-557-3330; www.cabosnorkeling.com

TIO SPORTS BEACH ACTIVITY CENTER: 52-624-143-3399; www.tiosports.com

we've come to see, but the ones down below. We are heading to an underwater-wildlife reserve in a rocky area just off Lovers' Beach. The reserve is famous among divers for its submarine canyon and underwater sandfalls, and its sea life makes it an ideal place for snorkeling, too.

Once off the boat, Anna, Steven and I put on our masks, snorkels and flippers, then wade into the water and swim around the rocks. We see schools of black-and-white-striped butterfly fish with brilliant yellow tails, bright-blue-and-yellow regal tangs, pink coral and brilliant-red spiny urchins clinging to submerged boulders. I feel as if I'm in a neon aquarium.

Back at Playa el Médano, after hours spent playing in the water, it's time for refreshments. Like the kayak trip to Lovers' Beach, our family has another Cabo tradition—eating at The Office. Open since 1987, The Office has become one of the area's most popular restaurants and bars. The restaurant offers beachside dining at its best—the tables and chairs are on the beach, and the sand is the floor, so there's no need to wear shoes here. The three of us share a bucket of ice-cold Coronas and an order of guacamole and chips as we relax and enjoy the great people-watching.

THE NEXT DAY, Steven and I rent a car and drive east to San José del Cabo, parking near the town's main square, Plaza Mijares. The large, shady square is dominated by San José del Cabo's most famous landmark, Iglesia San José. The pale yel-

Top left: The Hotel California is a charming place to stay while exploring the town of Todos Santos.

Top right: Iglesia San José, built around 1940, stands on the site of the city's original circa 1730 mission.

low-and-white, twin-towered church was built around 1940 on the site of the original circa 1730 Misión San José del Cabo.

From the church, it's a short stroll to San José del Cabo's tranquil historical district. In contrast to Cabo San Lucas' contemporary buildings, the town has preserved much of its 18th century architecture. The modest adobe homes that line the tree-shaded boulevards are painted bright pinks and blues, and draped in purple bougainvillea. Many of the homes have been turned into courtyard restaurants or boutiques selling silver jewelry, traditional Mexican gifts and clothing.

After buying souvenirs for our children—a Huichol beaded lizard for our son and a white Mexican fiesta dress for our daughter—we wander over to Obregon Street. With more than 20 galleries, the area is known as San José del Cabo's art district. Every Thursday night, from November through May, the district hosts Art Night. The galleries stay open late and invite visitors to browse their pieces while sipping complimentary wine and enjoying live music.

During our visit, we stop in at Galería de Ida Victoria. Located in a three-story building painted a light purple, the airy gallery specializes in contemporary art.

We pause to admire a vibrant painting by Andrés García-Peña from his "Revenge of the Bulls" series. The painting depicts the angels of deceased bulls cheering on one of their own in a Spanish bullfight.

Soon our stomachs are rumbling, and we leave the gallery in search of food. On our way back to the car, we happen upon a restaurant called La Panga Antigua. Above the door hangs an ancient wooden skiff. "It has to be a sign," Steven says, recognizing the word "panga" in the restaurant's name from our earlier boat ride. We walk inside, where we learn that the establishment is owned by the same people responsible for two of our favorite restaurants in Cabo, Peacocks and Mi Casa. We're delighted by the promise of great contemporary Mexican cuisine and the beautiful surroundings.

The main dining area is outside, surrounded by so many trees that the space feels tropical and lush. The tiled floors and brick walls give the area a rustic feel, like an old hacienda. We find out that La Panga Antigua is known for its seafood, so I order the seared sea scallops, while Steven gets the ahi. As we gaze from the flickering candles on our table to the twinkling stars above, we clink our glasses in a toast.

"To dining al fresco," I say. "To the other Cabo," Steven replies.

WE ENJOY OUR DAY TRIP to San José del Cabo so much that after a few days of relaxing poolside at ME Cabo, our hotel in Cabo San Lucas, and playing on the beach, we decide to embark on another adventure. But this time, instead of driving east, we head west and then north, hugging the Pacific Ocean as we motor through cactus-filled deserts and over rugged hillsides. Our destination is the sleepy town of Todos Santos—an oasis in the desert, thanks to the abundant water that flows down from the Sierra de la Laguna.

We see the town in the distance before we arrive—a green patch easy to spot along arid Highway 19. As we get closer, fields of palm trees, mangoes and chile peppers come into focus. We have arrived.

During the 19th century, Todos Santos thrived as Baja's sugarcane capital. Today,

the town is still a significant agricultural center, but the area's thunderous Pacific waves and colonial buildings have made it a destination for surfers and artists, as well.

We park in front of a beautiful butter-scotch-color church, Nuestra Señora del Pilar de Todos Santos, which was originally built in the 1700s and has since been reconstructed. As we begin our tour of Todos Santos, I can see why many visitors talk glowingly about the small town, the home of more than two-dozen galleries. In addition to the art, I'm also eager to see the Hotel California, purportedly the inspiration for the 1976 Eagles song of the same name. It turns out this story may not be true, but I'm still glad for our visit. The bright indigo-and-burgundy interior, as well as the blown-glass chandelier in the lobby, are charming. The garden dining area—replete with plants and flowers, and a tinkling Spanish fountain—is especially lovely.

I'm just about ready to ask for a table, but Steven has other plans. He wants to see some whales, and one of the best places for whale-watching is Posada La Poza, the only hotel in Todos Santos located on the beach. We make the drive to the eight yellow-and-orange suites on the edge of a freshwater lagoon, and join a group of people gathered on a second-story terrace, all gazing out over the vast Pacific Ocean. And then I see what they're looking at—a spray of water shooting up from a black form, followed by a giant tail bursting from the sea.

I take in this magical moment and make a vow to myself. Like the whales on their annual migration south, I will return to the Baja Peninsula. ▲

Melissa Siig is a freelance writer in Tahoe City, California.

GETTING THERE



Alaska Airlines has expanded its service to Los Cabos—including new service out of San Jose, California—and has also expanded its service to La Paz and Loreto. Book a complete Alaska Airlines Vacations package to Mexico at alaskaair.com or call 800-468-2248.