

Cabo beckons those in search of winter warmth



Warm waters of Cabo are perfect for swimming – even in winter.
Photos/Robert S. Wood

By Robert S. Wood

BAJA, Mexico – A winter visit to the tip of Baja in Mexico offers the quickest, easiest access I know to warm semi-tropical ocean beaches. Deanne and I like to visit shortly after Thanksgiving, when the water is still swimming pool warm – October can be too hot – before the snowbirds and spring breakers arrive in force and room prices double for the holidays.

We're currently just back from three December weeks, where daily temps hit the low 80s, the ocean was a balmy 75. We walked the beach barefoot at night in shorts. That's fairly

typical Cabo winter weather, with low Tropic of Capricorn humidity. Farther south in coastal Mexico. It gets warmer, but can be sticky, and the Pacific Ocean swimming isn't half so good as at sheltered Cabo.

The 1,000-mile long rugged desert peninsula hangs like a beard off the bottom of California. At its tip are two contrasting Mexican towns, Cabo San Lucas and San Jose del Cabo. They are joined by a fancy 25-mile seaside divided highway. This trio comprises Cabo, with its sport fishing yacht harbors, glitzy hotels, golf courses, condos, gringo enclaves and white sand beaches.

One inland airport – “Cabos International” – serves both towns, first heading south to San Jose, then turning west to Cabo. It's mostly traveled via local buses, hotel shuttles and taxis. It's also possible to drive your car or camper, or take a Mexican bus all the way down from the border on a fascinating and still wild 1,000 miles of third-rate blacktop through the desert.



Time to relax.

There's also primitive car ferryboat service from the Mexican mainland, though not directly to the Cabo area. During the past 30 years, we've tried every approach. For years we used to drive our old '56 Chevy camper van down from Tahoe, stopping at little beaches and fishing camps along the way to trade our frozen steaks for fresh catch, camping on the beach or rare campgrounds. That can still be done, and there are

more campgrounds now, even at the tip.

Cruise ships also visit Cabo, but not as a final destination – unless you jump ship, which I've seriously considered.

The two towns are wildly different. Cabo San Lucas is an old fishing village built around a handsome yacht harbor full of gleaming white fishing yachts. It lies only yards from the big surf of the wild Pacific Ocean, just behind Lands End and the famous granite arch that shelters Medano Beach.

Medano is the best, safest place to swim in water as clear and blue as Lake Tahoe – and always much warmer. All beaches are open to the public, with white clad Mexican vendors trudging through the sand to sell jewelry, rugs, clothing and crafts. We find them authentically charming, but some think them annoying, though it is their country.

Downtown Cabo behind the marina is home to the Giggling Marlin, Cabo Wabo, Squid Roe, raucous nightclubs, nightly girlie shows, swim with dolphins concessions, billfishing tournaments, ziplines, harborside cafes, dune buggy and Wave Rider rentals, loud salsa beach cafes (The Office, Mango Deck, Billigans) that are popular with spring breakers, sunset booze and dinner cruises, snorkeling tours, and glass-bottom boat trips to famous Lovers Beach behind Lands End.



Lodging options run the gamut.

There is also Wal-Mart, McDonald's and Costco, acres of gift shops – and the billboards are mostly in English. You can mostly drink the water and safely eat from taco stands. And your Mexican hosts are mainly friendly, cheerful and smiling, grateful to be living where they do.

In stark contrast, San Jose del Cabo at the eastern tip of the beard is a quiet, younger, charming Mexican village, with attractive outdoorsy restaurants, art galleries, museums, a new yacht harbor and nature park. It sits on rocky shores interspersed with beaches, but they are not safe for ocean swimming.

Clearly, Cabo is the happening place. We stay nearby at Club Cascadas on Medano Beach for the great swimming, only rarely walking – no car needed – into town or the harbor for dinner, where food is decidedly more expensive than at Tahoe. At Cascadas – funky architecture under waving palms – you can buy packages of as few as four beachside timeshare weeks quite reasonably – or expensive villas with third floor swimming pools or lifetime perpetual legacies.

The handsomely landscaped “corridor” that joins these two contrasting towns is locally known as “The Four Lane”. It provides access to the string of destination, side-by-side luxury hotels, most with championship golf courses and many swimming pools, with sometimes swimmable beaches. But they are comparatively isolated. You need a car (rentals are available) to get to town, or take a hotel shuttle or expensive taxi. Otherwise guests are captive to their hotel restaurants.

Condo-hotel-timeshare rooms must first be divided into standard – some with kitchenettes – and all-inclusive. The latter have proliferated in recent years, saving the casual traveler and young families the need to hunt down and travel to restaurants, deal with the language and foreign currency, thus nicely overcoming the isolation drawback in the corridor hotels.

All-inclusive allows the traveler to eat and drink all they want without ever changing dollars into pesos, usually at three or four restaurants, most of them buffets. You pay for everything before leaving home, then wear a bracelet that identifies you as pre-paid. No wallet is needed, as you can charge other costs to your room.

It's a new freedom with few drawbacks, growing fast in popularity with those who don't care about the local culture or are timid about foreign travel or want maximum freedom and comfort. Incidentally, street crime in Cabo is virtually unknown; police are watching out for tourists. We feel safer walking the Cabo streets at night than in any sizeable U.S. city.

Hotel rooms are next subdivided into beach-seaside and inland-town, the latter being much cheaper. They are then further categorized on the basis of location and view, using the common industry terms: Beachside, Ocean View, Poolside and Garden (meaning no water in sight).

Timeshares are aggressively offered for sale even before you get out of the airport. Attending a seductive timeshare presentation takes half a day, not the hour they promise, but it often earns a free meal and cash or perks worth up to \$200. If you must buy, get a floating (flexible) week, not a fixed (rigid) one. But beware that the uncapped stiff annual maintenance fee will keep going up until it's more than the place is worth and you're locked in to keep paying it.

For those who fall for Cabo and want to stay longer for less there are also condos for sale, as well as inland-gated gringo communities where a new home with a view to the ocean and Lands End can be purchased for under \$100,000. Incidentally the distinctive-prominent bare rocky spine leading to the arch and Lands End is made of the same light granite we know at Tahoe.

Cabo is highly popular with the more romantic expats and snowbirds, but for those who prefer what a city can offer, less glamorous, cheaper La Paz (population roughly 250,000, with a larger selection of cheaper gringo communities) lies only four hours by road to the north, with essentially the same climate and more amenities but no arch.

In between lies the artsy Pacific surfers village of Todos Santos. Cheap local buses make a circle day trip from Cabo around lovely scenic mountain ranges to see it all. So do more comfortable and expensive excursion buses and city tours leaving from Cabo hotels.

All things considered, Cabo is far from authentic old Mexico, but it's salubrious climate, warmth, charm and easy holiday seaside beauty, combined with its quick easy air access – our flight from Phoenix gets us there in time for a swim before lunch – makes it almost irresistible for an outdoor warm winter holiday.

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