

## Beautiful Baja

By

D. E. Fothergill

My first view of Mexico, before landing at the San José del Cabo International Airport, was the Sonoran desert of Baja California Sud. Cardon cactus (much like saguaro) and mesquite trees were patches of green upon a carpet of tawny sand. The Sea of Cortez was a slash of azure on the horizon.

!Bienvenida a Los Cabos! Welcome to The Capes!

As my husband and I stepped from the plane, Baja's heat quickly dispelled the chills of a snowy winter. The temperatures in Los Cabos hover around 25 degrees Celcius and it rarely rains. Our hotel, Casa Natalia, in San José del Cabo, had arranged for a driver to meet us and he was happy to tell us everything about Baja California Sud. Although his English was halting, it was better than our Spanish. From him, we learned our hotel was in an old Spanish colonial town. Cabo San Lucas, 20 km to the west, was the party town of The Capes and 80 km north, along the coast, was Todos Santos, an artisan centre and famous for its Hotel California.

We soon learned that every Mexican in Baja firmly believes the Eagles wrote the song 'Hotel California' while on holiday here and any musical venue in The Capes includes it in its repertoire.

By the time we reached the hotel, it was late afternoon and we were travel weary. The Casa Natalia stands near the town square and its adobe-like exterior blends well with the old colonial aspect of the town. We wondered if our driver had let us off at someone's home since it did not resemble a hotel. Ironwork decorated its upper windows and a tall cardon cactus guarded the entrance. Then I remembered that casa means house in Spanish so it would be appropriate that 'Nathalie's House' would be more like a home than a hotel.

Mayeli welcomed us with a cool, refreshing fruit drink as we sat at the huge desk dominating the front office. For a brief moment, I thought of the water-borne diseases for which Mexico is famous but then threw caution to the wind and slaked my thirst.

A simple rope divided the noise of the town from the quite peace of the hotel. As Mayeli lifted it, we passed into the magic the was the Casa Natalia. We entered a gracious lobby with white couches strewn with vibrantly-embroidered pillows. Local artwork graced the walls and sculptures decorated the tables.

The lobby opened onto another level, La Bodeguita del Güero (The Little Cellar of Goldspike Chile) bar and lounge. The bar had two sections, one inside

to serve the lobby and a palapa bar, under a thatched roof, serving a lounge open to the blue Mexican sky.

Casa Natalia, a boutique hotel, consisted of a series of terraces taking one from the hustle and bustle of the street into a sanctuary of palm trees, flowing water, and waterfalls. A stucco wall of blue-grey, tan and brick-red ran down one side of the courtyard while bright red and pink bougainvillea draped the rooms' balconies and bamboo hedges hid private patios on the opposite side.

Short walls divided the terraces and these bore large clay braziers. At night, they were lit to provide an enchanting atmosphere. Mayeli explained that the owners of Casa Natalia, Nathalie and L ic Tenoux, wished to create a place that embodied the ancient healing elements of earth, wind, fire, and water. The wind sighed through the palm fronds as if to add credence to Mayeli's words.

The first terrace was a dining area studded with palm trees. It was famous for its gourmet meals served under the stars. As we walked through its limestone and lava tables, Maylei told us the Mi Cocina (My Kitchen) menu was an unique blend of Mexican and European cuisine. Chef Loic Tenoux, trained in Europe, used only fresh ingredients and locally caught seafood in his cuisine. His wine list featured Mexican, Californian, European, and South American selections.

Stepping down from the Mi Cocina and onto the pool terrace was like walking into a secluded glade of waterfalls and lawns. Wood deck chairs with white cushions encircled the heated waters of the pool. Umbrellas and small tables made the place look like you had walked into someone's backyard.

Our room was off the final terrace. A giant cardon cactus and a planter of bougainvillea softened the back wall of the courtyard and made this area a quiet place to relax. We had a ground floor suite with a tiny patio and a room with a living area and king-size bed. The bathroom was all marble with closet space, a large vanity, and a shower and toilet with glass doors. There are only 16 rooms in the Casa Natalia so you feel, and are treated, like family. Each room is named and ours was Cuarto de la Estrella— the Star Room.

Original artwork (three-dimensional tin stars) decorated the walls and embroidered pillows, the bed. A TV was hidden in an armoire and the coffee and side tables held typical Mexican nicknacks. A bird created using a white towel rested at the foot of the bed. At its breast was a Hibiscus flower and written in small twigs on the bedspread was the word 'Bienvenidos'.

After making reservations to dine at the Mi Concia, Mayeli left us. A moment later, our luggage arrived and we quickly changed from our travel clothes. Already the magic of the Casa Natalia affected us as we sat on our patio

surrounded by bamboo and bougainvillea and listened to the gurgling water of the canal.

While we dined at the Mi Cocina that evening, I felt I had been transported back to a more romantic time. The stars were bright and the restaurant, with its fiery braziers and flowing water, evoked a sense of tropical paradise. The food enhanced this atmosphere. After a tasty breadbasket, I enjoyed an appetizer of a Chile poblano pepper stuffed with lamb, Oaxaca cheese and herbs. I followed this with grilled organic chicken breast with rosemary, lime, and garlic wine sauce and my husband had filet mignon with gratin dauphinois. He finished his meal with his favourite, crème bruléé. Our first taste of Mexican coffee was a delight. As we lingered, enjoying the brilliance of the stars, Nathalie Tenoux approached our table. We ran out of words describing how much we had loved the food and ambience. The sound of burbling water lulled us to sleep.

The next morning we enjoyed Mexican eggs, creamy yoghurt and fresh fruit on our patio but the lure of the sea drew us from the peace of the Casa Natalia. The hotel has a beach house so those who wish to sit on the sand or swim in a pool beside the ocean can do so (book ahead if you need transportation). The Sea of Cortez, along San José, coast has a wicked undertow so swimming is dangerous.

We decided to explore San José del Cabo as we walked to the beach. Our first stop was the historic town square dominated by a cream-coloured stucco church, Iglesia San José (built in 1940). A mosaic above the door depicted a priest being dragged into the desert by the Pericu Indians (descendants of Polynesians). Padre Nicolás Tamaral founded the mission in 1730 after fierce battles with the Pericues. Although he converted many to Christianity and introduced them to farming, they did not like his stand on polygamy so beheaded him. European diseases eventually wiped out the Pericues.

The town's main street is Antonio Mijares Blvd, named for a naval officer who defeated the occupying Americans during the Mexican-American war (1846-48). Scattered along the boulevard are art galleries, bars, restaurants, and souvenir shops. Most vendors speak English and all take credit cards, American dollars, or Mexican pesos. Everything from diamonds, Mexican opals and silver to tacky trinkets is for sale. One can haggle over prices but silver jewelry is weighed and the price per gram is not negotiable.

Leaving the bustle behind, we entered the park-like estuary, Estero San José. Here the Rio San José meets the Sea of Cortez after flowing, mostly underground, from the Sierra de la Laguna. The estuary is 50 hectares of Tlaco palms, sedges, willows, and mangrove. It is home to over 250 species of birds

and we saw many that summer in the north. We also spotted frigate birds, egrets, and vultures.

Strolling the beach, we marveled at the waves crashing on the sand. Brown pelicans fished the waters, as did local fishermen. Strings of horses also plodded along the beach; horseback riding is a popular tourist adventure. As we walked, we passed several sprawling modern resorts. Most were all-inclusive and appealed to families.

Returning to town, we had lunch at a 'gringo' bar called El Tulipan (The Tulip Tree). We had the best nachos, salsa, and cheese I've ever tasted and since the bar was on the roof of the restaurant, we could watch the passing scene on the streets below.

By this time we were ready for the peace of Casa Natalia. We swam in the warm waters of the pool then read to the sounds of falling water. On the lawn, Gopala lead a woman in a series of Yoga positions. He and Radha teach yoga and relaxation at the Casa Natalia's spa.

The wild life of Cabo San Lucas beckoned us the following day so we planned a snorkeling trip to Santa Maria Bay. Casa Natalia will organize excursions or one can hop a local bus. Cabo San Lucas has hundreds of bars and restaurants, a shopping mall, and several marinas. It caters to cruise ships and is the base for boat tours, sports fishing, whale-watching, snorkeling and scuba

diving adventures. The town sits on the southernmost tip of Baja and boasts the famous arch at land's end. Tour boats will take you out for a closer look. One, a pirate ship, is a reminder of the time when Sir Francis Drake sailed the Sea of Cortez in search of Spanish treasure.

My husband and I joined a small group onboard our catamaran, the Rissalena. Our captain took us out past Pelican Rock at the mouth of Cabo's harbour to Lover's Beach, so named because the Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Cortez 'kiss' at high tide across a sandy beach. Then we saw El Arco, a perfect arch set in a craggy rock face. Pillars of rock marched from it into the Sea of Cortez and one hosted a flock of cormorants. At its feet was the local sea lion colony.

As we headed east to Santa Maria Bay, our captain had us look for humpback whales which calve in the Sea of Cortez in the winter. I spotted a splash on the horizon and we were off. It wasn't a whale but dolphins and they cavorted around the boat as we took pictures. The crew played Vivaldi's Four Seasons on the sound system enhancing this wonderful experience.

Being a party boat (and they all are in Cabo San Lucas) as well as a snorkeling excursion, we had music, drinks, and snacks from the time we left the harbour. At Santa Maria Bay, the crew outfitted us with snorkels and fins before we stepped into the cool waters of the bay. There were hundreds of brightly-



coloured fish among the rocks as well as sea urchins and anemones. I came upon a wall of silver fish that stretched as far as I could see. I swam toward it and the school dove beneath me as if it were one large shimmering fish.

From sea to mountains, Baja California Sud has it all. Having explored the sea, we spent the next day experiencing the desert. We did so on an ATV.

Neither my husband nor I had ever been on such a beast. Our guides explained how the machines worked then led us through the streets of San José and up into the Sierra de San Lazaro. We wore red bandanas around our faces like Mexican banditos from an old movie. The coastal road we traveled was bumpy but the scenery breathtaking with desert sands meeting the waters of the Sea of Cortez. Once in the sand dunes, we were allowed to explore. The roar of the machines was a stark contrast to the beauty of the desert and mountains surrounding us.

Exhausted, we returned to the serenity of Casa Natalia. After showering off the Sonoran Desert sand, we enjoyed a cool cerveza (beer) in La Bodeguita del Güero lounge. There we met a couple who told us of their afternoon spent at the local 9 hole golf course. Like us, they had been drenched in sand. Martha complained of the grit in her teeth but otherwise they enjoyed their game.

Another couple regaled us with stories of their sport fishing adventure off the Baja coast. The wife had hauled in a 300 pound Marlin and her husband had

hooked a 250 pounder. They released these magnificent fish but had photos to prove they were not telling a 'fish story'.

We were sad to leave Casa Natalia when our time in The Capes ended for we had experienced an unique stay within its walls. Its motto, "Where I came to learn that 'Casa' was not Spanish for 'House' but rather for 'Home'" touched us.

For more information:

Casa Natalia – call toll free 1-866-826-1170, email at

[casa.natalia@lcarbonet.com.mx](mailto:casa.natalia@lcarbonet.com.mx), or see their website at [www.casanatalia.com](http://www.casanatalia.com)

Los Cabos Information – Los Cabos Tourism ([www.visitloscabos.org/](http://www.visitloscabos.org/) or [www.loscabosrestaurantguide.com/](http://www.loscabosrestaurantguide.com/) )

To view photographs of my stay in The Capes, go to [www.vashti.com/](http://www.vashti.com/)

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