

# TRAVEL

Los Angeles Times



DON TORMEY / Los Angeles Times

## WEEKEND ESCAPE

What happens when a family of four (including golfaholic) goes on vacation to a resort (that just happens to have three golf courses). L5

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Palmy: South of Rosarito Beach, hot tub, pool and ocean converge at Las Rocas Hotel.

J. T. MacMILLAN / For The Times

## Tijuana to Ensenada: a fresh look at resorts and restaurants

By HILLARY HAUSER

**L**A MISIÓN, Baja California—Sitting in the seaside restaurant at the La Fonda Hotel, surrounded by the sounds of Spanish, guitar music and heavy surf, my old friend Joni Stauffer and I talked about the magic.

Just a few hours after leaving home we were in a foreign land. No airport hassles, no cramped airplane seats—we simply threw my two schipperkes, Minke and Buster, and some clothes into the back seat of my old van and we were off.

The drive from Santa Barbara had been easy. We'd left at 8 a.m., got through L.A. with '60s oldies blaring from the car stereo, stopped for gas and a snack in San Diego, and stopped again just before the U.S./Mexico border to get Mexican auto insurance and a wad of pesos.

We had coasted along the divided highway next to the border fence and by 3 p.m.—after a quick detour to the Playas de Tijuana area—Joni and I were romping with Minke and Buster on the beach in front of the hotel.

Located 37 miles south of the border, La Fonda is just the kind of hotel I love: rustic rooms overlooking the Pacific, accessible only by steep, narrow stairs. The hotel was to be our home base for an exploration of Baja's "Gold Coast," the stretch of resorts between Tijuana and Ensenada along Mexico Highway 1. I wanted to check out the wild white Morocco-style buildings, the pink castles, the modern high-rises, the jumbles of rooms set into steep sea cliffs.

Highway 1 is a wide-open, well-paved

# BAJA'S GOLD COAST

toll (*cuota*) road. It generally skirts the coast, with all the restaurants, hotels and spectacular views on the ocean side. Though we exited the highway to non-toll (*libre*) roads to visit some Gold Coast resorts, we kept returning to Highway 1 as we headed south.

Highway 1 is dotted with kilometer markers so drivers know where they are between towns. These markers even function as addresses in some hotel brochures. The stretch between Tijuana and Ensenada runs from K0 to K112—about 70 miles. After Ensenada the

numbers start all over again (K0 to K126 to San Quintín, for example). It was easy navigating the Gold Coast, we just kept our eyes on the Ks.

**K29**—Most fun-seekers looking for a Mexico quick trip, head for Rosarito Beach, about 18 miles south of the border, to take advantage of weekend deals offered by the numerous Americanized hotels, shops, discos and restaurants lining Boulevard Benito Juárez.

(North of Rosarito, in the Playas de Tijuana area, the hotels are less modern,

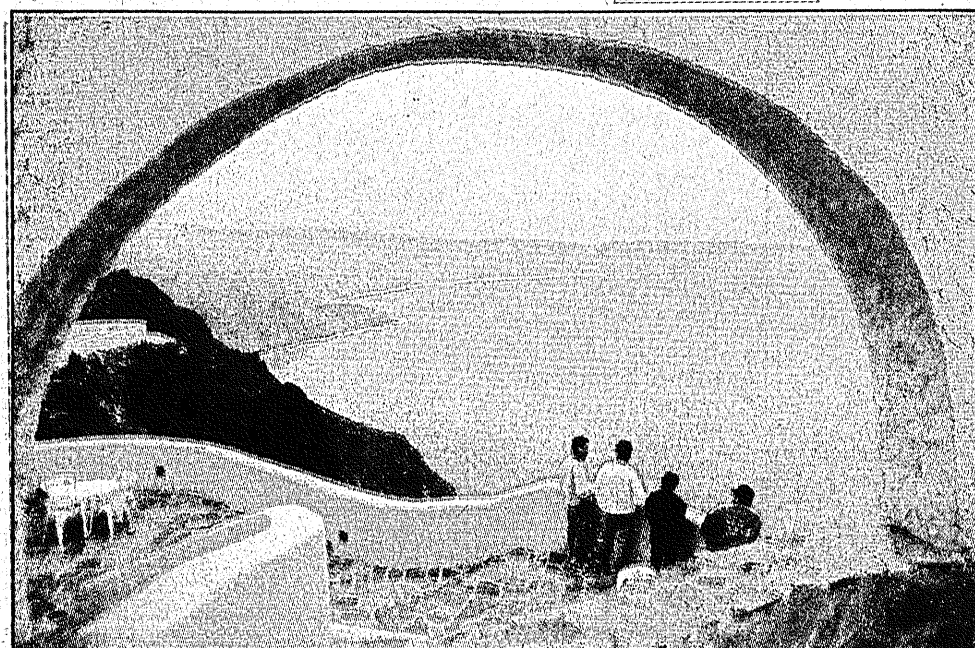
Please see RESORTS, L12







# Destination: Baja California



See-slide: Looking south from El Mirador.

HILLARY HAUSER

## RESORTS

Continued from L1

more local in appeal. Pollution problems continue to plague Tijuana beaches; anyone interested in swimming or surfing may be best advised to head south.)

Joni and I drove past places like the Dragon Del Mar Restaurant and the Salty Dog Disco before we reached the Rosarito Beach Hotel, an imposing resort that is a legend unto itself. It was once a gambling casino frequented by 1920s Hollywood stars who came here to vacation, throw dice or be married.

"This looks like Party Central," Joni said as we stepped into the hotel's cavernous lobby. A long line of *norteamericanos* were checking in at the front desk, eager to start

their weekends. Although it was cloudy the afternoon we were there, the beach concessions were primed for the crowd—jewelry and souvenir vendors, horse and dune buggy renters.

My idea of a beach vacation involves swimming in a scenic, uncrowded ocean, or at least going for quiet walks. Neither the beach by the Rosarito Beach Hotel, nor the hotel itself inspired this or any other such felicity. The quieter, more natural scenes in Baja are to be found farther south.

**K35.5**—About three miles south of Rosarito Beach, on the *libre* road that parallels the highway for the next 20 miles, is one of the happier resorts in Baja: the Hotel Calafia, a sprawling, Disneylandish place with zillions of little balconies, porches, terraces, tables, nooks and crannies set into a rocky sea cliff. I was intrigued by Calafia when I first saw it years ago—with its huge old Spanish galleon, the *Corona Aurea*, sitting high and dry on a lower terrace just above the beach.

The surf was enormous the morning Joni and I stepped into the Calafia's restaurant, so we took a window seat, ordered breakfast and watched the ocean roar by. Joni had delicious *huevos rancheros* for \$3.50, I had *machaca con huevos* (shredded beef and eggs) for \$4.50. The service was excellent and the dining room atmosphere casually elegant. Other diners sat outside on the whale-watching terraces. Amid piped-in mariachi music, waiters ran around preparing patio tables for the upcoming lunch crowd. I have always considered the Calafia a must-stop for breakfast, lunch or dinner, and still do. The hotel rooms, however, are small, dark and uninviting.

**K37.5**—About a mile down the same *libre*



J.T. MacMILLAN / For The Times

road, we came to Las Rocas Hotel, a modern, multilevel, Americanized resort built on a rocky shore. The emphasis of this resort is on its swimming pool, patio and the large open-air bar facing the sea. The white-stucco architecture and the rooms (equipped with wet bars, refrigerators, microwave ovens, telephones and televisions) are somewhat unimaginative and un-Mexican, but visitors looking for a quiet place to read a book would probably have a great time here.

**K44.5**—An important draw of the next two modern, Americanized resorts—the Grand Baja Resort and the New Port Beach Hotel (at K45)—is their proximity to Puerto Nuevo, Baja's "Lobster Village." In this quaint but touristy seaside community there are more than 20 restaurants specializing in lobster dishes—boiled, broiled and baked; lobster thermidor, lobster tacos, lobster salads.

The New Port Beach Hotel is large, modern and many would find it attractive, but for me, the whole point of going to Baja (or anywhere, for that matter) is to get away from places that feel like an American resort. In this light, the real fun began for Joni and me down the road at (of all places) the Hotel Cafe Americana.



VICTOR KOTOWITZ / Los Angeles Times

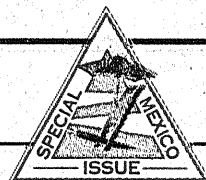


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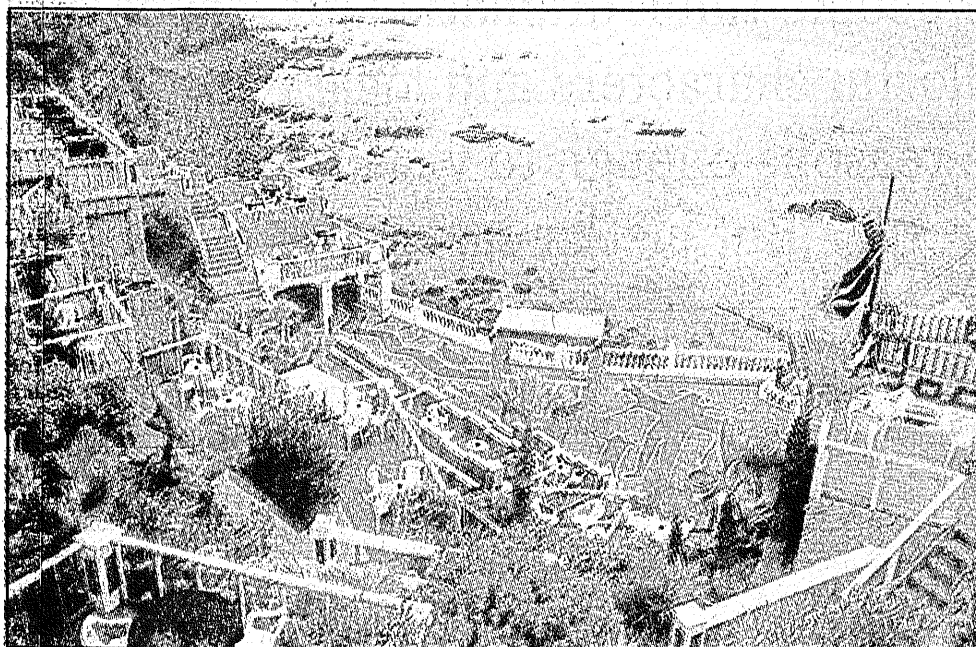
Fine, funky:  
Lobby of Las  
Rosas, above;  
author in  
Room 22 at La  
Fonda, left.

**K65**—Our next stop south on Mexico Highway 1 was the turnoff at La Misión, where both the La Fonda and La Misión hotels are located. La Fonda's funkiness would not appeal to people who insist on luxury, phones or room service, the lack of which appeals to me all the more. I also knew from previous brief visits that it would be easy to smuggle Buster and





# Destination: Baja California



**On edge:** Hotel Calafia's multilevel outdoor dining.

HILLARY HAUSER

Mike into the place.

La Fonda has oceanfront rooms starting at \$46 a day, and oceanfront apartments with full kitchen and fireplace for \$69 a day. I rented room No. 22, the "Norman" Suite, one of the more picturesque in the hotel, for \$69 per night for the two of us. Plus we got the mid-week discount of \$50 per night for the weeknights we planned to be here.

Getting our belongings, and the dogs, to the room was a major belly-laugh since the stairway to the Norman Suite is narrow and very steep, but it was worth the struggle. The room has a corner picture-window view of the sea, stone floor, fireplace, potted plants everywhere, a shelf of books over a sofa. The narrow three-story brick bathroom featured tiled stairs curving up to a first landing, and from there up to a sunken shower that offered a view of the sea through another picture window.

Joni and I went one evening for drinks at the Hotel La Misión, an easy walk from La Fonda, where we found the center of activity to be Duffin's Tavern, a large oceanfront bar where margaritas cost \$1. The 10 hotel rooms located on the ground floor are stark but large, and some of them have private Jacuzzis.

**K14**—Proceeding south from La Fonda, we stopped at the El Mirador lookout/restaurant, a building project I'd seen in progress for at least four years. Now it is a handsome pink stucco building and terrace that overlooks the dramatic Bahía Salinas coastline to the south. When we were there, the sun had broken through a gray fog to turn the sea into a glittering blue, and the shoreline was so breathtaking it was easy to see why it's some-



J.T. MacMILLAN / For The Times

## Slipper: Hard work at Puerto Nuevo.

times called Baja's Big Sur.

From the El Mirador lookout there also is a majestic view of the Todos Santos Islands, two craggy outcroppings 12 miles offshore, and as far south as Punta Banda, a seven-mile-long peninsula that defines the southern edge of the huge Bahía de Todos Santos, which is Ensenada's waterfront.

**K100**—Just before Ensenada, Las Rosas Hotel dominates the coastline with its attractive pink-and-turquoise Mediterranean architecture. This is probably the

most luxurious resort on the Gold Coast, complete with spectacular swimming pool overlooking the sea. The interior tends toward stark (as do the rooms), and standing in the lobby (or sitting in the restaurant), a hotel guest could easily feel as if he/she had never left the United States. We had breakfast here, sharing a somewhat dry, unimaginative *machaca* with eggs for \$6, but Joni loved the complimentary champagne. Las Rosas is a favorite destination for many Baja aficionados, but it is not rustic (or funky) enough for me.

**K112**—Ensenada came next. This bustling port city is dominated by the commercial activities of its waterfront. In previous years, when I spent weeks camping with my husband on the isolated beaches of southern Baja, I always experienced a sort of culture shock driving back into Ensenada, with all its hotels, RV parks, steakhouses, Hussongs bars, French bakery, Mandarin restaurant, discos and traffic jams. The Ensenada beach area is dominated by the enormous luxury Hotel Coral and Marina, where visitors can berth their yachts and enjoy an indoor pool, spa, fitness club, tennis courts and rooms that rent for \$135-\$600 per night.

Joni and I were not enticed to stop in Ensenada, but continued toward the southernmost part of our itinerary—La Bufadora, the famous ocean blowhole at the tip of Punta Banda.

**K15**—Before we got to the La Bufadora turnoff, however, we took the road through Ejido Chapultepec to the Estero Beach Resort. I'd heard of Estero Beach from windsurfing friends in Santa Barbara, who often take their children there for family vacations.

It wasn't hard to see why they liked it. The Estero Beach Hotel is on a wide, sandy bay that is safe for swimming (and excellent for launching sail boards). The hotel itself consists of an assortment of rooms, cottages and suites spread over attractive grounds. It offers a homey, relaxed atmosphere where children can play Ping-Pong, billiards and games. There is tennis and horseback riding too.

**K21**—Now we were headed to La Bufadora, the end of our trail. Driving into the farming community of Maneadero, we came to a fork in the highway. The right road leads to La Bufadora, about 13 miles onto the Punta Banda.

The drive is through a countryside littered with roadside stands, and signs advertising campsites for rent, scuba diving shops and charters. The Punta Banda area has resisted major development, however, and only at La Bufadora itself—the road there is lined with souvenir stands—we did we feel the effects of tourism.

On a day of good sea swells, the water funnels into a narrow cove at La Bufadora where it is pushed through a vent at the top of a tidal cave to create a spectacular

saltwater geyser. When we were there, the surf was enormous and La Bufadora put on a full display.

While taking in this show of nature we noticed a handsome Mexican couple—she in high stiletto heels and black leather skirt, he in a black dress shirt—holding hands as they watched. Were they honeymooners? Is La Bufadora the Mexican equivalent of Niagara Falls?

Who knows, but everywhere Joni and I went on our brief foray into the Gold Coast we were handed flyers with fractured English enticements such as: "romantic weekend getaway special," "dinner and

dance under the stars," and "beaches for arm-in-arm walking."

This point was brought home the night Joni and I asked the La Fonda Hotel office for an extra lightbulb. The nice office worker handed it to us and said, "Have a romantic evening, ladies."

We gleefully told this story to our husbands and friends, but the fact remains that the Gold Coast of Baja may well be one of the world's hottest destinations for lovers looking for a place to escape.

*Hauser is a freelance writer living in Summerland.*