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Don't write off Baja just yet

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Remember when we treated Baja like a suburb of Southern California, when you only had to point your compass south to quickly bask in sunny climes, otherworldly scenery and a tinge of the exotic? Then came the great drug wars, with the first gruesome headlines coming out of Tijuana. Suddenly, anyone contemplating a trip across the border was placed on suicide watch.

Leave aside for the moment that the drug cartels aren't targeting tourists, that their internecine battles rarely break out anywhere near tourist districts, or that crime has actually declined around Tijuana recently as the field of combat shifts to northeastern Mexico. For some travelers, those early headlines will remain indelible.

That doesn't mean Baja is off the itinerary. Baja California is just one of the peninsula's two states; to get your Baja fix, keep going south. Baja California Sur is as distant from the drug wars as San Francisco is from Denver, and it's just as safe as Anaheim. Southern Baja's tourism numbers have suffered by association, but the region hasn't been idle. And if you're not into time-share pitches, raucous clubs and gridlocked traffic, there's plenty beyond Los Cabos. Here's what's been going on in some of our favorite places.

La Paz

Tucked into a sheltered nook in the Bahía de La Paz on the Sea of Cortés (a.k.a. Golfo de California), the capital of Baja California Sur has labored, workmanlike and unheralded, to keep goods coming in and out of the peninsula since the 16th century. Serendipitously, development of Los Cabos siphoned off the glitz-seeking hedonists and left this utterly charming and thoroughly authentic city to the rest of us. Everyday life focuses on day-to-day work rather than tourism, yet it has all a modern traveler needs — a beguiling malecón, pleasant and affordable lodgings, seaside restaurants, movie theaters, a surfeit of festivals, and white-sand beaches with splendid sunsets that outdo Los Cabos by a mile.

La Paz perches on the edge of a great natural aquarium teeming with everything from marlin to sailfish, and sport fishing was the city's main source of tourism for decades. Recently, it's also become a staging ground for ecotourism, exemplified by Isla Espiritu Santo, home to 31 species of marine mammals (including one-third of the world's whale and dolphin species). You can snorkel alongside sea lions and turtles — you don't even need a snorkel to spot multitudes of colorful fish — or, if you like, reel in some prize catches.

The latest additions to La Paz's tourist offerings are new residential communities tailored to the increasing number of expatriates flocking south in search of sun, watersports and golf. One of these, CostaBaja Resort, has built the city's largest public marina 5 minutes north of town, just south of Isla Espiritu Santo. The Fiesta Inn is open now and another is scheduled to open later this year. Another residential development, Paraiso del Mar, occupies the Peninsula El Mogote, facing La Paz's malecón across a short stretch of water. All units are privately owned, but guests can rent the condos and homes much as they would a hotel room.

Todos Santos

OK, so the Hotel California in Todos Santos, less than 50 miles north of Cabo San Lucas on the west side of the cape, wasn't the inspiration for the Eagles' hit song. That was (and remains) a myth that's fun to play with, but the soul of the 18th century mission town has been the fertile valley's seemingly effortless agriculture — in the 19th century the town boasted eight sugar mills, and today it is rich with farm crops, palm groves, mango and avocado orchards, as well as farmlands that supply Los Cabos as well as local markets. The agricultural bounty shows up in Todos Santos' restaurants, the popularity of the Pescadero farmer's market and the region's strong "farm to table" movement.

In recent decades, Todos Santos' colonial buildings and ethereal light have exerted a magnetic pull on painters, sculptors, artisans and intellectuals; it is said to have more galleries per capita than any other town in Mexico. The town is 2 miles inland, but a string of seductive beaches, including surfing favorites Palm Beach and Pedrito, is minutes away. All invite strolling, sunbathing, surf fishing and whale watching, but most are subject to treacherous currents and waves. Save your swimming for Playa Los Cerritos and (with caution) Playa Punta Lobos.

In its brief four months, the still-expanding Rancho Pescadero hotel — a dude ranch for very sophisticated "dudes" — has garnered raves from everyone from Travel+Leisure to Chowhound. Nearby, the Palm Orchard is another new development taking shape within, oddly enough, a working palm orchard. It will add no more than 50 homes and have a small rental pool that will operate as a hotel.

The East Cape

I'd barely heard of the East Cape when I first visited there five years ago, and the rutted dirt roads nearly voided my rental-car contract. Air-conditioning was a rare luxury; solar and generator power ruled. This rugged area, beginning just north of San José del Cabo and stretching nearly 10 miles along the Sea of Cortés past Los Barillos on the way to La Paz, remained for decades a secret fishing and diving playground. Snorkeling, kayaking, surfing and windsurfing have entered the mix, while hiking, zip-lines and hot springs have earned it ecotourism credentials. Active types and fans of primitive, wide open spaces will still find plenty to love, but be aware that Baja Sur has big plans to turn this region into the Cabo Riviera one day. The paved highway, making its way south from La Ribera, will eventually run all the way to the Los Cabos airport.

In the meantime, it's a little easier to get to this idyllic region of calm waters, white sand beaches and stellar deep-sea fishing that lured John Wayne, Bing Crosby and Dwight Eisenhower in the 1950s. The sandy, laid-back town of Los Barillos, surrounded by hot springs and waterfalls, has become an ecotourism hub; Santiago, at the foot of the mountains, has a little zoo and a great hike to a waterfall and lagoon. The still-remote Cabo Pulmo's marine park draws divers to the Northern Pacific's only living coral reef.

While Four Seasons, Mandarin Oriental, and a spate of resort developments are still on the drawing boards, you can still find humble bungalows and modest hotels on the East Cape. For a taste of what Cabo might have been like in the 1950s, try Rancho Buena Vista, which likes to call itself the last of the "golden age" Baja fishing lodges. First opened in 1952, it was recently restored to send you right back to old Hollywood, but its location — and its customizable packages — will launch you into all the area's latest activities if you aren't in the market for a fish tale to recite at your next cocktail party.

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