



LA PAZ, CITY OF PEACE, GOES BOOM!!

by J. Michael Sullivan

“Boom!”

No, that's not the sound of the wedding party fireworks sounding over the now demolished Hacienda Beach Resort, site of a new condo and hotel development.

“Boom” describes what's happening right now in La Paz. Just look around. Condo towers are going up and new marinas are being installed. The highway to Todos Santos is being enlarged and improved. The malecon now extends out toward Pichilingue and the hillsides are covered with surveyed lots and new homes. New houses are going up all over our neighborhood.

Workers from the mainland, attracted by the boom times, are arriving in increasingly larger numbers. You are more and more likely to hear a Mexico City or other mainland accent and not the accent of a Paceno. You may know this accent: a singing pronunciation and “swallowing”

of the s's.

The Wall Street Journal recently published an article on living in La Paz. *House Hunters International*, a television program on the Home and Garden channel has already aired one show from La Paz and they have another one in the works. A production company is filming here for a presentation on, yes, Cosmopolitan TV and a reporter affiliated with a major U.S. newspaper interviewed us for an article on the daily life of retirees living in the Yucatan and in La Paz. Major airlines have added flights from the U.S. over the past year. What do they know that maybe we don't? And is this good or is it bad?

My partner and I had long planned to retire to Mexico and had done a great deal of research. We loved the desert after living, respectively, in Phoenix and Las Vegas for many years. The desert is open, clear and, yes, even spiritual.

So, why not the southern Baja,

where the desert meets the sea? Loreto? Too few services. Cabo? Too much of a tourist town for our taste. Todos Santos? Beautiful, but more for surfing than swimming and, again, too small. La Paz looked just right, with good hospitals, an accessible airport, stores and services. This was the Goldilocks decision.

Our adventure started a year ago last May when we spent a week in La Paz. After only three days of watching the famous purple sunsets from the malecon surrounded by loving, playful families and practically drawn to tears at the gentle beauty of the place, we made our decision; La Paz, here we come!

We sensed the beginning of the boom after checking out real estate prices and talking to local expats. So, our two year plan became the two month plan. It was now or probably never; prices were rising. We put a down payment on a villa, returned to the states and sold our home in Las Vegas.

We have lived in La Paz for over one year now. Would we move here again? Absolutely. “Nosotros amamos La Paz.” We love La Paz. Why? There are lots of reasons.

There are the obvious and usual suspects. You'll see them in the tourist brochures. There are magnificent, pristine beaches with gentle currents just minutes from town. If you like to fish, the waters are teeming with them. A boat tour on a *panga* out to the island sanctuary of Espiritu Santo and the adjacent islands makes for pure wonder. There's a real downtown that is active, vibrant, and very walkable, with an historic center, and the malecon is world-class.

And developers obviously find La Paz attractive. You can't swing a dead cat without hitting a work site for a new project. Could it be because of the relatively cheap land prices compared to Cabo? Can this be the last, undeveloped, substantial outpost left in Baja California Sur? Why the increased access with the rising number of plane flights? Maybe it's the baby boomers with money who crave the warm sun?

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We're not quite sure the reasons but there is certainly something more subtly seductive here that the official promotions of La Paz don't quite capture. What is it?

Let's start with this; residents of Mexico City come here to vacation. These are folks with the means to vacation almost anywhere but they come to La Paz. When we ask our friends from Mexico City why this is so, they always speak of how calm and relaxed they feel here.

And, for a place considered to be at the "end of the universe," there are a surprising number of tourists and residents from all over Europe; including one family we got to know that was from Slovenia and our neighbor who is from Denmark. Leave it to the Europeans to know a great place and a great bargain.

There's a phenomenon here that we call the "La Paz" sleep. Our friends from the United States and Canada all talk about how they sleep long and deeply at night after the first few days. "I haven't slept like this since I was a kid," one friend said. Those who stay for more than a week even begin taking a siesta in the afternoons. The pace here is leisurely. Folks don't rush. This is a great opportunity for Type A personalities to practice a "Zen" attitude.

You can drive across town in twenty minutes, or even less, especially if

you learn to use the back streets the locals take. Access to excellent supermarkets, such as CCC and Soriana, is easy. A quick run to the store is really a quick run. And we live only ten minutes from the airport; we North Americans who tend to suffer from commuter trauma appreciate this.

Contrary to the beliefs of some, you don't have to order furniture and other goods from Cabo or Guadalajara anymore. La Paz has good furniture stores and galleries all over town. Try either the Gallery de La Paz or Gallery Colibri for high quality, and unique furniture and crafts. Or try Ramos', where we purchased hotel-style beds and comfortable, plump, upholstered seating for the living room. You can set up a stylish, comfortable household very easily.

In La Paz there's nothing pressing to do. There is a small anthropological museum, an aquarium and a snake zoo, the *Serpentario*, that are actually very interesting. The city and four local universities sponsor cultural events. We attended the performances of Cirque du Soleil last spring as part of the first La Paz International Art Festival.

But you won't miss seeing them in the way that you might if you didn't rush to see the San Diego Zoo or the British Museum in London. Kickin' it is not only o.k. but the norm.

Hawkers of time shares are a miss-

ing species here. Store owners don't accost you from the doorways. There are very, very few panhandlers. This is very much a middle class city with the manners to go with it.

Paceños are warm and welcoming. The expat community, estimated at about four thousand, is the same way. We've made more friends more quickly here than anywhere we have lived. For heaven's sake, neighbors actually drop in for a visit.

And this may be considered a city, but it feels like a town. You almost always bump into someone that you know when driving and walking. The young people cruise along the malecon on weekend nights. Strangers greet you with a "buenas dias." Friends always stop to greet each other and chat.

Gringos who come here, to visit or live, do so to fish, kayak, enjoy nature and just plain relax; Gringos don't come here to "boogie down". And did I mention the restaurants? There are many excellent restaurants here in La Paz, with prices that are very reasonable. We can honestly say that we've never had a bad meal and usually the food is superb. From Super Tacos downtown, with dirt cheap, yummy seafood tacos, to Campestre out toward the airport, with its eclectic menu and great ribs, you can eat well and not become impoverished in the process.

So, here's the obvious question;

will the boom spoil La Paz? We say no, with our fingers crossed. We're betting on several things. No, it's not the long history of boom-bust that La Paz has experienced over the years, starting with the failure of the black pearl industry early last century.

Nor are we relying on the fact that, as the state capital, there's a guaranteed influx of tax money for the development and maintenance of infrastructure and provision of services. La Paz is not desperate for development money, merely very interested. There are actually planning processes in place and no huge rush.

Here's why we have guarded optimism. The local government and citizens have pushed back against rampant development several times. Just recently the mayor and an organization of citizens have blocked the development planned for the Balandra area; a state park and a world-class jewel of a beach. Ecologically-minded citizens also pushed for the preservation of the mangrove areas on El Magote, even as the east end of this peninsula is undergoing development. And even in this development, the plan is to use "gray water" for the golf course.

Read the local newspapers and you'll see that the state government is spending increasingly large amounts on the development of the infrastructure. The government has also set up task forces to address the issues of affordable housing and of the training of local workers to meet the needs of the boom.

Estimates vary, but let's assume there are 300,000 residents in La Paz. This number helps to insure a certain inertia that will inoculate the area from wide-spread "gringoization." La Paz is a real Mexican city, not a tourist haven and we think this will continue to be true.

We've talked to many buyers of properties here. While some are "investors" and happy to see the appreciation of their holdings, even more say that all they want is a wonderful place to vacation and a place where they can retire eventually in ease and comfort. Many buyers do not plan to "flip" their property but rather to relax, enjoy and maybe even to settle here.

La Paz is still the city of peace, even with the boom and we just love it. The good part is the rich lifestyle, the bad part is that you can't stop progress. And since you can't stop it, you might as well enjoy the ride.



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