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In This Issue

The Real Hotel California

Just down the road from the place the Eaglesmade famous, find an equally mesmerizing hotel that captures the spirit of Baja hospitality.

By Charlene Rooke



I'M ON A DARK DESERT HIGHWAY, cool wind in my hair—cool air conditioning, that is, wafting into the back seat of the black Hummer whisking me from the Los Cabos airport. Up ahead in the distance, I see a shimmering light. And though to visit the fabled Hotel California you'd continue about an hour and a half west on Mexico's Baja Peninsula to Todos Santos, I recommend stopping for the night at the One&Only Palmilla. Because, as the song implies, sometimes a hotel exerts a gravitational pull on a traveller.

More Beverly Hills than Baja, Palmilla is a 34-acre oasis of carefully groomed palm trees and bougainvillea caressing red-roofed, Mission-style buildings that have clean, mid-century lines. Sitting, as it does, on a prime piece of the peninsula that it has occupied since 1956, Palmilla's buildings are all oceanfront. Parts of the shore are rocky and unswimmable, perhaps the reason why Baja has largely avoided high-rise, mega-resort fate to become a favourite destination and second-home for Westerners.

This is one of just six One&Only resorts around the world—think Club Med for the sophisticated traveller. All inclusive, in this case, might refer to perks like the private, ocean-view infinity plunge-pool on my patio. Or the little snacks of nuts, cheese, olives and the like delivered at cocktail hour every day, along with fresh ice to stock the full bar (no mini-bottles here). Or the butler assigned to my suite, who will do everything from unpacking and pressing clothes to delivering wake-up calls and coffee in bed.

Our first night, over cocktails at the open-air, palapa-style Agua beachfront restaurant, a group of Western Canadians gossip over recent celebrity visitors. Jennifer Aniston is rumoured to stay here often (that would explain the nine volumes of Friends in the DVD library). The muscled, tattooed young man in the suite beside me is apparently a hip-hop artist from Texas.

Stay

At one&only Palmilla (954-809-2726, oneandonlyresorts.com), book the 8,500-square-foot Villa Cortez (from \$7,000 [U.S.] per night), a hacienda featuring a screening room for 12, private pool and gym, dedicated butler and chef service and a telescope for whale-watching or star-gazing. The hotel's Market by Jean-Georges restaurant is a good reason not to leave the property. Don't miss morning yoga classes in the shady outdoor courtyard of Palmilla's spa and wellness centre.

Eat and Drink

Unless you're looking for buckets of Corona and American-style restaurants, avoid Cabo San Lucas and head to the nearby, charming colonial town of San José del Cabo. Locals like the hidden gem Casianos (Calle Bahia des Palmas, San José del Cabo, 624-142-5928), which has three- or five-course chef's tasting menus (with or without wine pairings) of Mexican fusion food.

At La Panga Antigua (Zaragoza 20 Centro, San José del Cabo, 624-142-4041, lapanga.com), the catch of the day is carefully prepared by Culinary Institute of America-trained chef Jacobo Turquie. With a soup or salad, an entrée choice, and dessert, it will set you back only about \$15. There is also a Cabo San Lucas location.

Loebster roll with mango, sea scallops with lemon oil and garlic and Masayuki Niikura's daily sushi bar creations are specialties of the house at NickSan Japanese Restaurant and Sushi Bar (The Shoppes at Palmilla, San José del Cabo, 624-144-6263).

For cocktails or light snacks (botanas), try Tropicana Bar and Grill (Blvd. Mijares 30, San José del Cabo, 624-142-1580), where cool water mists the patio in hot weather.

Play

Shop San José del Cabo's Art District boutiques, featuring amber and silver jewellery, carvings and colourful printed textiles. Furnishing a home in the area?

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The next day, we decide to borrow a little stardust and charter the One&Only 50-foot yacht for a sunset cruise. It's easy to feel like celebrities as we pull out into the cobalt water in late afternoon, glasses of Casa Moderno Semillon, a crisp white Baja wine, in hand. We cruise past the famous "Land's End" arched rock formation and hordes of picture-snapping tourists lining the white-sand shores. A telltale spurt of water from the sea, seen through the captain's binoculars, leads us to a pod of grey whales: the visual rhythm of their sleek curved backs, then flicking majestic tails, plays out over and over. Like the Canadians in Cabo, they're wintering in the Sea of Cortés before making their way north for the summer.

After docking, we stuff ourselves on sweet Caribbean lobster and Caesar salad prepared tableside at a restaurant near the marina. At the table beside us, a tipsy, sunburned man barks: "These high-pressure deals are like going through a carwash." Content as clams, we all giggle at his agitation. Post dinner, we walk Cabo's gauntlet of souvenir shops, raucous bars and taco stands. I'm happy to leave the noise and lights behind as cars arrive to deliver us back to the sweet-scented, breezy confines of Palmilla.

Though pampering at this point seems redundant, the next day I pad off to the spa. Robed and slippered, I'm led to a labyrinthine area of gardens, outdoor showers and spa cabanas, some with deep outdoor soaker tubs on private patios. After a hot-stone massage (a gentle rubdown with shiny, smooth, puck-size obsidian stones), I slurp a spa lunch of yellow tomato gazpacho topped with basil before trying the unique Révérence de Bastien pedicure, an almost medical-style (no nail polish, no pumice, no pain) treatment—originally developed in Paris, it's a One&Only exclusive—that leaves my feet as soft, pink and natural as a child's.

By the end of my weekend stay, I've become obsessed with Palmilla's signature scent, which registers anew every time I return to the hotel or open the door to my room. The first whiff is of fresh floral. The next note is something cozy, like vanilla. I breathe it in deep to get the finish, the essence of ocean and clean laundry. I inquire whether it's this place's natural fragrance or some form of magic in a bottle. With a wink, a resort staffer admits that it's a potion that the hotel manager has even been known to spray on correspondence with frequent guests. I bet the minute they inhale that enchanting smell, they get on the phone to book their next stay.

You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave. *w/*

Visit cabo Furniture Company (Carreterra Transpeninsular, km. 32, San José del Cabo, 624-142-4878, cabofurniture.com).

Getting There

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