



# LAND OF EXTREMES

A WHIRLWIND TRIP TO AN UP-AND-COMING RESORT ON THE WEST COAST OF MEXICO'S BAJA CALIFORNIA PENINSULA OFFERS A GLIMPSE AT WHAT MAY JUST BECOME THE NEXT GREAT CRUISING DESTINATION. BY DANIEL HARDING JR. PHOTOGRAPHY BY JONATHAN COOPER





In the 1700s, missionaries traveled down the west coast of North America to Mexico's Baja Peninsula in the hopes of trading religion for access to the fabled city of gold. Three-hundred-plus years later, bouncing violently atop a single-lane dirt road through sprawling desert en route to Los Cabos, I got the impression not much has changed.

A lot has, of course. Cabo San Lucas—a popular port for cruisers working their way south, sportfishermen bound for the Sea of Cortez, and spring breakers alike—is to the south. Then there's La Paz, a small town with a few bars and a booming kite surfing scene to the north. In between there's not much but untapped land. That is, until recently. The Four Seasons is in the process of building a one-of-a-kind resort called Costa Palmas Los Cabos, an all-encompassing luxury property with real estate, hotels, restaurants, and a potentially game-changing, deep-water marina.

My mission was to spend 48 hours on the grounds to assess for myself if this latest gamble from the Four Seasons would bear fruit, and, more importantly, determine what the creation of a new port would mean for serious cruisers in this region.

I knew the 50-minute ride from the Los Cabos International Airport to the resort site was coming to an end when a sliver of azure water appeared on the horizon. Perhaps it was because I spent the morning cooped up on a plane, but it appeared unnaturally blue.

Upon reaching the beach, rum drinks were presented to me and my fiancé, Karen. She glanced at me and shrugged her shoulders as if to say, "Well, this is off to a positive start." Around us, the 1,000-acre property was a hive of activity. The foundation of a clubhouse was being poured; a superyacht marina, capable of welcoming yachts up to 250 feet, was being dredged; workers marched up and down sand dunes moving materials. All focus was on the resort's 2018 grand opening.

Despite the buzz, Karen and I enjoyed a snack of chips, guacamole, and fresh ceviche, and couldn't help but feel like we were in a world all our own. Crunching on a chip I leaned forward, my eyes wandering down the white-sand beach and placid Sea of Cortez toward neighboring La Paz, just a speck on the horizon, and the monstrous mountains that accentuate the coast. *Extremes*. That's the word that first came to mind. The southern tip of the second longest peninsula in the world felt like a land of extremes.

On my way down to Cabo, via a direct flight from New York, I was thinking about the serious cruisers I know who might want to make a trip to the Sea of Cortez, and how most of them fall into one of two categories. There are those who are content to sit on the shore with a good book and margarita, as water laps at their toes. No judgment here; after one rum drink, that option pulled at me like a magnet.

But then there's the second type, the ones who want to be everywhere, see everything, get the T-shirt, and come back for seconds. They're the boaters for whom the regret of not trying something stings the hardest. That's the group Karen and I (on most days) belong to, and I think it's the group most likely to cruise to this part of Mexico.

So when our Costa Palmas host Pete Hardey sat us down and asked if we wanted to fish, snorkel, bike, hike, go cruising or tour the property, we politely answered, *yes, please*.

"No problem," he replied, with a be-careful-what-you-wish-for smile.

The adventure team, a band of highly polished professionals, ran our trip like a well-oiled machine and set in motion a precise schedule that allowed us to make the most of our time in the area.

Should you find yourself heading south along the west coast of the

*From "Fat Boy" bikes to a Hinckley picnic boat, Costa Palmas offers a plethora of ways to explore the rugged beauty of the Baja Peninsula.*





Baja California Peninsula next year, I invite you to tap their expertise and steal this itinerary.

**Day 1 3:00 p.m.**

Costa Palmas lays so many activities at your feet that you can't help but feel (a little) guilty giving up an afternoon to lounging. There are kayaks, SUP boards, and Hobie Cats that practically purr, begging you to take them out. At the suggestion of the adventure team, we pulled a pair of Fat Boy beach bikes out for a spin. For those who've never ridden beach bikes before (it was new to us), know that it's a great way to explore the shoreline while providing a deceiving amount of exercise.

**6:15 p.m.**

After much-needed showers, Karen and I caught our breath and sat on the edge of our beachfront cabana, content to stare at the pristine white-sand beach that lay before us. The sun was setting at the back of the mountains that were behind us, and the light reflected off the water.

**8:30 p.m.**

We headed to the north end of the property for dinner at The Nursery. It's like an oasis in the desert, because to reach it we had to walk beneath ancient-looking greenery and follow the glow of an orange flame in the open-air kitchen. Executive Chef Gonzalo Cerda uses a unique, open grill with burning wood below and above your entrée. Don't be surprised if he steps out from behind the flame to greet you with a big grin and a few minutes of conversation. As we found our seats, our ears were soothed by the sound of a single guitarist strumming away at a tune that was both traditional and contemporary. Those familiar with the Four Seasons resorts will expect the culinary bar to be pretty high. After a meal here, you'll need to raise it again. Ceviche, steak, lamb, and shrimp melt in your mouth with a smoothness rivaling the guitarist's melody in the background.

**Day 2 7:10 a.m.**

The hotel and private homes have yet to be built, so we stayed in custom-designed bungalows that were designed to fit in with the natural landscape of the coast. An outdoor shower allowed us to bask in hot water while breathing fresh, beach air.

Next up was a fresh cup of Mexican coffee on the beach, which got us wondering if we would ever want to return home.

**8:00 a.m.**

The Four Seasons is renowned for world-class restaurants, real estate, and service, but it's what the company is *not known for* that really makes this location special: fishing. There's great action just offshore, and it can be accessed from your own boat tied up at a slip here, or from one of the many charter boats. If you see a small skiff, you simply hand the captain \$10 and a bucket. With the flick of his wrist he'll scoop live mackerel from the center portion of his boat. Just minutes—literally—from the marina is a hotbed of tuna, dolphin, and marlin fishing. The nearest marinas are 50 miles to the north and south of this stretch of water.

This proximity allows you to troll or drift for a few hours and gauge the bite. If it's not looking good, you can buzz back to the marina and play a few holes on the Robert Trent Jones II-designed golf course. No need to feel guilty about not spending the whole day at sea; when the fishing is this close you can go out again in the afternoon.

**12:20 p.m.**

I had never fished this area before, but I knew that anglers have been traveling to this part of the world for years to take advantage of the incredible fishing in the Sea of Cortez. The water has everything that



*If Costa Palmas put this much care into the design of the temporary beach bungalows (top), imagine what the actual resort and marina will look like. Executive Chef Gonzalo Cerda (top right) serves guests*

*some incredible meals made with as many locally sourced ingredients as possible. The rendering of the marina (bottom left) shows just how close it is to the Sea of Cortez.*



blue-water anglers love to chase.

Yet despite the area's reputation for world-class fishing, we had a slow day. We didn't land any game fish, but we did catch some incredible sights along the rugged coast. Should you still want to observe your fair share of aquatic life, cruise a little farther south to the Cabo Pulmo National Park, where there's a protected stretch of reef that is home to incredible snorkeling and scuba diving. Schools of jacks and other brightly colored fish swarm, which is cool, but nothing you can't experience in other locales. What's special about snorkeling here are the sea lions that jump at the chance to swim with tourists.

Watching these predators glide through the water was an experience unlike any other Karen or I have had. I like to think of myself as a tough guy, but I have to admit I felt incredibly small watching these 1,000-plus-pound animals lounging on nearby rocks, and then darting below my feet. As our guide Marco said, "They're very friendly. They'll probably swim up to you, but they *are* sea lions so don't lunge out at them." He didn't have to tell me twice.

**3:15 p.m.**

Whether you're interested in making the full-time move to one of the posh properties Costa Palmas offers or are simply interested in what the grounds have to offer, time spent cruising the 1,000-acre property on a Polaris won't be time wasted. From the golf course, to the beaches, and dense green forest, there's a ton to experience in this desert oasis.

Ripping through forest one second and atop powdery sand the next, I grew more and more amazed at the natural beauty found here. Later, when I had the chance to review renderings of what the final resort will look like, I was glad to see that most of the natural beauty will be preserved.

**5:35 p.m.**

The pull of the water reached its peak right around the time the sun started its descent. A sunset cruise was tempting, although if I had my boat here, I'm not sure I'd want to pull her away from the dock if she were tied up neatly. Fortunately, there are a number of choice charter yachts in the area—there was a Sunseeker 100 on hand during our visit—that are ready and able to entertain passengers for a sundowner. If they're booked, the resort runs a smart-looking, red-hulled Hinckley runabout.

**Day 3 9:15 a.m.**

Another extreme characteristic in the southern Baja Peninsula we noted was the juxtaposition between the flat shoreline and mountain ranges that are just a short cab ride away. With extra waters and camera batteries in our backpacks, we set off. Countless trails, from beginner-friendly to expert-level, lay before us, inviting us to wind and wander through barren, cacti-dotted ascents until we reached waterfalls or hot springs. Because of time constraints we opted for a short hike to a waterfall. Dipping my hand into the cool, clear water made me feel, yet again, like we were transported to another place entirely.

All too soon, our time at Costa Palmas came to an end. As our car rumbled back along the dirt road toward the airport, I looked back one last time to see the water disappear and I started thinking about those missionaries that came before us and what they must have thought when they reached the end of the peninsula. There may not have been a city made of gold, but man did they find one heck of a treasure. □

**Costa Palmas, 800-917-9115; costapalmas.com**