



Loreto

Small Town, Grand Adventure.

After clocking over 2,500 miles around the Baja Peninsula last year in my aged Ford Explorer, one town stood out: Loreto. Small and quaint, with its historic heart intact, this seaside community of 10,000 has one of the best locations in Baja. Parked on the Sea of Cortés, with half-a-dozen islands beckoning off her shores, Loreto sits nestled near the base of the red Sierra de la Giganta mountains.

Activities abound in this area, such as: diving with sea lions and manta rays in Loreto's National Marine Park (founded in 1996); petting whales in Magdalena Bay; sport fishing for marlin or yellowtail; tracking Big Horn sheep; kayaking and camping on nearby islands; visiting historic missions; horse-back riding; mountain biking; viewing ancient cave paintings; golf or tennis. The more I researched, the more I realized my planned four-day weekend would only serve as an introduction to this natural playground.

Renewed interest in Loreto has been stimulated recently by the addition of weekly flights from San Diego on AeroMexico. A trip that had taken me a leisurely week of driving last year, now took less than two hours. My girlfriend and I left San Diego midday Thursday and would return on Sunday. On our way down, the plane

flew above the scenic coastline of the Sea of Cortés much of way, landing at a cozy palm-thatched airport near the coast.

Nopoló

Preferring to relax on the sandy shores of the Sea of Cortés instead of in the historic town of Loreto proper, we reserved a spot at the El Camino Real resort in Nopoló, five miles south. As our shuttle pulled off Highway 1, it was clear that Nopoló is still in the infancy stage of its development. Though the gracious meridians were planted with stately palm trees and vibrant bougainvillea, the streets were lined with acres of undeveloped land, a few homes and a golf course. Images of early Palm Springs or Scottsdale sprung to mind. What had those upscale areas looked like when they were first developed? Then I imagined them situated on the ocean—what would these lots be worth in 10 years! I was stunned to hear home lots within 1,000 yards of the water were still going for as low as \$5,000.

On our first morning, dawn chill warmed as the sun rose over the Sea of Cortés and the jagged mountains on Isla del Carmen. The





desert was bathed in shades of lavender and orange. Calm water lapped the beach. Families were still asleep. Sun worshipers would trickle down to the pools with the mid-morning heat. All was silent except for the flutter of wings as a flock of 30 pelicans took flight, glided, then dived headfirst into the bay — splash! The lucky ones tilted their beaks to gulp down a morning meal; the rest bowed their heads and waited for another sortie. Every two to three minutes, the cycle repeated: float, fly, dive and eat. From dawn until dark, these graceful hunters worked tirelessly to feed themselves.

Though El Camino Real is surrounded by an 18-hole golf course, palm trees and zen-like cactus gardens, it is an island of civilization in an otherwise unaltered landscape. Pelicans flock together as though the hotel didn't exist. Sea lions swim regularly near the small lagoon that flows beneath the resort's trademark arching bridges. Occasionally guests spot pilot and blue whales spouting or breaching offshore.

Returning to the lobby, I met a gathering of guests who were about to head to Magdalena Bay for an all-day whale-watching excursion. In two hours they would cross the Baja peninsula from the Sea of Cortés to the Pacific. During the annual whale migration from January to March, the bocas, bays and canals of Magdalena Bay make tranquil homes for infant whales and their mothers. The inland waterways are calm, protected by barrier islands and vast mangroves. Having taken two whale watching trips in the past year, I had booked other, new experiences, but I knew those leaving this morning would return with one the fondest memories of their lives.

Diving/Isla Coronado

After a filling breakfast buffet of made-to-order omelets, pancakes and a wide array of fresh-squeezed juices, we strolled fifty yards to the beachfront dive shack belonging to Arturo Sport fishing's. Thirty minutes after selecting snorkeling gear for us, and radioing the main office to confirm our reservation, a blue and white panga pulled up on the beach — Baja's version of door-to-door service.

Victor Vargas, our dive master for the day, introduced himself. He had a sturdy frame, an easy smile, and an air of comfort around

the water. He was accompanied by two support crew to drive the boat and care for the passengers. Victor made sure the equipment he'd brought was to our satisfaction, checked my dive certification card, then invited us aboard.

Fully loaded with wetsuits, fins, tanks and dive gear, the panga backed slowly off the beach, leaving behind the rows of palapas and warm colored buildings of El Camino Real. As we headed out into the Sea of Cortés, we discussed various dive options: Coronado Island to the north had a colony of sea lions we might dive with, along with some good wall dives. Danzante Island to the south would offer us better visibility, but noteworthy sea life was less predictable. I voted for animal contact, so we motored toward the small, round island of Coronado.

As we made our crossing, Victor shared some of his encounters from more than 1,000 dives in the Sea of Cortés: a school of shy hammerhead sharks, collections of mantas, groups of sea lions, viewing whales and marlin from beneath the sea. Within twenty miles of Loreto lie the islands of Monserrat, Santa Catalina, Coronado, Danzante, and del Carmen. He described kayaking excursions that paddle from Loreto to La Paz, camping on islands and enjoying fresh seafood. One could spend weeks here diving, one cove after another, or spend a year and experience the change of sea life as the water temperature warms from 65 degrees in the winter and spring to 85 degrees in the summer and fall.

Thirty minutes later, we were hugging the dramatic shoreline of Coronado. Lava rock spires polished smooth by the sea jutted out of the water, while stunning gray rock formations melded into the burnt-sienna desertscape, dotted with Baja's signature flora. For both visual beauty and animal contact, Victor recommended two novice-to-intermediate dive sites. The first would be Piedra Blanca — "white rock," named for the year round "snow" cover, courtesy the local pelicans and sea gulls. The rock forms a finger ridge that extends a few hundred yards offshore, descending to a depth of about 80 feet.

Victor and I were the only divers on the boat. After donning our gear, checking our air and regulators, we flipped backwards off the panga. It felt great to be back in the water. Floating on the surface, we

gave each other the OK sign, then dropped into the emerald depths.

The water was a tad chilly at 66 degrees, but with a double-layer wetsuit on, it was comfortable enough. We glided along the ridge and found schools of yellow and black barberfish, mammoth parrotfish, and angelfish in their eternal pairs. Large sea scallops were anchored to the rock face; their shells open to absorb passing nutrients. Moving at imperceptibly slow speeds, a variety of multicolored starfish and sea stars contrasted with the many bright green, red and yellow soft coral, anemones, and gorgonian fans.

After a 45-minute dive, we surfaced. Our seasoned panga captain had been trailing our bubbles, and was waiting for us. Back on board, we circled the island for a midday break at a sheltered beach. On the way we passed local fisherman in other pangas, sightseers and kayakers. As we approached the west side of the island, the rocky coast gave way to white sand, turning the waters Caribbean blue. We passed a secluded bay with four small sailboats and a group of 20-or-so campers from the National Outdoor Leadership School. Five hundred yards further, three palapas graced an expansive beach. A pair of red and yellow kayaks was pulled up on the sand. Three other pangas were beached on shore. Two families with their children barbecued lunch on a makeshift grill.

We then took a hike on an annotated nature trail, stunned at the vast array of plants that thrived in the harsh desert climate. We climbed sand dunes to take pictures of the unique melding of rugged, rocky desert and pristine tropical water that Baja offers. We

snorkeled at a nearby reef, helped a beached puffer fish find its way back to the sea, then flopped onto the sand for a nap in the mild, springtime sun.

Loreto

My girlfriend had never seen Loreto before, never eaten a fish taco in Baja, nor wandered through a mission. I had pointed out the tower of the Misión Nuestra Señora de Loreto from the dive boat and, as soon as we arrived at the marina, we headed toward it. Flanked by a historic museum, plaza, shops, the colonial styled buildings, the mission is the cornerstone of the historic hub of Loreto. We explored this quaint area as we meandered toward McLulu's taco stand for lunch. Owner Lourdes "LuLu" Armendáriz is always on hand with a generous smile and a wide variety of fish, chorizo and other tasty fare.

After consuming a hearty helping of six tacos, we shopped the curio stands along a graceful walkway shaded with arches of sculpted focus. Casa de la Abuela, located in a 200-year old adobe house, sold an eclectic collection of goods: hand embroidered shirts, fresh vanilla extract, leather goods, brightly painted ceramics, dried puffer fish, shells and wood carvings. We passed a sign calling the neighborhood the Silver Desert, alluding to the half-a-dozen stores full of beautiful handcrafted silver jewelry.

San Javier Mission/Cave Painting

The 32-km drive through the Sierra de la Giganta mountains to Misión de San Francisco Javier gave us a taste of Baja's rugged side. The passage was a winding dirt and gravel road that snakes through tight gorges of red stone, offering heart-stopping views of oases thick with palm trees below and bird's eye vistas of the Sea of Cortés. Jagged, serpentine peaks are scattered with enormous cardón cactus, ocotillo, thorn scrub and paloverde. It is a slow, dusty, bouncy ride, and the switchbacks made us queasy, but the immersion into Old World Baja was well worth it. I couldn't help thinking why anyone would have built a mission so far from the lifelines of sea, roads or trails. Almost two hours by car—it would be an arduous trek by foot or mule, especially in the heat of the summer.

When we finally arrived in the small pueblo of San Javier, there were four large SUVs with stacks of mountain bikes strapped to their roofs. As many as 20 riders had taken a more adventurous and arduous approach; they biked to the Mission and were preparing to be shuttled home.



BARRY ROSEN



BARRY ROSEN



San Javier rests in a small valley oasis, surrounded by mountains on all sides. The small town that lines the road has a few charming thatched cottages, the rentable bungalows of Casa de Ana intermixed with ramshackle abodes and struggling rancheros. Local residents wandered about from home to church to yard to field. This historic church had become a backdrop, part of their everyday world.

We explored the handsome mission constructed of cut lava stone and rock. We were told that it was originally built without mortar and is an architectural landmark for this reason. Chickens flitted about as neighborhood dogs and cats wandered freely about the plaza. Pigs and goats in nearby pens could be heard. Small fields were planted in green rows. A small creek fed a dense palm grove and some large olive trees. The simple life in this insulated outpost remains much the same as it did for the early Jesuits in the late 1600s, extracting a living from the soil.

As we drove back, we stopped by the Cuevas Pintas archaeological site, tucked into the Arroyo de Las Parras. These rock paintings are the work of natives before the arrival of Jesuit missionaries, and look more like graphic designs or geometrics than anything pictorial. There is a stream that flows nearby that creates small pools. If dusk hadn't been quickly approaching, a long hike into this canyon would have been exciting.

As we wound our way toward Loreto, the fading sun changed the colors of the Sierra de la Giganta from rust to orange, brown to purple. The Sea of Cortés came back into view as we exited the steep canyon. The soothing pace of this relaxing world had become infectious. Our spirits high, we entertained ourselves singing Eagles, Beatles and James Taylor songs... "Oh, Mexico. It sounds so sweet with the sun sinking low. Moon's so bright like to light up the night, makes everything all right...."

Gena Lee Nolin

A native of Duluth, Minnesota, Gena Lee Nolin is best known for her role as Neely Capshaw on *Baywatch* and her title role in the TV series *Sheena*. Most recently, Gena reprised her role as Neely in the

made-for-television movie *Baywatch: Hawaiian Wedding*. I chatted with Gena in her top-floor suite at the El Camino Resort. She had been up since 4:30 a.m. and had been working with make-up artist Renee Ventura since 5 o'clock for the second day in a row. She sat cross-legged on a chair in pajama pants and a sweatshirt, wrapped in a blanket for extra warmth. A fashion special on *e!Latin* was playing on the television. Gena was animated, genuine and sweet even at this hour, and always the consummate professional—able to talk at ease while focusing on creating the right look for *Baja Traveler's* sunrise photo shoot.

BT: Gena, have you ever been to Baja before?

Gena Lee Nolin (GLN): Cabo a couple times. I really enjoyed it down there, but this is my first time farther north. I've wanted to see other parts of Baja California and was really excited to hear we were coming to Loreto.

BT: Describe your first impressions of Loreto.

GLN: The town is very quaint—there are little shops and quiet streets you can walk on and the old mission. This area is like Arizona on the ocean. Since I live in Scottsdale, and I love the ocean, I feel as if I get the best of both worlds—like that George Strait song *Ocean Front Property*: "I've got some oceanfront property in Arizona, from my front porch you can see the sea...." And that's what it's like here. I stare out from my balcony and watch the pelicans dive into the sea, yet all around the landscape is just like home.

BT: What kind of activities did you want to pursue while you were here?

GLN: Whale watching, but I'm not sure I'll make it. It's one of the things about working in beautiful places— you have to learn to



go with the flow. Yesterday was overcast on-and-off throughout the day, so we couldn't shoot as much as we wanted. We drove out to San Javier Mission and walked around, met the local families and their children, looked at the church—it was great. Now we're reshooting today, so it doesn't look as if I'm going to be petting any whales on this trip.

BT: Any interest in getting into the water? Any other activities?

GLN: I'd like to scuba. I'd love to fish—I've heard about the great sport fishing here: marlin, yellow fin, dorado. That sounds very exciting. Maybe drive around and see what other areas here look interesting. I've seen most of the town of Loreto. It's small and still relatively undeveloped—I like it.

BT: Yesterday, during the drive to San Javier, we were reading some astrology blurbs in a magazine. I believe yours said that you had been taking a break of sorts, and that a big project was coming. What do you see in the pipeline?

GLN: I start shooting a Western movie soon. I'm one of the lead gals and it has a great cast. I'm also up for a movie with Ben Stiller and Owen Wilson—it's a remake of Starsky and Hutch. I love those guys! It should be so much fun!

BT: You've been busy here in Loreto, shooting in hotel suites, Jacuzzis, in old town and San Javier Mission. What's it like to be

on a photo shoot?

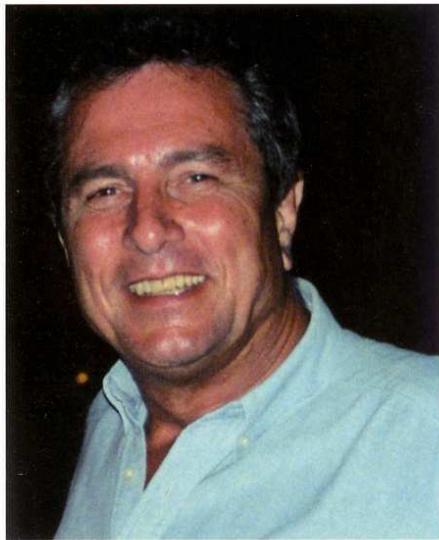
GLN: It's zany and crazy and as fun as it can be. I love to be part of a creation, of making something. It makes me feel good. And being with friends is great. While the pictures that come out of a shoot tell a certain story, what goes on behind the camera can be even more wonderful.

BT: How do you balance being a model, actress and single mom?

GLN: It's been hard, very hard. I am so OK with not working, and spending more time at home with my family. That's one of the reasons I quit after Baywatch. Then, two years later they handed me the Sheena script. It read well and sounded like fun, so we moved to Florida and my mother came along, but it was still difficult. That time away from home you can never get back. Your priorities change once you have children. Now, if I'm gone for more than three days, Spencer usually comes with me. I wouldn't have it any other way.



Peter Maxwell, Director of Fonatur in Loreto



Peter Maxwell is the Director of FONATUR in Loreto. He is responsible for the operation and administration of FONATUR's properties and infrastructure in Loreto, as well as the promotion of the destination via new businesses, flights, and other tourism development programs. Since much of the future of Loreto will be shaped by FONATUR's direction, Peter's insight and vision are key to understanding the Loreto of tomorrow.

BT: Peter, what prompted the renewed investing in Loreto recently? Why now?

Peter Maxwell (PM): FONATUR's involvement in Loreto goes back 25 years. It is one of five FONATUR destinations in Mexico: Cancun, Ixtapa, Huatulco, Los Cabos and Loreto. However, budgets and political priorities had left the area on the sidelines for much of that time, with more emphasis on the established destinations. Since tourism, especially sustainable tourism, is a national priority, it seemed obvious to finish the Loreto project.

Loreto/Puerto Escondido will also be one of the key "steps" in the Escalera Nautica program; another national priority for the Fox administration will be to have its headquarters in Loreto. (The Escalera Nautica program, "Nautical Ladder," is a

government backed plan to develop 22 marinas, so boaters will always be within a day's reach of a marina while cruising the Baja peninsula. Additional roads and infrastructure for trailering boats across the peninsula are part of the plan, as well).

BT: Where do most visitors come from who visit Loreto?

PM: Loreto has traditionally been a fisherman's destination, and mostly American (90 percent). The Canadian market was the usual winter market, but this was lost when Canada 3000 and the Hotel Solare went bankrupt. Now, with AeroMexico service between Loreto and San Diego, we are seeing new markets appear.

BT: What are your five-year goals for Loreto and Puerto Escondido? Ten-year goals?

PM: We have seven top priorities for the next five years: 1. Increase flights and accessibility to destination. 2. Increase hotel and lodging options available. 3. Finish the Convention Center. 4. Install slips in Puerto Escondido and develop the area with hotels, golf courses and condominium alternatives. 5. Improve the quality and range of tourist services in the destination. 6. Install the largest artificial reef in the world. 7. Have the Escalera Nautica up and running.

BT: And your 10-year goals?

PM: We should have at least four championship golf courses in operation. The Puerto Escondido project should be financially and operationally independent. Work and development on the Golden Beach project should be initiated, and we should have integrated Loreto town into a fully planned and managed concept.

BT: Who is your target audience?

PM: The USA is our primary market. One target audience is definitely the

Retirement Community for active retirees. The proximity of the city to the USA makes it an ideal destination, plus good weather and quality of life. We will continue to develop the fisherman market, as well as the special interest/activity markets: kayak, hiking, diving etc. We also plan to have turnkey apartments and finished product for different age groups and income levels. We hope to be a family-oriented market, those interested in quality of life, the natural beauty and the ecological opportunities not available in other destinations, like whales, manta rays and sea lions.

BT: What has FONATUR learned from its past projects that it is applying here?

PM: The goal is to develop Loreto into a tourist project that doesn't repeat the mistakes of Cancun and Cabo San Lucas. Our intention is NOT to be another Cabo San Lucas, rather to develop a unique Loreto with more options.

BT: How does FONATUR get involved with enhancing the historic/colonial style of the town of Loreto or preserving the surrounding missions?

PM: FONATUR is actively involved in such activities. If not for FONATUR, these activities would probably not be achieved. Some examples we've been involved with include the restoration of the city center, painting the church, the restoration of the area around San Javier Mission, and the maintenance and operation of fresh water supply, waste water treatment, and so forth.

BT: Is there anything else you would like to add?

PM: It is incredible that such a beautiful, preserved, undiscovered, destination exists so close to the USA. We are aware that Cabo San Lucas has been a victim of its own success, and our intention is to try and avoid the mistakes and overgrowth of Cabo San Lucas.