

A PALAPA OFFERS SHADE ON ISLA CORONADO, ONE OF THE PROTECTED ISLANDS IN LORETO BAY'S NATIONAL MARINE PARK.



Baja Bliss

EXPLORING LORETO'S NATURAL ATTRACTIONS AND HISTORIC MISSIONS

Story and photos by Rob Dunton

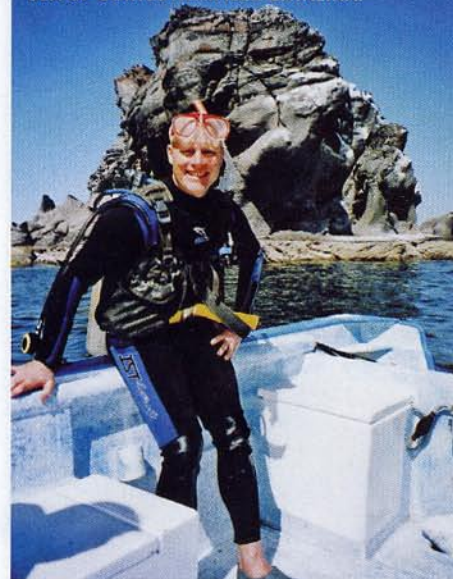
Mountains and buttes I explored by dirt road years ago now rise to greet me. Sandy inlets, bays and islands dot a sea whose color runs from navy to sapphire. The last time I came to this part of Mexico, it took me a week to get here. It was a leisurely pace to be sure, and I was younger then, with ample time to look for infant whales, empty beaches and forests of cacti. After I zigzagged 2,500 miles along the Baja Peninsula, camping in the majestic silence of its open desert, one town stood out: Loreto. Even then, I knew I would return.

This time I travel by plane with Priscilla, my wife-to-be. Priscilla lived in

Seattle for many years and is used to nature sprouting up inexorably around her. I am excited to introduce her to the sublime wonder that is Baja, while discovering for myself some of the luxury I neglected on my car-camping trip before. We fly along the coastline, its arid landscape contrasting sharply with the rich blues of the Sea of Cortés, and soon land at Loreto's palm-thatched airport, a few miles outside of town.

Small and quaint, with its historic heart intact, Loreto has one of the best locations in Baja. Located on the Gulf of California, with half-a-dozen islands beckoning off its

THE AUTHOR PREPARES FOR A DIVE IN THE SEA OF CORTÉS NEAR ISLA CATALINA.

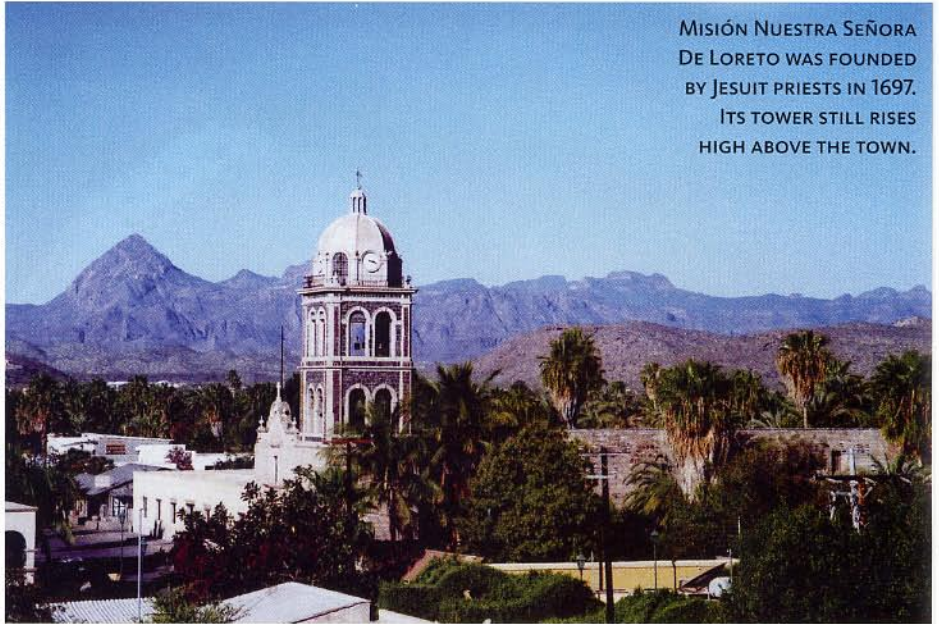


shores, this seaside community of 10,000 sits nestled near the base of the Sierra de la Gigante. Adventures abound: diving with sea lions and manta rays, swimming with whales in Magdalena Bay a few hours away, sportfishing for marlin or yellowtail, or kayaking and camping on nearby islands. There is also easy access to two historic missions, horseback riding, mountain biking, viewing ancient cave paintings, golf, tennis. ... The more I researched, the more I realized our four-day getaway would only serve as an introduction to this natural playground.

Waking early our first morning, I walk onto the balcony to discover nature is blossoming outside our room. The world is bathed in lavender and orange. The chill of dawn slowly disappears as the sun rises over the Sea of Cortés and the mountains of Isla Carmen. The smell of sea air is as subtle as it is unmistakable. Calm water laps the beach, freshly raked, and lined with *palapas* and empty beach chairs. Sun worshippers will trickle down to the pools in the midmorning warmth, but for now, all is silent except for the flutter of a flock of pelicans. I watch as they take flight, glide, then dive headfirst into the bay. The lucky ones tilt their beaks to gulp down a morning meal; the rest bow their heads and wait for another sortie. Every two to three minutes, the cycle repeats: float, fly, dive and eat—from dawn until dark, these graceful hunters work to feed themselves.

Within 20 miles of Loreto lie the islands of Monserrate, Catalina, Coronado, Danzante and Carmen. To preserve the surrounding sea, marine life and islands, Loreto Bay's National Marine Park was founded in 1996. At 1,282 square miles, the park is roughly the size of Rhode Island, and there are restrictions on commercial fishing and development within its boundaries.

After a breakfast of made-to-order omelets, pancakes and a wide array of fresh-squeezed juices, Priscilla and I decide to explore the marine park. We stroll 50 yards to a beachfront dive shack run by Arturo's Sport Eco-Tours, and 30 minutes later, a blue-and-white *panga* (an open-bow



MISIÓN NUESTRA SEÑORA DE LORETO WAS FOUNDED BY JESUIT PRIESTS IN 1697. ITS TOWER STILL RISES HIGH ABOVE THE TOWN.

fishing boat) pulls up on the sandy beach, loaded with wetsuits, fins, tanks and dive gear. Door-to-door service, Baja style!

Victor Vargas, our dive master for the day, hops from the boat to the sand and introduces himself. He has a sturdy frame, an easy smile and an air of comfort around the sea. As we head toward the nearby islands, Vargas entertains us with tales of some of his face-to-face encounters from more than 1,000 dives in the Sea of Cortés: He's seen a school of shy hammerhead sharks, collections of mantas, groups of sea lions, even an occasional whale. He describes a kayaking trip his company offers in which vacationers can paddle from Loreto to La Paz, camping on islands and dining on fresh seafood each night. Since the water temperature warms from 65 degrees in spring to 85 degrees in summer and fall, water enthusiasts can witness a cycle of changing sea life each year.

Soon we're hugging the dramatic shoreline of Isla Coronado, or Crown Island. Lava spires, polished smooth by churning water, jut out of the sea, while stunning rock formations meld into the stark desertscape punctuated with Baja's signature flora.

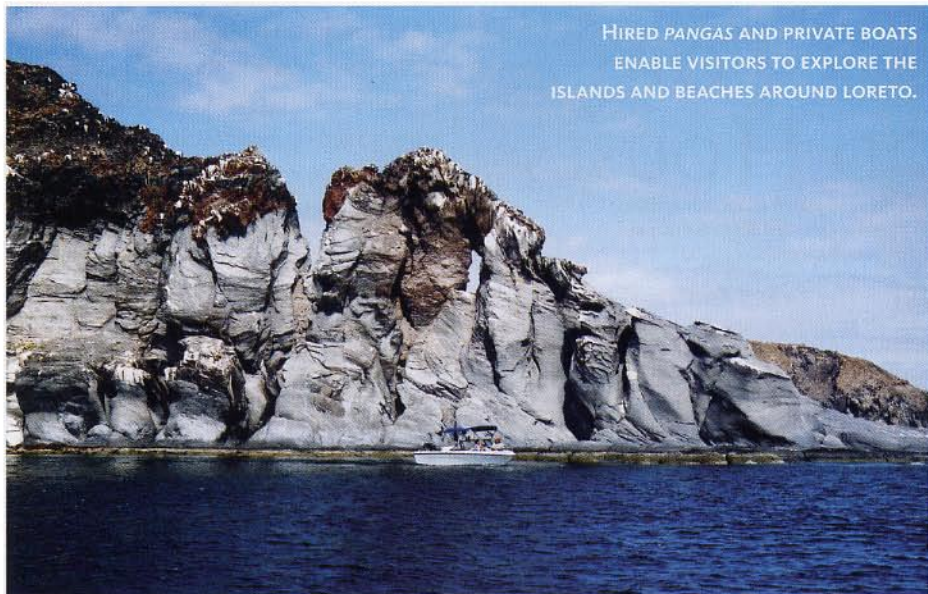
We head to a dive site called La Lobera on the southeast side of the island. Eight mature sea lions provide a noisy audience as we drop below the surface. We follow the terrain beneath the sea, zigzagging in

and out of tiny inlets and caverns, examining an array of soft coral and sea fans. We descend along a sheer wall, passing a grouper the size of a small dog and a curious moray eel. As we head deeper ... 50, 60, then 80 feet down ... the water grows cold while rare black coral trees sprout along the wall's face. Circling back, I spot a docile family of spiny lobsters tucked beneath a rock shelf. I kick toward them, only to find a collection of empty shells sloughed off by their former owners. As I turn around, I see two 5-foot-long sea lions who have emerged out of the depths to check us out. They loop and swirl around us like a pair of excited puppies, then freeze, hovering in the water. We playfully make faces at one another. Then, as quickly as they arrived, with a somersault they disappear.

After 45 minutes, we surface. Our seasoned boat *capitan* has been trailing our bubbles and is waiting nearby. Once on board, we circle the island for a midday break at a sheltered beach. The rocky coast gives way to inviting white sand and rich turquoise-blue water. We beach next to another *panga* and a pair of kayaks, as two local families barbecue on a makeshift grill in the shade of a palm-draped *palapa*.

Priscilla and I take a hike on an annotated nature trail created by the Parque Nacional Bahía de Loreto, where we learn about the astonishing array of

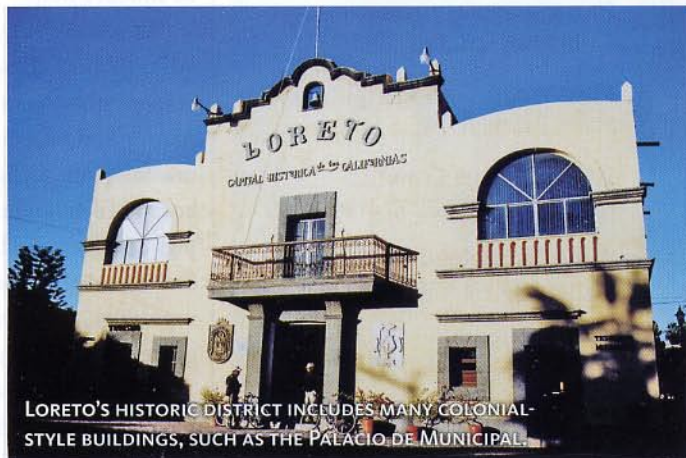
HIRE PANGAS AND PRIVATE BOATS
ENABLE VISITORS TO EXPLORE THE
ISLANDS AND BEACHES AROUND LORETO.



plants that thrive in the harsh desert climate. We climb sand dunes, snorkel at a nearby reef, help a beached puffer fish find its way back to the sea, then flop onto the sand for a nap in the mild, springtime sun.

Priscilla has yet to explore the town of Loreto, has never eaten a fish taco in Baja nor wandered through a mission. I point toward the tower of the Misión Nuestra Señora de Loreto and ask Vargas if he can take us to town instead of our hotel. Gracious as always, he turns toward the small marina in Loreto. As we motor toward shore, a fin whale spouts a large blast of air and water, a kind of farewell from our friends in the sea.

The mission is the heart of the historic part of town. It is flanked by one of the better collections of colonial-style buildings in Baja—the adjacent museum, city hall and the handsome Posada de las Flores Hotel. We explore the quiet streets as we meander toward McLulu's taco stand—one of my favorite eateries discovered on my last trip. Lourdes "Lulu" Armendáriz, who owns and runs this one-woman shop, is waiting with a generous smile and a wide variety of authentic, Baja-style tacos. Tout-



LORETO'S HISTORIC DISTRICT INCLUDES MANY COLONIAL-STYLE BUILDINGS, SUCH AS THE PALACIO DE MUNICIPAL

ing a hand-painted sign, the food stand lampoons the other "Mc" we know so well: "McLulu's—Muchos Tacos Sold Aqui."

Lulu's smile is infectious. She has a warmth of spirit I see frequently in Baja. She chats with people as they pass on the street. Locals and tourists stop by for a quick meal. We order four of Lulu's fresh fish tacos—a Baja specialty that has migrated north and is now extremely popular in my hometown of San Diego. Lulu batters-up and fries pieces of fresh fish, spoons them into soft corn tortillas, then lines them up on a plate. The front of the stand is lined with a row of green plastic bowls with an array of toppings—cabbage, white sauce, sliced lime, spicy carrots, and a range of peppers and salsas. Priscilla and I load up our steaming tacos and dig in.

After a second round of tacos, Priscilla and I choose to walk off the meal by

ADVENTURE

There are many ways to experience the natural wonders of the Sea of Cortés.

Arturo's Sport Eco-Tours can arrange diving, fishing, kayaking, whale-watching and mission tours. For more information call 011-52-613-135-0766 or visit www.arturosport.com.

Sea Kayak Adventures offers full-service guided kayak tours—complete with snorkeling, whale-watching and meals—from mid-December through mid-May. For more information call 800-616-1943 or visit www.seakayakadventures.com.

BajaSail offers week-long luxury catamaran voyages that feature snorkeling, kayaking, hiking and other activities. For more information call 760-804-5788 or visit www.bajasail.net.

visiting a colorful collection of shops that line a graceful walkway beneath an arch of sculpted ficus trees. Casa de la Abuela, located in a 200-year-old adobe house, sells an eclectic assortment of local handicrafts: hand-embroidered shirts, fresh vanilla extract, leather goods, brightly painted ceramics, dried puffer fish, shells and wood carvings. We visit a half-dozen stores full of the beautiful handcrafted silver jewelry Mexico is renowned for. A sign nearby aptly names the district "The Silver Desert."

The next day, a 22-mile drive to Misión de San Francisco Javier provides a taste of Baja's renowned dirt roads that have made endurance races such as the Baja 1000 infamous. The dirt road snakes into the Sierra de la Gigante range, through tight gorges, parched desert and occasional oases lush with palm trees. Jagged, serpentine peaks shoot up on all sides, littered with enormous cardón cactus, ocotillo, thornscrub and paloverde. It's a slow, dusty ride, with miles of switchbacks to test our stomachs, but the immersion into primeval Baja is worth it. I can't help wondering why anyone would build a mission so far from the sea, town or primary roads. The journey takes almost two hours by car, and

I can't imagine making the trek by foot or mule, particularly in the midsummer heat.

San Javier rests in a small valley oasis, surrounded by mountains on all sides. This small pueblo comprises a few charming thatched cottages, the rentable bungalows of Casa de Ana and other structures. Local residents walk from home to church to yard to field, with the historic mission as a backdrop to their everyday world.

When we finally arrive in San Javier, there are four large SUVs with stacks of mountain bikes strapped to their roofs. Twenty dusty riders have taken a more adventurous and arduous approach and biked to the mission, and are preparing to be shuttled home.

We wander the grounds of the mission. We're told the church was constructed of cut lava stone and rock, was built without mortar, and, of all the missions, is the only one fully intact. Chickens flit about; neighborhood dogs and cats wander freely; and pigs and goats can be heard in nearby pens. Small fields are planted with neat rows of vegetables, and a small creek waters a palm grove and a few large olive trees.

Some of the local families welcome us into their houses that surround the mission. We meet babies and play with smiling children on a rusted jungle gym. The people in this insulated outpost live much like the early Jesuits in the 1600s and the Cochimíes Indians before them: peacefully eking out a living from the dry, rocky soil. San Javier encapsulates the Zen-like contrast that is Baja: quiet yet profound, austere yet inviting—and a long way from the frenetic pace of the modern world. I'm already missing it, before I've even left. ▲

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