

UPDATE

Cabo's COMEBACK

After a devastating hurricane two years ago, Mexico's longtime playground is back. And with 13 new hotels, two golf courses, and countless private homes being constructed, it's set to keep getting bigger and better.

BY ELIZABETH SILE

ESPERANZA
The adults-only pool overlooks the Sea of Cortez and El Arco in the distance.

At the southernmost tip of Baja California, not far from Los Cabos International Airport, a well-maintained road is flanked by the Sierra de la Laguna. The mountains are greener than usual because of recent rain, and in their shadow, cardon cacti fill the desert. A cow stands off the road watching cars turn onto Carretera Transpeninsular, the highway that runs the length of Baja California—1,063 miles—from Tijuana to Cabo San Lucas. “We have many problems in Mexico but not here,” my driver says as the royal blue Sea of Cortez appears to the south. This contrast, where ocean meets desert, has welcomed travelers for decades.

But soon, the familiar scenery is interrupted. Ten-foot-tall signs advertise empty lots. Suntanned men carry ladders and two-by-fours to half-constructed buildings, one after another, as I enter the Tourist Corridor (yes, unfortunately that's its official designation), the 20-mile stretch of beaches, resorts, and golf courses that connects Cabo San Lucas to the west and San José del Cabo to the east. Collectively the area is known as Los Cabos, or Cabo for short.

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I've come here to see the explosion of growth since the area was decimated by the worst hurricane in its history. Around 9:30 p.m. on September 14, 2014, Hurricane Odile made landfall in Cabo San Lucas, bringing winds of 125 miles per hour that flattened homes, blew out windows, and left 239,000 locals—90 percent of the population—without electricity for months. Category 3 Odile killed 11 people, injured 135 others, and caused more than \$1 billion in damage.

Yet, in the two years since Odile, the four main luxury hotels have reopened after overhauls. About 20 private jets are parked the

THE CORRIDOR: NEW AND IMPROVED

Los Cabos's Tourist Corridor has long been the area's most exclusive attraction, seeing a parade of the rich and famous since the 1950s. The draw, other than golf (see "Golfing in Los Cabos," March/April 2014, at departures.com/golfcabo), is the resorts themselves, which all feature top restaurants, impeccable service, and beautiful beaches (some swimmable, some not). The point of staying in the Corridor is to hunker down—to spend days by the pool, in the spa, or venturing to San José del Cabo, followed by leisurely dinners at Corridor hotels.

rant, led by chef Enrique Olvera, lacks the energy and precision of his standout Cosme in New York. Though The Cape has great views—El Arco, the 200-foot-tall rock formation across the bay, is visible throughout—it is not yet competing with Cabo's other luxury hotels.

Ten minutes down the highway from The Cape is Auberge Resorts' intimate **Esperanza** (rooms from \$550; *Carretera Transpeninsular, km. 7, Manzana 10, Punta Ballena*; 52-624/145-6400). After the hurricane, it closed for nine months while Dallas-based HKS Hospitality Group redesigned all 57 rooms and suites, giving them more of a beach-house feel with Mexican fix-

RESORT AT PEDREGAL

The one-bedroom Estrella Suite has two outdoor terraces.



LA LUPITA

The San José taco restaurant serves homemade tortillas and local mezcal.

morning I arrive at the airport, which closed for two weeks for repairs after the ceiling collapsed in one terminal and the roof was torn off the other. Last year saw a record number of visitors, up 11 percent from 2014, to 1.8 million people. Cabo San Lucas's marina is booming, with almost all 380 slips full. Luis Palacios, chief commercial officer of the tourism board, estimates that Cabo's recovery is the fastest ever for a vacation destination. By the end of 2017, 3,000 new rooms will have been built across 13 hotels. "We are the comeback kid," Palacios says. "The airlines came together with the federal government, the local government, and with the private sector to bring us back to life."

The area's most hyped new hotel is **The Cape** (rooms from \$419; *Carretera Transpeninsular, km. 5, Misiones del Cabo*; 52-624/163-0000), Thompson Hotels' first property in Mexico, located on Monuments Beach near Cabo San Lucas. The 161 rooms and suites are decorated like a surfer's contemporary bungalow, with handmade cement tiles from Guadalajara and leather headboards. "We wanted to defy the established status quo of what design in Los Cabos was supposed to be," Mexican architect Javier Sánchez says of the black concrete lobby. But a year after opening, there are still kinks. Guest room doors slam shut so loudly I was woken up more than once. Towels are rough. The service was, at times, aloof. Manta, the hotel's restau-

tures and furniture. (Nothing was imported, I'm told.) Thirteen thousand aloe and agave plants were replaced, and the resort's palapa (palm leaf) roofs, which Odile destroyed, were rebuilt. In total, Auberge spent \$40 million on repairs and upgrades. Request casita 64, which, at 1,200 square feet (with a private plunge pool), is a near-perfect guest room. Meanwhile, the two-bedroom villa 67, with a fire pit and pool, is a standout.

Rosewood's **Las Ventanas al Paraíso** (rooms from \$640; *Carretera Transpeninsular, km. 19½*; 52-624/144-2800), when it opened in 1997, set a high bar for luxury in Cabo. It debuted Cabo's first infinity pool, added desert landscaping, and built an open-air lobby—all features



FLORA FARM
The signature drink at the restaurant's Farm Bar is a "farmarita" with carrot juice.

now found throughout the area. After Odile, Rosewood shut down the property for nine months, spending \$30 million to repair its seven pools, 83 suites, and 12 villas. The decor remains similar to the hotel's pre-Odile look, with Otomi bed scarves and mosaic headboards. The four two-bedroom beachfront villas are still what to request.

Ty Warner, the Beanie Babies mastermind, comes up a lot in conversation at Las Ventanas (he purchased the resort in 2004), and when I'm there, Frederic Vidal, the hotel's managing director, is buzzing about the new \$18 million Ty Warner Mansion, which at press time was set to open in July. For \$46,900 per night, the somewhat Middle Eastern-inspired villa offers 28,000 square feet, two bedrooms, the biggest pool on the property, and a roof deck.

Fourteen years before Cabo had a highway, in 1956, John Wayne and Bing Crosby were among the guests in the 15-room home of Don Abelardo Rodríguez, the son of Mexico's former president. Two expansions later, in 2004, the estate became **One&Only Palmilla** (rooms from \$615; *Carretera Transpeninsular*, km. 7½; 52-624/146-7000). The green lawns and 1,200 palm trees are more Beverly Hills than desert. The resort is vast, with 172 rooms and two villas.

Odile blasted right through One&Only, which closed for seven months and invested millions (the company won't disclose the exact figure) to reimagine itself. The hotel added a

second villa, Villa One, as a modern counterpart to the 10,500-square-foot Villa Cortez, which has four bedrooms and a decor that's more traditionally Mexican. Unlike most resorts in Cabo, where the current is too strong, One&Only has a beach that's swimmable. As far as guest rooms go, request an ocean-facing one-bedroom casita suite by the pool. It also introduced a new restaurant, Seared steak house, and kept chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten's *Suviche*, a sushi and ceviche restaurant.

Parts of the Corridor's coastline stretch for miles with few signs of a hotel boom—but it is coming. A 232-room Park Hyatt is expected by year's end, as is another Auberge Resorts property called Chileno Bay Resort & Residences, with 29 rooms and 32 residences. It will be the centerpiece of Discovery Lands' second Cabo development. (Its El Dorado Golf & Beach Club, where George Clooney and Rande Gerber sold their twin houses in April, is seven miles away.) It will also include a Tom Fazio golf course. In 2017, a 122-room Montage Hotel will open on Santa Maria Bay.

CABO SAN LUCAS: BEYOND THE MARINA

Building is also happening in Cabo San Lucas, which has the area's main marina, with views of El Arco. The arch marks the end of the Baja Peninsula and divides the Sea of Cortez and

EAT + SHOP

EL RESTAURANTE AT LAS VENTANAS AL PARAISO

Chef Fabrice Guisset highlights regional dishes. Try the octopus carnitas with morita chile sauce, a twist on a central Mexican recipe. *Carretera Transpeninsular*, km. 19½; 52-624/144-2800.

EDUARDO SANCHEZ

At his San José boutique and workshop the jewelry designer crafts mostly silver necklaces, statement rings, and cuffs with Mexican and Italian coins. *Calle Boulevard Antonio Mijares*; 52-624/105-2313.

LA LUPITA TACO & MEZCAL

Cabo's best tacos are at this small, family-owned restaurant and bar in San José. The tortillas are homemade, with creative fillings like duck mole with hibiscus compote. Grab a beer after at Baja Brewing Company next door. *Calle José María Morelos*; 52-624/688-3926.

EL FARALLON

The more rustic of the Resort at Pedregal's two restaurants is built into the cliffs and largely unlit, so you feel suspended over the Pacific. Daily seafood catches (lobster, tuna) are ordered by the pound and grilled. *Camino del Mar 1*; 52-624/163-4300.

SOLANA

Cabo isn't known for its shopping (mostly tchotchkes), but the resorts have well-curated boutiques. We liked the Eugenia Kim beach hats and terra-cotta chandeliers at this shop in Esperanza. *Carretera Transpeninsular*, km. 7; 52-624/145-6400.

the Pacific Ocean. The Pacific side, which has rougher water, has remained largely undeveloped, but that is changing. In 2017, Nobu will open its first hotel in Mexico, with 200 rooms, and farther north the Mexican chain Solmar Group will debut the 460-room Grand Solmar Rancho San Lucas, with a Greg Norman golf course (his second in Cabo).

For now, though, the only place to stay is at the **Resort at Pedregal** (rooms from \$675; Camino del Mar 1; 52-624/163-4300), where the dining and 12,000-square-foot spa are the draws. The former Capella property closed for four months and underwent a \$20 million renovation post-Odile, then reopened as an independent hotel. (The jury is still out on whether the service compares under new ownership, but I found it warm.) The redone interiors evoke a Spanish hacienda. Book suite 930, with three bedrooms and views of Pedregal Beach from the tub. The Luna y Mar Spa is Cabo's most dramatic; it resembles the inside of an oyster, with eight treatment pods.

If you tire of fine dining, Cabo San Lucas, while very touristy, has some fun, laid-back cantinas. Los Tres Gallos serves traditional Mexican dishes like chicken mole. Smoked-marlin tacos are what to order at Los Claros. Bar Esquina, at the Bahia Hotel & Beach Club, is more upscale and serves excellent nontequila cocktails (try the Farmers Mark) for when you just can't have another margarita. As you leave town, stop at no-frills Asi y Asado for shredded beef tacos and watermelon water.

SAN JOSE DEL CABO: OFF THE BEATEN PATH

The area's cultural capital is the older and smaller San José del Cabo, with 18th-century colonial buildings, a 1730 Jesuit mission, and a central plaza. Small streets like Calle Boulevard Antonio Mijares and Calle José María

Morelos are lined with art galleries, shops, and taco stands. Locals recommend Thursday night's Art Walk, from November to June.

Cabo is no Mexico City, but San José has a few galleries worth visiting. Among the dealers is Patricia Mendoza, whose namesake gallery

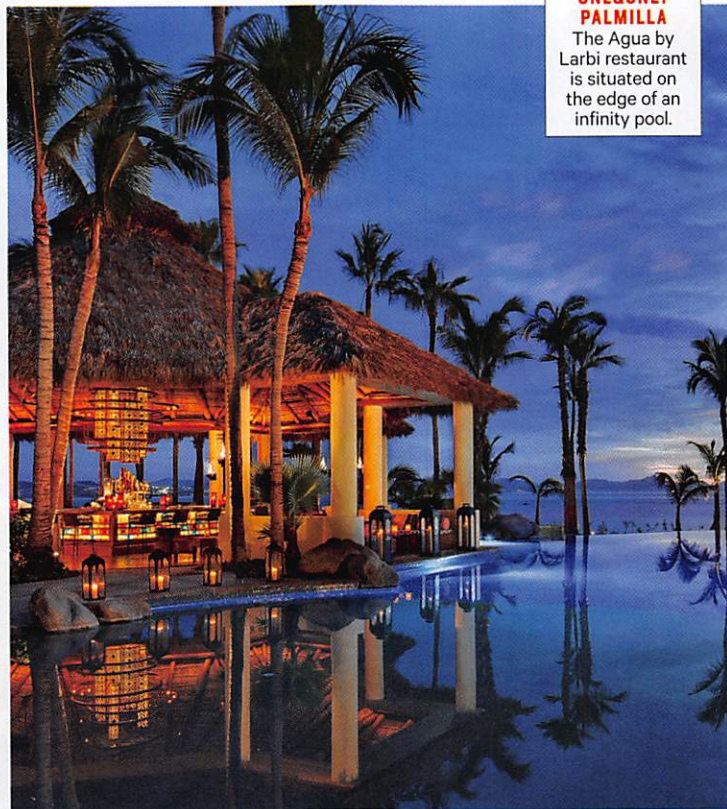
hotel with 69 rooms and a recording studio. Farther east is a 299-room **JW Marriott** (rooms from \$460; Fraccion Hotelera FH5-C1, Subdelegación de la Playita; 52-624/163-7600), which opened in November (book one of the 49 rooms in the Griffin Club, a "hotel within a

hotel"); its Café des Artistes restaurant is worth a visit for its duck confit chilaquiles. Ritz-Carlton is building 124 Reserve residences, east of the JW Marriott, by early 2017. To the west of Puerto Los Cabos is a stretch of beach called the Zona Hotelera. The new hotel there is the year-old ultramodern Mar Adentro. Farther afield, Four Seasons will open a 145-room resort 45 miles northeast of San José in a development called Costa Palmas in 2018.

The hotbed of organic dining in Cabo is happening a 20-minute drive north of the mission, down a dirt road where three farm restaurants grow over 25 acres. All do organic, vegetable-heavy cooking. Huerta Los Tamarindos and Flora Farm are more rustic, with pizzas, pastas, and grilled meats, while design-minded Acre is more modern, with a crudo of the day and tomato carpaccio. Locals and longtime Cabo regulars point me to Flora's Field Kitchen. The property has a dining area, small market, and fields of produce. California expats Patrick and Gloria Greene have built ten sold-out culinary cottages on site, with

three more on the way, where owners get unlimited produce. It's hard to imagine that just two years ago, the rows of multicolored cauliflower, snap peas, and tiny carrots were decimated.

The sun goes down and the string lights come on, twinkling under the night stars. The breeze is cool. At my table, there's coppa to start, bread and fresh butter, farm fettuccine dyed purple from beets, wood-fired mesquite chicken, a creamy corn salad that tastes like *elote* without the crema, and maybe one too many pink-hibiscus margaritas. The dishes, and then the hours, pass in a satisfying blur, as they can only on a perfect evening in Cabo. ♦



ONE & ONLY PALMILLA
The Agua by Larbi restaurant is situated on the edge of an infinity pool.

By the end of 2017, 3,000 rooms will have been built in new hotels in

Los Cabos.

specializes in contemporary artists such as sculptors Jorge Marín and Julio Martínez Barnette. She's still reeling from the hurricane. "I'm paying for it. I lost artists," she says. "But for the first time, I think we're recovering. People are coming back to Cabo."

The problem with San José is lodging. But luxury development is happening outward from the town's center, in an area called Puerto Los Cabos. Here, a golf course by Jack Nicklaus and Greg Norman was completed in 2008 (nine more holes are expected by 2017), and a new marina was built in 2007, with 200 slips. On the marina itself is El Ganzo, a boutique