

Cabo March 6-13, 2010 Travel Story

Cabo is the nickname given the southern tip of Baja California, which officially is the municipality of Los Cabos, which means the capes. The two principal cities of Cabo are Cabo San Lucas at the western cape and San Jose del Cabo at the eastern cape. The names are confusing, so people tend to refer to the former as Cabo and the latter as San Jose. The airport is officially called Los Cabos, but most refer to it as Cabo too. I'll use the colloquial names in this travel story.

The Eastern side of lower Baja, where the airport lies, tends to be dryer than the Western side where large forests of huge (25-ft) cardon cacti grow. As you can see by the airport photo, the eastern side looks like desert and has huge sandy arroyos where hurricane rains wash from the Sierra de la Laguna mountain range to the sea.



In the 3 years since we've vacationed here, it feels pretty much the same despite some dramatic changes in the economy. The crowds at the airport are smaller and the lines at restaurant shorter. But the number of hotels and resorts in Cabo San Lucas, where we have timeshare weeks, has grown by 25% to over 60. However, some of them are completely dark at night, which

means that they went bankrupt or just slowed down the pace of construction. We stayed in Villa del Arco (Arch) this time, which is essentially next door to Villa del Palmar, where we stayed on two previous occasions. Above is Villa del Arco's beach at dawn.

Cabo

Cabo has a population of well over 60,000 and San Jose is just a little smaller. An expat real estate agent told me that the price of homes and condos has dropped about 30% because so many people sold off their second homes in order to keep paying their mortgages back home. He said that timesharing has not been hit so hard



because they cost a lot less. Newspaper articles said Cabo has not been hurt as much as most of Mexico because it has been able to keep Mexicans and other non-American tourists traveling to Cabo.

Cabo has a harbor deep enough for the monstrous 7,000-person cruise ships. On some days three of these giant ship sat in the harbor unloading hordes of tourists that keep the gift shops and bars solvent.



Cabo boasts about its stone arch at the southernmost point of Baja California. Local vendors tout that it is the point where the Pacific Ocean meets the Sea of Cortez.

As you might expect, we joined the crowds on the beach for our daily walks. The beach before 8am is deserted and the rising sun casts an orange haze over the beach and buildings.

By early afternoon hundreds of vendors try to sell all kinds of things to thousands of tourists. The college students on Spring Break seemed to be more intent on getting smashed in the beach bars than buying trinkets.

Gina and Nancy splurged and got massages on the beach on three different days. The massages were professional and a steal at \$20 for 45 minutes. I, on the other hand, regressed to my childhood and mounted a horse on the beach for a short ride. I also enjoyed swimming in the warm pool water while the women got their massages.

San Jose

San Jose is known as the more sedate town and lies about 15 miles east of Cabo. It is known for its luxurious resorts and houses as well as its genuine Mexican Art District in the center of town. Adjacent to the Art District is the main City plaza shown in the photographs of the fountain in front of the cathedral. The City Hall sits right off of the plaza, which gives the City a centered, community feeling.



Many of the shops and museums of the Art District sold little **Day of the Dead** folk statues. Some of these stores have huge life-size statues like the one on the right, that are placed right outside the entrance. The Day of the Dead is a celebration day on November 1 & 2 in Mexico and other Latin American countries. The holiday focuses on gatherings of family and friends to pray for and remember friends and family members who have died. It is a variation on All Souls' Day of the Catholic Church. For us, a bone skeleton is not a fitting symbol of respect for departed loved ones, but for many Mexicans it is.



Scattered across San Jose are bright orange African Tulip Trees, also called Fountain Trees (because the buds are known to spout water upon being touched). This flowering tree is native to tropical Africa, and we recently saw them in the Puerto Rico rainforest. The flower's buds look like tiny bananas until they start to bloom.

Apparently, warmth is more critical to their survival than moisture as they bloom so brightly in Baja California.

A couple of miles north of San Jose is Puerto Los Cabos, a huge new development including a marina, a small harbor, and hundreds of residences. This photo taken from the airplane shows the desert-like terrain. The economic recession has been a mixed blessing because while it has put people out of work, it has also slowed down such grandiose projects that alter the environment for ever.



Drug/Alcohol Treatment

Just by accident I met two men in the San Jose main plaza that were promoting and fundraising for CRREAD, which is a network of about 40 centers in Mexico for the rehabilitation of drug/alcohol abusers. Roberto and Roman let me take their picture and told me that they are been sober and on the 12-step program for 11 and 31 months respectively. I told them that I had been sober for 7 years. (I didn't brag about it; it is just something I do. Time passes and next year I will have had 100 months of sobriety.) I wish I could have learned more about their support networks, but they didn't speak English any better than my Spanish.



Estuary

While Gina went shopping and walking the in the San Jose Art District, Nancy and I drove about 5 miles to the estuary, called Estero San Jose. This is the point where the rain/spring water of the Rio San Jose mixes with the salt water of the Sea of Cortes and the Pacific Ocean.

Three years ago we saw lots of sandpipers as the water level was lower. This time not a single sandpiper was in sight but coots, cormorants and frigates were common. Most of the coots looked just like the ones we see all summer on our lake, but we saw some with bright red beaks that we have never seen in Minnesota. As you can see by the picture, the estuary is bounded by tall, majestic palms and the water lined with very tall reeds.



The highlight of the walk was the aerial show of about a dozen huge frigates, also called Man of War. These beautiful fork-tailed black and white birds are 3 feet long with a wing span of 8 feet. Ordinarily they circle high in the sky with the ospreys, but this day their favorite fish must have



been swimming close to the surface because the frigates, one right after another, rapidly dove to the surface, grabbed a meal and headed back up. Frigates cannot swim, so they made a quick splash and got out of there in a hurry. During all of this commotion, the large, stately cormorants remained perched on a stump a few feet away. They did not even seem interested.



On the left is Nancy on the Estuary walk. Note the sad bulldozing of palm trees to make way for development.

Dinners

Among the highlights of our trip were special dinners. Probably our favorite place was the restaurant at the Hacienda, a brand new luxury resort next to the main shopping center in Cabo. The food was Mexican and relatively inexpensive, but the tables were close to the surf. Most fun was watching a variety of tour boats decorated with colored lights slowly meandering around the outer harbor.



Another special place was the Sunset da Mona Lisa (above). Perched high on the shoreline rocks about 2 miles east of the Cabo harbor, this Italian restaurant pulls in

crowds just to see the colorful sunsets and take pictures. As you can see, the sky did not disappoint. The décor with pools of water topped off the experience. Ironically, access to the special place is by dirt road past a dozen empty buildings, no doubt victims of the world recession. Here is the sunset from Mona Lisa's:



The place Gina says have the best tortillas in the world is Mi Casa. A tortilla chef in the dining room makes nothing but thick corn tortillas. They also have a clown, a mariachi band, and a great souvenir shop. Notice the colors and happy faces.



Most entertaining was the big “Caborey” dinner cruise. The food was surprisingly tasty, but the best was last. One couple performed several colorful Mexican folk dances, and another couple from Argentina performed flamenco-type dances with the energy and skill of Olympic dancers. Finally, two male acrobats performed whirly-things not describable in words. To see for yourself, check out this video on [YouTube](#).

Whale Watching

Thousands of whales pass the Cabo capes as they travel south every winter to the Sea of Cortez, have their babies, and then head back north to Alaska for summer feeding. Tens of thousands of the humpback and gray whales swim around the Cabo capes between December and April each year in their annual 6,000 mile migration.

During our whale watching trip on a little 12-passenger pontoon-like outboard, we were able to get within 5 or 10 feet of a humpback family without getting the boat thrown out of the water by the 35 ton mother and father whales. For about an hour several little

boats of whale watchers followed them as they dove and glided rapidly around the bay as if they were playing or teaching the child to maneuver the rough waters while getting enough to eat. Here are the mother and baby:



The female whale and the “infant,” which no doubt weighed several tons, stayed close together most of the time, while the male hung around a little distance removed, not unlike a lot of human families. Unlike men, the male

humpbacks often sing songs that typically last for 15 or 20 minutes. It seems to have something to do with mating. We didn’t hear any singing, but the noise from their snouts, like an elephant roar, signaled their frequent blowing of water out of their nostrils.



Humpbacks have distinctive, long flippers that resemble a wing on each side. Outstretched, they may be 10-20 feet long and critical to their control. Each whale has a tail, called a fluke, with a unique pattern making it possible to individually identify each whale. Usually the fluke is not observable until they dive downward. Sometimes the dives are extremely deep, keeping them from the surface for a long time, while other

dives are short and playful. When the fluke is fully visible above the surface, that seems to indicate a deep, long dive. It was thrilling to watch them play in the water up close. You can even detect a smile on the face of the whale here.



Mexico

The day after we returned home, the news was filled with the embassy-worker killings in Juarez and executions in Acapulco. The drug wars have turned the border towns into tragic killing zones. We felt safe in Cabo, in part, because it takes two days of desert driving to get there. It even takes 2 hours from LA by airline. Perhaps it is safer because it is too dry to easily grow marijuana or coca. We felt a little safer to see the Mexican military patrolling the harbors.

We rarely noticed police patrolling the roads, much less giving out speeding tickets, despite the fact that the average traffic speeds were 30% to 100% higher than the speed limit. This pattern of establishing, but not enforcing, laws seems to be quite typical of developing countries. Partly, the problem is the cost of enforcement, but another underlying factor is that laws are passed to please tourists and noncitizens, but never intended to be strictly enforced. Instead of lots of costly highway patrols, Mexicans have lots of speed bumps. Some of the speed bumps are so high, that you have to come to a nearly total stop. It does slow the traffic down, except between bumps.



We had been thinking of going to Puerto Vallarta next Spring, but now we are looking into Costa Rico. Costa Rico has one of the highest income levels of countries in the Americas, and I am interested in seeing if problems of segregation and inequality are less of a problem.

Mexico in recent history has been plagued by a tremendous gap between the poor and the rising urban middle class, to say nothing of the wealthy superclass. Mexico has what is called a “social housing” project which builds huge neighborhoods of tiny houses, which they sell to low income people at an extremely low price, to be paid off as if they were paying rent. We saw these neighborhoods of

thousands of houses lined in straight rows in both Cabo and Puerto Vallarta. From the air, they look like California's housing tracts. While some of these housing projects have turned into threatening places to live, for the most part they appear to be successfully keeping the huge disparities in wealth and lifestyles from erupting with social unrest.



One evening as we left the Cabo harbor we got this picture of the town of Cabo with Zenji the huge black and white sailing yacht taking up the foreground. Zenji, which is for sale at \$50 million, is from Isle of Man and flies the British flag. This luxury 180-foot yacht with two huge engines and two giant

masts for sails. It sleeps 12 but has a crew of 8, so it is not your normal party boat. While it is a beautiful boat, it's size dominates the harbor and symbolizes the tremendous gap between the super-rich and the poor worldwide.

