THE ROMANCE OF TRAVEL

COSTA RICA
PARIS
VENICE
BAJA
MONGOLIA
Amy Goldwasser goes Goldilocks-ing through Mexico’s most-storied stretch of coast and quite possibly finds just right.

Photographs by
PAOLA & MURRAY
At the moment, the pool here, about a mile south of the dusty surf town of Todos Santos, is just a promise: a flat white rectangle painted in the dirt. Like any outline waiting to be filled in, it looks impossibly small. Spatial relations—particularly when you really care about a place and its before-and-after—call for a certain amount of trust, a suspension of disbelief. It’s hard to size up the present, hard to be objective about the past, harder still to imagine what comes next.

Pools, however, can tell you a lot.

A brief history of Baja Sur—of any tropical destination, really—is a history of where people swim. Bodies of water, built and unbuilt, are an opportunity for the traveler to go Goldilocks-ing. Whether you pull up to a vast empty ocean or a private plunge pool at an extravagant resort, the character of the swimming spot is a quick read upon arrival. The sea or the pool serves as your all-in-one porridge, chair, and bed—the tell of the tale.

In Baja Sur, you can quickly experience the extremes: This one is too soft (the bed, the butler, the air-conditioning), or, occasionally, this one is too hard (the cash-only policy, the broken ATM, the unmarked roads). What you really want from Baja Sur is simple and somewhere in between—the big surf, the big cactuses that look like your friends, the agreement with your travel companion that arroyo is a beautiful word, the fish tacos, the huevos rancheros, the beaches you have to hike into, the absence of rattlesnakes but the wish that lizards liked you more.

For Ernie Glesner, project director of the Todos Santos community-to-be (hotels, restaurants, residencias, and more), just south of Todos Santos, the pool of the future is perhaps a three-bears story. Perhaps these lines on the pre-groundbreaking ground, these four hard angles, are a chance to get it just right.

“There will be no swim-up bar,” Glesner says proudly. His eyes are fixed on the perimeter of white paint—at a glorious Playa Punta Lobos site overlooking the Pacific, where fishermen in small panyas come in with their catch—that will, in significant ways, determine the shape of development in Baja Sur.

“My stallion tried to mount a mare in the parade, so I had to trade in the stallion for this tiny horse,” Glesner says, showing us a photo of him in the saddle, his feet nearly touching the ground. “This one is too big. This one is too small. We’re drinking margaritas with Glesner and Tres Santos sales and marketing manager Wayne Trudeau, watching what Trudeau calls a “mind-blowing” sunset from the rooftop bar of the Hotel Guaycura. It’s fun to think you can set a drink down right on the Tropic of Cancer; the latitude line runs directly through Todos Santos. It’s the first time my husband, Peter, and I have tasted the local herb-based liquor called Damiana, which was supposedly in the first margarita ever mixed (the Baja answer to triple sec). The form of the liquor bottle so resembles an ample, expectant woman that you trust the future in her hands. There’s a sense of humor and a sense of play.

You want to stick around to see what comes next.

Same with Glesner’s storytelling. He’s both quick to laugh at himself and seems as seriously committed to being a cholreño (a Los Cabos native, named for the cholla cactus) as any expat could be—a fully immersed lover of life in this part of the world. With complete confidence, the American Glesner speaks what Peter and I believe is perfect Spanish. That is until a true cholreño and amigo of Glesner’s tells us, grinning across a dinner table, “He doesn’t even conjugate!”

Glesner is the kind of guy who has no experience with horses but starts with a stallion. And not just a stallion: one that had been wandering the streets of Todos Santos. He took it in, called it Niño Perdido—and, for better or worse, saddled up his lost boy to join the parade, an annual chain of cowboys riding from Todos Santos to Pescadero, eight miles south. We also saw pictures of Glesner dispatching a rattler with a machete. His dogs paddle-board—small dogs, not Labs. He’s started sponsoring and training local kids to race mountain bikes. He knows everyone in town, like the fisherman who walks into the restaurant La Casita one evening and plops a fresh marlin onto the counter before Sergio Rivera, the restaurant’s chef and owner, who serves it to us 15 minutes later as some of the best sushi we’ve ever had.

On-site at Tres Santos the next morning, Glesner shows us the crumbling stone ruins of an abandoned cannery. “It’s like Pompeii,” he says admiringly. He wants to preserve it and make it part of Tres Santos, maybe as an event space, maybe as a camping ground—a relevant, living relic that can coexist with a boutique hotel and a yoga platform in the continuum of a 250-year-old fishing village.

If you can imagine a lost horse wandering around any town, you can imagine him in Todos Santos. It’s not exactly like stray cats in Rome (or Pompeii), but stray stallions, and strays in general—surfers, cowboys, Californians from north of the border—are in their element here. The Wild West effect is all the more convincing during our visit because the streets have been torn up to bury telephone wires. In the name of progress, roads have been sent back in time to an earthy brown-red, with occasional slabs of pavement and six-foot cardon cactuses uprooted.

The signs in Todos Santos are hand-painted, with smiling fruits and vegetables in primary colors. A large juice costs about $1.30 at El...
Papayón, and you have confidence that jugo is not on the verge of becoming a verb down here. We stayed at a lovely little place called the Hotel Casa Tota (pool: encircled by the rooms, sized for a family of four), where the rooster across the street must wake every guest, every dawn, at 4:30 a.m. But somehow that’s okay here, even charming. What do you have to do today anyway?

The classic Italian Café Santa Fe in Todos Santos is such a draw, the lobster ravioli so good, that, so the story goes, at one point, the owner’s competitors tried to chase him out of business by deporting him. The taco stands here are phenomenal, and probably the most ubiquitous business in town. The women grilling the fish, shrimp, and carnitas right in front of you put out the toppings in plastic containers, for you to fill your tacos as you wish.

Below, from left:
Evita Anderson, longtime Todos Santos resident and owner of the eclectic boutique Motel; Caffè El Triunfo, in the former silver mining town of El Triunfo, about midway between the Pacific and the Sea of Cortez; locally grown fruit from a farm near Todos Santos; dining alfresco at the Todos Santos Inn’s La Copa Cocina.

Integration with the area’s long-standing culture and commerce is something the developers of Tres Santos hope to deliver, to entice new residents to their swath of land. As the website puts it: “Our intention is for Tres Santos to be part of the growth Todos Santos is experiencing in a thoughtful and positive way.” It’s development new-school, decidedly anti-resort. Rent cruiser bikes from their hub in town and they’ll mark up a map with the taco stands to hit. When Tres Santos says its restaurant, due to open early next year, is farm-to-table, it means both farm and table are on-site. Residents of the development will be able to buy dinner directly from fishermen at day’s end. The mountains and the mountain biking, the surf and the surfing, are serious.

So are the credentials of the team, which includes consultant Chip Conley, founder of Joie de Vivre Hospitality; Mexico City–based Alejandro Mendlovic Arquitectos; and hotelier Liz Lambert, whose Bunkhouse is designing the Hotel San Cristóbal, set to open this fall, bringing to Tres Santos the funky, original style she pioneered with the San José and Saint Cecilia in Austin.

There will be a barn. There will be no swim-up bar.
To understand Tres Santos's starting point—the many iterations of both community- and pool-building in Baja Sur that have been realized to date, and the truly limitless possibilities ahead—you have to go back to the spring of 1940. You have to consider John Steinbeck a Goldilocks of sorts, an out-of-place protagonist on a Baja adventure decades before infinity was a pool-edge option, before pools themselves were even an option in these parts. On the marine biology expedition Steinbeck would famously document in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, the "pool" was primordial: "The Sea of Cortez, or the Gulf of California, is a long, narrow, highly dangerous body of water...subject to sudden and vicious storms of great intensity," he wrote. The closest thing to a swim-up bar was *The Western Flyer*, a 76-foot sardine fishing boat. The whiskey on board was for "medicinal purposes." And as Steinbeck noted dryly, it "did not survive our leave-taking."

Eight years later, a dashing young pilot named Abelardo L. Rodríguez Montijo—son of the president of Mexico and new husband to Hollywood beauty Lucille Bremer—watched the sun rise over 10,000 acres baptized by Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés in 1535 as Santa Cruz (about 25 miles east of present-day La Paz). "Rod" would build his home here, along with the small luxury resort Rancho Las Cruces. And the state of Baja California Sur would be BYOB-by-boat no more. So began the era of the fully stocked bar—an enticement U.S. travelers would readily swim to in one sense or another. Rancho Las Cruces was the first resort to attract high-flying North Americans to Baja Sur, offering guests the glamour of a private airstrip and more than five miles of secluded coastline, a dining room with a dress code, and 150-pound marlin easily landed. From then on, pools would be part of the peninsula. Pools would be part of the plan.

Rod's son Abelardo Nicolás Rodríguez, a.k.a. Niki, runs the property today. We have
a hard time finding the place, down miles of dirt road and cactus and uncertainty. “The old man didn’t like signs, so I just kept it that way,” Rodriguez says when we finally pull up to the resort. He is amused, but not at all apologetic. Immediately likable, he is a natural in the forgotten role of host: a listener as well as a storyteller.

Everything at Rancho Las Cruces celebrates a brand of luxury long lost. Entering the reception area, past the empty game room with billiard table, Peter wonders, “Are we off-season, or 50 years off-season?” And seeing no indication of a Wi-Fi password, or even Wi-Fi, in our seaside bungalow, he adds: “There may be no Internet because it hasn’t been invented yet.”

What little signage there is on-site is subtle, classy, of another era. The house crest is elegantly stamped on each plate. A small plaque greets guests post-Greta Garbo who wander down to I Vant to Be Alone Beach. Beside the plaque a privacy bell still stands, so you can announce your presence with fair warning to any ladies who may be sunning themselves in attire not suited for mixed company.

Pools of the past, still in use at Rancho Las Cruces, include: classic rectangular with finite edges (between the outdoor breakfast tables and the sea); guitar-shaped (at the former residence of Desi Arnaz); and standard oval (beside the old man’s hacienda, placed so as to be recklessly cannonballed into from the rooftop golden-age Hollywood personalities who believed in their own immortality, at least for the length of a legendary party).

Meals are American plan, eliminating the crass exchange of cash from moneyed members who have discreetly signed for themselves and their families year after year. Strip steaks and parfaites and tapioca pudding are still on the menu. (Rodriguez: “My wife finally said no to the Jell-O.”) He tells us that Maria, one of the waitresses, has been with his family since she was a teenager—some 55 years now. There is both an afternoon bartender and an evening bartender.

The guest books date back to the beginning. On weathered pages are drawings by early-animation pros—of Woody Woodpecker, of less rich-and-famous birds, of fish, of starlets in bikinis—that make you truly wish the Internet hadn’t been invented in your lifetime. Bing Crosby stayed here. There are complaints from men who went fishing on what Rodriguez likes to call “a gin-clear day” and “only” caught seven or eight Hemingway-size marlin.

Rodriguez can, of course, tell a delightful big-fish story. But he can tell a delightful small-fish story, too. People are always getting themselves “in deep yogurt.” Peter wants to hear all about the old skeet-shooting range, just up from I Vant to Be Alone. Clearly it hasn’t been functional in many years. There’s the rust and overall decay, the occasional rattlesnake skin—and also the near-complete skeleton of a sperm whale beached in the middle of it.

“Are we talking 1950s? Eisenhower era?” Peter asks.

“Yeah, that’s about right,” Rodriguez says. “I believe he was the last one to use it.”

It’s seven o’clock, official Rancho Las Cruces cocktail hour, as Juan, the evening bartender, assumes his shift and Rodriguez launches into a tale about shooting geese at age ten with President Eisenhower.
Baja Sur How-To

WHEN TO GO
From mid-October through June, the weather is dry and sunny but not unbearably hot. Go in February, between winter vacation and Spring Break, for fewer crowds and to catch the gray whale migration.

GETTING THERE
Fly into Cabo San Lucas International Airport, rent a car (with four-wheel drive). Make sure you have plenty of pesos before leaving the airport; many places are still cash-only. It’s an hour’s drive to Todos Santos, an hour and a half to Cabo Pulmo, and two hours to La Paz.

WHERE TO STAY
In Los Cabos, the reopened One&Only Palmilla, at the tip of Baja, is still our go-to for impeccable service and views of both the Pacífico and the Sea of Cortez. To be in the thick of town life in Todos Santos, base yourself at the elegant 1970s Todos Santos Inn. If you want a more laid-back vibe (and direct access to great surf), check out the beachside Hotel Rancho Pescadero, a ten-minute drive south of town. Also, keep your eyes on the opening of Tres Santos’s Hotel San Cristóbal, set for this fall. Stay at Rancho Las Cruces, about 25 miles west of La Paz, and time-travel back to when Baja was the playground of golden-age Hollywood.

SIDE TRIP
Cactus grows everywhere—on roofs, on trees, on other cacti—at Dr. Héctor Nolasco Soria’s impressive Santuario de Los Cactus, just outside the charming old mining town of El Triunfo, an hour’s drive from both La Paz and Todos Santos. Time things right and hit café/bar El Minero de El Triunfo for a lunch of paella tradicional and sangría.

This

one is too resortlike. This one is too not-resortlike.

On a two-hour drive, you can essentially track the evolution of development in Baja Sur. In Los Cabos (Cabo San Lucas and San José del Cabo), pools of the present are highly designed and often direct waterways to all-inclusive cocktails. Those reimagined at the spectacular One&Only Palmilla after Hurricane Odile damaged the previous ones include: adults-only, swim-up-to-margarita-made-with-habanero-infused-tequila; family-friendly; outdoor-hot-and-cold rock pools (in the spa’s Japanese relaxation garden); and private-infinity (on the oceanfront terrace of our Casa Sirena suite, next to our cactus garden). Predating these was the one built in 1958 by a certain son of the president (yes, Rod) when he opened his second Baja resort, the Hotel Palmilla, on this site, ushering in the movie-star tourism that was already thriving two hours north.

By contrast, just 60 miles up the East Cape in quiet, atavistic Cabo Pulmo, the coral reef is protected, the power is solar, and the pools are few, if any. Here, you can begin to imagine Steinbeck’s "lonely and uninhabited Gulf." (Tulum 25 years ago must have felt a lot like this.) At the moment, we are seated at a table on the beach at La Palapa in...
Cabo Pulmo. Some guests have no shirts. Some have little dogs. We have little cash. The last two ATMs we passed, an hour and a half ago, were broken. And La Palapa, like most everything in Cabo Pulmo, is cash only.

The sky above and the water before us are swirled in pastels, the colors of the peso notes we’ve laid out on the table—pale purple, blue, yellow, green, pink. We count what we have left: 217 pesos (about $13). For the same price as a margarita at a Cabo San Lucas resort, we get two of them here, plus two plates of chicken enchiladas with rice and beans. Had credit cards been in play, we’d have ordered the fresh-caught fish tacos. But this is kind of a delicious downgrade, a site-specific Goldilocks choice—too expensive, too inexpensive—that we will forever associate with Cabo Pulmo. We spend the rest of the meal looking out over the water, appreciating the charming fact that cash-only places still exist.

The next morning, a chicken jumps into our jeep when we pull up to Playa Los Arbolitos, a few miles south of town. We hike, as much as you can hike in flip-flops, 20 minutes along the coastal trail to Playa La Sirenetta. Endemic green hummingbirds hover, lizards and crabs scramble away from us. Goofy pelicans dive-bomb and splash. It’s a glorious beach, with coves of coral, sea urchins, water you can see deep into from the cliffs above. The white sand is bordered by giant smooth round rocks that look like pebbles made dinosaur-size. There’s supposedly a can’t-miss mermaid in the rock, but as much as we try, we can’t find it.

Steinbeck wrote in The Log from the Sea of Cortez that “trips to fairly unknown regions should be made twice; once to make mistakes and once to correct them.” Sure, in a sense it’s every traveler’s wish. Don’t trust the bears. Take leave with more whiskey. Withdraw more cash for fish tacos, less cash to pay more attention to your meal. Build a swim-up bar. Don’t build a swim-up bar. But sometimes the mistakes, the unknown shape of the story or the pool, are what make the experience unforgettable. You have to end up in deep yogurt. You have to end up in the deep end. From there, who knows? A stray stallion may turn into someone’s horse, fish into sushi, skeet shooting into mountain biking, cactus into friends, 217 pesos into an adventure.