

# Travel Buzz

# Los Cabos

## A view from the other side

by Tracy L. Barnett, contributing writer

**M**ention a getaway to a Mexican resort, and most people think of the Yucatan: Cancun, Cozumel, the Riviera Maya. And while Mexico's Caribbean corner can have its charms, too many tourists stop there.

Pilar McNear is one who knows that there's a lot more to enjoy. She's traveled extensively in Mexico's interior since she was a child and enjoyed time in the most popular beach getaways – Acapulco, Cancun, Puerto Vallarta – but for her, nothing beats Cabo San Lucas.

This spectacular resort town on the Baja Peninsula, plus the neighboring colonial town of San Jose del Cabo and the lush corridor between the two, make up the destination of Los Cabos.

So when she was trying to decide what she wanted to do for her 40th birthday, her husband, Jeff, said, "Why don't we invite our friends and go to Los Cabos?"

Pilar was delighted with the idea. "The majority of our friends had never been there, and so I thought, 'That's perfect. The guys can play golf, and the girls can just relax.'"

The two-week extravaganza ended up including 12 other couples the first week and family during the second. For both groups, the trip was a success.

"I really didn't know what to expect," said the McNears' friend, Leash Yu. "I'm kind of bad about vacations – I don't do any research, so I didn't really expect anything. Then we got there, and the accommodations were just amazing."

Pilar and Jeff are members of Exclusive Resorts, and as such they have access to homes and villas in beautiful destinations across the world. In Los Cabos, they were able to get two houses, fully staffed with a kitchen crew and meticulous waitstaff.

(Exclusive Resorts membership fees start at \$160,000, with annual dues of just under \$1,000 per day on most plans, which range from 10 to 60 days. Comparable accommodations acquired independently would cost about \$5,000 per day, Pilar estimated.)

What surprised the first-timers was the climate. "Typically when you go to a coastal destination, it's like Galveston or the Caribbean, very humid," Leash said. "But this was like California weather – no humidity."

Cabo San Lucas is part of Baja California, where the inland Sea of Cortez meets the Pacific Ocean under the graceful curve of El Arco, a spectacular stone archway. Los Cabos has grown up around this arch in a leisurely yet luxurious man-

ner, making the area a more upscale destination than its Caribbean counterparts, Cancun and Cozumel. The prices are comparable to a vacation in Maui.

"Cabo doesn't have the typical young college crowd," Pilar said. "It is very laid back. They have a nightlife downtown, but it's different. Not the wild party scene you might find in Cancun, for example."

Los Cabos has done a lot to maintain its authenticity, so you know you're in Mexico. "You don't see masses of people, and you don't drive down the highway and find Burger Kings and McDonald's," Pilar said. "They do have those in town, but Cabo has still retained its flavor of Mexico. In a tourist location

such as Cancun, it unfortunately has become very Americanized. When you go to Cancun, everyone speaks English and they accept dollars – of course Cabo does, as well, but the Mexican essence hasn't been washed away."

During the day on their Cabo vacation, options included jet skiing at Playa Médano and snorkeling at Playa Santa Maria, sunbathing by the pool, and golfing at world-class courses like El Dorado and Cabo del Sol.

The evening was all about romance and excitement, with drinks at the over-the-top Esperanza Resort and, at the other extreme, Cabo Wabo, Sammy Hagar's famous rock 'n roll nightclub.

One unforgettable night was Pilar's birthday, and the group dined in. After dressing up for drinks at Esperanza, they returned to find the home decked out in candles, waitstaff offering hors

d'oeuvres in the pool area and a meal prepared by their private chef.

"The way these homes work, the doors to the living room and the dining room push open, and they completely disappear, so there's no wall between the house and the patio and pool," Pilar said. "The mood was just completely intoxicating."

On their last night, the group went for a private, sunset, dinner cruise that took them out to the Pacific side, past Lover's Beach and El Arco and back again.

Unlike the Yu family, Mona Howard had been to Cabo before, once on a Disney cruise with the kids and once before with Pilar and Jeff.

While Cabo is typically seen as an upscale destination for couples, it's fine for families as well, Mona said.

At the Cabo Dolphin Center, you can get up close with the playful sea creatures. Mona said her son, Austin, who was 7 at



**Pilar and Jeff McNear take in the views of the ocean off the cliffs of Esperanza while enjoying a celebratory toast before a birthday dinner.**

the time, went for a swim with the dolphins and had the time of his life.

Also on the agenda for the Howard family were dune-buggy riding in the desert and a day at Playa Médano. This beach, right alongside Cabo San Lucas, has vendors hawking everything from pickles on a stick to jewelry with your name on it. Travelers can rent jet skis, go parasailing or see sea-life from a glass-bottom boat. The boat goes to El Arco and Lover's Beach, which are a secluded contrast to Médano.

These public beaches, in addition to various private hotel



Left to right: Arty Howard, Mona Howard, Andy Keene, Maria Keene, Wendy Yu, Leash Yu, Chris Hanslik, Catherine Hanslik, Bobby Russo, Antonetta Russo, Kim Sisk, Kevin Sisk, Pilar McNear, Jeff McNear. This photo was taken after the chartered sunset cruise.

beaches, are generally safe for swimming. But it's important to note that much of the Cabo shoreline, particularly on the Pacific side, is not safe for swimming because of riptides and undertows.

While many Cabo restaurants are upscale, there are kid-friendly ones like Mi Casa, where canaries draw fortunes out of a box, puppet shows are staged, and waitresses dress in

colorful costumes.

Mexico's tourism industry has taken some hits in the past year, beginning with the recession and worsening with reports of drug-related violence. But most of the drug-related violence has occurred near the U.S. border and far from Los Cabos or any of Mexico's other major tourism destinations, from the beach resorts in the Yucatan and Acapulco to Puerto Vallarta and to the north of Vallarta on the pristine beaches of the Riviera Nayarit.

Pilar and Jeff's extravaganza was in June, and the swine-flu epidemic had hit the headlines two months earlier. "Everyone got a little worried," Pilar said. "Friends asked, 'Are you still going?' But I had no qualms, no fears. Because although it's still Mexico, Cabo is physically separate from the rest of Mexico, and the majority of the swine flu was in Mexico City.

"People had asked about kidnapping – but it's very, very laid back in Cabo. To my knowledge, that doesn't occur near the beach-resort areas. It's just something you don't hear of happening there, despite Cabo being a luxury destination."

After their latest experience, the McNears, the Yus and the Howards are more sold on Los Cabos than ever. All hope to return someday soon.

"It's a great place for those who are going to just relax and lay out by the pool, or for those who are going to play golf or go deep-sea fishing," Pilar said. "It's great for couples or for people who just want to go and have a good time and enjoy night life."

*Editor's Note: For a slide show from Cabo, visit [www.bit.ly/LosCabos](http://www.bit.ly/LosCabos). Has an article in Travel Buzz inspired one of your own trips? If so, please let us know and maybe we can share your story in Travel Buzz too.*

## The Buzz on Los Cabos

### Ready to book? Here's the inside Cabo scoop.

#### Flights

Continental offers a direct, 2 ½- to 3-hour flight to San Jose del Cabo, sometimes for just over \$500.

#### Hotels

You can do like Pilar and Jeff McNear and sign up for your own destination club at [www.exclusiveresorts.com](http://www.exclusiveresorts.com). Other five-star options include:

- Hilton Los Cabos Beach & Golf Resort: [www.hiltonloscabos.com](http://www.hiltonloscabos.com). Conveniently located on the Corridor between Cabo San Lucas and San Jose del Cabo, with one of the only swimmable beaches in Los Cabos and ranked in the Top 3 Best Golf Resorts by *Travel & Leisure Golf*.
- La Palmilla: [www.palmilla.com](http://www.palmilla.com). Follow the lead of John Travolta, who celebrated his 50th birthday with a star-studded, two-day fiesta here.
- Esperanza: [www.esperanzaresort.com](http://www.esperanzaresort.com). With an emphasis on exclusivity and privacy, this classic resort garnered No. 2 in Latin America last year in *Conde Nast Traveler's Readers Choice Awards*.

Lower-priced options include:

- Cabo Inn Hotel: [www.caboinnhotel.com](http://www.caboinnhotel.com). Highly recommend-

ed by Frommer's, it is a funky alternative with rooms starting at \$39 for a single and \$58 for a double.

- The Bungalows: [www.caboinnhotel.com](http://www.caboinnhotel.com). Frommer's calls it "one of the most special places to stay in Los Cabos." Rooms start at \$115 in high season, \$105 in low season.

#### Recreation

- Cabo Adventures can plan activities from a desert safari to swimming with the dolphins at its Cabo Dolphin Center. [www.cabo-adventures.com](http://www.cabo-adventures.com).
- Take a sunset cruise. Pilar and Jeff's favorite captain is Eduardo Padilla of [www.Rissalena.com](http://www.Rissalena.com).
- For water sports, go to Playa Médano to find outfitters for everything from kayaking and snorkeling to jet skis and catching a ride on a glass-bottom boat.

#### Restaurants

- Mi Casa has a lively atmosphere, good for kids, and authentic cuisine from the Yucatan and other regions. Av. Cabo San Lucas, Centro. [www.micasarestaurant.com](http://www.micasarestaurant.com).
- Edith's, [www.edithscabo.com](http://www.edithscabo.com), near Playa Médano on Paseo del Pescador, gets the McNears' top rating for ambience and its tequilas, all under the stars.
- Nick San, [www.nicksan.com](http://www.nicksan.com), is Fodor's choice for eclectic dining, with its creative fusion of Japanese and Mexican.