

chilli factor

The temperatures are scorching, the mood's upbeat and the food is hot... A visit to the stunning Los Cabos region in Baja may change the way you think about Mexican food.

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global kitchen.

As I landed at the airport in Los Cabos, Baja, on the extreme western peninsula of Mexico, the scorching 36°C sun beat down on the tarmac and blinding sunlight illuminated what appeared to be a relentlessly desolate canvas of desert. I began to experience mild panic at my decision to spend 30 days in the land of the iguana. Apart from the climate and my non-existent Spanish, I was also worried about what to expect in terms of local cuisine.

Back home in Australia, Mexican wasn't my idea of great dining: taco shells filled with mince and sludgy beans never seemed particularly exciting, so I'd never really bothered. Savvy travellers had assured me, however, that food in Mexico was many culinary notches removed from

the Tex-Mex fare typically served up in Australian restaurants, so, praying they were right, I prepared to explore new culinary frontiers...

The two resort towns of Cabo San Lucas and San Jose del Cabo (also known as Los Cabos – the Capes) are at the southernmost tip of Baja. Popular with American tourists thanks to their proximity to California, both boast stunning beaches, ideal for diving, snorkelling, whale-watching and generally frolicking under the endlessly gleaming Mexican sun.

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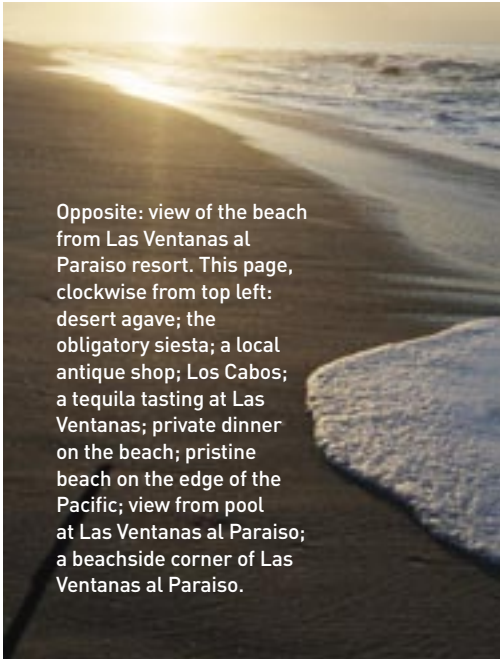
We opted to make our base a one-hour drive north of these towns, preferring something quieter, with Pacific beaches to be enjoyed in solitary splendour. After settling in, we headed to the most popular cafe in the nearest town, Todos Santos, for our first taste of the local *cocina*.

Surrounded by Frida Kahlo posters, I ordered *pescado*: the catch of the day was mahi mahi sprinkled with cayenne pepper, ground turmeric and nutmeg, bathed in coconut milk and baked in a banana leaf. It was served with a tomato and onion relish and a pat of yellow rice, and we drank a crisp Chilean wine with it. “*Muy delicioso*” was the first Spanish phrase I mastered, and one I was to repeat countless times over the ensuing weeks.

As the days unfolded, I became more adventurous and broadened my culinary

and conversational repertoire. “*Huevos rancheros por favor*” was my breakfast refrain, as I waited for scrambled eggs to arrive on a warm, plump tortilla drenched in a tangy *salsa rojo* of tomato and mild chilli. The ubiquitous refried beans adorned my plate, too – they didn't look especially appetising, but were tasty and filling. A pleasant change from *fruta fresca* and *jugo de naranja* (fresh fruit and orange juice), which was my more usual fare.





Opposite: view of the beach from Las Ventanas al Paraiso resort. This page, clockwise from top left: desert agave; the obligatory siesta; a local antique shop; Los Cabos; a tequila tasting at Las Ventanas; private dinner on the beach; pristine beach on the edge of the Pacific; view from pool at Las Ventanas al Paraiso; a beachside corner of Las Ventanas al Paraiso.

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Despite my initial misgivings, I soon realised that I'd actually become a fan of tortillas and refried beans. In Mexico, fresh tortillas (doughy corn pancakes) accompany most meals in the same way that bread typically accompanies ours. Refried beans look, as my partner accurately describes it, like "yuck" and are an acquired taste, I guess, but I happily wolfed mine down at most meals.

Meanwhile, our routine (eat, sleep, read, doze and relax) was gearing up to be more lively than we imagined: by sheer coincidence, the sleepy outpost we inhabited north of Los Cabos was staging a five-day celebration during our stay; roller coasters, market vendors and mariachi bands were pulling into town with a vengeance. For five consecutive

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nights, we were treated to a smorgasbord of entertainment after dinner in the balmy evening air of the town square.

As temperatures cooled at sunset, fairy lights began to sparkle and the citizenry emerged to kick up their heels. Enrique Iglesias, Shakira and J. Lo wannabes warbled into microphones, big bands belted out raunchy Latina vibes and everyone – mamas, papas and spritely grandparents included – danced the salsa under canopies of red, green and white, Mexico's national colours.

While most of the locals ate from the market stalls crowded around the town square for the festival – tortillas typically stuffed with roasted meat or chicken, vegetables and salsa – we usually sloped off to our favourite eatery, Los Adobes de Todos Santos, a hip, Santa Fe-inspired outdoor restaurant with jazzy Cuban music in the background. One night I finally decided to take the plunge and order *mole*, one of the national dishes that defines Mexican cuisine.

The first mole is said to have come out of the city of Puebla, to the south-east of Mexico City, where a Dominican nun, Sor Andrea de la Asuncion, discovered the magical, indescribable flavour that chocolate gave to her *guiso* (stew) of

pureed roasted chilli, cloves, cinnamon, capsicum, coriander, sesame seeds and turkey broth. Today, every region – and most Mexican families – has its own variation of mole, with some cooks using very simple, and others very complex, combinations of ingredients to make a sauce served with turkey, chicken or even fish. What makes the mole so important to the Mexican identity is its reliance on the fusion of native Indian and Spanish ingredients. It's a truly *mestizo* (mixed) dish, and has been embraced by patriotic Mexican foodies for centuries.

I found the mole sauce surprisingly light, and a welcome addition to what was otherwise a fairly uninteresting piece of chicken. A few nights later, I ordered a similar dish in Cancun. This time it was

decorated with crunchy almond flakes, giving the dish even more texture.

We continued to tick regional specialties off the local menus: *chiles en nogada* turned out to be a big green capsicum stuffed with roasted meat and smothered in a creamy walnut sauce and sweet chillies, served with the ubiquitous tortillas and salsa.

On another occasion, *sopa de lima*, a refreshing broth of fine chicken and vegetable pieces, and limes, seemed the perfect way to end a hot day of sightseeing and shopping. Typically, we accompanied these great Mexican dishes with a drop of Chilean wine – terrific matches with those flavours at a fraction of the cost of Californian wines. The Santa Rita, Errazuriz and Caliterra labels have been regularly commended by wine buffs – and they were spot-on.

The last days of our holiday were bittersweet, as we savoured our salsa and chilli-infused *pibil* (barbecued) dinners for the last time, swam in the perfect waters and sipped margaritas as we strolled barefoot along the beach. A mosaic of vibrant colour, music and flavours, Mexico had not disappointed. And when the locals murmured "*Vuelva usted pronto*" (come back soon), we got the feeling they really meant it. **Josephine Brouard**



At the southern tip of Mexico's 1000-kilometre long Baja Peninsula, the resort of Las Ventanas al Paraiso ('windows to paradise') in Los Cabos is flanked on one side by the Sea of Cortez and on the other by a starkly beautiful desert landscape. Since opening in 1997, it has fast become a luxury destination, with its stunning views, adobe-walled, marble-floored suites, and expansive grounds that include an infinity-edge pool overlooking the ocean.

Its restaurants, too, are good places to sample modern Mexican fare. Executive chef Michel Gehrig sources produce from local markets and organic farms where regional as well as more exotic ingredients are produced. He says, "I rely on organic fisheries as well as local fishermen who know just where to find the best." The Ceviche Bar serves dishes such as the spicy prawn ceviche (see next page), but my favourite among the resort's dining options is the Sea Grill, where you can sip an over-sized margarita and eat grilled seafood, and ice creams flavoured with one of the bar's many tequilas, by the water's edge.

*Valli Little
Las Ventanas al Paraiso, Los Cabos, Mexico, +52 624 144 0300, www.lasventanas.com.*



Chilled avocado
& coconut soup



Yucatán-style fish
in banana leaves

chilled avocado & coconut soup

Serves 6

- 3 tsp olive oil
- 1 eschalot, finely chopped
- Flesh of 2 ripe avocados
- 1/2 cup firmly packed mint leaves
- 3/4 cup firmly packed coriander leaves
- 1/4 cup (60ml) lime juice
- 3 cups (750ml) chilled chicken stock or water
- 400ml can coconut milk

Chipotle oil

- 100ml olive oil
- 1 chipotle chilli in adobo sauce*, drained,
pounded to a paste in a mortar and pestle

Heat oil in a frypan over medium heat and cook eschalot for 3-4 minutes until softened but not coloured. Cool, then blend with avocado, herbs and lime juice in a blender until smooth. Gradually add stock or water (add more liquid to adjust consistency to taste) and season with sea salt and pepper. If desired, pass through a fine sieve for extra smoothness. Chill until ready to serve.

For the chipotle oil, combine ingredients in a small pan and stir over low heat until warmed and fragrant. Cool.

Serve soup in chilled bowls, drizzled with coconut milk and a few drops of chipotle oil. Serve with tortilla chips, if desired.

* See Tastes of Mexico over page.

yucatán-style fish in banana leaves

Serves 4

For extra sauce to serve, bring some of the sauce to the boil with a little fish stock.

- 2 banana leaves
- 4 x 200g skinless blue-eye fillets
- 2 eschalots, thinly sliced into rings
- 1/2 cup coriander leaves
- 4 long green chillies
- Lime wedges, to serve

Yucatán sauce

- 1 cup (250ml) pineapple juice
- 1/2 cup (125ml) orange juice
- 100g achiote paste*, or to taste
- 1 small eschalot, finely chopped
- 2 tsp white wine vinegar

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tastes of mexico

If you want to go beyond burritos, look out for these authentic ingredients.

Achiote paste

Also known as annatto seed paste, this seasoning has a mild, peppery flavour and is rubbed onto meat, particularly chicken, before cooking. It's also used as a natural food colouring and is available from gourmet food shops.

Black beans

These dried beans have a black skin, cream-coloured flesh and a sweet flavour – great in salsas and stews. Also known as turtle beans, they're available from health food shops.

Chipotle chillies in adobo sauce

Chipotle chillies are actually dried, smoked jalapeño chillies. They're used in stews and sauces to impart a lovely smoky flavour. Adobo sauce is a sharp, dark-red sauce made from ground chillies, herbs and vinegar, and used as a marinade and serving sauce. Chipotle chillies in adobo sauce are available (together and separately) from gourmet food shops.

Dried guajillo chilli

This long, narrow chilli with a smooth, shiny skin can be quite hot. Due to its tough skin, it often takes longer to soften in water. Available from specialty spice shops and gourmet food shops.

Tequila

Tequila is a clear or straw-coloured spirit made from the fermented and distilled sap of the agave plant. Nowadays, there are hundreds of different varieties. Tequila is the base for the classic margarita cocktail, and is available from bottle shops.

Tortillas

These soft, pancake-like Mexican flatbreads, made with corn or wheat, are eaten at breakfast with eggs, as wraps and to scoop up stews, grilled meats and vegetables. Heat in the oven or toast on a barbecue or chargrill to serve. Available from supermarkets.

Amira Georgy

Preheat the oven to 200°C and line a baking tray with baking paper.

For the sauce, simmer juices in a small saucepan over medium heat for 10 minutes or until reduced to $\frac{3}{4}$ cup (185ml). Cool, then process until smooth with the remaining ingredients and 1 teaspoon of salt.

Cut banana leaves (or a double layer of baking paper) into 25cm squares, large enough to wrap each fillet.

Season fish and rub with a quarter of the Yucatán sauce. Place a fillet in the centre of each square, then top with some eschalot, a few coriander leaves and a chilli. Drizzle with remaining sauce, then fold in leaves to enclose fish and seal with toothpicks. Place parcels on the baking tray and cook in the oven for 15 minutes. Serve fish immediately with remaining coriander and lime wedges.

* For achiote paste, see Tastes of Mexico, left. Banana leaves are from Asian food shops and selected greengrocers.

snapper tacos with rancho sauce

Makes 8

Remove chilli seeds for a milder sauce and salsa. Start this recipe a day ahead.

8 corn tortillas*

8 baby snapper fillets with skin (90g each)

Olive oil, to brush

Lime wedges, to serve

Rancho sauce

1kg roma tomatoes, halved lengthways

1 white onion, quartered

1 garlic clove, halved

Olive oil, to brush

1 dried guajillo chilli*, soaked in boiling water for 30 minutes, drained

1 canned chipotle chilli in adobo sauce*, drained

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup roughly chopped coriander leaves

Black-bean salsa

180g dried black beans*, soaked in cold water overnight

3 tsp olive oil

1 eschalot, finely chopped

30g bacon (about $\frac{1}{2}$ rasher), finely chopped

1 canned or fresh green serrano chilli (or other small green chilli), finely chopped

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup roughly chopped coriander leaves

For the rancho sauce, preheat the oven to 200°C and line a baking tray with baking paper. Place the tomatoes, onion and garlic on the tray and brush with a little olive oil. Roast for 20-25 minutes or until tomatoes caramelise slightly but have not collapsed. (Cover the onion and garlic with a small piece of foil if they're starting to get too brown). In a food processor, process the chillies with the garlic and 2 roasted tomato halves until you have a paste. Using a large knife, roughly chop the remaining roasted tomato and onion mixture. Place in a bowl with the chilli paste and season to taste with sea salt and pepper. Stir in coriander and refrigerate until needed.

For the black-bean salsa, place the beans in a large saucepan and generously cover with cold water, bring to a simmer and cook for $1\frac{1}{4}$ hours or until softened, topping up water when necessary. Meanwhile, heat the oil in a frypan and cook the eschalot and bacon over medium heat for 3-4 minutes until the eschalot is soft. Drain the beans and return to same saucepan, add the bacon mixture, chilli and coriander, then season with sea salt and pepper.

Preheat the oven to 180°C. Wrap tortillas in foil and warm in the oven for 3-5 minutes.

Meanwhile, brush the snapper with a little olive oil and season with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper. Cook the snapper, skin-side down, in a heated chargrill pan for 2 minutes, then turn and cook for a further minute or until cooked through.

Divide the tortillas among serving plates and top with the snapper, rancho sauce, black-bean salsa and a squeeze of lime juice before folding the tacos.

* See Tastes of Mexico, left.

prawn ceviche

Serves 4-6 as an entree

For a milder, sweeter flavour, remove chilli seeds and add 1-2 tablespoons of tomato sauce (ketchup).

500g green prawns, peeled, deveined, halved lengthways

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup (125ml) lime juice (from about 4 limes)

3 vine-ripened tomatoes, peeled, seeded, finely diced

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup finely chopped coriander leaves

2 canned chipotle chillies in adobo sauce*
 (or to taste), drained, finely chopped
 1 small eschalot, finely chopped
 ¼ cup (60ml) orange juice
 2 avocados, flesh finely diced
 Corn tortillas*, cut into wedges, toasted,
 to serve

Place the prawns and lime juice in a bowl, then toss to coat the prawns. Cover and refrigerate for 3 hours.

Drain the prawns, discarding lime juice, and place in a bowl with the tomatoes, coriander, chillies, eschalot and orange juice, then season with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper. Stir until combined, then gently stir in the diced avocado.

Serve the prawn ceviche immediately with corn tortillas.

* See Tastes of Mexico, left.

mascarpone tequila ice cream

Makes about 1.5L (Serves 4)

2 cups (500ml) milk
 2 cups (500ml) thin cream
 ⅓ cup (80ml) tequila*
 500g caster sugar
 4 eggs
 4 egg yolks
 250g mascarpone

Bring milk, cream and tequila to the boil in a pan over medium-high heat. Remove from heat, cool for 10 minutes.

Using electric beaters, whisk sugar, eggs and egg yolks in a bowl until thick and creamy. Gradually add milk mixture to egg mixture and whisk continuously until well combined. Pour into a saucepan and stir over low heat (do not boil) until thick enough to coat the back of a wooden spoon. Strain custard mixture through a fine sieve and refrigerate until chilled.

Whisk mascarpone into chilled mixture, then pour into a shallow container and freeze until frozen at the edges. Remove from freezer and beat using electric beaters. Pour back into container and refreeze. Repeat 2 or 3 times. (Or use an ice-cream machine following manufacturer's directions.)

Serve ice cream with pistachio and almond biscotti, if desired.

* See Tastes of Mexico, left. **d.**



Mascarpone tequila ice cream



Snapper tacos with ranchero sauce



Prawn ceviche