

Peaceful oasis

La Paz has escaped the rush to cash in on tourists, and that's part of its charm

By Brian J. Cantwell, McClatchy News Service November 19, 2011

As traffic stalled along the palm-lined street, we peered from our taxi and spied the cause.

A little parade came our way: boys in crimson church robes, young women balancing flower baskets on their heads, and a flatbed truck carrying a raucous band. Crackling fireworks zipped every which way.

A local festival? We asked the cabdriver. He shrugged. No idea.

Maybe a wedding? Perhaps a girl's 15th birthday - they call it Fiesta de Quinceanera. Who knew? It was just one of many little street celebrations my daughter and I observed in a spring visit here.

That's La Paz, said 30-year-old Chabelo Castillo, a local dive guide. "Any excuse, any excuse, for a party! 'Whose birthday is it today?' Hey, PAR-tee!"

La Paz, a city of 220,000, about a two-hour drive north of Cabo San Lucas, isn't a major tourist centre (though it has hopes, having recently launched its first-ever U.S. ad campaign). The state capital of Baja California Sur - the southern half of this desert peninsula - it has few big hotels, with no American names such as Marriott or Hilton.

Unlike Cabo, most partying in the street is done by locals, not by drunken gringos on college break.

For visitors looking for authentic Mexico, that's a big part of the charm. While the Spanish explorer Cortez landed here in 1535, author John Steinbeck hung out in the 1940s and Jacques Cousteau called local waters "the world's aquarium" in the 1960s, these days La Paz is mostly a normal, mid-size Mexican city, unsullied by drug violence and untrammled by tourists.

Costs are much lower than touristy Cabo, prompting CNN Money to call La Paz one of the best places for Americans to retire.

A holiday here is kind of the Mexican equivalent of vacationing in Spokane, Washington - which also made that retirement list. La Paz has what Spokane doesn't: world-class diving, saltwater fishing and kayaking, found nearby on the Sea of Cortez.

Just a few miles north of the Tropic of Cancer, La Paz has a pleasant winter climate, enjoyed by many as they stroll the city's sea-wall promenade, or malecon.

"I love just walking or biking the malecon," we heard from George Hastings, a Seattle friend who had journeyed here with his wife, Celeste Bennett, on their sailboat.

"The people here are happy!"

That showed in the evenings when the temperature cooled and crowds flocked to the malecon, a wide swath of red tile lined with wrought-iron benches and liberally dotted with sculptures of whales, manta rays, mermaids and other marine subjects.

Old couples walked past arm in arm. Groups of self-conscious teens shuffled like herd animals.

Twenty-somethings zoomed by on skates and bicycles while young marrieds pushed strollers. On the adjacent street, a stream of cars poked along, including a limo with a bride and groom standing to wave through the sunroof.

Down the line, a pink-streamered sedan full of giggling young women in fancy dresses blared its horn nonstop. Another Quinceanera? A bachelorette party? Who knew?

We were the only turistas in sight, and it all felt happy.

In 1995, my family had come to La Paz from the U.S. Pacific Northwest on our sailboat. I noticed a few changes 16 years later:

- City boosters have extended the malecon miles beyond downtown, connecting with a beach park and making for a great bay-front cycling path. (Bike rentals are available downtown.)

- New condos and a golf course have sprouted on El Mogote, a formerly empty peninsula in the bay, and the fancy CostaBaja resort has sprung up on the bay's outer rim with a marina full of superyachts.

- America has made incursions: Applebee's and Burger King along the malecon, a downtown Sears, plus Office Depot and Walmart on the city's edge.

But much is unchanged, and the local character remains strong.

I could still find my way around downtown's narrow back streets, to the Mercado Madero, a public market where fresh shrimp mounded high at a seafood stand and steaks dripped at a butcher's counter, just down the aisle from a shop with neonhued party dresses (apparently in high demand in La Paz).

Across the way, we stopped at our old favourite bakery, Panificadora Lilia, for pina empanadas - pineapple turnovers - for 4 pesos - about 35 cents apiece.

On Via Revolucion, a family-run stand on the sidewalk still sold tasty fish tacos for the equivalent of 45 cents. And if you need shoes, La Paz seems to have enough shoe stores to take care of every foot in Mexico.

We happened on big doings at the downtown primary school. Blockades stopped traffic, kids in school uniforms ran up and down sidewalks, and the local police band stood in formation, ready to play.

It was in observance of Benito Juarez's birthday, a national holiday for the 19th-century Mexican leader famous for separating church from state. And another chance to celebrate!

That evening, in that slow taxi, we ventured with our sailing friends to a free concert.

A Mexican soprano, Loyda Vazquez, was singing traditional songs at the La Paz cultural centre, a restored governor's mansion with stone towers and massive, carved wooden doors.

Free concerts are a regular thing, our friends told us - another part of the La Paz party scene.

It was a lovely performance, diminished only slightly by the beat of music from passing cars and nearby bars, heard through the building's open doors. La Paz - the name means "the peace" - doesn't do "quiet" very well.

IF YOU GO:

- Entry requirements: Passport plus tourist card, also called Multiple Migratory Form for Foreigners. This document is provided by airlines or by immigration authorities at the country's points of entry.

- Getting there: Horizon Airlines (part of Alaska Airlines) has direct flights on midsize turboprop planes into La Paz from Los Angeles. See alaskaair.com.

Combine La Paz with visits to Cabo San Lucas and Todos Santos using inexpensive connections by modern buses operated by Aguila bus lines and you can take advantage of cheaper airfares into Los Cabos, the big airport serving Cabo tourist centres. The La Paz bus station is off the malecon (Paseo Alvaro Obregon) at the corner of Cinco de Mayo. Buses depart hourly every day.

Or combine a La Paz visit with Mazatlan, on mainland Mexico. A passenger ferry connects the two cities; about \$75 US one way. www.bajafferries.com.

- Currency: Mexican Peso. Recent exchange rates: \$1 Cdn = 13.3908 MXN 1 MXN = \$0.07467 Cdn

- Traveller's tip: Mexico's nationwide war on drug cartels is evident in southern Baja, even though drug violence is virtually unknown there. Last spring, "Policia Preventiva" squads, armed

like soldiers, cruised the La Paz waterfront in open trucks, and police randomly flagged down vehicles for inspection even along the peaceful malecon.

- More information:

- The Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs has compiled travellers' advisories for countries around the world. For details, go to voyage.gc.ca/countries_pays/menu-eng.asp

STAYING IN LA PAZ

- Lodging: Rates start at \$75 US at La Casa Mexicana, a restored 1940s Spanish art-deco villa with five guest rooms, some with shared bath. Our room with a large balcony overlooking the bay, a short block away, was \$85 US (including tax and breakfast at a nearby restaurant). www.casamex.com.

A popular option for kayakers and budget travelers is La Posada Luna Sol, www.posadalunasol.com, on a back street three blocks from the malecon. Rooms with private bath start at \$65 US, with communal kitchen. It is connected with an outfitter, Sea & Adventures, so arranging saltwater outings is easy; see www.kayakbaja.com.

Centrally located on the malecon is the full-service, 110-room Hotel Perla, which claims to have been the first hotel in La Paz (circa 1940). Rates start around \$75 US; www.hotelperlabaja.com.

You'll miss easy access to strolling the waterfront, but if you want five-star amenities a short drive from La Paz, there's CostaBaja Resort & Spa, www.costabajaresort.com, with rates in the range of \$200 US a night.

- Restaurants: La Costa is a favourite of locals as well as visiting boaters, at the end of Calle 5 de Febrero, near Marina La Paz. A memorable dinner for two of deep-fried snapper (the whole fish!) and the local chocolate clams was \$16 US.

- Special event: La Paz Carnaval is the city's biggest annual festival. Legends, Myths and Famous Characters is the 2012 theme, with parades, costumes and performers. Feb. 16-21.

<http://www.vivalapaz.net/english/home.aspx> or <http://www.vivalapaz.com/#>

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