

f Baja California were a person it would be Sienna Miller—boho-gone-smart, and definitely in vogue. Baja, where 50 percent of the guests at the swish resort of **LAS VENTANAS** arrive by private jet from New York and Los Angeles, is a new Riviera. Baja is eco-friendly—you can stroke gray whales in their calving lagoons, to which they migrate annually. Baja is flip-flop funky—most of the streets in the old town of **TODOS SANTOS** are still sand-covered and lined with artisans' shops. There you will find the **HOTEL CALIFORNIA**, the back of its tequila bar made of beaten silver.

This thin finger of Mexico has long been the Hemingway standard for marlin fishing—some of the best in the world—with the biggest competition worth \$2 million in prize money. Once, the scene was filled with big rough-tough men with stubble. But macho now embraces both the vulgar (a bar in **CABO SAN LUCAS** called **THE SINGING MARLIN**—avoid) and the exquisite (Brad Pitt, who frequented Las Ventanas while filming *Troy*). It is part of the surreal that is Baja that *Troy's* set for mythic ancient Greece was built there, on the west beach as you drive up to Todos Santos, as was the giant water tank where James Cameron filmed his Oscar winner, *Titanic*, further north. Those of less cinematic instincts might be fascinated with the only Tom Fazio-designed golf course outside of the United States.

Baja is where it is all happening. One & Only's **PALMILLA** has joined Las Ventanas as a whizbang resort. It even has a **CHARLIE TROTTER** restaurant. Shimmering butlers circle its cavernous rooms at cocktail hour with freshly shaken, giant-size margaritas. There are iPods by the pool. I stayed there and wanted to stay forever; everything in my suite was so beautiful. The guest rooms—all with views of the Sea of Cortez—are comfortable, lush, and extravagant. The objects within are intriguing, unique pieces from Guadalajara. I wanted to take everything home, including José, my personal butler. I had dinner at **AGUA** with hotelier Sol Kerzner and lawyer Bob Shapiro, and Bob said, "Isn't this marvelous? You could be anywhere." By which he didn't mean it was cookie-cutter or anonymously international. He meant Mexico has come of age, that Baja is up there with Mauritius, the South of France, smart Thailand, and New Zealand. Great hotels, fabulous food—you won't get sick. The **ESPERANZA** resort is the oceanside sister of the **AUBERGE DU SOLEIL** hotel in Napa Valley: arty, relaxed, very linen.

Wine? Centuries ago, Mexico had the most distinguished wines in the Americas, quashed by conquistadors. Now Napa names are moving in. Organic farms? Fabulous markets in Todos Santos and **MIREFLORES**.

So you can do resort life, but also local life. **CASA NATALIA** in San José del Cabo is a doll of a boutique hotel—lovely just to have dinner at, too. San José del Cabo is as charming as Cabo San Lucas is crass. The restaurants are joyously cool. You can eat seafood at **LA PANGA ANTIGUA**, taste pastries at the **FRENCH RIVIERA RESTAURANT AND BAKERY**, and wake up in the morning to pelicans flying by and skimming over the sea. As John Steinbeck wrote of Baja in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, in 1951: "The very air here is miraculous, and outlines of reality change with the moment." □

WHERE TO STAY Las Ventanas (lasventanas.com); Hotel California (hotelcaliforniabaja.com); One & Only's Palmilla (palmillaresort.com); Esperanza (esperanzaresort.com); Casa Natalia (casanatalia.com).

WHERE TO EAT Agua, at One & Only's Palmilla; La Panga Antigua (lapanga.com); French Riviera Restaurant and Bakery (frenchrivieraloscabos.com). For more details, see page 24.



CALIFORNIA DREAMING
 (1) Entrance to Las Ventanas. (2) Room service at One & Only's Palmilla. (3) On the beach at the Esperanza resort. (4) Poolside at the Casa Natalia Hotel & Spa. (5) Hotel California's sleek take on laid-back chic. (6) Fine toiletries at Las Ventanas.

