

Central Baja



For many a Baja traveler, the *real* Baja begins south of El Rosario, when the Transpeninsular snakes into the Desierto Central (Central Desert) with its wild landscapes of giant boulders, towering *cardón* cacti and bizarre *cirio* trees. This is Baja's most sparsely populated region, where dirt roads stray from the highway traversing spectacular, wildly varying desert landscapes only to arrive at desolate beaches and forgotten bays. They lead across empty plains to the peninsula's most important gray whale calving grounds at Laguna San Ignacio, Laguna Ojo de Liebre and Bahía Magdalena. And they lead over rugged mountains to historic villages, ghost towns and exquisitely preserved missions that plunge you into centuries past. Even if you don't stray from the Transpeninsular, you'll pass through historic time machines such as tiny San Ignacio, the former French mining town of Santa Rosalía and Loreto, the first capital of the Californias.

Except for the vicinity of Loreto, most of central Baja is unaffected by the tourism and real-estate development present elsewhere on the peninsula. The people you'll encounter – hotel owners, local tour operators, boat owners who take you out in their *pangas* (outboard skiffs) to fish, guides who lead you on muleback to see cave paintings in the Sierra San Francisco – are exceedingly friendly and, when you get them talking, show a real connection to the region and its past. There's hardly anything *not* worth exploring in central Baja – and you'll often do it alone.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Wander the empty beaches and camp beneath the stars at **Bahía San Luis Gonzaga** (p148), one of Baja's most spectacular bays
- Get within touching distance of majestic California gray whales as they frolic with their calves at **Laguna Ojo de Liebre** (p157), **Laguna San Ignacio** (p166) and **Bahía Magdalena** (p184)
- Meander by muleback into the **Sierra de San Francisco** (p164) and gape in awe at the pre-Hispanic rock art
- Put your car, and mind, to the test driving out to the remote beaches and bays of **Península Vizcaíno** (p160)
- Journey into the rugged Sierra de La Giganta and visit the isolated mission oases of **Comondú** (p176)



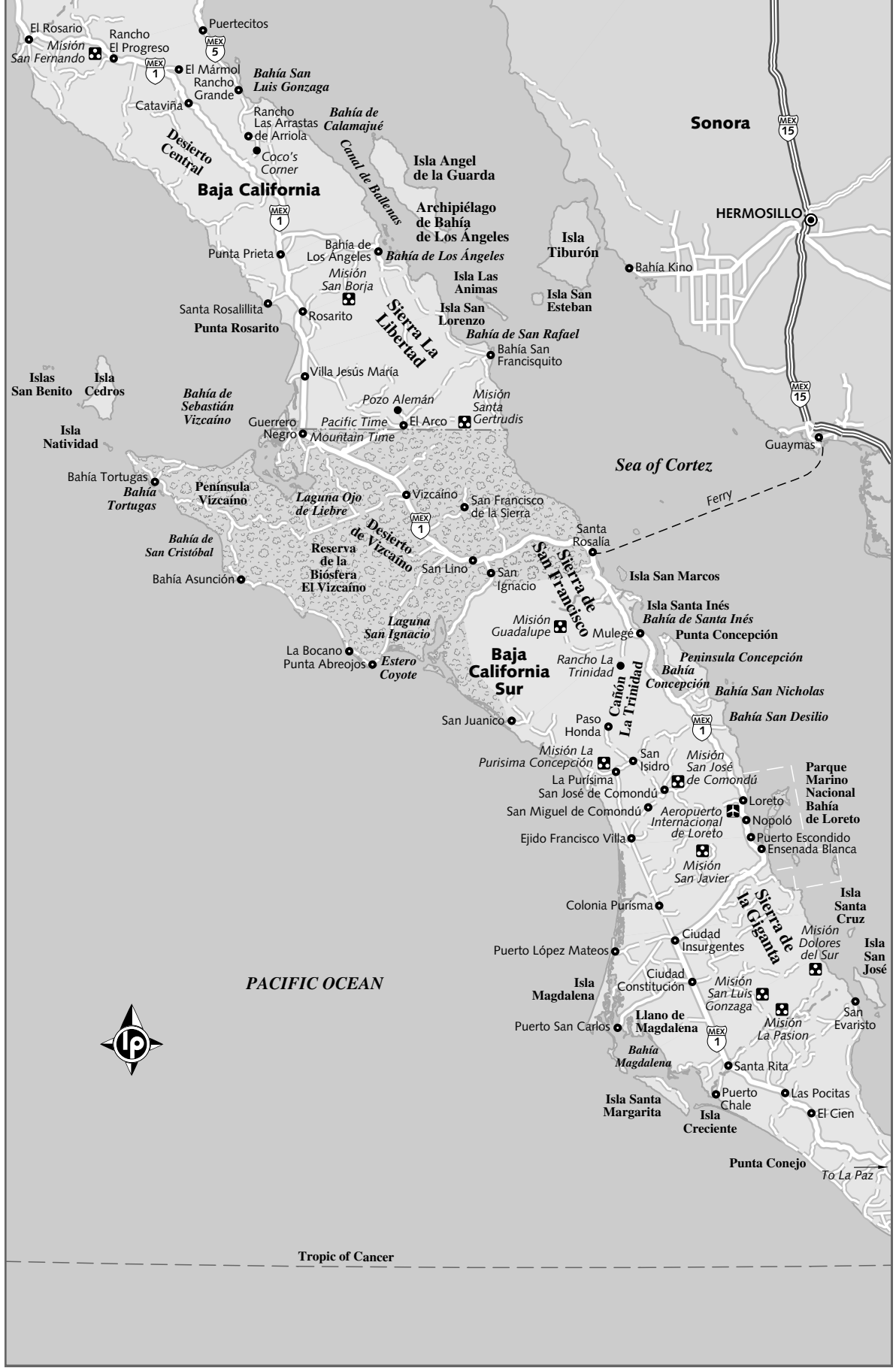
■ MULEGÉ JANUARY AVERAGE HIGH: 80°F/27°C

■ WATER TEMP OFF LORETO: 62-83°F/17-28°C

CENTRAL BAJA

0 100 km
0 60 miles

CENTRAL BAJA



CIRIOS: CURIOS OF THE DESERT

Traveling south from El Rosario, one finally gets a glimpse of that strangest of all Baja plants – the *cirio*. Its English name, boojum, was bestowed upon it in the early 1920s by Arizona ecologist Godfrey Sykes, who took the word from the mythical creature in Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark*. In his wonderful book, *The Forgotten Peninsula*, botanist Joseph Wood Krutch deems the boojum the 'little known freak in the vegetable world' and claims it was the reason he began his forays into Baja California.

In Krutch's days of exploring the peninsula, finding boojums was no easy task. Aside from a small patch in the mainland Mexican state of Sonora, *cirios* exist nowhere else in the world. Even in Baja, they are confined to the relatively small area just south of El Rosario and immediately north of San Ignacio.

The tallest *cirio* trees reach heights up to 20m (60ft), tapering from a base of only about 50cm (19in). They often draw comparisons to inverted carrots or turnips, but their Spanish word, *cirio* (church candle), makes for a closer likeness, as their predominant feature is their long, narrow, tapering body. Some trees have one or more armlike branches that extend willy-nilly from near the top of the tree. Occasionally the entire tree bends over to form a giant arch, a sort of fantastic doorway into the world of the desert.

Cirios are covered with short, thin, spinelike branches (as if someone jabbed a bunch of pencils into them), which are covered with tiny deciduous leaves. During summer and fall, yellow flowers bloom from the top of the tree. As astounding as their appearance is how slowly they grow: less than 2in per year. So a 12m (40ft) tree – and you'll see plenty nearing this height as you wind your way south – is more than 240 years old!

In some areas, *cirios* grow in greater concentration, and it's well worth pulling off to the side of the road and wandering into the odd desert landscape they create, if only because it's unique to this pinpoint-of-a-place on the planet. You might even find the experience as Krutch did upon his foray into a *cirio* forest: 'almost hallucinatory – rather like some surrealist dream.'

SOUTH OF EL ROSARIO

Between El Rosario and Guerrero Negro, the peninsula is practically uninhabited. Except for the Transpeninsular and the paved offshoots to Bahía de Los Ángeles and Santa Rosalillita, the going is rough but scenic and exciting. Towns are tiny and few and far between, and residents are always quick with advice on how to survive the nasty roads.

MISIÓN SAN FERNANDO

About 56km (35 miles) southeast of El Rosario, just before the roadside settlement of Rancho El Progreso, a dirt road at Km 121 heads west to these **mission ruins**. The famed Franciscan Padre Junípero Serra founded the mission in 1769, but the Dominicans assumed control four years later when Serra decided to concentrate his efforts in Alta California (present day California). A few years later, epidemics nearly obliterated the native population, and the mission closed in 1818.

Some of the mission church's adobe walls are still standing, but of greater interest are the

petroglyphs on a conspicuous granite outcrop a few hundred yards down the *arroyo* (dry river bed). They date from about AD 1000 to 1500. Unfortunately, vandals have damaged some paintings and others have weathered poorly, but together with the mission ruins they make the trip worthwhile.

CATAVIÑA

 646

Set within a dramatic landscape of massive granite boulders, *cardón* cacti and *cirio* trees, the isolated oasis of Cataviña is a special spot for desert lovers. At night, the stars are extraordinary. Two hotels, a couple of campgrounds, an out-of-service Pemex and a few other businesses make up the settlement, but the real reason to stop is to explore one of Baja's most unique and fascinating desert ecosystems. Spend a couple of days hiking among the cacti, climbing boulders and searching for cave paintings and you'll come to love the place too.

Until the Pemex is operating, men selling barrel gas along the highway is the only way to fill up the tank; the next Pemex station on

the Transpeninsular is at Villa Jesús María, 198km (123 miles) south.

South of Cataviña, at Km 211, fix your sights on the boulder field of El Pedregoso, a giant pile of granite boulders that seems to have simply fallen from the sky.

Sights & Activities

A minor but interesting series of Cochimí **cave paintings** lie just north of town. They're a little tricky to find, but hiking around the boulders looking for them is fun. The entrance to the site is almost exactly at Km 176, a couple of kilometers north of Cataviña proper. If you're driving south, the site is to your left. You'll see a small access road and some abandoned administration huts just below the highway (there may be someone there collecting donations). Pull off the highway and spot the white sign on the boulder-strewn hill just across the *arroyo*, before walking down into the *arroyo*. Once you spot the sign, which marks the site, you'll know where to hike to; the sign is not visible from down below.

Just north of the cave paintings, between Km 175 and 176, the **Museo El Palmerito** (admission by donation; ☎ 9am-4pm) is a small but interesting museum housed in a geodesic dome. Exhibits tell the story of the Transpeninsular's history, and the area's natural and human history. It's a quickie, but it's a good way to gain a brief understanding of where you are. The museum is inside the **Parque Natural Palmerito** (admission by donation; ☎ 9am-4pm), a privately operated 2000-hectare park with hiking trails and camping. The area is home to diverse plant and animal life, including three species of palm trees, grasses and mesquite trees. If you're at all interested in desert ecology, this is a must.

The proprietors of Rancho Santa Inés can arrange excursions to the isolated ruins of **Misión Santa María**, which lie 27km (17 miles) east of the highway by a road difficult even for 4WD vehicles – the trip takes about three days out and back.

Sleeping & Eating

Rancho Santa Inés (campsites US\$5, dm US\$3.50) This fourth-generation ranch (it's been here well over 100 years) sits at the end of a paved road 1km (half-a-mile) south of Cataviña. The camping is good if you score one of the trees for shade, otherwise you'll cook in the sun. There are hot showers and toilets. Santa Inés also has spotless dormitory accommodations.

A restaurant (mains US\$4 to US\$6) provides cold beer and good breakfasts.

Parque Natural Palmerito (Transpeninsular Km 175.5; per vehicle US\$5) The most scenic campground in Cataviña is only semi-established, but you can usually score some shade beside boulders or trees. There are no services, but the location among the desert scenery is superb, especially if you plan to do any hiking. Also see left.

Cabañas Linda (r US\$30) Just north of Hotel La Pinta, Cabañas Linda is the pink building cooking in the sun on the eastern side of the highway. Rooms are basic and surprisingly expensive, considering what's on offer.

Hotel La Pinta (☎ 176-2601, in the USA 800-800-9632; www.lapintahotels.com; r US\$84) Fatigued visitors with a bigger budget can stay at La Pinta, which offers excellent rooms, an attractive cacti garden, a swimming pool and a children's playground.

Café La Enramada (mains US\$4-7) Offers quality *antojitos* (snacks or light meals) and traditional Mexican chocolate. It's much better value than the more elaborate restaurant at Hotel La Pinta, and has a small grocery store.

BAHÍA SAN LUIS GONZAGA

Bad roads are like a filter in Baja: drivers with determination, time and the right vehicle get through; those without are confined to the vicinity of the Transpeninsular. And that's exactly what makes Gonzaga Bay so rewarding. Its magic is still reserved for those that make it through the mesh.

The bay spans from Punta Willard in the north – where there's a strip of vacation homes (with dune buggies and private airplanes parked out front), a good hotel and restaurant, and a small island immediately offshore – to Punta Final in the south. Between these points are stretches of fine sand, tide pools, a few campgrounds and ample opportunities for beachcombing, kayaking, wading, swimming and fishing. Unfortunately, it's also a popular motorcycle destination, meaning campgrounds can sometimes be noisy at night.

The 'town' is anchored by the roadside Rancho Grande complex, which has a small grocery store (with plenty of tequila and beer) and fairly priced gas and diesel. The out-of-place Pemex, across the highway, remains closed.

Activities

Sea kayaking here is excellent. Experienced kayakers have made the seven-day paddle to Bahía de Los Angeles, reportedly the most difficult stretch on the Sea of Cortez. But you could spend days just paddling around Gonzaga (provided you bring your own kayak).

Sportfishing is Gonzaga's traditional attraction. Anglers usually bring their own boats, but you can hire a *panga* at Alfonsina's (below) or Papa Fernández (right) to take you out; the cost is US\$150 for five hours for up to three people. Both places will also prepare any fish you catch, generally for about US\$5 to US\$7 per person, which includes everything but drinks. The following list indicates at what times the various fish species are most common:

Bass April to June

Cabrilla July

Corvina March to September

Grouper April to October

Sierra July to September

White sea bass November to March

Yellowtail May to October

Sleeping & Eating

Rancho Grande (☎ in Mexico 555-151-4065, in San Quintín 616-165-3017) Gonzaga's only store, this place stocks basic supplies, cold drinks, snacks and fresh tamales. The owners rent *palapas* (palm-leaf shelters) for camping down on the beach.

Alfonsina's (☎ in Mexico 555-150-2825, in Tijuana ☎ 664-648-1951; r US\$55-75) At the very north end of the bay, Alfonsina's offers oceanfront, motel-style rooms with doors opening right onto the sand. It's a lovely place to stay, if

you don't mind simple, and the swimming is excellent at high tide. Aside from its own airstrip, Alfonsina's also has an excellent restaurant (mains US\$6 to US\$13).

Papá Fernández (papafernandez@hughes.com, gcmafdez@hotmail.com; per vehicle US\$5) Four kilometers (2½ miles) north is the turnoff for Punta Willard and this place, a popular fish camp with beachfront camping. The beach here is on the north side of Punta Willard so you're not actually on Bahía San Luis Gonzaga, but on open sea. It's a beautiful spot but not as sheltered as the bay. No *palapas* are available, just the sand and pit toilets. There's also basic but excellent restaurant (mains US\$5 to US\$6, shrimp US\$13).

Campo Beluga (per vehicle US\$15) About 1.5km (1 mile) south of town, Camp Beluga offers excellent *palapas* (for camping) on an empty beach. It has a wonderfully remote feel, and, unless a posse of ATV riders turns up, it's generally quieter than sites to the north. There are pit toilets, showers and a small store. It's at the end of a signed 2km sandy road branching off México 5.

Getting There & Away

Bahía San Luis Gonzaga sits smack in the middle of one of Baja's worst stretches of road, the span of México 5 between Puertecitos (p143) and the Transpeninsular. It doesn't usually require a 4WD vehicle, but it does require sturdy tires and slow speeds. This route is a good alternate to the Transpeninsular on either the southbound or return-leg of a peninsular road trip. If you're heading north to San Felipe, taking México 5, rather than the Transpeninsular shaves some serious miles from the trip.

COCO'S CORNER

About 40km (25 miles) south of Gonzaga, or 21km (13 miles) north of the junction of México 5 and México 1, lies **Coco's Corner**. This Baja landmark is a customary stop on any journey north or south on México 5. In the middle of a harsh desert landscape, Coco's is an island of art made from objects Coco has collected over the years: oil cans, hats, hubcaps, posters, auto parts, autographed underwear and, of course, beer cans. Radiator water, motor oil and automatic-transmission fluid are all available here (along with Coco's Corner T-shirts and hats), as are ice-cold drinks. Camping is encouraged (free, with pit toilets).

Coco arrived here in a wheelchair in 1990 after an accident left him without his right leg. He's built most of what you'll see himself. He's an excellent source of information and a great talker (he speaks English well). Upon signing his guestbook (which, along with the books at Mamá Espinoza's in El Rosario, is the most famous registry on the peninsula) he'll add a sketch of you and your vehicle.

DRIVING MÉXICO 5

México 5 runs from Mexicali south through San Felipe and passes Bahía San Luis Gonzaga before hitting the Transpeninsular near the dry lake bed of Laguna Chapala. Only the stretch between Mexicali and Puertecitos is paved. The rest, although most maps show it as a gravel road, consists of bone-rattling washboard, hellishly sharp rocks and random washouts that will slow you to a crawl. A 4WD vehicle is usually unnecessary, but high clearance is helpful.

The stretch between Puertecitos and Gonzaga takes about four hours without stops. It's another 1½ hours between Gonzaga and the Transpeninsular. If you're going to tackle this road, do it as the locals do:

- Take the *laterales* (parallel tracks) – These tracks sometimes run alongside the main road. If your vehicle has decent clearance, the *laterales* usually offer a far smoother ride than the washboard.
- Drop your tire pressure – Locals swear by 18 to 20 psi. It takes the pain out of the washboard and turns your tires into part of your vehicle's suspension. It also keeps your vehicle from hopping around. Refill your tires in Puertecitos or at the *lantera* (tire shop) at the junction of México 5 and the Transpeninsular. (Never drive paved roads at speed with low tire pressure!)
- Watch your speed – The stretch between Bahía San Luis Gonzaga and the Transpeninsular has less washboard but has the sharpest rocks. High speeds cause punctures.
- Run the washboard – This is a tricky one. Driving washboard requires finding the sweet spot in your speed – usually about 56km/h to 64km/h (35mph to 40mph). Drive too slowly and you'll bounce like crazy, too fast and you'll either lose control or hit a rock you didn't see.
- Be patient – Flat tires are the biggest problem, and nearly all are caused by impatient driving.
- Enjoy the view – This road is slated for paving, so *disfrútelo* (enjoy it) while you can.

NORTH TO PUERTECITOS

The worst stretch of México 5 is between Bahía San Luis Gonzaga and Puertecitos. At the time of research, storms had damaged some sections of this roadway, but rugged 2WD vehicles with high clearance were getting through. For more details on this route, which is steep, narrow and washboarded, making it extremely difficult for vehicles with low clearance and impossible for RVs, see p144.

SOUTH TO MÉXICO 1

The roughly 61km (38-mile) road from Gonzaga Bay to México 1 is in better condition than the road north of Gonzaga, but the rocks along this stretch are sharp; keep speeds low to avoid flat tires. The drive takes two to three hours, depending on your vehicle.

From Coco's Corner (p149), another dirt road leads east to little-visited Bahía de Calamajué; a branch off this road eventually leads south toward Bahía de Los Ángeles but is suitable only for high-clearance vehicles with 4WD and short wheelbases.

México 5 meets México 1 directly north of the dry lake-bed of Laguna Chapala, about

52km (32 miles) south of Cataviña. There's a tire shop at the junction, where you can reinflate your tires for pavement driving.

BAHÍA DE LOS ÁNGELES & AROUND

☎ 200 / pop 600

'LA Bay', as gringos call it, is an outdoor enthusiast's paradise. Kayaking, off-roading, sportfishing – they are all practiced with great gusto by gringos who haul down their trailers full of gear and shack up in semi-permanent RV parks, complete with mock street signs (don't be surprised to find yourself at the corner of Cerveza and Tequila). Entire families ride around on ATVs (one for each member!), and salty old-timers buzz around, picking up beer and gossip. This place is so popular with gringos, even the local museum is run by expats. Despite this, Bahía de Los Ángeles maintains its Baja charm (thanks to the decaying cars, boats, bed frames and other junk scattered about), and there's no denying the setting is supreme. The jagged, barren islands directly offshore fade from brown to pink as the water turns from turquoise to deep blue in the afternoon. The kayaking here is outstanding.

Orientation

Though there are no street names or addresses, Bahía de Los Ángeles is easy to figure out, with most businesses on or just off of the main road through town. This road, an extension of the road from México 1, turns to dirt south of town and continues (in its horrible state) to Bahía San Francisquito (p158). North of town, a paved road leads to Punta La Gringa; off this road, you'll find many of the best beachfront camping and accommodation options.

Information

The best source of information on Bahía de Los Ángeles and its surroundings is the Museo de la Naturaleza y de la Cultura (right).

The local **caseta telefónica** (telephone office; ☎ 124-9101/02/05/08) offers the only long-distance telephone service in the village.

Market Isla (near the entrance to town) and Flor del Mar (near the road to San Francisquito) offer internet access for about US\$1.50 per 30 minutes.

Since early 2005, the Pemex has remained reliably open, selling Magna Sin (89 octane) and diesel. A second Pemex should have *premium* (97 octane) soon.

Sights & Activities

MUSEO DE LA NATURALEZA Y DE LA CULTURA

The self-supporting **Museum of Nature and Culture** (admission by donation; 🕒 9am-noon & 2-4pm) features well-organized displays of shells, sea turtles, whale skeletons and other local marine life as well as exhibits on native cultures (including Cochimí artifacts and rock-art displays), mining and *vaquero* (cowboy) culture. Also on the grounds are a desert botanical garden and a reconstruction of a mining site. The volunteers here, mostly resident gringos, are a good source of information.

PROGRAMA TORTUGA MARINA

Bahía de Los Ángeles was once the center of the turtle fishery on the gulf and, unfortunately, the now illegal practice has not completely disappeared. In a modest facility just north of town, the **Conanp Sea Turtle Program** (admission US\$20; 🕒 9am-2pm Mon, Tue, Thu, Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) conducts research on sea-turtle biology, ecology and conservation. In 1996 the program released a loggerhead turtle named Adelita at Santa Rosalillita, on the Pacific side of the peninsula, and tracked her by radio

EXPLORING THE ISLANDS OF LA BAY

Some of Bahía de Los Ángeles' most stunning features are the dramatic reddish-brown islands visible immediately offshore. The islands are part of the uninhabited **Archipiélago de Bahía de Los Ángeles**, and they're one of Baja's finest sea-kayaking destinations. The biggest of the islands, **Isla Ángel de la Guarda**, lies 19km (12 miles) away and shelters the bay from prevailing winds.

Most kayakers stick to the closer islands. **Isla Ventana**, the closest island to town, is a 7km (4.5-mile) paddle away. It has two beaches: **Playa El Bony**, and the more southerly **Playa del Sur**. Both offer excellent camping (no services) and are good bases for exploring the island, which has several trails. From Isla Ventana you can either return to the mainland, explore nearby islets or continue north to the larger **Isla Coronado**, the island with the giant volcanic cone visible from shore. Coronado has excellent hiking and camping. Between these two islands are several restricted islets which you can explore from the water. Of these, only **Isla Pata** is open for boat landings, and it has a good beach for camping.

As with all islands in the gulf, the islands of Bahía de Los Ángeles are Unesco World Heritage Sites and are protected by the Mexican government. Anyone wishing to land on an island must first register with, and obtain a permit from, the local office of **Conanp** (☎ 124-9106; 🕒 9am-2pm & 4-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat), in Bahía de Los Ángeles. The fee is US\$4 per person per day, though you can buy an annual *pasaporte* (passport) for US\$23, which gives you access to any protected area in Mexico for a year.

Once you register, you are given a bracelet (which you must wear while visiting the islands) and you are allowed to camp and hike on Isla Coronado, Isla Pata and Isla Ventana. The office will also provide you with a small brochure which has some useful information and a map of the islands. When camping, you are not allowed to burn any local fuel, so bring your own camp stove. Before heading out, always inquire locally about weather and pick up a set of kayaking guidelines from the museum. And, above all, have fun paddling!

transmitter across the ocean to Japan. The modest program's tanks offer the opportunity to see endangered sea-turtle species such as the leatherback, the green and the hawksbill.

SEA KAYAKING

Bahía de Los Ángeles has become a prime kayaking destination, and paddling to the islands around the bay can be one of the most challenging adventures in the Sea of Cortez. Northeasterly winds of up to 35 knots can suddenly appear and churn the water into a nasty mess, so expect some excitement. According to locals, inexperienced kayakers drown nearly every year.

Isla Coronado, northeast of town, is the most popular local destination for paddlers. To get there, follow the dirt road north out of town for about 8km (5 miles) to Punta La Gringa; in winter there are usually plenty of campers around to watch your vehicle while you paddle. Many kayakers continue north from Punta La Gringa to Punta Remedios and **Isla Ángel de la Guarda**.

Those exploring offshore islands should take care to avoid disturbing wildlife; careless visitors have scared many birds, most notably pelicans, from their nests, exposing eggs and chicks to predators and the hot sun.

Daggett's Beach Camping (right) and a couple of other places rent kayaks for about US\$40 per day.

FISHING

Sammy & Alfredo Diaz (located behind Casa Diaz, opposite), Daggett's (right) and a few other outfitters arrange eight-hour fishing excursions for US\$150 for up to three or four people. Most require that you rent or bring your own gear, but if there are just two of you, the Diaz brothers will usually lend you gear if you go out with them. Fishing licenses are also sold at Guillermo's (right).

The following list indicates when game-fish species are abundant in the vicinity of Bahía de Los Ángeles:

Cabrilla April to January

Corvina February to June

Grouper year-round

Halibut April

Marlin June to August

Roosterfish November to April

Sailfish May to September

Sierra March

Yellowtail year-round

Courses

California's Glendale Community College runs its **Baja California Field Studies Program** (www.glendale.edu/baja) at its facility in Bahía de Los Ángeles. Courses, available to accepted applicants only, focus on marine biology and Mexican culture. They last about two weeks and cost around US\$785.

Sleeping & Eating

Bahía de Los Ángeles has several motels, RV parks and other campgrounds north and south of town, plus a handful of decent restaurants. Hotels in town are generally about five minutes' walk to the beach. For those hotels without telephone numbers, you can usually reserve by calling the *caseta telefónica* (p151) and leaving a message.

Punta La Gringa, a beautiful beach area to the north, has several rugged campsites (US\$5) with choice views of offshore islands, but the road to get there is so heavily wash-boarded, it hurts; take the meandering sandy track on the inland side of the road instead.

Guillermo's Trailer Park & Restaurant (☎ 124-9104; campsites US\$4.50, RV with/without hookups US\$13.50/4.50, r US\$73) Next door to Hotel Villa Vita and separated from the beach by an unsightly row of trailers, Guillermo's has about 40 spaces for tents and RVs, some with limited shade. The bathrooms are less than immaculate, but hot water is reliable. Its motel annex has five huge rooms with ocean views (from the doors) and private bathrooms. What really stands out is Guillermo's Restaurant (mains US\$6 to US\$14), open from 6am to 10pm, which has a festive atmosphere unmatched by anything else in town. The food (mostly seafood) is tasty, and the margaritas are large but expensive (go for the 4pm to 5pm happy hour).

Campo Archelón (resendizshidalgo@yahoo.com; palapas/cabañas US\$10/40) For superb beach bumming in between jaunts out to sea in your kayak, this is the spot. The *palapas* provide ample shade for tent campers and set you about two paces from the water's edge. The shared showers and bathrooms are kept clean. The excellent, homey *cabañas* (cabins) come with kitchens and a private patio. The signed access road is located off the road to Punta Gringa (near Km 1) about 2km or so from the center of town.

Daggett's Beach Camping (campsites per person US\$10, r US\$50) Just north of the Programa Tortuga Marina (off the road to Punta La Gringa), Daggett's offers hot showers and

DETOUR: MISIÓN SAN BORJA

A detour to the extensive ruins of this Jesuit mission make an excellent alternate route to or from Bahía de Los Ángeles. The mission, founded in 1762 as Misión San Borja de Adac, is the best preserved of all the Jesuit adobes in Baja California. Local families still cultivate grapes, olives and other crops, making the setting simply exquisite.

Dominicans built the now-restored church, made of locally quarried volcanic stone with many outstanding details, well after the Jesuits' expulsion. See the custodian before climbing the spiral staircase to the chorus and leave a small (or large) donation. On October 10, the local saint's day, devotees from throughout the region converge on the tiny *ranchería* (settlement) to pray and to party.

To get to the mission from México 1, take the well-signed *lateral* from the truck stop of Rosarito (not to be confused with Playas de Rosarito, the resort town between Tijuana and Ensenada), 14km (8.5 miles) south of the Santa Rosalillita junction and 52km (32 miles) south of the Bahía de Los Ángeles junction. The 34km (21-mile) road is rough in spots, but most passenger vehicles can handle it.

The route passes through a spectacular Wild West valley landscape of *cirio*, *cardón*, *torote* (elephant tree), *datilillo* (yucca) and cholla beneath broad volcanic mesas. The road forks about 3km (2 miles) before San Borja; a sign indicates that both forks go to the mission, but the left (northern) fork is easier on both car and driver. The road continues northeast from the mission to the Bahía de Los Ángeles road. If you're on the Bahía de Los Ángeles road, the turnoff is signed just under 21km (13 miles) west of town. This road is also manageable for nearly all passenger vehicles.

is much cleaner and tidier than most other area campgrounds. About half the sites are just above the beach and the only downside is the noise: you may find yourself watching the sunset to blaring *norteño* (country) music as fishermen clean their daily catch and waking up before sunrise to the resident rooster.

Casa Díaz (☎ 124-9112; r US\$27) Moldy bathrooms and dirty walls make this family-run motel a little hard to ease into unless you're stumbling off the fishing boat full of Tecate and fish stories. Rooms open onto the parking area which gives way to the beach. It has a grocery store and a restaurant (mains US\$5 to US\$14).

Hotel Villa Vitta (☎ 124-9103, in the US 619-618-0300; www.villavitta.com; r US\$40-60; 📶 🚰) With a large square swimming pool (not always filled), a Jacuzzi (occasionally filled) and a few hammocks strewn about, this is the closest thing to a resort in town. It's comfortable and clean and a good place if you like sitting around the pool drinking *cervezas* and munching on chips and salsa. Its restaurant (mains US\$6 to US\$12) specializes in moderately priced seafood.

Hotel Las Hamacas (☎ 124-9114; www.baja-desert.info/hotellashamacas; d US\$50-60; 📶 🚰) In town, Las Hamacas has clean and spacious but unadorned doubles; the pricier rooms have

TVs (the three channels supposedly include HBO) and air-con. It's a delightfully friendly place. Its restaurant (mains US\$5 to US\$10) is a good choice and a bit cheaper than others in town. You can fuel up on a big plate of *pescado a la Veracruzana* (seafood baked with onions, peppers and olives) for only US\$6. The chips are delicious and the salsa packs a punch.

Costa del Sol (☎ 124-9110, in Ensenada 646-178-8167; costadelsolhotel@hotmail.com; r US\$50-70; 📶 🚰) Just south of Las Hamacas, this five-room hotel is the most upscale accommodation option in town. Big wooden bed frames, immaculate bathrooms, colorful bedspreads, handsome dressers and large mirrors give it a luxurious feel. It's across the main road from the beach.

Villa Bahía (www.villabahia.com; accommodations US\$60-250) Located off Km 4 on the road to La Gringa, Villa Bahía is a sprawling, solar- and wind-powered place offering deluxe accommodations in everything from single rooms to a three-bedroom, two-bathroom house. Most have kitchens or kitchenettes. It has a library, games room and more artwork than the local museum.

Two stores in town stock a slim supply of fruits and veggies – the selection is biggest after the Tuesday deliveries.

Getting There & Away

There is no bus service to Bahía de Los Ángeles; without your own wheels (or wings), you'll have to hitch from the junction on the Transpeninsular. The turnoff from the Transpeninsular is about 105km (65 miles) south of Cataviña. It's an easily spotted paved road leading 68km (42 miles) to the bay.

SANTA ROSALILLITA

This stunning, sheltered bay lies at the end of what is likely the widest road in all of Baja. Santa Rosalillita is the starting point of the Escolera Náutica (Nautical Staircase), a massive government tourist project that will, in essence, connect the Pacific to the Sea of Cortez via a paved road wider than the Transpeninsular. Currently under construction, it will allow yachters to bypass the cape and hit planned upscale marinas along the gulf.

For surfers, however, Santa Rosalillita, will always be known for something else: waves. It's home to some excellent **surfing**. On the north end of the bay, **Punta Santa Rosalillita** is a long, right-hand point break, reachable by a difficult 12km (5-mile) dirt road that requires high clearance. **Punta Rosarito**, to the south, is known among surfers as 'The Wall,' and may be the most consistent break on the entire peninsula. It's a long, often powerful right-hand point break that gets more exposure to swells than the sites to the immediate north.

Santa Rosalillita itself is a dusty fish camp, with a couple basic stores and no lodging to speak of. Camping is free north and south of Santa Rosalillita.

To get here, take the signed road from the Transpeninsular 39km (24 miles) south of the Bahía de Los Ángeles junction. It's just under 16km (10 miles) west of the highway.

PARALELO 28

☎ 615

Marked by a 42m (140ft) steel monument ostensibly resembling an eagle, the 28th parallel marks the border between the states of Baja California (Norte) and Baja California Sur. The time zone changes here: Pacific time (to the north) is one hour behind mountain standard time (to the south). There is an agricultural inspection and an immigration office (where you can acquire your tourist card, if, for some reason, you don't have it), one hotel and two trailer parks.

Hotel La Pinta Guerrero Negro (☎ 157-1304, in the USA 800-800-9632; www.lapintahotels.com; r US\$77-88), part of the Baja chain of La Pinta hotels, sits precisely on the 28th parallel. It has a restaurant, a bar and 28 comfortable rooms. **Trailer Park Benito Juárez** (campsites US\$10), alongside the hotel, has a few *palapas* and spacious RV sites.

GUERRERO NEGRO

☎ 615 / pop 10,000

Guerrero Negro is a company town that owes its existence to the world's largest evaporative salt works. The town's low, cement-block buildings, standard grid layout, oft-gray sky and flat surroundings make for a drab initial impression. But there's a surprising amount to see and do here, despite the misleading veneer. Most travelers come to visit the famous Laguna Ojo de Liebre (p157), an important calving site for California gray whales. However, few people stick around to appreciate the expansive salt marshes and their rich birdlife, or the giant sand dunes known as the Dunas de Soledad (Dunes of Solitude). And a tour of the ESSA saltworks is simply fascinating, if only for its peculiarity.

Guerrero Negro was named for the *Black Warrior*, a Massachusetts whaler that shipwrecked nearby in the mid-19th century. The town further capitalizes on tourism through its annual Festival Cultural de la Ballena Gris (Gray Whale Cultural Festival), lasting three weeks in early February.

Orientation

Guerrero Negro comprises two distinct sectors: a disorderly strip along Blvd Emiliano Zapata west of the Transpeninsular, and ESSA's orderly company town, with a grid pattern that begins shortly after Blvd Zapata curves southwest near the airfield. Most of the town's accommodations and restaurants are in the former area on Blvd Emiliano Zapata.

Information

Banamex (Blvd Emiliano Zapata) At the far end of Blvd Emiliano Zapata, near the entrance to the ESSA sector. Changes traveler's checks.

Café Internet Las Bellenas (Calle Victoria Sánchez near Blvd Emiliano Zapata; per hr US\$2) Internet café.

Clinica Hospital IMSS (☎ 157-0433) On the southern side of Blvd Zapata where the road curves southwest.

Lavamática Express (Calle Victoria Sánchez; wash & dry US\$6) Laundry. Across from Hotel Bellenas.

Post office (Blvd Emiliano Zapata) In the ESSA sector.

Sights & Activities

WHALE-WATCHING

Guerrero Negro is the northernmost of Baja California's whale-watching locales and has the most abundant accommodation options of any of them. However, tours are usually briefer than tours elsewhere because they require traveling some distance to the whale-watching sites.

Three-hour tours usually start at 8am and 11am, and cost around US\$48, including transportation to Laguna Ojo de Liebre, a box lunch and sometimes a visit to the salt works. Local operators include **Mario's** (☎ 157-1940; www.mariostours.com; Transpeninsular Km 217.3) and **Malarrimo Ecotours** (☎ 157-0250; www.malarrimo.com; Blvd Emiliano Zapata), both located at their namesake establishments.

Note that whale-watching excursions at Guerrero Negro and more southerly points conform to mountain standard time; south-bound visitors who forget to change their watches at the state border will, literally, miss the bus.

SALTWORKS

Guerrero Negro is home to the largest evaporative saltworks in the world. The saltworks consist of about 180 sq km (70 sq miles) of evaporative ponds, each about 100 sq meters (110 sq yards) in area and about a meter deep, and is located just south of the town. Under the intense desert sunlight and with high winds, water evaporates quickly, leaving a saline residue that is dredged from the pools, hauled to nearby quays and barged to Isla Cedros for transshipment by freighter. The works produces more than five million tons of salt annually.

If you have your own vehicle, you can take a 1½-tour of the *salinas* (saltworks) with a company guide. Driving out to the salt flats, where it looks like snow in all directions, is truly a unique experience. Set up tours at least 24 hours in advance by calling the **ESSA office** (☎ 157-5100, ext 290/101; www.essa.com.mx; Blvd Emiliano Zapata). Otherwise, stop by the office early in the morning, and you may be able to arrange something for the afternoon. The office is located at the far end of Blvd Emiliano Zapata.

SALT MARSHES & DUNAS DE SOLEDAD

One of the most splendid sights in Baja California is the 11km (7-mile) drive along the

bumpy road through the salt marshes out to the **faro viejo** (old lighthouse) and the abandoned **pier**. During the Northern Hemisphere winter, thousands of migratory birds stop in the salt marshes, making for some wonderful bird-watching, not so much for the rarity of the species, but for the sheer number of birds. If you head out early, you'll see everything from herons and sand pipers to ospreys. Across the water from the lighthouse, you can see the giant sand dunes known as Dunas de Soledad. For a small fee, the fishermen (who leave from the old pier) will take you across to see them, though they're not always there. More dunes are accessible via a road leading east from near the Paralelo 28 marker.

To get here, follow the road that heads north from Blvd Emiliano Zapata directly across from the ESSA office. The road is signed 'Dunas' (dunes) and 'Avistamiento de Aves' (bird-watching).

Sleeping

Accommodations in Guerrero Negro are fairly abundant and are reasonably priced, but they fill up fast during the winter whale-watching season. Reservations are advisable from January through March. Almost all hotels are on or just off Blvd Emiliano Zapata, the road you'll be on if you're driving in from the Transpeninsular.

Motel Brisa Salina (☎ 157-1110; RV US\$12, r US\$20-25; Ⓟ) On the northern side of Blvd Zapata, no-frills Motel Brisa Salina is a good budget option if you don't mind that someone went wild with the paint: it's like sleeping in a rainbow dipped in mud. Rooms are tiny (and a tad musty) and open onto a narrow interior courtyard. They're fine for the price, and management is friendly.

Motel Las Ballenas (☎ 157-0116; s/d US\$19/25; Ⓟ) Clean and with a TV in every room, this friendly motel is likely the best value in town. It's just your basic motel, with rather ramshackle rooms and a bare parking area, but something about the pink paint job and the staff's friendliness give it a welcoming feel. It's off the main drag (behind El Morro), but signed.

Motel San Ignacio (☎ 157-0270; s US\$22, d US\$25-28; Ⓟ) This bright peach motel with lime-green trim basks in the afternoon sun on the main boulevard. Rooms are simple and rather box-like, while the pricier doubles are larger but equally bland. That said, it's a totally friendly, clean place. Can be noisy.

Hotel El Morro (☎ 157-0414; cnr Blvd Emiliano Zapata & Victoria Sanchez; s/d US\$28/31; 📍) Easily spotted on the northern side of Blvd Emiliano Zapata, El Morro has 35 clean, pleasant rooms with TV and reliably hot showers. Most of them could use a paint job, and the brown carpet's getting a bit shabby, but it's fine. Wooden headboards give them a homey feel.

Motel Don Gus (☎ 157-1611; dongushotrest@prodigy.net.mx; Rosaura Zapata Cano; s/d US\$28/35; 📍) Just off Blvd Emiliano Zapata, Motel Don Gus has huge, spotless rooms set around a large off-street parking area. It's practically upscale by Guerrero Negro standards, and the attached restaurant (mains US\$5 to US\$10) serves good Mexican food and pastas. Rooms have satellite TV.

Hotel Los Caracoles (☎ 157-1088; hotelloscaracoles@prodigy.net.mx; cnr Blvd Emiliano Zapata & Calzada de la Republica; s/d US\$35/40; 📍) Bright new Los Caracoles offers immaculate rooms with tasteful light fixtures, industrial-style carpet and little framed artworks, and standard bathrooms. It's a plain but fresh-feeling place with cable TV and friendly receptionists. It's the big mustard/brown building on the right side of Blvd Emiliano Zapata as you're rolling into town.

Malarrimo Motel & RV Park (☎ 157-0100; www.malarrimo.com; Blvd Emiliano Zapata; campsite/van/RV/s/d US\$14/16/20/40/45; 📍 🚐) Also known as Cabañas Don Miguelito, this is the cushiest place in town. Colorfully painted and carefully decorated rooms open onto modest walkways filled with bougainvillea and other plants. For RVers, hot water is plentiful and the toilets are clean. Motel rates drop by US\$5 outside whale-watching season. The restaurant (right) is excellent.

Eating

Guerrero Negro's best food bargains are the numerous taco stands along Blvd Emiliano Zapata, which keep erratic hours but maintain high standards. The three near the Pemex, including delicious Carnitas Michoacan (full meal US\$3 to US\$5), are great.

Asadero Viva México (Blvd Emiliano Zapata; tacos US\$1-2.50; 🕒 6pm-midnight Mon & Tue, noon-1am Wed-Sun) The friendly owners of this colorful *taquería* (taco stand) whip up delicious *carne asada* (grilled beef) tacos, *quesatacos* (quesadillas with meat) and *tortas* (sandwiches) to a mix of locals and tourists who keep returning for the great food and atmosphere.

Birrería Brianda (cnr Blvd Emiliano Zapata & Rubio Ruiz; tacos US\$1.50, birria US\$2) From 8am to 2pm, this small taco stand serves outstanding *birria de res* (a type of beef stew) either in Styrofoam cups or in tacos. It reopens for the evening at 7pm and serves delicious *carne asada* tacos and stuffed potatoes. It's east of Hotel El Morro.

Restaurant Puerto Viejo (☎ 157-1472; Blvd Emiliano Zapata; breakfast US\$2.50-5, mains US\$4.50-8) On the main drag, near Hotel El Morro, Puerto Viejo serves good, cheap breakfasts. For example, US\$2.50 will buy you eggs with ham or chorizo. Dinners are Mexican and seafood.

Cocina Económica Letty (Blvd Emiliano Zapata; mains US\$3-8) On the southern side of Blvd Zapata, Letty serves very fine *antojitos* and seafood at friendly prices.

Restaurant El Morro (Blvd Emiliano Zapata; mains US\$6-9) Beside its namesake motel, this diner-style eatery serves reliable chicken, meat and seafood. Think Mexican comfort food.

Restaurant Malarrimo (Blvd Emiliano Zapata; mains US\$7-15) At its namesake motel this highly regarded restaurant specializes in seafood in both traditional *antojitos* and more sophisticated international dishes. It's not cheap, but portions are abundant. The 'lions' paws' (scallops smothered in butter and herbs) are legendary.

Mario's (☎ 157-1940; Transpeninsular Km 217.3; US\$7-20) Just north of town (and just south of the Paralelo 28 monument) on the Transpeninsular, this long-time favorite serves excellent, moderately priced seafood inside a giant, deluxe *palapa*-style building complete with gravel floor and wooden tables.

Entertainment

Entertainment is pretty much nil in Guerrero Negro, unless you want to stroll into one of the slightly seedy bars on the main drag. Two decent options include sidling up to the bar in Restaurant Malarrimo or shooting pool at the restaurant-bar (open during whale season only) at Motel Brisa Salina.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Aeropuerto Guerrero Negro is 2km (1.25 miles) north of the state border, just west of the Transpeninsular. Guerrero Negro also has an airfield near the ESSA sector in town.

Aereo Servicio Guerrero (☎ 157-0137; www.aereoserviciosguerrero.com.mx; Blvd Emiliano Zapata; ☎ 7am-6pm Mon-Sat) offers flights to Guaymas (on mainland Mexico) every Thursday, as well as flights to Hermosillo (also on the mainland) on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Both Guaymas and Hermosillo have connecting flights to the national capital in addition to other mainland destinations.

Aereo Servicio Guerrero also has services to Isla Cedros (US\$55, 30 minutes) on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday, departing around 9:30pm. The Monday, Wednesday and Friday flights continue on to Ensenada (US\$138, additional 1½ hours). Prices for children under 12 are US\$37 to Isla Cedros and US\$87 to Ensenada. The office is located on the east end of Blvd Emiliano Zapata.

Aeroméxico connector airline **Aerolitoral** (☎ 157-1745) offers services from Monday through Saturday to Hermosillo, with connections from there to Ciudad Juárez, Ciudad Obregón, Chihuahua, Mexico City, Phoenix and Tucson. Its office is located on the western end of Blvd Emiliano Zapata, near the Pemex station.

BUS

From Guerrero Negro's **bus terminal** (☎ 157-0611), on the southern side of Blvd Emiliano Zapata, ABC and Autotransportes Aguila offer services throughout the peninsula. There are five or six daily departures to the destinations in the following table.

Destination	Fare (US\$)	Duration (hr)
Cabo San Lucas	76-82	11
Ciudad Constitución	47-50	9
Ensenada	50-54	8-9
La Paz	64-69	10
Loreto	34-37	5-6
Mulegé	24-26	4-5
San Ignacio	13	3
San Quintín	22-25	5-6
Santa Rosalía	20-23	4
Tijuana	59-63	10-12
Vizcaíno	6.50	1

AROUND GUERRERO NEGRO Laguna Ojo de Liebre

Also known in part as **Parque Natural de la Ballena Gris** (Gray Whale Natural Park), the bay of Laguna Ojo de Liebre has the greatest number of whales of any of Baja's whale-watching sites. The bay, which is also known Scammon's Lagoon, is part of the massive 25,566-sq-km (9833-sq-mile) Unesco-designated **Reserva de la Biosfera El Vizcaíno** (Vizcaíno Biosphere Reserve), which sprawls from Laguna San Ignacio, Guerrero Negro, Isla Natividad and Isla Cedros across to the Sea of Cortez, taking in part of the Sierra de San Francisco.

At the lagoon, local *pangueros* (fishermen with skiffs) take visitors out for 1½-hour **whale-watching excursions** (per person US\$25-30) on its shallow waters. It's also possible, and sometimes preferable for the sake of ease and transportation, to organize whale-watching tours through hotels or operators in Guerrero Negro.

SCAMMON & THE WHALES

Laguna Ojo de Liebre takes its English name, Scammon's Lagoon, from Captain Charles Melville Scammon, an American whaler who frequented the area in the 1850s. Born in Maine, Scammon yearned to captain a trading ship but had to settle for command of less lucrative whalers, such as the *Boston* out of San Francisco. In 1857, upon learning that an estuary near Bahía de Sebastián Vizcaíno was the breeding ground of the gray whale, he headed south.

For whalers, the density of whales in constricted, shallow lagoons meant almost literally shooting fish in a barrel, but Scammon's first attempts were disastrous: whales crushed two of his small whaleboats and seriously injured half the crew. Resorting to 'bomb lances' – bombs fired into a whale from a hand-held gun – instead of harpoons, Scammon and his crew managed to get 740 barrels of oil, filling virtually every container on board, which was later sold in San Francisco as lubricant. (It's interesting to note that no whale has ever crushed or capsized a whale-watching boat in the lagoon.)

By the end of 1859, Scammon and other whalers had nearly eliminated the gray whale from the lagoons. Whaling did not cease until 1935 and it took many decades for the population to recover. Today the US and Mexican governments have effective laws, in addition to international agreements, that protect the gray whale and its habitat.

Whale-watching officially begins December 15 and lasts until April 15, but whales are few at the earliest dates. Those on late-season trips, from mid-February on, are likelier to encounter friendly whales. If you decide to head out and negotiate with the *pangueros* themselves, you'll save about US\$5 per person.

Camping is possible at the lagoon, where savvy visitors choose sites above the sometimes flooded tidal flats; the more remote sites are also closer to the maternity channel, so you can hear the whales up close and personal. The *ejido* (communal land holding) charges US\$5 per vehicle for camping or day use. Its **Restaurant Palapa** (mains US\$5-9) has superb food at very reasonable prices – don't miss the tasty *almejas rancheras* (clams with salsa).

The turnoff to Laguna Ojo de Liebre lies 8km (5 miles) southeast of the Guerrero Negro junction, at Km 208 of the Transpeninsular. The smooth, graded road leads 24km (15 miles) southwest to the lagoon. All vehicles must register with the guard at ESSA's checkpoint, which controls the access road.

El Arco, Pozo Alemán & Misión Santa Gertrudis

About 27km (17 miles) south of Guerrero Negro, a 42km (26-mile) gravel road leads eastward to **El Arco**, a 19th-century gold-mining town that now serves as a supply center for surrounding *ranchos*. The area's real highlight, however, is the nearby ghost town of **Pozo Alemán**, a few miles east on a sometimes rugged dirt road. Its ruins include caves, several residences, the smelter, a blacksmith's shop, a still-functioning windmill and water system, and a company store with items still on the counter. A caretaker oversees the ruins and shows visitors around; a small tip is appropriate.

The dirt road continues east to Bahía San Francisquito (below) on the Sea of Cortez.

About 37km (23 miles) east of El Arco via an unpaved road, you'll find the isolated **Misión Santa Gertrudis**, founded by the famous Jesuit, Fernando Consag, in 1751. After the Spanish government expelled the Jesuits in 1767, Dominicans took over and finished the small stone church, which bears a ceiling date of 1796.

The church **museum** contains a selection of Guaycura, Cora and Cochimí artifacts, as well as *ofrendas* (offerings) left by pilgrims for Santa Gertrudis. Every November 16, pilgrims jam the village for the **Fiesta de Santa Gertrudis**.

Another landmark is **El Camino Real**, the royal road (really a trail), which still leads 29 leagues (161km or 100 miles) from San Ignacio to Misión San Borja via Santa Gertrudis. Most travelers prefer the improved road from El Arco, passable for any passenger vehicle and even small RVs. The entire trip from Guerrero Negro takes 2½ to three hours.

ISLA CEDROS

☎ 616 / pop 1500

Isla Cedros is a mountainous northward extension of Península Vizcaíno, separated from the mainland by Canal de Kellet, the much smaller Isla Natividad and Canal de Dewey. Reaching altitudes of nearly 1200m (4000ft) above sea level, this desert island is a rewarding, off-the-beaten-track destination for adventurous travelers.

The ramshackle village of Cedros faces Bahía de Sebastián Vizcaíno from beneath the slopes of towering Cerro Cedros, whose summit (1185m or 3950ft) is the highest point on the island and usually hidden by clouds. In town, several two-story buildings with porches or balconies facing the bay add

DETOUR: BAHÍA SAN FRANCISQUITO

About 84km (52 miles) east of El Arco and 129km (80 miles) south of Bahía de Los Ángeles, Bahía San Francisquito is one of the most beautiful, isolated beaches in Baja. Here you'll find the remote, rustic fishing resort **Punta San Francisquito**, many of whose guests arrive by private plane. Beachfront camping is possible at the resort for just US\$5 per site with access to hot showers, while *cabañas* cost about US\$15 per person or US\$30 with full board. The restaurant is open all year and offers excellent, if pricey, food.

A short distance north of the resort, **Puerto San Francisquito** has equally attractive beachfront camping for about US\$5 per person with a saltwater flush toilet, but no fresh water.

The road from Bahía de Los Ángeles is passable for just about any vehicle, but drive with caution because it has washed away at certain points. The total drive takes about 2½ hours.

a touch of vernacular architectural interest. It's definitely not your stereotypical tourist destination.

History

Early Spanish explorers found surprisingly large numbers of indigenous Cochimí on the island, whose 'intransigence' prompted the Jesuits to forcibly relocate them to the mainland mission of San Ignacio. Manila galleons later used Isla Cedros as a port of refuge on their return across the Pacific. The island supports unusual vegetation, including native tree species and coastal wildlife such as elephant seals and sea lions. Cedros mule deer, an endangered subspecies, still inhabit the rugged backcountry. The island is known for its abalone, from which a very unique sausage is made, and lobster.

Orientation

Most of the island's inhabitants live in the tiny port town of Cedros on the sheltered eastern shore, but many also live at ESSA's company town at Punta Morro Redondo at the southern tip of the island, which is the site of the airfield and the transshipment point for salt barged over from Guerrero Negro.

Information

Cedros has no bank or any other place to change money, and you can't even get a margarita, but there is phone service, a post office, an IMSS clinic and a Capitanía del Puerto (port authority). Electricity is available 6am to noon and 5pm to 11pm only. Running water is available mornings only, though most houses have storage tanks. Prices are high on the island because nearly everything is shipped in – including salt, despite the mountains of it at Punta Morro Redondo.

Sights & Activities

In Cedros' tidy hillside church, murals in the curious **Capilla de la Reconciliación** (Chapel of Reconciliation) depict events in Mexican and Baja Californian history, such as the expulsion of the Jesuits, in a comic-book style.

Hiking to the top of Cerro Cedros usually takes three to four hours and, when it's not foggy, offers splendid views.

Sleeping & Eating

Cedros' two hotels, **PNA** (☎ 158-5301) and **Zamar** (☎ 158-5527) both charge about US\$35 per

double and are very basic. *Casas de huéspedes* (guesthouses) can usually be arranged for about US\$15; ask around or ask your cab driver on the way into town from the airport. There are only a few restaurants.

Getting There & Away

Isla Cedros' airfield is at Punta Morro Redondo, about 8km (5 miles) south of the village. Taxis charge about US\$5 per person, but locals will sometimes offer you a ride. **Aereo Servicio Guerrero** (☎ 158-5544; www.aeroserviciosguerrero.com.mx; Calle 5 de Febrero, Sector Panga, Cedros) flies to Guerrero Negro (US\$55, 30 minutes) Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday; and to Ensenada (US\$100, 1½ hours) on Monday and Friday. See the Getting There & Away sections under Guerrero Negro (p156) and Ensenada (p106) for more information.

ISLAS SAN BENITO

This tiny archipelago consists of three small islands 55km (30 nautical miles) west of Isla Cedros and is largely the haunt of fishermen chasing the area's abundant yellowtail. The westernmost island, the largest of the three, supports a large winter camp of abalone divers and their families, as well as a substantial breeding colony of northern elephant seals. The seals begin to arrive in December but are most numerous in January and February. Sea turtles and whales are visible offshore (the islands are just off the gray-whale migration route).

Bring all your own camping equipment, food and water. There's no public transportation to the islands. Ask around in Cedros, on Isla Cedros, about catching a lift on the supply boats that make the often rough four-hour voyage over.

SOUTH OF GUERRERO NEGRO

Culturally and historically, this region of Baja has some of the peninsula's most interesting towns and villages. Places such as San Ignacio, Loreto, San Isidro, La Purísima and the twin oases of Comondú plunge you into Baja's colonial past. Peninsula Vizcaíno offers some of Baja's most out-of-the-way beaches, and the whale-watching at San Ignacio and Bahía Magdalena is a marvel.

PENÍNSULA VIZCAÍNO

As thin on plants as it is on people, Peninsula Vizcaíno is a mountainous extension of the Desierto de Vizcaíno. The peninsula has a way of separating the wheat (those who are willing to bare the solitude and brutal driving conditions) from the chaff (those who'd rather stick to the Transpeninsular), and it awards the former immensely. The beaches and towns on the coast give you a real sense of being far from anywhere, and the people tend to be warm and welcoming to anyone straying as far as they have from the beaten path. While you may not need a 4WD vehicle everywhere – roads are generally passable – conditions can be terrible in certain areas.

Vizcaíno

☎ 615 / pop 2350

Vizcaíno is a crossroads town built up around the Transpeninsular and is the main supply point for anyone venturing west to the Peninsula's isolated beaches. It's about 64km (40 miles) southeast of Guerrero Negro and has two decent-size **markets**, a couple of hardware stores, several restaurants and a Pemex that sometimes runs out of gas – fill up as soon as you roll into town or you'll find yourself stuck until the next fuel truck rolls in. There is no bank.

Petite but excellent rooms, complete with wireless-internet access and a good restaurant (mains US\$6 to US\$9) are available at the family-run **Hotel Kadekaman** (☎ 156-4112; kadekaman@yahoo.com; r US\$40; **P** 🚰 📺). The adjacent RV park charges US\$10, and the owners will likely let you pitch at tent behind the motel.

Vizcaíno's **bus terminal** (☎ 156-4561), if you can call it that, is directly across from the Pemex, in a restaurant. Aguila and ABC buses run north to Tijuana (US\$65 to US\$70, 11 hours) five times daily and south to La Paz (US\$63, 11 hours) four times daily. They'll stop anywhere on the Transpeninsular along the way.

Bahía Tortugas & Around

☎ 615 / pop 2600

Bahía Tortugas has the reputation of having the friendliest people on the peninsula. And it's no wonder – anyone who can make the drive out here is worthy of a smile. From the Transpeninsular town of Vizcaíno, the 172km (107-mile) road is paved for the

first 75km (47 miles). On the way out you pass two decaying settlements (with their clapboard shacks and rusting car hulks they make for an apocalyptic scene) before crossing salt flats (which fill with water after the rare rain) and an area of shifting sand dunes (announced by signs reading 'zone of flying sands'). And that's all *before* the pavement disappears.

The gravel begins at the junction to Bahía Asunción and slowly deteriorates into hellish washboard within 15km or so. The only way to drive the road (without going insane or destroying your car) is to lower your tire pressure and take it at a quick clip while watching for washouts. It's a white-knuckler to say the least. The reward for driving the road is Bahía Tortugas, one of the most isolated towns on the peninsula.

Bahía Tortugas has a few hotels, a bank, a Pemex and a long-distance telephone office.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

If you're driving, you can continue north to **Punta Eugenia** and, if you chance upon a *panguero* who's willing to go, hire a fishing boat to take you out to **Isla Natividad**.

Anglers cruise the offshore kelp beds for bass, mackerel and barracuda, while further offshore they find bonito and yellowtail. You can hire a guide to take you **fishing** in a *panga* for about US\$75 per day.

From Bahía Tortugas, a rough dirt road leads northeast to the almost mythical **Playa Malarrimo**, a desolate beach hanging into the Pacific like a giant scoop, collecting all the debris that washes south on the ocean currents.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are two decent hotels in town.

Motel Rendon (☎ 615-158-0232; Altamirano; s/d US\$18/23) This place is friendly, simple and clean. The decent restaurant next door, El Moroco, is run by the same family.

Motel Nancy (Av Independencia; s/d US\$18/27) This is an equally friendly, popular place.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Vizcaíno's bus terminal, minivans depart at 10am daily headed for Bahía Tortugas (US\$18, three hours); they depart Bahía Tortugas for the return trip at the ungodly hour of 3am.

Passing yachts usually anchor at Bahía Tortugas because it's still the only port between San Diego and Cabo San Lucas that has direct refueling facilities, making it a good spot for lifts south despite its remoteness. Hang out on the pier near the tuna cannery.

Bahía Asunción

Bahía Asunción lies approximately 40km (25 miles) south of the Vizcaíno–Bahía Tortugas road via a graded road that's a little better than the road out to Bahía Tortugas. Bahía Asunción is basically an oversized fish camp set on a beautiful bay. Services are minimal, but barrel gas is available. Camping is possible along the shore.

Punta Abreojos

A little too big to be deemed a fish camp, Punta Abreojos is a sandy fishing town on a small bay at the end of a long, empty road. It's the sort of place where, in the course of eating a fresh fish taco, you can watch a tractor haul fishing boats onto the sand while birds dive for fish and schools of dolphins zip through the waves peeling gently across the bay. The town itself consists of ramshackle houses, rusting lobster traps, sandy streets, a school, a hardware store, a lighthouse and a military base. It lacks even a lick of pavement. The bay gets good **surf**, especially at the east end, off the point.

Barrel gas is sold near the entrance to town. Lobster and abalone form the core of the local economy, though there has been talk of building a harbor as part of the Escalera Náutica project (see p25), which would definitely alter the atmosphere of this wee town.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are several restaurants along the main road through town, and they may serve lobster during lobster season (the crustacean is ironically tricky to find, since most of the lobster harvested here gets sold for export). One of these restaurants rents basic rooms (US\$15).

Otherwise you can camp for free on the east end of the bay (to your left if you're facing the water); to get there follow the tracks across the *salitral* (salt flat) toward the conglomeration of vacation houses (they stand out like a gringo in a cantina). Someone will usually stop by and offer to sell you a lobster during lobster season.

Lonchería Las Palmas (tacos US\$1.20, mains US\$4-7) Teal colored and covered in stickers, Lonchería Las Palmas on the waterfront road, serves delicious fish tacos and fresh fish, and faces the bay.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The signed road to Punta Abreojos is long, flat and paved except for the last 16km into town. The latter section is passable (although sometimes very washboarded) for normal passenger vehicles except after heavy rains.

La Bocana

West of Punta Abreojos (to your right if you're facing the ocean), a road leads through the town's de facto junkyard and across a vast *salitral* and, after about 17km (11 miles), to the fishing camp of La Bocana. If Punta Abreojos isn't desolate enough for you, this might be. There's not much out here, but you can camp for free anywhere along the beach and explore the coast to your heart's content. If you plan to spend more than a day, bring all your own supplies. Experienced off-roaders with a sturdy 4WD vehicle and high clearance can continue north up the coast as far as Punta Prieta and Bahía Asunción.

Estero Coyote & Campo Rene

Shortly before you reach Punta Abreojos, a sign points seaward to Campo Rene, an extremely well-kept tourist complex on the shores of the beautiful, shallow lagoon known as Estero Coyote. Lined with squat mangroves and glimmering in the sun, the lagoon teems with life: *lisa* (mullet) burst skyward from the water and, during winter, migratory birds shelter among the mangroves that line the shore. In the estuary, fishing for *corvina* (croaker), *lenguado* (halibut) or *cabrilla* (sea bass) is good. Scallops and clams can also be taken. If you'd rather not find your own shellfish, you can buy oysters from the **oyster cooperative**, just across the estuary from Campo Rene.

Campo Rene rents **kayaks** (per hr US\$5), and can set up **panga rides** (per person US\$5) through the estuary. Kayaks, however, are the best way to spot birds since they're motorless. Another nearby attraction is a massive **dune**, which you can see off in the distance. Local *pangueros* can take you out to see it.

Campo Rene (☎ 615-157-2348; camping per vehicle US\$10, palapa US\$15, cabañas US\$15) is the only place

to stay out here, unless you want to camp out on the beach in the wind (and it gets really windy). It offers small, basic, clean, wooden *cabañas* with shared hot showers and bathrooms. The complex also has a landing strip, a small RV park, a good **restaurant** (mains US\$5-13) and a camping area. There are hot showers for campers.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The nearest town of any size is San Ignacio. The road out to Estero Coyote from the Transpeninsular is passable for nearly all passenger vehicles and even RVs.

SAN IGNACIO

☎ 615 / pop 4000

After the scrub and cacti forests of the Desierto de Vizcaíno, the palm oasis of San Ignacio is a soothing sight. With its lingering colonial atmosphere and its laurel-shaded central plaza backed by a beautifully preserved mission, San Ignacio makes the perfect place to chill out. But there's more – it's also the jumping-off point for two of Baja's premier attractions: whale-watching excursions to Laguna San Ignacio – probably the best spot for contact with so-called friendly whales – and trips to the spectacular pre-Columbian rock-art sites in the Sierra de San Francisco.

San Ignacio has several grocery stores, a handful of restaurants, lodging and modest trailer parks. San Ignacio's Fiesta Patronal (festival in honor of San Ignacio's patron saint, San Ignacio de Loyola) takes place in the last week of July.

History

In 1728 the Mexican Jesuit Juan Bautista Luyando located Misión San Ignacio de Kadakaamán here, planting dense groves of date palms and citrus in the Arroyo El Carrizal surrounding the town. After the Jesuits' expulsion, Dominican missionaries supervised construction of the lava-block church (finished in 1786) that still dominates the town's plaza.

Orientation

San Ignacio is 142km (88 miles) southeast of Guerrero Negro. The town proper is about 1.6km (1 mile) south of the Transpeninsular (which is actually running east-west when it passes San Ignacio); a paved lateral leads south from the highway junction past a small lagoon on the spring-fed Río San Ignacio and

through groves of date palms into the town. Parking is easy, and the town invites walking. Just north of the junction on the Transpeninsular, another road leads from the highway to two hotels (Rice & Beans and Ricardo's) and on to San Lino.

If you're driving into San Ignacio, signs around the plaza point to Laguna San Ignacio along two different directions. The roads meet a block behind the plaza, taking you to the same place.

Street names are not used in San Ignacio.

Information

Most services are found around the plaza, including the post office and Ladatel pay phones. On the plaza, **Kawa Intro** (per hr US\$2; ☎ daily) offers internet service with a slow connection.

Casa Lereé (opposite) has a superb selection of books on Baja California, and its amiable North American owner, Juanita Ames, can tell you about hiking in the area. Check out the historical photo archive she's assembled, with photos dating to the late 1800s.

Sights & Activities

MISIÓN SAN IGNACIO

With lava-block walls nearly 1.2m (4ft) thick, the former Jesuit **Misión San Ignacio de Kadakaamán** (admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm daily Oct-Mar, 8am-3pm Mon-Sat Apr-Sep) stands directly across from San Ignacio's small plaza and is flanked by a tiny grove of citrus trees. Occupying the site of a former Cochimí *ranchería* (indigenous settlement), the mission has been in continuous use since its founding in 1728. One of the three 18th-century altarpieces inside is dedicated to the San Ignacio de Loyola, the town's patron saint. The mission was initiated by Jesuit Juan Bautista Luyando, and was completed in 1786 under the direction of Dominican Juan Crisóstomo Gómez. Epidemics reduced the Cochimí population from about 5000 to only 120 by the late 18th century, but the mission lasted until 1840.

MUSEO SAN IGNACIO

Just south of the mission church, the Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Historia (INAH) has built an impressive new **museum** (☎ 154-0222; admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm daily Oct-Mar, 8am-3pm Mon-Sat Apr-Sep) that has elaborate displays on the Desierto Central's rock art, including a replica cave-mural site that's the next best

thing to descending into Cañón San Pablo (p164) itself. You must request permission at the INAH office here to visit any rock-art site in the area.

HIKING

It's well worth hiking up one of the mesas around San Ignacio. Trails are well marked, and there are a couple of old adobe ruins you can hike to. The views are good, and the walk offers the chance to experience some of the quiet beauty of the desert. Juanita, at Casa Lereé, provides free hiking maps showing the area highlights.

WHALE-WATCHING

The 'friendly' gray whales that visit nearby Laguna San Ignacio every winter are probably the town's biggest draw. While you can sign on for a tour, you can also head out to the lagoon yourself and save US\$20 by arranging a boat ride with the *pangueros* themselves. You get the same boat ride because the *panga* owners are the only people licensed to navigate the lagoon during whale season. However, you won't have an English-speaking guide (not that you'll be listening to anyone anyway as you stare into the eye of a gray whale calf) and you have to drive out to the lagoon yourself. You can also see the whales from the shore. For more information about the lagoon, see p166.

Tours

Kuyima (☎ 154-0070; www.kuyima.com; 🕒 8am-8pm daily Dec 15-Apr 15, 8am-1pm & 3-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat Apr 16-Dec 14), a local cooperative on the plaza, arranges whale-watching trips (US\$60 per person, including transportation) in season as well as visits to rock-art sites in the surrounding area year-round.

You can hire guides directly through INAH (see Museo San Ignacio, opposite) to take you to rock-art sites throughout the Sierra de San Francisco. Hotel Posadas (right) arranges both whale-watching trips and excursions to Sierra de San Francisco.

Sleeping

BUDGET

San Ignacio has several basic but good riverside RV park-cum-campgrounds along the road into town. Some of them are unattended outside whale-watching season (which is roughly December through April).

Camping La Muralla (campsites US\$3) On the western side of the road, La Muralla offers tent sites only.

Don Chon (campsites US\$4) Across the road from La Muralla, Don Chon has plenty of shade and a nice riverside location but, like La Muralla, lacks showers and toilets.

El Padrino RV Park (☎ 154-0089; camping per person US\$4, RV with/without hookups US\$14/8) Just south of Hotel La Pinta, El Padrino has about 100 sites (15 with full hookups) beneath handsome stands of date palms. Four good showers have dependable hot water. What makes the place *really* worth while is the restaurant (p164).

Camping Los Petates (campsites from US\$5) New and inviting Los Petates sits on the river among stands of date palms and barbecue pits.

Rice & Beans RV Park (☎ 154-0283; ricardoriceandbeans@hotmail.com; campsites US\$10, RV with/without hookups US\$15/5, s/d US\$40/65; 📍 🚻) On the road to San Lino, Rice & Beans is a favorite RV park, hotel and restaurant for the off-road crowd. Thirty RV spaces have full hookups. The hotel rooms are in a two-story block at the edge of the RV area and, other than the fact that they're giant, are quite standard: beds, white nightstands and a bathroom.

Hotel Posadas (☎ 154-0313; r US\$25; 📍) On the road to Laguna San Ignacio, behind the plaza, the little motel-style Posadas offers cell-blocklike rooms livened up with a yellow paint job and colorful bed spreads over slightly saggy mattresses. It's clean, extremely friendly and, for the price, hard to beat. The owners can arrange all manner of tours around town.

Chalita (☎ 154-0082; r US\$25) This family-owned place, on the southern side of the plaza, has a few comfy but basic rooms around a backyard filled with fruit trees. It's akin to staying in the family's backyard.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Casa Lereé (☎ 154-0158; janebames@prodigy.net.mx, www.prodigyweb.net.mx/janebames; r US\$35-65; 📍) Historic Casa Lereé has three lovely rooms, a huge bougainvillea-shaded backyard and a delightfully friendly North American host who is full of information about the area. Formerly a residence, two of the rooms have private bathroom, and the third shares the house bathroom. Each is adorned with wall hangings, rugs and paintings (some verging on psychedelic) by a local artist. There's a wee bookstore attached and a cozy common area that was once the barn.

Ignacio Springs Bed & Breakfast (☎ 154-0333, 104-7747; www.ignaciosprings.com; yurt US\$60-90, communal tent US\$24; 🚽 🛏) These are some serious yurts! We're talkin' deee-luxe. All five have air-con, two have private bathrooms and the other three share an immaculate bathroom. There's also a private house (a great family option) and a snazzy *palapa* with a private bathroom. It's right on the river, and the US owners provide kayaks for your paddling pleasure. There's free internet, and tours can be arranged on-site. Excellent.

Hotel La Pinta San Ignacio (☎ 154-0300, in the USA 800-800-9632; www.lapintahotels.com; r US\$77-84; 📍 🚽) San Ignacio's slickest hotel is part of the La Pinta chain and on the main road into town. It sports colonial-style architecture, a grassy courtyard, swimming pool and groves of date palms. Colorful Mexican glasswork livens up otherwise standard (but definitely comfy) rooms.

Eating & Drinking

Wee San Ignacio is hardly a culinary destination, but several places offer darn good food. Entertainment and drinking options are almost nil.

Tota's (mains US\$4-8) On the road behind the plaza (toward the ocean), Tota's was once a great spot for Mexican standards. It was closed on our last visit, but the neighbors said new owners were planning to reopen. Check it out.

Chalita (mains US\$5-6) Facing the plaza, Chalita serves good inexpensive Mexican food in a family atmosphere.

El Padrino Restaurant & Bar (Flojos; mains US\$5-9) Inside its namesake RV park on the road into town, casual El Padrino serves delicious, fresh seafood and Mexican *antojitos* at great prices. It also has a pool table, meaning it's a good place for a drink.

Rice & Beans (mains US\$6-10) At its namesake RV park, this established restaurant serves good food all day long; it's particularly handy if you just want to stop for a bite to eat without driving into San Ignacio.

Ignacio Springs (above) does family-style home-cooked dinners by reservation. Just call before 2pm or, preferably, the day before. It's open for breakfast with espresso, sweet treats and date shakes for walk-ins.

Two restaurants out at the junction of the Transpeninsular and the road to San Ignacio sell Mexican *antojitos*.

Getting There & Away

Transpeninsular buses pick up passengers opposite the Pemex station at the San Lino junction. There are at least five northbound buses daily between 6am and 3pm and as many southbound between 6am and 10:30pm.

AROUND SAN IGNACIO

San Ignacio is a great base for all sorts of trips. Besides the sites covered here, you can head out for day trips or overnight jaunts to Punta Abreojos (p161) and La Bocana (p161) or, if you have a sturdy vehicle, south to San Juanico. And we haven't even mentioned the plethora of interesting desert roads...

Sierra de San Francisco

Part of the Vizcaíno Biosphere Reserve and a designated World Cultural Heritage Site, the Sierra de San Francisco is home to the most spectacular manifestations of Baja California's unique cultural heritage: pre-Hispanic rock art. To date, researchers have located about 500 pre-Columbian rock-art sites in an area of roughly 11,200 sq km (4300 sq miles) in this mountainous region north of San Ignacio.

The gateway to the Sierra is the village of **San Francisco de la Sierra**. San Francisco's residents, descendants of the early *vaqueros* who settled the peninsula along with the missionaries, still maintain a distinctive pastoral culture, herding mostly goats in the surrounding countryside. They also retain a unique vocabulary, with many terms surviving from the 18th century, and produce some remarkable crafts – look at the guides' *polainas* (leather leggings) for riding in the bush, for instance. Such items are generally made to order, but occasionally villagers will have a pair of men's *teguas* (leather shoes) or women's open-toed *huaraches* (sandals) for sale.

INFORMATION

Visitors to all rock-art sites in the Sierra de San Francisco must obtain permission from INAH in San Ignacio (see Museo San Ignacio, p162) and pay a US\$3 admission fee. INAH will contact an authorized guide (required for anyone visiting any site). You are required to agree to a series of INAH restrictions established to preserve the paintings. (Visitors may not touch the paintings, smoke at any site or take flash photographs. Campfires and alcoholic beverages are prohibited in the vicinity of sites.)

ROCK ART OF CENTRAL BAJA

When Jesuit missionaries inquired about the creators and meaning of the giant rock paintings of the Sierra de San Francisco, the indigenous Cochimí responded with a bewilderment that was, in all likelihood, utterly feigned. The Cochimí claimed ignorance of both symbols and techniques, but it was not unusual, when missionaries came calling, to deny knowledge of the profound religious beliefs that those missionaries wanted to eradicate.

At sites such as **Cueva Pintada**, Cochimí painters and their predecessors decorated high rock overhangs with vivid red-and-black representations of human figures, bighorn sheep, pumas and deer, as well as more abstract designs. It is speculated that the painters built scaffolds of palm logs to reach the ceilings. Postcontact motifs do include Christian crosses, but these are few and small in contrast to the dazzling pre-Columbian figures surrounding them.

Cueva de las Flechas, across Cañón San Pablo, has similar paintings, but the uncommon feature of arrows through some of the figures here is the subject of serious speculation. One interpretation is that these depict a period of warfare. Similar opinions suggest that they record a raid or a trespass upon tribal territory or perhaps constitute a warning against such trespass. One researcher, however, has hypothesized that the arrows represent a shaman's metaphor for death in the course of a vision quest. If this is the case, it is no wonder that the Cochimí would claim ignorance of the paintings and their significance in the face of missionaries, unrelentingly hostile to such beliefs.

Such speculation is impossible to prove, since the Cochimí no longer exist. However, the Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Historia (INAH) has undertaken a survey of the Cochimí, the largest systematic archaeological survey of a hunter-gatherer people yet attempted in Mexico. INAH has discovered that, in addition to rock art and grinding stones, the Cochimí left evidence of permanent dwellings. In recognition of its cultural importance, the Sierra de San Francisco has been declared a Unesco World Heritage Site. It is part of the Reserva de la Biosfera El Vizcaíno, which includes the major gray-whale calving areas of Laguna San Ignacio and Laguna Ojo de Liebre.

The Sierra de San Francisco remains an INAH-protected archaeological zone, which means that all visitors need entry permits. The INAH office in San Ignacio issues tourist permits only; research permits must be obtained in Mexico City.

Guides, who can take up to four people, charge about US\$5 per person or up to about US\$10 for four people for a day trip to Cueva del Ratón. Excursions to Cañón San Pablo involve hiring a guide for about US\$20 per day, a mule for each individual in the party for about US\$15 per day, plus additional pack animals, either mules or burros, to carry supplies such as tents and food. Visitors must also provide food for the guide; San Francisco de la Sierra has a small market, but it's better to bring food from Guerrero Negro or San Ignacio.

Backpacking is permitted, but backpackers must hire a guide and mule. Most will find the steep volcanic terrain easier to manage on muleback, leaving more time to explore the canyon and enjoy the scenery. The precipitous muleback descent into the canyon takes five or six hours, the ascent slightly less; in winter this means almost an entire day devoted to transportation alone. The best time to visit is late March or April, when days are fairly long but temperatures are not yet unpleasantly hot.

One of the very best sources of information on these and other rock sites is Harry Crosby's authoritative *The Cave Paintings of Baja California*.

ROCK-ART SITES

About 2.5km (1.5 miles) west of San Francisco, **Cueva del Ratón** (☎ 6am-5pm) is the most accessible site, featuring typical representations of *monos* (human figures), *borregos* (desert bighorn sheep) and deer, but they are not as well preserved as paintings elsewhere in the area. Excursions to Cueva del Ratón can take about three hours in a 4WD and make a good day trip from San Ignacio.

The area's most rewarding excursion is a descent into the dramatic **Cañón San Pablo** to see its famous **Cueva Pintada**, **Cueva de las Flechas** and other magnificent sites. Cueva Pintada, really an extensive rock overhang rather than a cave, is the single most imposing site. It's also known as Gardner's Cave after the popular American novelist Earle Stanley Gardner

wrote several books about his adventures in the area. Mexicans, however, intensely resent the identification with Gardner and strongly prefer the Spanish term. Exploring Cañón San Pablo requires a minimum of two days, preferably three.

TOURS

Going to INAH and working with guides directly generally requires proficiency in Spanish, your own vehicle and a fair amount of legwork. It's much easier (though a bit pricier) to visit the sites as part of a tour organised through an operator in San Ignacio. Along with others, Ignacio Springs Bed & Breakfast (p164), Kuyima (p163) and Hotel Posadas (p163) offer highly regarded tours. In particular, the family who owns Hotel Posadas has been guiding people into the Sierra de San Francisco for decades.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

San Francisco de la Sierra is reached by a graded road from a conspicuously signed junction at Km 118 of the Transpeninsular, 45km (28 miles) north of San Ignacio. The road is regularly graded, but spots can be difficult for vehicles with poor traction and low clearance (though 4WD is not necessary). It can be very difficult after a rain.

Laguna San Ignacio

Along with Laguna Ojo de Liebre and Bahía Magdalena, Laguna San Ignacio is one of the major winter **whale-watching** sites on Baja's Pacific coast, with probably the highest concentration of 'friendly' whales of any location. For a general discussion of whale-watching in Baja, see p46.

Whale-watching excursions take place from December 15 to April 15, but whales are most abundant in January, February and March. During other seasons, the area has outstanding **bird-watching** in the stunted mangroves and at offshore **Isla Pelicanos**, where hundreds of ospreys and as many as 5000 cormorants nest; landing on the island is prohibited, but *pangas* may approach it. **Sea kayaking** is allowed but only in the mangroves, not in the main lagoon.

WHALE-WATCHING TOURS

There are basically two ways to take a whale-watching boat ride on the lagoon: by joining a tour, or by driving to the lagoon and

negotiating with the *pangueros* themselves. The *pangueros* are the only people licensed to take people out on the lagoon. They charge a flat rate of US\$40 per person; either you pay it or the tour operator pays it. Operators in San Ignacio charge about US\$60 per person, but that includes the two hour ride to the lagoon and – usually – lunch and a knowledgeable, English-speaking guide (though the *pangueros* speak some English). Boat excursions last about three hours. International operators charge more, take care of almost everything and generally have highly qualified guides.

SLEEPING & EATING

Camping at the fish camps costs US\$5 to US\$10, and there are opportunities for free camping elsewhere around the lagoon.

Kuyima (☎ 154-0070; www.kuyima.com) Based in San Ignacio, Kuyima operates a spotless whale-watching camp with solar shower bags and clean flush toilets. *Cabañas* cost about US\$165 per night per person, and include all meals and the whale-watching boat excursion. A four-day/three-night package costs US\$495. Tent spaces and RV sites cost US\$10 for up to four people. Reservations are required for the *cabañas*. Kuyima's cozy solar-powered dining room has whale and natural history videos, as well as a library of natural history books. Meals are available to nonguests in the excellent restaurant (mains US\$7 to US\$10), open from 6am to 10pm.

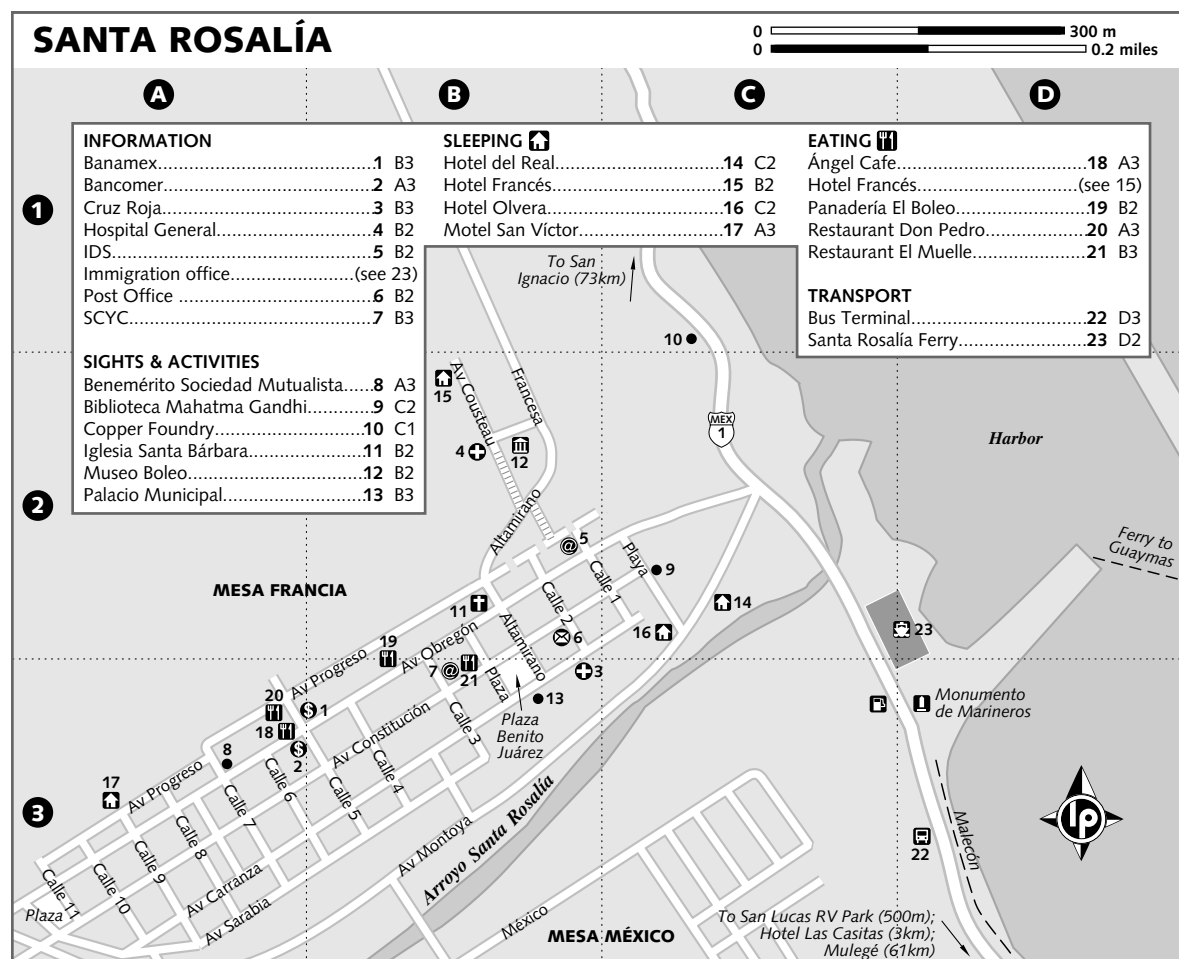
GETTING THERE & AWAY

The road from San Ignacio has deteriorated in recent years; most passenger cars need at least two hours to cover the 65km (40 miles) to La Fridera fish camp (assuming no rain has fallen recently) without wrecking their suspension. The first half of the road from the village is spine-wrenching washboard, but the second half is notably better.

SANTA ROSALÍA

☎ 615 / pop 10,500

This former French mining town is a Baja anomaly. Wandering its narrow streets, lined with old balconied houses, immediately sets you wondering, 'wait a minute, where *am* I?' Not only have you stepped back in time, you've seemingly stepped into...French Guiana? But everyone is eating tacos! It's a strange and wonderful place, with a vibrant street life and a tropical feel. Papaya trees and



other plants grow from uneven sidewalk beds, screen doors open directly off the street into people's living rooms and taco stands line the sidewalks. With all the off-kilter, colorfully painted wooden buildings fading in the sun, it's as if the town has been allowed to age gracefully, rather than receiving the soulless facelifts so typical of historic towns throughout the world.

Santa Rosalía is great for a visit, but its lack of beaches and active harbor make it more of a cultural treat than a beach-type, activities-based destination.

History

Santa Rosalía dates from the 1880s, when the French-owned Compañía del Boleo (one of the Rothschild family's many worldwide ventures) built it under a 99-year concession granted by the government of Mexican president Porfirio Díaz. Nearly all of the buildings downtown were constructed from timber imported from Oregon and British Columbia, and the French-style colonial homes still stand along the main streets. The Compañía also assembled a prefabricated, galvanized-iron

church designed by Alexandre Gustave Eiffel for the 1889 World Fair in Paris (see the boxed text, p169). The church is still in use, while balconies and porches along the tree-lined streets encourage a spirited street life contrasting with the residential segregation of the mining era.

The French left by 1954, but a palpable legacy remains in the town's atypical architecture, a bakery that sells Baja's best baguettes and building codes decreeing that new construction must conform to the town's unique heritage.

Orientation

Santa Rosalía is on the gulf coast 73km (45 miles) east of San Ignacio and 61km (38 miles) north of Mulegé. Most of central Santa Rosalía nestles in its namesake *arroyo* west of the Transpeninsular, while residential areas occupy plateaus north and south of the canyon. French administrators built their houses on the northern Mesa Francia, now home to municipal authorities, the museum and many historic buildings, whereas Mexican officials occupied the southern Mesa México.

The town's narrow *avenidas* (avenues) run northeast-southwest; its short *calles* (streets) run northwest-southeast. One-way traffic is the rule. RV owners should park their vehicles along or near the Transpeninsular and walk into town.

Plaza Benito Juárez, about four blocks west of the highway, is the focus of the town. The Andador Costero, overlooking the harbor south of downtown, is an attractive *malecón* (waterfront promenade) with good views of offshore Isla Tortuga.

Information

Most tourist-oriented services are on or near Av Obregón. There is no official information office. Santa Rosalía has the only banks between Guerrero Negro and Loreto; Mulegé-bound travelers should change US dollars or traveler's checks here.

Banamex (cnr Av Obregón & Calle 5) Bank with ATM.

Bancomer (cnr Av Obregón & Calle 5) Bank with ATM.

Cruz Roja (Red Cross; ☎ 152-0640; Av Carranza) Near Calle 2 and Plaza Juárez.

Hospital General (☎ 152-0789; Av Cousteau) In Mesa Francia.

IDS (cnr Calle 1 & Av Obregón; per hr US\$2) Internet café.

Immigration office (☎ 152-0313; Transpeninsular) In the ferry terminal.

Post office (cnr Av Constitución & Calle 2)

SCYC (cnr Calle 3 & Av Constitución; per hr US\$2.50) Internet café.

Sights

HISTORIC SITES

Due to its origins as a 19th-century company town, Santa Rosalía's architecture is fascinatingly atypical for a Mexican town. Its most famous landmark is the **Iglesia Santa Bárbara** (cnr Av Obregón & Altamirano; ☎ daily), designed by French engineer Alexandre Gustave Eiffel and exhibited at the Paris World Exposition in 1889. The church was then disassembled and stored in Brussels, until a director of the Compañía del Boleo stumbled upon it by chance in 1895. He had it shipped to Santa Rosalía, where it was reassembled in 1897 and adorned with attractive stained-glass windows.

On the southwest side of the main plaza, the **Palacio Municipal** (Town Hall; Av Carranza near Altamirano) was originally a school, burned down, was rebuilt in 1925, renovated in 1967 and became the town hall in 1978. It's based on a design by Eiffel. Closer to the Transpeninsular,

the faded, green-trimmed, schoolhouse-like **Biblioteca Mahatma Gandhi** (cnr Playa & Av Constitución; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri) was another Compañía del Boleo project. The 1916 **Benemérito Sociedad Mutualista** (cnr Av Obregón & Calle 7) features an interesting clock tower.

Many buildings on **Mesa Francia** also deserve a visit, most notably the Fundación del Pacífico, now the Museo Boleo (below), and the **Hotel Francés** (opposite). Lined with numerous French colonial houses, **Av Cousteau** runs between the museum and the hotel and is adorned with antique mining equipment, steam locomotives, mine cars and cranes.

Also worth a look are the ruins of the **copper foundry** along the Transpeninsular. Much of the original plant is intact.

MUSEO BOLEO

Once the business offices of the Compañía del Boleo, this **museum** (Mesa Francia; admission by donation; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) includes accountants' offices (featuring old desks topped with dusty adding machines), the purchasing office (filled with maritime memorabilia), the pay office (complete with massive walk-in safe) and the boardroom. The museum overlooks downtown from Mesa Francia at the southern end of Av Cousteau. Even if you're not into history museums, it's worth walking through this one just to see the building. The wide balconies catch the ocean breeze and the views over the Sea of Cortez are simply splendid.

Festivals & Events

Celebrations of Santa Rosalía's **Fundación de la Ciudad** (Founding of the City) last four days in mid-October.

Sleeping

Hotels in town are all walking distance from restaurants and the main plaza.

San Lucas RV Park (campsites US\$6) From between Km 181 and Km 182 on the Transpeninsular (south of town), a 1km (half-mile) road leads west to this spacious RV park. It has a good beach a boat launch, flush toilets and hot showers.

Motel San Víctor (cnr Av Progreso 36 & Calle 9; r US\$15; ☎) Basic but quiet, this pleasant, family-run operation on a shady street is more than fine for a good night's rest. Rooms are dark and simple but ample and open onto the shaded parking area.

EIFFEL BEYOND THE TOWER

Few know that French engineer Alexandre Gustave Eiffel (1832–1923), so renowned for his tower in Paris, also played a significant role in the New World. New York's *Statue of Liberty* is his most prominent transatlantic landmark (he was the structural engineer), but his constructions also dot the Latin American landscape from Mexico to Chile. Santa Rosalía's Iglesia Santa Bárbara is only one of many examples.

In 1868, in partnership with the engineer Théophile Seyrig, Eiffel formed G Eiffel et Compagnie, which later became the Compagnie des Etablissements Eiffel. Among its notable creations in South America were the Aduana de Arica (Customs House, 1872) in Chile, Arica's Iglesia San Marcos, the gasworks of La Paz (Bolivia) and the railroad bridges of Oroya (Peru). Most of these were designed and built in Eiffel's workshops in the Parisian suburb of Levallois-Perret and then shipped abroad for assembly.

What might have been his greatest Latin American monument effectively ended his career. In the late 19th century, Eiffel had argued strongly in favor of building a transoceanic canal across Nicaragua but a few years later he obtained the contract to build the locks for Ferdinand de Lesseps' corruption-plagued French canal across Panama. Implicated in irregular contracts, Eiffel was sentenced to two years in prison and fined a substantial amount. Though his conviction was overturned, he never returned to his career as a builder.

Hotel Olvera (☎ 152-0267; cnr Av Montoya & Playa; r with/without air-con US\$30/20; 🚽) 'Rickety' is an understatement for this creaky old hotel, but the place is definitely endearing (and atmospheric) once you're settled in. Rooms are worn but clean, and the best ones open onto the big balcony overlooking the streets below. It's a good place to pretend you're on the run from the law. Careful on that staircase.

Hotel del Real (☎ 152-0068; Av Montoya 7; r US\$25-35; 🚽) In yet another historic building, the Hotel del Real offers adequate rooms in the original building in front and more spacious (but pricier) rooms in the newer add-on out back. A small banistered stairway leads up to a huge wooden porch. Unfortunately its location on a busy street makes it a bit noisy.

Hotel Las Casitas (☎ 152-3023; www.santarosalia.casitas.com; Transpeninsular Km 195; r US\$55; 📞 🚽 📺) Santa Rosalía's newest hotel, 3km south of town, has only five rooms, but each is beautifully tiled and has a private balcony and sublime views of the sea from the queen-sized beds. A hot tub completes its allure.

Hotel Francés (☎ 152-2052; Av Cousteau 15; r US\$60; 📞 🚽 📺) Up on Mesa Francia, the historic Hotel Francés once provided all the 'necessary services' (as the INAH paper on the door explains) to lone French employees (men) of the Compañía del Boleo. Possibly more fun then, it now offers an atmospheric restaurant, a small swimming pool, wonderful views of the rusting copper foundry and

air-conditioned period-style rooms. The walls are covered in original fabric wallpaper.

Eating

The fun of eating in Santa Rosalía is sauntering up to one of the sidewalk taco stands along the east end of Av Obregón and eating at its outdoor counters with everyone else. Most of them serve *carne asada* tacos.

Panadería El Boleo (☎ 152-0310; Av Obregón btwn Calles 3 & 4; pastries US\$0.25-1.50; 🕒 8am-9pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun) Started by the French when mining operations were in full swing at the turn of the 20th century, this is one of the best (and definitely most interesting) bakeries in Baja California. For many travelers, it's an obligatory stop for its delicious Mexican and French breads and pastries. Baguettes usually sell out by about 10am.

Ángel Cafe (cnr Av Obregón & Calle 5; US\$4-7) This place serves sandwiches and hamburgers in a nice, open patio.

Restaurant Don Pedro (Calle 5 near Av Obregón; mains US\$4-7) For standard *antojitos* at good prices, try Restaurant Don Pedro.

Restaurant El Muelle (cnr Av Constitución & Plaza; mains US\$4-10) El Muelle is great both for its crispy-crust pizzas and its outdoor patio, which offers, by far, some of the best shade in town. The margaritas are darn good, too.

Hotel Francés (mains US\$7-12; 🕒 7am-midnight Mon-Sat) The restaurant at this hotel is very popular, and the breakfasts are reportedly delicious.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Santa Rosalía's small marina offers some possibilities for catching a ride by private yacht north or south along the gulf coast or across to mainland Mexico, but you'll likely have to hang around a while.

The **Santa Rosalía Ferry** (☎ 152-1246, in Mexico 800-672-9053; www.ferrysantarosalia.com; 🗓 ticket window 9am-6pm Mon, Wed & Thu, 10am-3pm Tue, Fri & Sun, 10am-2pm Sat) to Guaymas, Sonora (mainland Mexico) leaves Tuesday and Wednesday at 9am and Friday and Sunday at 8pm. The journey is nine hours. The boat departs Guaymas on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday at 8pm.

One-way standard/first-class passenger fares are US\$55/65. It's US\$27.50/32.50 for children under 11. Fares for cars and pickups up to 5.4m (17ft, 4in) are US\$248; vehicles up to 7m (22ft, 11in) cost US\$324. Cars with trailers (total length up to 15m or 45ft), cost a whopping US\$880, which includes one passenger. Other vehicle fares do *not* include passengers. Rates are one way. Advanced reservations are recommended.

BUS

Autotransportes Aguila and ABC buses between Tijuana and La Paz stop at Santa Rosalía's bus terminal, on the western side of the Transpeninsular opposite the *malecón*. Approximate fares (they change regularly) are listed here. There's also one night bus to Mexicali (US\$94, 14 to 16 hours).

Destination	Fare (US\$)	Duration (hr)
Cabo San Lucas	54	10
Ciudad Constitución	27	5
Ensenada	66	12
Guerrero Negro	22	4
La Paz	43	8
Loreto	17	3
Mulegé	6	1
San Ignacio	8	1
San José del Cabo	59	11
San Quintín	50	9
Tijuana	73	11-13
Vizcaíno	11	2

MULEGÉ

☎ 615 / pop 4000

On the northern end of the stunning Bahía Concepción, Mulegé is a small town and it feels

that way. People are friendly, and the longer you stay, the more you begin to recognize the characters that make the place unique: the old man who disappears behind the door off the plaza, the bicycle repairman who once rode to Guatemala, the hotel owners and shop owners, the guy who sells hot dogs on the plaza every night. The town has two faces: the Mexicans and the itinerant, slightly cliquy gringo residents who come and go with the seasons. You could spend a couple days here or shack up for weeks, getting to know every *taquería*, every snorkeling spot, every beautiful beach on the bay and every adventurous hike into nearby Cañon de Trinidad. The diving is outstanding, and the water is warm year-round.

Mulegé was badly flooded during Hurricane John in 2006, but almost everything was up and running upon our most recent visit.

Orientation

Mulegé sits about 3km inland from the Sea of Cortez on the banks of the Río Mulegé. The bulk of visitor services are on the northern side of the river, on, or near, Jardín Corona, the town plaza. Drivers of large RVs will be unable to negotiate downtown Mulegé's narrow, irregular, one-way streets.

Information

Mulegé has no tourist office. There's been talk of opening a bank, but until one materializes you'll have to go to Santa Rosalía or Loreto. Most businesses accept US dollars.

Baja Adventure Tours (Madero; per hr US\$2) There's an internet café inside this tour operator's office.

Centro de Salud (☎ 153-0298; Madero; 🗓 24hr) Basic health clinic with very attentive staff.

Lavamática Claudia (☎ 153-0057; cnr Zaragoza & Moctezuma) Charges US\$5 per load of laundry.

Mini Super Padilla (Cnr Zaragoza & Av General Martínez) Offers long-distance telephone services. There are also Ladatel phones around town.

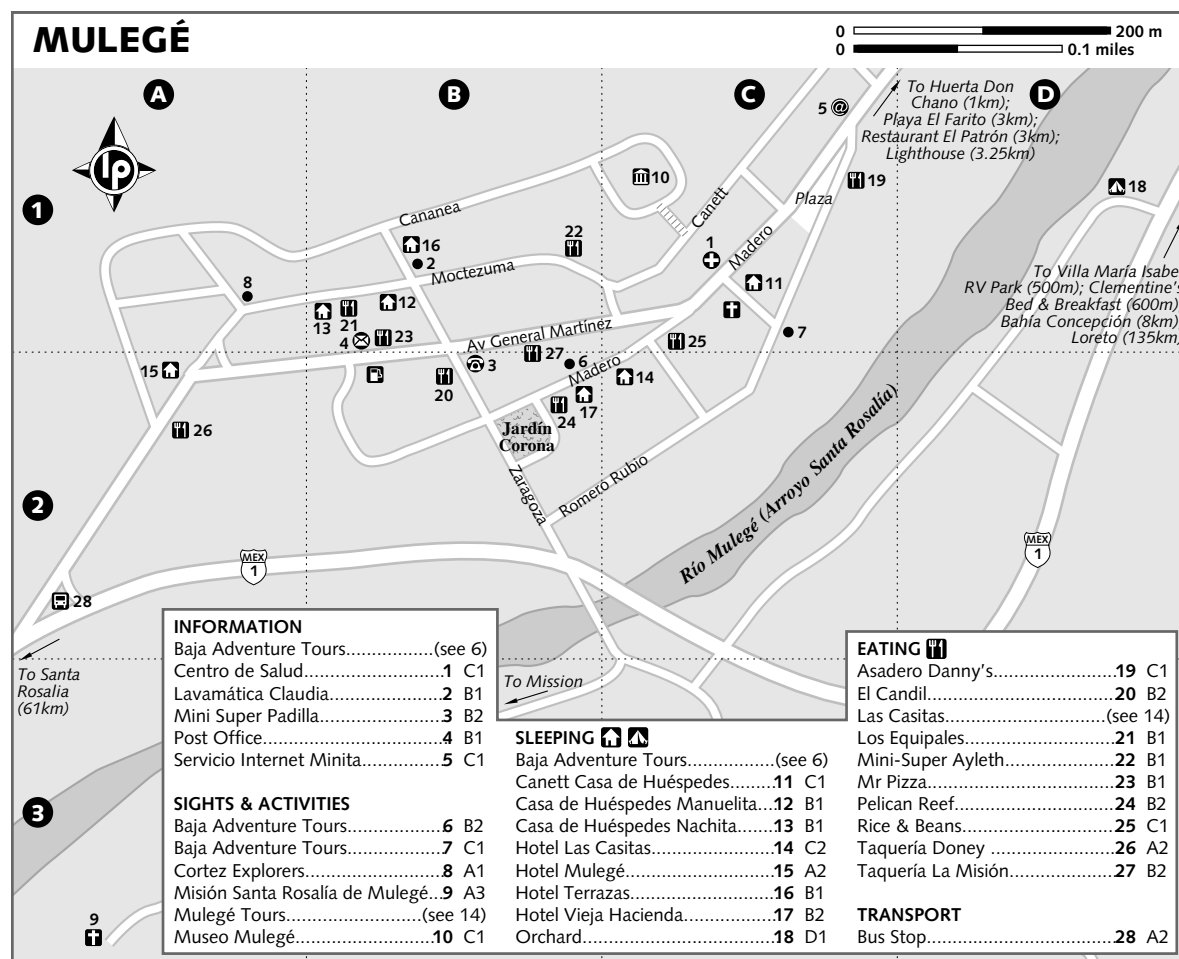
Post office (Av General Martínez) Opposite the Pemex station.

Servicio Internet Minita (Madero; per hr US\$2) Internet café.

Sights

MISIÓN SANTA ROSALÍA DE MULEGÉ

Across the Transpeninsular and near the southern bank of the river, Mulegé's restored **mission** (admission free; 🗓 10am-2pm) stands atop a hill southwest of town. Founded in 1705 and completed in 1766, the mission functioned



until 1828, when the declining indigenous population led to its abandonment. Remodeled several times, the church is less architecturally distinguished than its counterparts in San Ignacio and San Borja; it's imposing but utilitarian, with fewer enticing details. The exterior alone is still faithful to the original.

Behind the church, a short footpath climbs a volcanic outcrop to an overlook with soothing views of the palm-lined Arroyo Santa Rosalía and its surroundings. This is one of the visual highlights of the area, well worth a detour even for travelers not intending to stay in town.

MUSEO MULEGÉ

Before it housed local artifacts, the town's **museum** (Cananea; admission by donation; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Fri) housed criminals. This strikingly whitewashed neocolonial building overlooking town was once Mulegé's 'prison without doors,' an experimental prison housing federal inmates who enjoyed a great deal of liberty. Except for the most serious felons, who were confined in its inner compound, prisoners usually left at 6am for jobs in town, returning

at 6pm. They could even attend town dances, and a number of them married locally.

Now, as the town museum, the building displays some eclectic artifacts: archaeological and religious materials, cotton gins, antique diving equipment, firearms and – most curious of all – the massive shell of a Star 48B space-launch motor, which dropped out of the sky in 2000, landing on a nearby ranch.

Activities

Mulegé is one of the peninsula's best **diving** destinations. The water is incredibly warm and everything from puffer fish and turtles to manta rays, whale sharks, guitar sharks and more are down there to keep you company. The best sites are around the Santa Inés Islands (north of town) and just north of Punta Concepción.

There is excellent beach diving and **snorkeling** at Punta Prieta, near the lighthouse at the mouth of Arroyo Santa Rosalía. The best snorkeling beach in the area is Playa El Burro (p174) on Bahía Concepción.

Cortez Explorers (☎ 153-0500, in the USA 760-716-7288; www.cortez-explorers.com; Moctezuma 75A; ☎ daily)

is a British-owned, PADI-certified dive school, offering everything from first-time dives and introductory courses to full PADI certification and instructor training. The owners' diving knowledge and enthusiasm for the area are extraordinary. Shore dives cost US\$50/90 for one/two dives; local boat-based dives cost US\$70/110, or US\$110/135 to the Santa Inés Islands. A PADI Open Water course costs US\$385. The most expensive course is the PADI Divemaster for US\$625. It also offers guided snorkeling trips by boat for US\$45/90 for two hours/all day. You can snorkel with sea lions from June to September.

Salvador Castro, owner of **Mulegé Tours** (☎ 153-0232, 153-0019, 103-5081; mulegetours@hotmail.com), and **Ciro Cuesta**, owner of **Baja Adventure Tours** (☎ 153-0566, 103-0503; cirocuesta@hotmail.com; main office Romero Rubio s/n; other office Madero s/n), offer trips to see cave paintings in Cañón La Trinidad (p175) for US\$40 to US\$50 (depending on whether it includes lunch and beer), as well as trips to San Borjita, local ranches and bird-watching tours. Salvador Castro can also be contacted through Hotel Las Casitas (right).

Bahía Concepción, south of Mulegé, is the main destination for **sea kayaking** in the area. For **mountain biking**, Cortez Explorers offers bike rentals for US\$15 per day. Mulegé is a popular **fishing** destination as well.

Sleeping

Mulegé lacks upscale accommodations, yet it has a couple of very appealing family hotels; you won't be dowsed in all the mod-cons but you'll be well cared for.

BUDGET

Several families rent rooms in their homes. Known as *casas de huéspedes*, they are very basic accommodations but offer a chance to stay with a Mexican family (and save a little money in the process). There's also plenty of camping around town but be sure to have bug repellent when camping near the Río Mulegé.

Eastbound Madero and Romero Rubio merge into a single dirt road leading to beach camping areas at Playa El Farito, 3km (2 miles) northeast of town. This is also a popular party spot for local youth, so there's no guarantee of any sleep, at least on weekends anyway.

Huerta Don Chano (☎ 153-0720; per vehicle/RV US\$8/15) On the way to Playa El Farito you'll

pass this place which offers grassy areas on which to pitch a tent just off the north shore of the river. There are showers and bathrooms, and water and electricity for RVs.

Orchard (Huerta Saucedo RV Park; ☎ 153-0300; campsites/RV US\$5/16) Abounding with palms, mangoes and citrus the Orchard is 1km (half a mile) east of town on the river side of the Transpeninsular and offers some of the best camping around. Hot (sometimes lukewarm) showers, decent toilets and a boat ramp are available. The Orchard was badly hit by Hurricane John and was closed at the time of research. It should be open again by the time you read this.

Villa María Isabel RV Park (☎ 153-0246; campsites without/with hookups US\$6/15) Just beyond the Orchard this is a fine spot, but the real reason to stop here is the fabulous bread and cinnamon rolls at its first-rate bakery.

Casa de Huéspedes Nachita (Moctezuma; d US\$15) Doña Nachita rents a large old room with saggy beds and a shared bathroom. It's as bare-bones as they come, but totally legitimate. Prices may vary slightly, depending on how Nachita and her husband are feeling when you arrive.

Casa de Huéspedes Manuelita (Moctezuma; r with/without air-con US\$20/15) Provided you don't mind a cage full of parakeets outside your bedroom door, this friendly little place is fine for a few nights' shut-eye. It's a step up from Nachita's and offers adequate rooms with private bathrooms.

Canett Casa de Huéspedes (☎ 153-0272; Madero; s/d US\$15/20). This plain, eight-room guesthouse does the trick if you're living on the cheap, but the church bells across the street make morning mincemeat of your brain.

Baja Adventure Tours (☎ 153-0566, 103-0503; cirocuesta@hotmail.com; r US\$25-30; 🚽) There are three rooms with air-con and private baths for rent here.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Mulegé (☎ 153-0416; s/d US\$22/38; 🚽) Near the Y-intersection at the entrance to town, this is Mulegé's 'modern' hotel. Rooms are spotless, comfortable and have satellite TV, but character is nil.

Hotel Las Casitas (☎ 153-0019, 153-0681; lascasitas1962@hotmail.com; Madero; s/d US\$29/35; 🚽) Colorful bougainvilleas and tropical plants shade the two patios of this welcoming hotel in an attractive historic building. The attached

restaurant is excellent, the management is friendly and the rooms are decorated with colorful tiles, Mexican handicrafts, and decorative furniture. The place just *feels* like Mexico.

Hotel Vieja Hacienda (☎ 153-0021; hotelhacienda_mulege@hotmail.com; Madero 3; s/d US\$30/40; 📶 📶 📶) Great if you want a pool (hope it's full) and a central location, Vieja Hacienda offers two floors of unexceptional rooms with white walls, Mexican fabric bedspreads, curtains and bathrooms in need of a facelift. Big sunny patio, dark rooms.

Hotel Terrazas (☎ 153-0009; Zaragoza; r US\$35) Named for its giant rooftop terraces, Hotel Terrazas is long past its prime but still decent. Guests can use the ramshackle kitchen area in the rooftop *palapa*, though it's so old and dry it could spontaneously combust (or blow off the roof) any time. The rooms' painted brown rock walls and mustard 1960s bedspreads create a lairlike atmosphere.

Clementine's Bed & Breakfast (☎ 153-0319; www.clementinesbaja.com; r US\$60-77) Located in the expat settlement on the south side of the Río Mulegé, Clementine's is a lovely four-room B&B with a giant shared kitchen and small but supremely comfortable rooms. The owner serves up orange juice, rolls and coffee every morning, and the kitchen keeps the communal spirit aflame. There are also *casitas* (small houses) for rent by the week for US\$440 to US\$660. To get here, take the Transpeninsular past the Orchard and turn down to the river.

Eating

BUDGET

Asadero Danny's (cnr Romero Rubio & Madero; tacos US\$1) Outstanding Saturday *carnitas* (slow-roasted pork) and daily *carne asada* tacos.

Taquería La Misión (Av General Martínez s/n; tacos US\$1) Chow down on delicious *carne asada* tacos at this hole-in-the-wall with plastic tables.

Taquería Doney (tacos US\$1-2) Serves up some of the best tacos around. At the western end of Mulegé, just before the Transpeninsular.

Rice & Beans (Madero; mains US\$2.50-5; 🕒 8am-9pm) Pesos go a long way at this clean little joint serving cheap breakfasts, *comidas corridas* (set lunches), stuffed potatoes and excellent *tortas* (sandwiches).

Mini-Super Ayleth (Moctezuma; 🕒 8am-10pm) The best stocked grocery store in town also has a steady supply of fresh fruits and veggies.

MIDRANGE

Las Casitas (☎ 153-0019, 153-0681; Madero; mains US\$4-9) In its namesake hotel, Las Casitas is especially good for breakfast as the birds chirp you awake over a bottomless cup of coffee. Typical *antojitos*, daily specials, a few seafood dishes and unusual drinks such as mango daiquiris make the lunch and dinner menus enticing.

Pelican Reef (cnr Madero & Jardín Corona; mains US\$4.50-9; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Outstanding hamburgers, crispy french fries, juicy skirt steaks and Tex-Mex-style enchiladas make up a decidedly American menu.

El Candil (Zaragoza; mains US\$5-10) Just off the plaza, popular El Candil serves filling meat and seafood dishes in addition to decent Mexican fare.

Restaurant El Patrón (☎ 153-0284; Playa El Farito; mains US\$5-10) El Patrón's fabulous setting on the beach out near the lighthouse makes for an unforgettable meal. It's a casual place, making it that much better.

Mr Pizza (Av General Martínez; pizzas US\$5-12; 🕒 5pm-10pm) The medium pizza loaded with cheese comes with a side of 'spagetty' and salad (US\$9.50) and is enough for two.

Los Equipales (☎ 153-0330; Moctezuma; mains US\$5-20) Specializing in Sonoran beef, Los Equipales serves outstanding meals that, if pricier than most in town, are worth the money. The large open dining area gives it that casual, Baja feel.

Drinking & Entertainment

Mulegé ain't no Cabo, but restaurants offer several options for tying one on after dark. Both El Candil and Pelican Reef have big-screen satellite TVs showing US sports games; the latter is very popular. Knocking back a few beers on the beach at Restaurant El Patrón is a rather unforgettable experience, and it's especially fun when the *norteño* music kicks in on weekend nights. Also, check out Las Casitas on weekend nights; it occasionally hosts live mariachi bands, which will really get you fired up, while the cozy, dimly lit bar will transport you back in time by three decades.

Shopping

For its diminutive size and isolated location, Mulegé has some surprisingly good shopping. Hammocks, straw hats, colorful ceramics and T-shirts are the most popular commodities, and prices are fair (especially if you bargain). Most shops are clustered around the intersection of Zaragoza and Av General Martínez.

Surrounded by date palms, dates are a Mulegé specialty. Most grocery stores in town sell them, and the gift shop at Hotel Las Casitas sells them in decorative boxes.

Getting There & Away

Mulegé has no formal bus terminal, but buses running from Tijuana to La Paz stop daily at bus stop at the Y-junction (*la i griega*) on the Transpeninsular at the western edge of town. Buy tickets at the store up the hill from the stop.

Fares and approximate travel times:

Destination	Fare (US\$)	Duration (hr)
Ciudad Constitución	22	4
Ensenada	69-73	13
La Paz	37	7
Loreto	11	2
Santa Rosalía	6	1
Tijuana	81-88	15

BAHÍA CONCEPCIÓN

☎ 615

When the sun rises out of the Sea of Cortez and peeks over the 35km (22-mile) peninsula that forms the eastern side of Bahía Concepción, it lights up the beaches, the bay and the surrounding mountains in one of Baja's most breathtaking scenes. With a peppering of offshore islands, excellent beaches and warm, crystal-clear water, Bahía Concepción is a virtual playground. It's home to some of Baja's best diving and kayaking, as well as good sportfishing and outstanding snorkeling.

The most accessible beaches run along the western edge of the bay (hence the many semipermanent RV settlements), but few people travel the rough dirt road to Punta Concepción at the peninsula's northern tip. The following beaches are described north to south.

Punta Arena

At the northern end of Bahía Concepción, this difficult to reach beach lies at the end of a bumpy 2.5km (1.5-mile) road. Rural **tent camping** (per vehicle US\$5) is offered, but because it lies at the mouth of a seasonal stream, mosquitoes can be brutal during *chubasco* (tropical storm) season, which runs roughly June to early November. During summer, wind keeps the beach a little cooler than the sheltered coves further south.

Playa Santispac

Heading south from Mulegé the first easily accessible beach is Playa Santispac, 21km (13 miles) south of town. There are several **camp-sites** (US\$7) with *palapas* at the water's edge but no showers or drinking water. Sites are hard to come by as regular visitors shack up for long periods of time during the winter high season. If you can score a site, it's a good place, considering the conveniences.

There are two good restaurants. **Ray's Place** (mains US\$9-13; ☎ 2-9pm Tue-Sat) is excellent; you can't miss the sign boasting the best food 'between Tijuana and Cabo.' True or not, the seafood is outstanding and the burgers are sublime. Toward the north end of the beach **Ana's Restaurant & Bar** (☎ 161-9427; captshaggys@yaho.com; mains US\$4-6; ☎ 7am-9:30pm Thu-Tue) is open year-round and, aside from serving decent food, rents kayaks (US\$25 per day), organizes diving, snorkeling and fishing excursions, and stocks a small supply of fishing tackle.

Playa Escondida

'Hidden Beach' (as its name means in Spanish) is an appropriate title for this secluded stretch of sand. If you have the high-clearance vehicle (or walking shoes) necessary to make it down the 0.5km (quarter-mile) road that leads over a small hill and down to the beach, you'll find one of the best spots on this side of the bay to get away from the crowds. If you roll in with a kayak and a week's worth of food, you're set. On our visit, there were a few **shade palapas** (US\$5) for rent, but that's it – no outhouses, no showers.

The sign for Playa Escondida is easy to miss. Near Km 111, look for the gringo settlement of Posada Concepción. Just past this is a sign for the now-defunct Ecomundo-Baja Tropicales (a kayaking outfitter which may or may not reopen in the future) and Playa Escondida. Follow the rugged track past Ecomundo, over a small hill and down to the beach. Bring all your own supplies.

Playa El Burro

Just south of Playa Escondida, Playa El Burro is one of the bay's finest beaches, but much of the sand is taken over by semipermanent RV inhabitants who block access to some of the best stretches of beach. At the north end of this cove stands **Restaurant Bertha's** (Km 109; mains US\$5-9; ☎ 8am-10pm), a friendly Mexican-owned place serving reasonably priced

Mexican dishes, seafood and delicious breakfasts. It also sells bags of ice.

The north end of the beach (take the right fork after turning off the highway) is a great spot for **tent camping** (campsites US\$8), though it's far from isolated. The office, where you pay your camping fees, rents kayaks (per day US\$20) and canoes (per day US\$25) for exploring the offshore islands. There's also usually someone here that will take you by *panga* (per hour US\$25 for up to six people) to prime snorkeling spots in the area.

Playa El Coyote

Playa El Coyote offers yet another chance to pitch a tent on the edge of a spectacular, shallow inner bay known as Bahía Coyote. The road down to the beach is easy to miss, but look for the RV Park El Coyote (long-term leases only) 29km (18 miles) south of Mulegé. Less than 1km (half a mile) past the RV park, a road drops down from the Transpeninsular to the water's edge and a small **camping area** (about per vehicle US\$5), and then skirts the beach to a dozen or so more secluded sites along a narrow strip of white sand. It's a fine place to camp, but its proximity to the highway can make it a bit noisy. Pit toilets, shade *palapas* and garbage cans are the only services.

Playa Buenaventura

After winding away from the coast for several kilometers, the Transpeninsular hits the water again at Playa Buenaventura, a small beach at Km 94.5 that's taken up by the bay's cushiest accommodation options. **Resort Hotel San Buenaventura** (☎ 153-0408, 155-5616; r US\$69-99) is an attractive stone building with about a dozen small but comfy rooms, each with its

own shaded patio. It's well worth dropping a little extra for the oceanfront room if you can. Four kayaks are available for guests to use at no additional charge.

Also at Playa Buenaventura is **Olé Sports Bar & Grill** (☎ 161-1077; bajabuenaventura@hotmail.com; mains US\$4-8), an eclectic oceanfront restaurant and bar with kayak rentals (half/full day US\$20/30), a boat launch, beachfront camping (US\$10) and a fabulous fully-equipped three-bedroom house for rent (US\$150). The latter sits about three paces from the water and has splendid views from inside. As the sign on the door explains, the restaurant is 'most of the time open, sometimes closed.'

Playa El Requesón & Playa La Perla

Playa El Requesón, 45km (28 miles) south of Mulegé, once made a *Condé Nast Traveler* list of Mexico's top-10 beaches, but its scanty services keep it suitable – fortunately – for short-term camping only. El Requesón's unique feature is its *tombolo* (sandspit beach) that connects the main beach to the offshore Isla El Requesón except during very high tides. Camping out on the spit means you're surrounded on both sides by water. Despite its proximity to the highway, it's relatively quiet; camping here is free.

At the time of research, the access road to Requesón was blocked, but the beach was accessible via nearby Playa La Perla, a short distance south. Campsites are available at La Perla for US\$5.

Playa Armenta

Free camping is possible at this signed beach, just south of La Perla. It has a short but sandy beach, and although it's more exposed to the

DETOUR: CAÑÓN LA TRINIDAD

In Cañón La Trinidad, 29km (18 miles) southwest of Mulegé, adventure lovers can get a serious fix during a hike-and-swim excursion to several pre-Columbian **rock-art sites** set in impressive volcanic overhangs. The setting is spectacular, and the rock paintings themselves are multicolored Cochimí depictions of human figures and wildlife, including fish and sea turtles. Those at a lower site, visited prior to the swim up the canyon, are more vivid and better preserved, thanks to their more sheltered location.

The rough drive to the canyon from Mulegé involves taking several unmarked junctions from the westbound (San Estanislao) road and can be difficult for a first-timer. Therefore, the best way to get out here is by contacting Salvador Castro or Ciro Cuesta in Mulegé (p172), both highly recommended local guides. Otherwise, get precise directions at your hotel.

All visitors must check in with the INAH caretakers at Rancho La Trinidad (on the way to the canyon), who also lead hikes for a very modest fee.

highway than El Requesón, it's less crowded. It's the last beach on the bay that's immediately accessible from the highway.

Península Concepción

At the south end of Bahía Concepción, a rough 60km (33-mile) dirt road leaves the Transpeninsular and skirts the western shore of Península Concepción before petering out at Punta Concepción, on the peninsula's northern tip. There's free beach camping along the shore (no services). Don't attempt this road without a sturdy, high-clearance vehicle, and keep your eye on the tides. Depending on conditions, 4WD may be necessary.

SOUTHWEST OF BAHÍA CONCEPCIÓN

Across the rugged Sierra de La Giganta from Mulegé lies a series of isolated, historic mission villages set within dramatic canyon scenery. Accessible by trying dirt roads from the Transpeninsular or via the long paved road running north from Ciudad Insurgentes (p183), these towns offer a glimpse into the Baja of old, where services were few, the people were friendly and modernity seemed light-years away.

From La Purísima it's possible to continue northwest to the Pacific at San Juanico and then, if you have a high-clearance vehicle, north to Laguna San Ignacio and San Ignacio proper. If you're coming from the south this makes for an exciting alternative to retracing your route along the Transpeninsular. The entire area is off-the-beaten-track travel at its finest.

San Isidro & La Purísima

South of Bahía Concepción, the paved Transpeninsular continues to Loreto, but at Km 60 a graded alternative route crosses the Sierra de la Giganta to the twin villages of San Isidro and La Purísima. Sometimes referred to as the 'Shangri-La of Baja,' the area is a desert oasis shaded by vast stands of date palms. If you've crossed the mountains from Mulegé, you'll hit San Isidro first. La Purísima is just under 3km (2 miles) further on.

La Purísima was the site of **Misión La Purísima Concepción**, founded in 1717 by Jesuit Nicolás Tamaral (who later founded the mission at San José del Cabo) at the base of Cerro El Pilón, a steep volcanic plug presiding over town, just north of the Arroyo La Purísima.

Only foundations of the mission remain, but the setting is as spectacular as ever.

San Isidro has the area's only lodging, a few stores with basic provisions, a tire shop, a school and a tiny playground ringed by multicolor tires half buried in the dirt. In the center of town, the simple but friendly **Motel Nelva** (rUS\$15) provides *extremely* basic accommodation with shared bathrooms and saggy beds. Better are the two rooms at the yellow, unnamed **casa de huéspedes** (rUS\$20) at the south end of town (on the way to La Purísima); look for the faded Tecate sign.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

San Isidro and La Purísima offer bus service to La Paz (US\$26, five hours) with Autotransportes Aguila.

At the time of research, the road from the Transpeninsular was manageable only for high-clearance vehicles, the result of heavy rains from Hurricanes John and Paul in 2006. Conditions have likely improved but check before heading out. The road from Ciudad Insurgentes is paved but horrendously potholed. Take it slow and watch for sections of the road that have washed out.

Neither San Isidro nor La Purísima has a Pemex station, but both offer barrel gas at about a 25% markup. The *casa de huéspedes* in San Isidro sells gas.

Comondú

South of San Isidro, a bumpy, rocky, undulating road crosses a volcanic upland before dropping steeply into **San José de Comondú**, site of the Jesuit **Misión San José de Comondú**. The descent into the Arroyo Comondú and the sight of date palms and fruit trees against the area's harsh desert cliffs is one of Baja's most splendid sights.

The church itself dates from the 1750s, although the mission proper began in 1707. Only part of the mission temple remains intact, but there are extensive walls surrounding it. Inside are some good examples of traditional religious art, though the canvases are deteriorating badly. Note the historic photos, dated 1901, when a major *recova* (colonnade) and two short *campanarios* (bell towers) still existed. Ask for the key to the church at the bright-green house 30 yards to the east.

West of San José de Comondú is its almost equally picturesque twin, **San Miguel de Comondú**.

Most inhabitants of the area are fair-skinned descendants of early Spanish pioneers, in contrast to later *mestizo* (of mixed Spanish and indigenous descent) arrivals from mainland Mexico.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

For vehicles without high clearance, access to San José de Comondú used to be easiest by way of the graded lateral from Ejido Francisco Villa that leaves the paved highway about 64km (40 miles) north of Ciudad Insurgentes. However, at the time of research this road was badly damaged by heavy rains from two hurricanes and therefore passable only for the hardiest of 4WD vehicles. The road from San Isidro was in an equal state of disrepair. These roads will likely be improved, but before heading out, ask about road conditions at the Pemex in Ignacio Zaragoza (just north of Insurgentes), in Francisco Villa (at the junction to Comondú) or in San Isidro.

The road via Misión San Javier (p183), which leaves the Transpeninsular just south of Loreto, is normally passable for all vehicles with good clearance, except after storms.

San Juanico

About 48km (30 miles) northwest of La Purísima and 97km (60 miles) south of Laguna San Ignacio, the village of San Juanico is well known among surfers for nearby **Punta Pequeña**, at the northern end of Bahía San Juanico. Its right-hand point breaks, some believe, provide the highest-quality surf on the peninsula in a southern swell. September and October are the best months for surfing. Other area activities include windsurfing, sea kayaking, diving and sportfishing.

Scorpion Bay (📞 in the USA 619-239-1335; www.scorpionbay.net; campsites per person US\$7, palapa US\$36-60) is a well-run campground operated by an American in cooperation with the local *ejido*. The restaurant serves excellent food and the *palapas* are fully equipped and comfy.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

San Juanico is most easily accessed by a good, graded dirt road heading north from La Purísima. Unfortunately, despite depiction as a graded surface on the AAA map, the road south to San Juanico from Laguna San Ignacio is potentially hazardous, even for high-clearance vehicles.

The road from Laguna San Ignacio veers off from the graded road approximately 13 km (8 miles) south of Laguna San Ignacio. This is the Baja 1000 road – and passable by most trucks – as long as drivers know how to drive dirt roads. The road passes through a number of sand dunes and seems to be in the middle of nowhere, which means it's very easy to get lost and you'll be isolated if you happen to break down. If you're lucky, the drive will take about four hours.

LORETO

📞 613 / pop 11,800

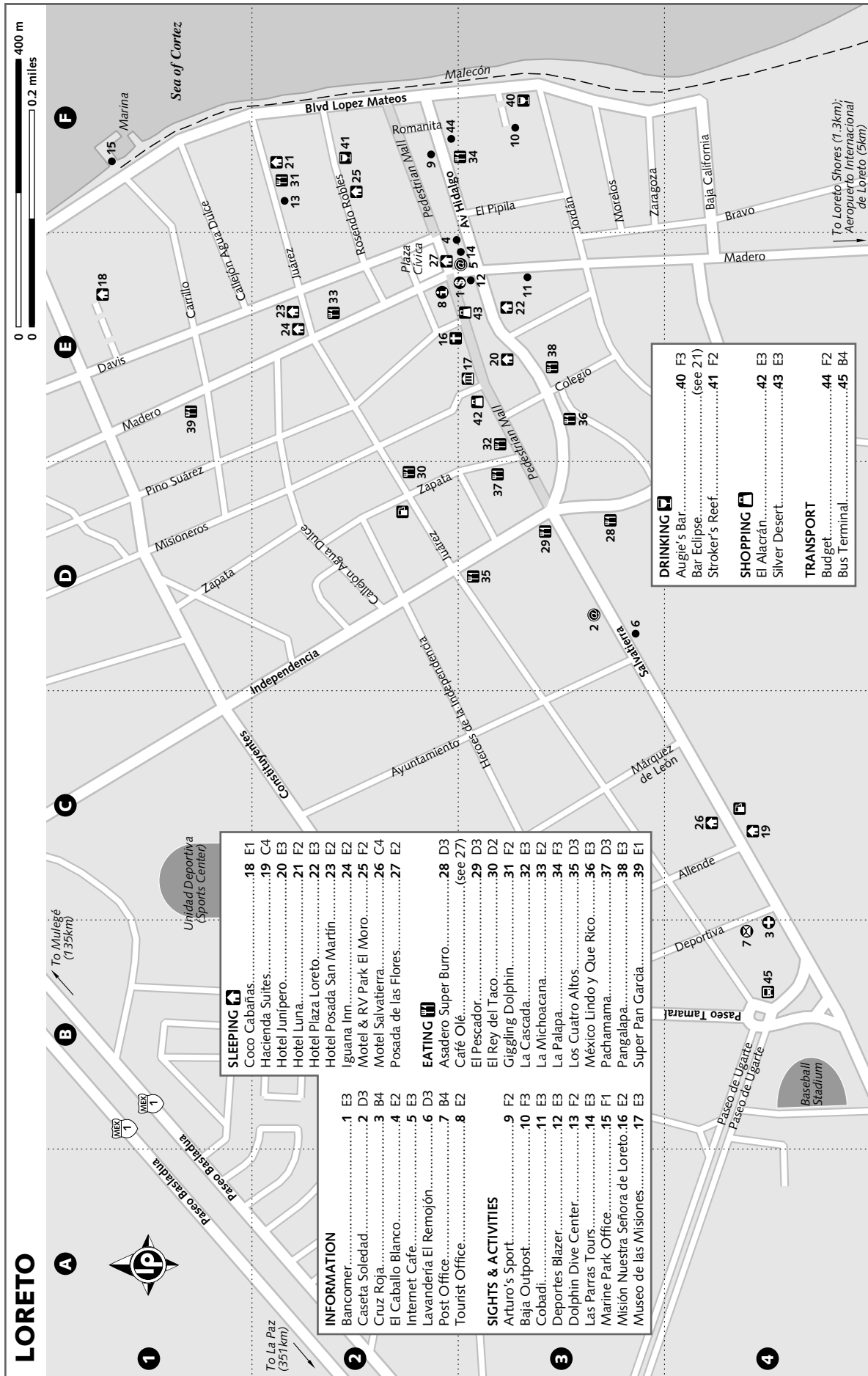
Like Mulegé, Loreto's subtropical climate makes it particularly inviting for those of us who like to sweat over our beers in summer and be warm enough to *want* beer in winter. Loreto's seamlessly restored mission underscores its role in the history of the Californias, and the church's adjacent plaza gives downtown a distinctly Mexican feel. Topping things off, the long *malecón* makes for lovely walks right along the gulf. The town's laidback feel is slowly vanishing, however, as droves of North Americans pour in to investigate the homes going up at the nearby Loreto Bay development and equal numbers of laborers from mainland Mexico pour in to build the place (see p180 for more information). Still, the cobblestone streets and historic buildings help ensure the historic ambience of downtown is alive and palpable.

History

In 1697 the Jesuit priest and explorer Juan María Salvatierra established the Misión Nuestra Señora de Loreto on the gulf coast as the first permanent Spanish settlement in the Californias. In concentrating local indigenous people at mission settlements instead of dispersed *rancherías* and converting them to Catholicism, the Jesuit missionaries directly extended the influence and control of the Spanish crown in one of the empire's most remote areas.

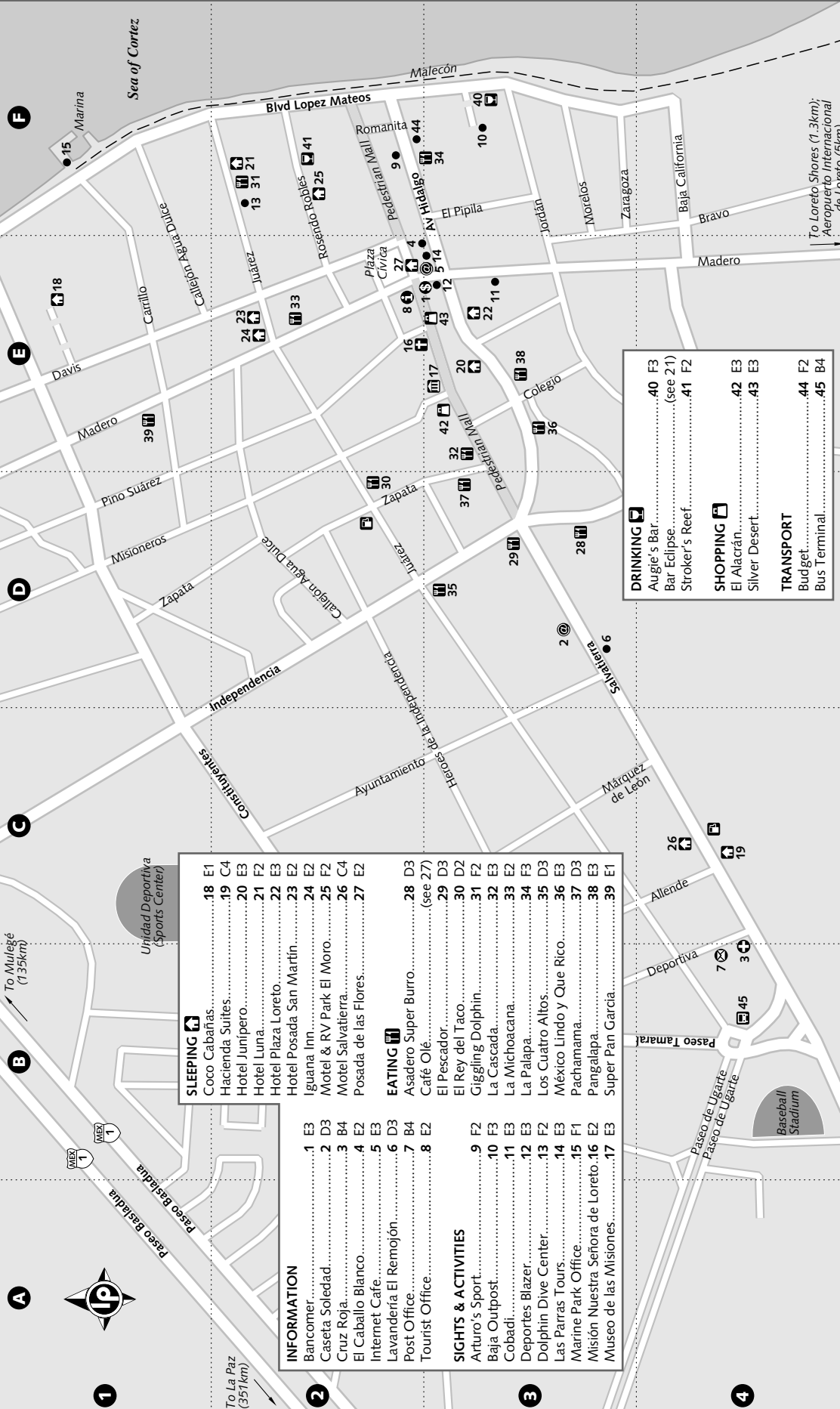
It was a convenient staging point for missionary expansion even after the official expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767 – in 1769, Franciscan Padre Junípero Serra trekked northward to found the now-famous chain of missions in mainland California. The first capital of the Californias, Loreto served that role until its near destruction by a hurricane in 1829.

CENTRAL BAJA



LORETO

0 400 m
0 0.2 miles



INFORMATION	1 E3	Bancomer.....	2 D3	Caseta Soledad.....	3 B4	Cruz Roja.....	4 E2	El Caballo Blanco.....	5 E3	Internet Café.....	6 D3	Lavandería El Remojón.....	7 B4	Post Office.....	8 E2	Tourist Office.....										
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SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	9 F2	Arturo's Sport.....	10 F3	Baja Outpost.....	11 E3	Cobadi.....	12 E3	Deportes Blazer.....	13 F2	Dolphin Dive Center.....	14 E3	Las Parras Tours.....	15 F1	Marine Park Office.....	16 E2	Misión Nuestra Señora de Loreto.....	17 E3	Museo de las Misiones.....								

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SHOPPING	42 E3	El Alacrán.....	43 E3	Silver Desert.....	
TRANSPORT	44 F2	Budget.....	45 B4	Bus Terminal.....	

Orientation

Loreto is 351km (218 miles) north of La Paz and 135km (84 miles) south of Mulegé. Most hotels and services are within easy walking distance of the Plaza Cívica, as the *zócalo* (central plaza) is known. The plaza lies one block east of the mission. Salvatierra, which runs from Independencia to the *malecón*, is a de facto pedestrian mall with loads of shopping.

Information

Bancomer (cnr Salvatierra & Madero) Changes US dollars and traveler's checks and has an ATM.

Caseta Soledad (Salvatierra; per hr US\$2; ☎ Mon-Sat) Internet café and long-distance telephone office.

Cruz Roja (☎ 135-1111; Salvatierra near Allende) Local Red Cross.

El Caballo Blanco (Av Hidalgo 19) Stocks used novels (mostly pop fiction) and new Baja-related books, all in English.

Internet café (Madero; per hr US\$2; ☎ Mon-Sat) Internet café.

Lavandería El Remojón (Salvatierra; ☎ Mon-Sat) This Laundromat is on Salvatierra between Independencia and Ayuntamiento.

Post office (Deportiva btwn Juárez & Salvatierra)

Tourist office (☎ 135-0411; cnr Madero & Salvatierra; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri) In the Palacio de Gobierno on the western side of the Plaza Cívica.

Sights

Loreto's traditional sights are all within a small radius around the central plaza.

MISIÓN NUESTRA SEÑORA DE LORETO

Above the entrance to Loreto's **mission** (cnr Salvatierra & Pino Suárez; ☎ daily), the inscription *Cabeza y Madre de las Misiones de Baja y Alta California* (Head and Mother of the Missions of Upper and Lower California) attests to Loreto's role as the first capital of the Californias. Featuring a floor plan in the shape of a Greek cross, the mission suffered serious damage when the ceiling and bell tower collapsed during the 1829 hurricane. It has only been restored over the last 25 years and today is splendid sight both inside and out.

MUSEO DE LAS MISIONES

Alongside the mission church, INAH's **museum** (☎ 135-0441; admission US\$3; ☎ 9am-1pm & 1:45-6pm Tue-Sun) recounts the European settlement of Baja California in a generally

chronological manner. It pays attention to the peninsula's indigenous population, honoring the accomplishments of the Jesuits and their successors without ignoring the native demographic collapse caused by the missions. It also displays a fine selection of the implements of daily ranch life of the early European settlers. The museum bookstore sells a variety of Spanish-language books about the archaeology, anthropology and history of Mexico and Baja California.

Activities

Next to the marina, the **marine park office** (☎ 135-0477; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Sat) is a good source of information for all water activities in the gulf including kayaking, fishing and camping on the islands. Because Loreto's shoreline and offshore islands are protected, by registering with the marine park you will ensure that you know all the guidelines for traveling in the park. In addition, the staff provide information about such things as fish populations, dive locales and campsite occupancy.

PARQUE NACIONAL BAHÍA DE LORETO

Loreto sits within this national marine park composed of 2077 sq km (799 sq miles) of shoreline and offshore islands. The town is an ideal base for all types of outdoor activities, and a number of outfitters cover the range, from kayaking and diving along the reefs around Isla del Carmen to horseback riding and hiking in the Sierra de la Giganta.

About 5km (3 miles) northeast of Loreto, opposite Punta Tierra Firma, **Isla Coronado** is one of the gulf's most accessible islands and is the northernmost island in the park. The turquoise waters along its sparkling sandy beach, facing the mainland, are ideal for **snorkeling**. There are also many seabirds, mostly pelicans, and the rocky eastern shore has a small sea-lion colony.

Many kayakers make the trip to Coronado, where camping is possible, and several *palapas* offer shade. Las Parras Tours and Baja Outpost (p180) offer excursions to this and other nearby islands, as well as drop-off and pickup so you can paddle independently.

FISHING

Many guides are available for all-day fishing trips, but fishing near Loreto is poorer than it once was. The creation of the offshore national park is beginning to have a positive

NOPOLÓ & LORETO BAY

In the 1980s Fonatur, the federal tourist-development agency also responsible for mainland Mexican resorts such as Cancún and Ixtapa, plopped the incongruous Nopoló resort onto an erstwhile goat ranch, 6.5km (4 miles) south of Loreto. An eyesore on an otherwise stunning stretch of coast, the site went from bad to worse in 2004, when the Arizona-based Loreto Bay Company stepped in to transform the problem-plagued complex into a full-scale luxury residential development.

According to the company, Villages at Loreto Bay will be North America's largest 'sustainable resort community.' The 8000-acre development will have 6000 homes built within a series of pedestrian-oriented villages with car-free neighborhoods. The project's final estimated price tag: US\$3 billion. The company hired a former president of Earth Day International as its Vice President of Sustainability, and claims it will designate 5000 of its 8000 acres to a natural preserve (which leaves 3000 acres to develop). Permaculture projects, organic orchards and solar- and wind-power projects are all supposedly in the works.

Loreto Bay's emphasis on sustainability sounds good, but there are critics. The arrival of vast numbers of workers (mostly men) from mainland Mexico has put a strain on Loreto's housing and resources, and some locals say crime in town has increased. There is also concern that the growth will strain the area's natural resources, particularly water. And, of course, the underlying question remains: is building 6000 luxury homes on the edge of a fragile marine park – a reserve that sits on the Nature Conservancy's Parks in Peril list – sustainability? If you're driving south of Loreto, swing into the development, take a look at the hundreds of buildings going up and decide for yourself. If you like it, you might want to drop the US\$300,000 to US\$1.8 million on a home yourself. Just hope no one builds into your ocean view.

impact on the fish population (in part because professional shrimpers are no longer allowed in the park area). Arturo's Sport (right) offers all-day fishing trips for US\$150 to US\$200, depending on the number of people and the size of the boat.

DIVING & SNORKELING

Reefs around Isla del Carmen, Isla Coronado and other sites are superb for water sports. From April to November the water temperature ranges from 75° to 85°F (24° to 29°C) and visibility is 18m to 24m (60ft to 80 ft). From December to March, the water temperature ranges from 60° to 70°F (15° to 21°C) and visibility is 9m to 15m (30ft to 50ft).

Diving and snorkeling excursions can be arranged at Baja Outpost (right), Cobadi (☎ 104-2468, 135-1222; Madero near Av Hidalgo; www.loretours.com) or Dolphin Dive Center (right). Two-tank diving excursions cost between US\$90 and US\$120 per person, depending on the dive destination. Deportes Blazer (☎ 135-0911; Av Hidalgo 23) sells scuba gear.

Tours

There are several well-run outfitters based in Loreto that offer a wide array of exciting tours including diving (around US\$90) and snorkeling trips (US\$50 to US\$55), whale-

watching excursions (US\$185 to US\$200), mountain biking (US\$75), kayaking (US\$90 to US\$100), tours to Misión San Javier (US\$75) and excursions to nearby rock-art sites (about US\$135). All prices are per person and operators all charge similar prices.

Arturo's Sport (☎ 135-0766; www.arturosport.com; cnr Av Hidalgo & Romanita)

Baja Outpost (☎ 135-1134, in the USA 888-649-5951; www.bajaoutpost.com; off Blvd Lopez Mateos btwn Av Hidalgo & Jordán) Offers complete multiday diving packages that include accommodation.

Dolphin Dive Center (☎ 135-1914, 135-0261, in the USA 626-447-5536; www.dolphindivebaja.com; Juárez near Blvd López Mateos) Specializes in diving, but also offers whale-watching, trips to rock-art sites and San Javier, and more.

Las Parras Tours (☎ 135-1010; www.lasparrastours.com; Madero 16) Also rents bikes for US\$5/25 per hour/day.

Festivals & Events

Loreto's main fiestas are early September's **Día de Nuestra Señora de Loreto** and mid-October's **Fundación de la Ciudad**, which celebrates the city's founding in 1699.

Sleeping

Downtown Loreto is fairly compact and most hotels are within walking distance of the center and the *malecón*.

BUDGET

Loreto Shores (☎ 135-1513; loreshores@yahoo.com; camping per person US\$5, RV US\$16.50) On a pebbly beach across the Río Loreto, spacious Loreto Shores offers good tent sites plus full hookups for RVs. Campers can use the clean bathrooms, hot showers and laundry room. Shade is minimal.

Motel & RV Park El Moro (☎ 135-0542; Rosendo Robles 8; campsites/RV/s/d US\$5/12/30/35; 📞 📺) Only half a block from the water and a few blocks from the mission, El Moro offers a dozen or so sites with full hookups, plus a few tent spaces. Very friendly and tidy. The eight rooms available have air-con and TVs.

Hotel Posada San Martín (☎ 135-1107; cnr Juárez & Davis; r US\$20-35; 📞) This is the best of the local cheapies, but the low-end rooms are stuffy and come only with fan. The priciest ones have a kitchen. Apparently, little effort goes into upkeep.

Motel Salvatierra (☎ 135-0021; Salvatierra 123; s/d US\$24/27; 📞) Offers clean but claustrophobically boxlike rooms which open onto a dusty parking lot. But hey, it has air-con.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Junípero (☎ 135-0122; Av Hidalgo; s/d US\$35/40) Although it's getting worn around the edges (it's the kind of place where the bed sheets are so old they refuse to stay on the mattresses), Hotel Junípero is still a good deal, offering large rooms with king-size beds, bathrooms, fridges, TVs and fans. Strong, hot showers.

Hotel Plaza Loreto (☎ 135-0280; www.hotelplazaloreto.com; Av Hidalgo 2; s/d US\$45/55; 📞) The outside of this attractive, downtown, colonial-style hotel was recently remodeled, but the rooms themselves, with their c 1978 decor, could use a facelift. It's overpriced for what you get.

Iguana Inn (☎ 135-1627; www.iguanainn.com; cnr Juárez & Madero; r US\$48-59; 📞 📺 📺) A downright welcoming vibe and four modern courtyard bungalows equipped with coffeemakers, VCR, microwaves, toasters and fridges, make Iguana Inn outstanding value. Owners Mike and Julie are wonderfully friendly and full of information, and loan videos from their extensive collection. The rooms are behind their small house, north of the plaza.

Hotel Luna (☎ 135-2288; www.hotellunaloreto.com; Juárez; r US\$60; 📞) Chic and eclectic, this three-room, Swiss-owned minihotel is definitely one of a kind. Stark white walls, round edges, built-in benches and small but fully equipped

bathrooms make it a slice of lunar sumptuousness. Rooms are a bit dark, but the white walls and decorations make it cheerful.

Coco Cabañas (☎ 135-1729; www.cococabanasloreto.com; Davis 71; d/t US\$70/80; 📞 📺 📺) It's hardly surprising several readers have recommended these immaculate *cabañas* built around a palm-shaded swimming pool. Each comes with a fully equipped kitchen (including microwave, VCR and blender) and has wireless internet, and there are plenty of lawn chairs around for lounging in the sun. Potlucks are occasionally orchestrated by enthusiastic guests, and nonanglers get in on the action at the grill. It's a great place to relax, whether you're fishing or honeymooning. More 'suites' in progress.

TOP END

Hacienda Suites (☎ 135-0202; reservhaciendasuites@prodigy.net.mx; Salvatierra; r US\$73, ste US\$88-106; 📞 📺 📺) If you prefer luxury over location (the hotel's one of the furthest from the ocean and several blocks from downtown), this deluxe hotel should do the trick. Rooms are contemporary, immaculate and open onto the blue-tiled swimming pool. There's a poolside bar and a restaurant on-site.

Posada de las Flores (☎ 135-1165, in the USA 877-245-2860; www.posadadelasflores.com; Plaza Cívica; r incl breakfast US\$158-259; 📞 📺) Any hotel with a glass-bottom swimming pool over the lobby is cool. But the fact that it's built into a historic building with a fabulous interior courtyard makes it *extremely* cool. Spacious suites overlook the plaza, and every room is sublimely comfortable (think big, fluffy white beds) and beautifully decorated in nouveau-Mexican style. Loreto's finest.

Eating

There's no shortage of great eats for all budgets in Loreto.

BUDGET

Super Pan García (☎ 135-1951; cnr Madero & Carillo; pastries US\$0.25-0.75) Pop in here for a slice of *pastel de tres leches* (three-milk cake) – it's legendary in Loreto. Other baked goods are delicious, too.

La Michoacana (Madero near Juárez; ice cream US\$1-2) Don't leave town without trying a *paleta* (fruit popsicle) or *nieve* (traditional Mexican ice cream) at Loreto's favorite ice-cream parlor.

El Rey del Taco (Juárez at Zapata; tacos US\$1-2) The first fish taco stand in Loreto; there's a reason this place is still around. Great *carne asada* and *cabeza* (head) tacos, too.

Pangalapa (Av Hidalgo near Colegio; tacos US\$1.40, mains US\$4-6; ☎ 8am-4pm Tue-Sun) Tuck into this *palapa* for delicious breakfasts, *licuados* (fruit shakes) and, for lunch, tasty *tacos de cochinita pibil* (a traditional pork dish from the Yucatán).

Café Olé (☎ 135-0496; Madero 14; mains US\$3-6) Good, inexpensive breakfasts (with especially tasty hotcakes) and *antojitos*.

Asadero Super Burro (Independencia s/n; mains US\$4-6; ☎ 10am-1am Thu-Tue) Behind mounds of freshly made flour tortillas and boxes of avocados, women grill up steak for the house specialty the *super burro*, a massive burrito jammed with diced steak and your choice of condiments. They also serve stuffed potatoes and 'volcanoes' (flour tortillas piled with meat and melted cheese).

El Pescador (cnr Salvatierra & Independencia) This is Loreto's largest supermarket.

MIDRANGE

La Cascada (☎ 135-0550; cnr Salvatierra & Zapata; breakfast US\$3-5, mains US\$4-12) An outdoor patio and a lengthy seafood menu makes this little joint extremely popular. Try the *chile relleno de marisco* (chili stuffed with seafood) or the house specialty, *bolsitas de mariscos* (seafood, onions, tomatoes and chilies baked in tinfoil). One regular claims the *pescado veracruzano* is to die for. They serve up great breakfasts as well.

México Lindo y Que Rico (☎ 135-1175; cnr Av Hidalgo & Colegio; mains US\$4-7; ☎ Tue-Sun) Big glasses of juice, friendly service, a casual setting and tasty, reasonably priced Mexican food make this a winner. The Sunday buffet draws faithful crowds.

Gigging Dolphin (Juárez near Blvd López Mateos; mains US\$5-9; ☎ 11am-11pm) Excellent, reasonably priced fish dishes include mouth-watering items such as *chile relleno de queso y camarón* (green chili stuffed with cheese and shrimp) and other takes on traditional Mexican seafood dishes. With tablecloths, Mexican music and big wooden chairs, it can be romantic or casual, depending on your mood.

La Palapa (☎ 135-1101; cnr Av Hidalgo & Romarita; mains US\$6-12) Locals start to drool when you bring up this place, obviously having devoured the excellent seafood in the past.

Los Cuatro Altos (☎ 114-3002; cnr Juárez & Independencia; mains US\$6-12; ☎ 4pm-10pm Fri-Wed) Named after the four-way stop where it's located, this American-owned bar and grill serves what might be the town's best burgers (they're Angus beef) with piles of crispy fries or onion rings beneath four TVs showing US sports. Sushi bar in the works.

Pachamama (Zapata near Salvatierra; mains US\$7.50-15; ☎ 5-10pm Wed-Mon) *Choripanes* (sausage sandwiches), pastas, cheese platters, a fat *bife de chorizo* (sirloin steak) and great atmosphere make this Argentine restaurant extremely popular.

Drinking & Entertainment

Nightlife in Loreto is all about the bars.

Bar Eclipse (Juárez; ☎ from 6pm Wed-Mon) The only thing 'Loreto' about this place is the TV showing US sports games. It's ultramodern, very hip, and quite intimate.

Stroker's Reef (Rosendo Robles; ☎ 3pm-late Mon-Sat, 1pm-late Sun) It's a darn friendly crowd at this wee bar with a red pool table, free snacks and a congenial, tattooed bartender. As the barman says, 'stop by and you'll definitely meet people.'

Augie's Bar (Blvd López Mateos near Jordán; ☎ 8am-10pm Sun-Thu, 8am-2am Fri & Sat) Smokey little bar downstairs, big rooftop terrace above. Sports are always on.

Shopping

Loreto has several handicrafts stores on the streets closest to the plaza. Stroll down the ped mall east of the mission for wall-to-wall souvenir shops. **El Alacrán** (☎ 135-0029; Salvatierra & Misioneros) and **Silver Desert** (☎ 135-0684; Salvatierra 36) have particularly high-quality goods.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Aeropuerto Internacional de Loreto (☎ 135-0454) is reached by a lateral off the Transpeninsular, just across the Río Loreto. To get there from town, head south on Madero. **Aero California** (☎ airport office 135-0500, 135-0555) flies direct to/from Los Angeles on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday. **Aeroméxico** (☎ airport office 135-1837) flies daily to/from San Diego.

Aerolitoral (☎ airport office 135-1837) flies daily from La Paz to Loreto, continuing to Hermosillo and Los Angeles. It returns daily as well. Continental Airlines has twice-weekly flights from Houston, Texas, to Loreto.

BUS

Loreto's **bus terminal** (☎ 135-0767) is near the traffic circle where Salvatierra, Paseo de Ugarte and Paseo Tamaral converge.

Destination	Fare (US\$)	Duration (hr)
Guerrero Negro	34-37	5-6
La Paz	27-30	5
Mexicali	110	19
San Ignacio	20-23	4
San José del Cabo	39-43	8
Santa Rosalía	17	3
Tijuana	97-103	18-20

Getting Around

Taxi rides to or from the airport cost about US\$9. **Budget's** (Airport ☎ 135-0937; Downtown ☎ 135-1149; Hidalgo near Blvd López Mateos) cheapest rate quoted at the time of research was US\$60 per day, all included.

AROUND LORETO

☎ 613

South of Loreto, the Transpeninsular snakes through endless stands of *cardón* cacti and mesquite trees against a backdrop of jagged peaks and rocky uplifts with spectacular views over the Sea of Cortez.

Four miles south of Loreto, the Transpeninsular passes the Loreto Bay development at **Nopoló**. After 26km (16 miles) it passes **Puerto Escondido**. Engulfed on nearly all sides by hills, this dramatically sheltered bay was to be the sight of a massive Fonatur development with moorings for 300 yachts, but never really progressed passed the laying of roads. Today it's the site of an Escalera Náutica development, part of the Mexican government's grand plan to turn the Sea of Cortez into a yachters' playground (see also p25).

Near the settlement of **Ensenada Blanca**, approximately 48km (30 miles) south of Loreto, **El Santuario Eco-Retreat** (☎ 104-4254, in the USA 805-541-7921; www.el-santuario.com; s/d US\$75/120) offers comfortable *cabañas* beautifully situated on or near the water. Rates include full board, and yoga, natural healing and other retreats are all on offer.

Misión San Javier

Set against rugged peaks in the Sierra de la Giganta, the exquisitely preserved Misión San Javier de Viggé-Biaundó is one of Baja's most stunning missions. It was California's

second, founded in 1699 at nearby Rancho Viejo by the famous Jesuit, Francisco María Piccolo, and moved to this site in 1720. Built of massive volcanic stone blocks, it took 38 years to complete.

The church itself is in excellent condition, with original walls, floors and venerable religious artworks. Irrigation canals from the time of the Jesuits – the first on the peninsula – still water the local fields. Every December 3, hundreds of pilgrims celebrate the saint's fiesta here.

Just over 1.6km (1 mile) south of Loreto is the junction for the spectacular 35km (22-mile) mountain road to the mission and village of San Javier, which takes about 1½ hours, not counting photo stops. The dirt surface is graded only to Rancho Viejo but is passable for most passenger cars despite a few bumpy spots and *arroyo* crossings. Rancho Las Parras, in a verdant canyon halfway to San Javier, grows figs, dates, olives and citrus, and there are a couple of potential swimming holes along the way.

With an early start, this makes a good day trip on a mountain bike, but parts of the road are steep enough that even the strongest cyclist will probably have to walk for short stretches. San Javier's only tourist facility is **Restaurant Palapa San Javier** (mains US\$3-5; ☎ lunch & dinner), where the owner serves simple meals, cold beer and sodas under a shady *palapa* alongside his house. Ask about camping and rustic accommodations.

The road leading southwest from San Javier, passing a series of remote *ranchos* before reaching the intersection with the paved Ciudad Insurgentes–San Isidro highway, is much improved and passable for any vehicle with good clearance. Before reaching San Javier, another rough road branches northwest to the twin towns of Comondú (p176) then north to San Isidro (p176).

CIUDAD INSURGENTES

Beyond Puerto Escondido, the Transpeninsular twists and climbs through the Sierra de la Giganta before turning westward and dropping into the **Llano de Magdalena** (Magdalena Plain), a major agricultural zone that stretches south nearly to La Paz. Right around the time you start thinking, 'Gee, this is really flat out here,' the road hits **Ciudad Insurgentes**, an increasingly prosperous agricultural town with little of interest for the average tourist. Most people stop

only long enough to gas up at the Pemex, or stock up on supplies for trips to Puerto López Mateos or north to San José de Comondú. There are no hotels.

CIUDAD CONSTITUCIÓN

☎ 613 / pop 45,000

Having grown dramatically with the Llano de Magdalena's rapid expansion of commercial agriculture, Ciudad Constitución bears all the marks of a 'progressive' city: broad, paved streets (at least in the center), banks and even city theater. However, most travelers find little of interest here except for the faraway feeling of hanging around the main drag (the Transpeninsular) watching people shop, sell, eat tacos, hawk newspapers, cruise and dodge the little maniacs whizzing around on skateboards and bikes. Its main draw is its proximity to the whale-watching centers of Puerto San Carlos and Puerto López Mateos.

Orientation & Information

The city is 216km (134 miles) northwest of La Paz, 143km (89 miles) southwest of Loreto and 58km (36 miles) east of Puerto San Carlos on Bahía Magdalena. The north-south Transpeninsular, known as Blvd Olachea as it rolls through town, is the main street. Most important services are within a block or two of Blvd Olachea. The other major street is the parallel Av Juárez, one block east.

Constitución has no *cambios*, but three banks on Blvd Olachea change US dollars or traveler's checks and have ATMs: **Banca Serfin** (cnr Galeana), **Banamex** (cnr Mina) and **Bancomer** (cnr Pino Suárez).

The **post office** (Galeana 236) is toward the north end of town, just west of Blvd Olachea.

Sleeping

Campestre La Pila (☎ 132-0562; campsites for 2 people US\$10, additional person US\$5; 🚐) Constitución's RV park is just south of town; turn right off Olachea at the large factory and head 1km (about a half mile) west.

Hotel Reforma (☎ 132-0988; Obregón 125; r US\$16; 🏠) Dilapidated but friendly Hotel Reforma is the cheapest option in town.

Hotel Maribel (☎ 132-0155; Guadalupe Victoria 156; s/d US\$25/27; 🏠) Just off Blvd Olachea, at the north end of town, Hotel Maribel is quieter than most, featuring clean, nondescript rooms with telephones and TVs. The attached restaurant (mains US\$4 to US\$8) offers basic Mexican dishes.

Hotel Oasis (☎ 132-3919; hoasis01@prodigy.net.mx; Guerrero 284; r/q US\$31/36; 🏠 🚽) At the north end of town, three blocks west of Blvd Olachea, the Oasis is an excellent little hotel offering spacious, spotless, air-conditioned rooms with satellite TV. Spot it by the big rusty sign on Olachea.

Hotel El Conquistador (☎ 132-2745; Bravo 161; s/d US\$33/41; 🏠 🚽) A conquistador clad in armor guards the lobby of this comfortable three-star hotel run by attentive staff. The pleasant attached café serves decent meals. It's half a block west of Blvd Olachea, one block south of the plaza.

Eating

There are more *taquerías* on Blvd Olachea than you can shake a tortilla at, and they all make for great people-watching. For more cheap eats, hit the Mercado Central on Av Juárez between Hidalgo and Bravo.

Lonchería La Pequeña (cnr Blvd Olachea & Bravo; mains US\$2-4; 🕒 5am-10pm) For good, cheap *antojitos* and sandwiches, look for this place, on the west side of Olachea, with the *palapa* roof, no walls, makeshift kitchen, dirt floor and five oilcloth-covered tables inside. It's a real deal and the food is delicious.

Getting There & Away

North-south ABC and Autotransportes Aguila buses on the Transpeninsular stop at Constitución's **bus terminal** (☎ 132-0376; cnr Av Rosaura Zapata & Pino Suárez), two blocks east of Blvd Olachea. Buses depart regularly for destinations north and south.

Destination	Fare (US\$)	Duration (hr)
Guerrero Negro	47-50	9
La Paz	17	3
Loreto	11	2
Mexicali	100-115	19
Puerto López Mateos	4.50	1
Puerto San Carlos	4.50	1
San Isidro	16	3
San Jose del Cabo	33	5
Santa Rosalía	27	5
Tijuana	115	20

BAHÍA MAGDALENA

☎ 613

The southernmost of Baja's three main calving grounds for California gray whales, Bahía Magdalena is a vastly meandering body of

water with two main population centers, both de facto bases for whale-watching trips. To the north, on the narrowest stretch of the bay, lies Puerto López Mateos, which has fewer services than the more southerly Puerto San Carlos. Both towns are miniscule but remain important ports, with canneries, fishing and tourism being the economic mainstays. Cement-block buildings and sandy streets give the towns a fairly forlorn feel.

Four barrier islands protect the bay, and a slew of other islands and islets makes for a unique coastal sanctuary. Aside from whale-watching, the bay also has great sea kayaking near Puerto López Mateos. At the southernmost end of the bay, the fish camp of Puerto Chale is home to some of the Pacific coast's best windsurfing. During whale season, 'Mag Bay' (as North Americans like to call it) also has the added draw of being less crowded than the more northerly whale-watching sites.

History

Bahía Magdalena has had a colorful history despite (or perhaps because of) its thinly populated coastline. In colonial times, both Sebastián Vizcaíno and, later, Jesuit missionary Clemente Guillén landed and looked, but found the bay unsuitable for colonizing. The former found no drinking water and the later found no suitable harbor. Before and after Mexican Independence the bay attracted smugglers, and foreign whalers worked the waters from 1836 to 1846.

After Independence there were several other failed US attempts to take over the Baja Peninsula, but accelerating agricultural development in the latter half of the 20th century finally consolidated Mexican control of the area. Today, the region, particularly around Ciudad Constitución, is booming.

Puerto López Mateos

pop 3200

Protected by the barrier island of Isla Magdalena, Puerto López Mateos is one of Baja's best **whale-watching** sites. The bay is narrow here, so you don't have to travel as far by boat to see the whales. Boca de Soledad, only a short distance north of the port, boasts the highest density of whales anywhere along the peninsula. It's also a great place for **sea kayaking**: compared with Puerto San Carlos to the south, there are plenty of spots to launch

along the shore, the bay is more sheltered and there are fewer commercial boats.

Because of the bay's narrowness, you can see the whales from the shore, but the best way to view them is by hiring a *panga* and hitting the water. Two boat cooperatives, the **Unión de Lancheros Turísticos** (☎ 131-5178) and the **Sociedad Cooperativa Aquendi** (☎ 131-5115) run whale-watching trips from the pier. Trips cost about US\$70 per hour for up to six persons.

Free camping, with pit toilets only (bring water), is possible at Playa Soledad. People often arrive and camp here so they can head out early for whale-watching the following morning. It's therefore usually easy to form groups to share expenses.

The town has a few basic but tidy lodgings. Closest to the pier, **Posada Ballena López** (Rodríguez 219; s/d US\$18/22) offers four basic rooms with shared bathroom. **Posada Tornavuelta** (☎ 613-131-5106; Rodríguez; r US\$23-28) is a step up, with simple rooms with private bathroom.

Besides a few adequate taco stands, Puerto López Mateos has several good seafood restaurants around town, including the popular **Cabaña Brisa** (seafood mains US\$6-12).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Puerto López Mateos lies 32km (20 miles) west of Ciudad Insurgentes by a paved road. Autotransportes Aguila provides daily buses to/from Ciudad Constitución (US\$4.50, one hour).

Puerto San Carlos

pop 3600

Sometimes windy and dusty, other times shrouded in fog, Puerto San Carlos has a faraway coastal feel and is home to superb whale-watching. Although cetacean spotting is a staple of the tourist economy, San Carlos's deepwater port – the major outlet for much of the produce grown on the Llano de Magdalena – is the town's real breadwinner. Unlike Puerto López Mateos, San Carlos has a very good selection of lodgings. Nearby beaches are fine for camping, clamming and fishing.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

All Puerto San Carlos' streets are named for Mexican port cities. Gasoline and diesel are available at the Pemex station. There's an **internet café** (cnr Puerto La Paz & Puerto Benito Juárez;

per hr US\$2) near the *parque central* (central plaza). Puerto San Carlos lacks a tourist office but has a post office, long-distance telephone service and an IMSS clinic.

WHALE-WATCHING

From mid-January through March, local *pangueros* take up to six passengers to view friendly whales in Bahía Magdalena for about US\$70 per hour per boat. The minimum time for a good trip is about 2½ hours. Some people come for the day from Loreto or La Paz (both about 2½ hours away by car) or even fly in from Cabo San Lucas, but early morning is the best time to see whales.

Among the local operators are **Ulysturs** (☎ 136-0017) and **Mar y Arena** (☎ 136-0076; bajamagbay@hotmail.com), on the right as you enter town. Most hotels can arrange tours as well.

SLEEPING & EATING

San Carlos has some surprisingly good hotels, but be sure to make reservations during whale-watching season. Prices quoted here are for whale-watching season and usually drop for the rest of the year. The following are all in town and easy to find.

RV Park Nancy (☎ 136-0195; campsites US\$5) Offers nine small, shadeless tent sites.

Motel Las Brisas (☎ 136-0498; Puerto Madero; s/d US\$12/15; (P)) Well-worn but friendly and perfectly fine for the price.

Hotel Alcatraz (☎ 136-0017; hotelalcatraz@prodigy.net.mx; Calle Puerto La Paz; s/d US\$32/41) A large patio filled with plants, tables and chairs makes this the most relaxing place in town. Rooms are spacious and have TVs, and the gracious owner is full of information and sets up whale-watching tours for guests. The Alcatraz' shady Restaurant Bar El Patio (mains US\$5 to US\$12) is arguably the best in town.

Hotel Brennan (☎ 136-0288; www.hotelbrennan.com.mx; s/d US\$36/45) This extremely well-kept hotel is another great choice, with modern, immaculate, tile-floor rooms, spotless bathrooms and friendly owners.

Molly's Suites (☎ 136-0131; turismo@balandra.uabcs.mx; Puerto La Paz; s/d US\$45/54) Molly's is owned by the same family that owns Hotel Brennan and offers equally pleasant rooms.

Mariscos Los Arcos (☎ 136-0347; Puerto La Paz 170; mains US\$4-12) This little brickfront restaurant has a big bar and excellent shrimp tacos and seafood soup.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Puerto San Carlos lies about 58km (36 miles) west of Ciudad Constitución. Based in a small house on Puerto Morelos, **Autotransportes Aguila** (☎ 136-0453) offers daily buses to Ciudad Constitución (US\$4.50, one hour) and La Paz (US\$22, four hours).

MISIÓN SAN LUIS GONZAGA

Although less impressive than the missions of San Borja and San Javier, the date-palm oasis of Misión San Luis Gonzaga is still worthy of a detour. Founded in 1737 by German Jesuit Lambert Hostell, the mission closed with the Jesuits' departure in 1768, after an original indigenous population of 2000 had fallen to only 300. The church has an unusual set of twin bell towers, and beside it stand ruins of more recent vintage with elaborate neoclassical columns.

The village's only other facilities are a school and a small store. To get here, take the good graded road leading 40km (25 miles) east from Km 195 on the Transpeninsular. The junction is about 14km (9 miles) south of Ciudad Constitución. Keep watching for the sign reading 'Presa Iguajil.'

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