

Desert Sanctuary

You have to wander off the beaten path a bit to find this old-Mexico treasure. But what awaits is surely worth the trip.

Text by Tracey Minkin : Photos by Gilda Badillo



Paradise for pilgrims: relaxing spaces for contemplation, conversation, or cocktails at the Todos Santos Inn.

As we lurch our way along the desert track, Sergio Jauregui's SUV bucks over ruts and rocks. We hit a big one, and like a rollercoaster rider at full tilt, I levitate off my seat, saved from a head injury only by the grip of my seatbelt.

"You hit your head?" Sergio hollers back over the noise of the ride.

I regain my focus on the sere landscape out my window—low scrub punctuated by exclamation points of cacti. This is the desert of Baja California Sur, the southernmost portion of that peninsular tail slung from the other California. I watch the finely ground dust kicked up by our tires swirl in the hot air and soften the harsh landscape into muted greys.

"Nope!" I call to the back of his head,

and in doing so, catch the view out our front window. The mountain escarpment we've been slogging toward, first distant when we turned off the coastal road 15 minutes ago, now looms near. And suddenly I see, as my guide maneuvers our vehicle's massive tires across what now feels loose and sandy underneath, a small cliff marking the end of our road.

There's water pouring from it.

An oasis. The sanctuary that cools, nourishes, and sustains the desert

traveler. The anachronism of plenty amidst little. Sergio's waterfall that marks a clear, meandering and mostly underground desert river. And, it turns out, just the right metaphor for my home base on the Baja, the town of Todos Santos.

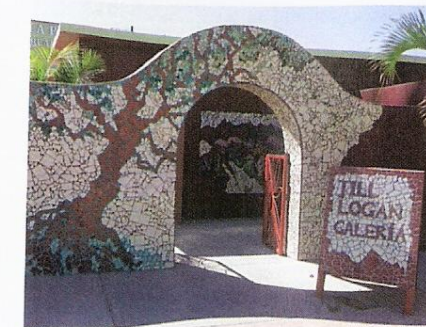
Todos Santos means "all saints," and even though I want for ecumenical identity, I confess I'm here on several pilgrimages at once. Meteorologically, I'm a chilly New Englander seeking winter warmth. Culturally, I hope to

find a genuine Mexican town surviving the development boom on the lower Baja, increasingly pinched by large, expensive resorts to the south in Cabo San Lucas and new, gated communities near La Paz to the northeast. Personally, I want to get off the beaten path, see parts of Mexico not on a typical tourist itinerary, meet the locals, and learn a little Spanish.

I have come, as my Jesuit missionary predecessors did in 1724, to the right place. They found an abundant freshwater spring in an arroyo west of the Sierra de la Laguna Mountains.

I find Todos Santos. They grew fragrant spices, figs, and pomegranates in the middle of the desert. I wander up and down dirt streets, marveling at restored haciendas intact from the 1870s, when Todos Santos became a thriving center of sugar cultivation. I find open-air taquerias neighboring upscale restaurants, art galleries next to curio shops.

Most importantly, I find the beautiful Todos Santos Inn, with its verdant courtyard, broad, cushioned wicker chairs for restful conversation, colonial-style beds festooned with



Enjoying *la vida* Todos Santos: local art galleries, a pottery lesson from Doña Ramona, pre-sunset cocktails after a cliff walk, the day's end.

Building a Cultural Adventure

You know you want to savor local flavors and meet local people, but you're not sure how to do it? Let the following companies guide you to excellent adventures that combine culture, language, food and wine, and light exercise such as walking, biking, or hiking.

Country Walkers (countrywalkers.com) offers a broad spectrum of trips on every continent, with an emphasis on walking as a means of connecting you to the landscape and culture.

Butterfield and Robinson (butterfield.com) is the venerable Canadian-based outfitter that focuses on walking and biking in far-flung settings rich with cultural adventures, and always bedding down in luxurious digs at night.

Backroads (backroads.com) has specialized for years in excellent cycling-based cultural adventures. On its itinerary this year is a new group of Insider Trips that claim to turn up the culture and take away the exertion.

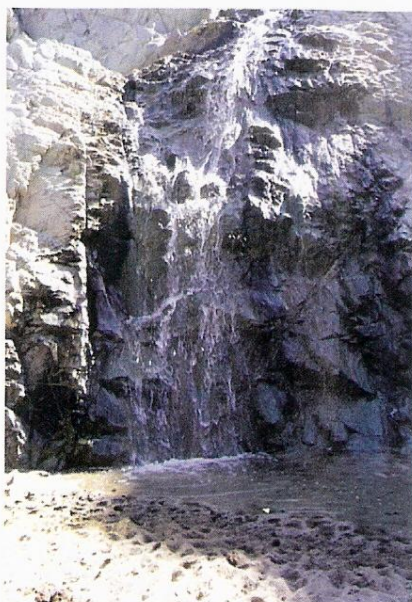
Exodus (exodus.co.uk), based in the UK, has been leading adventurers on trips around the world for 30 years. Look for their Egyptology trip, Ecuadorian village exploration, and wine-tasting forays in Italy, Spain, and South Africa.

GAP Adventures (gapadventures.com) offers so many cultural trips, you'll need a weekend off just to read up on the 779 tours they currently have listed on their website.

Cactus Language (cactuslanguage.com) lets you make language the focus of your travels by connecting you with language schools and travel packages in more than 45 countries.

ToVino Wine, Culinary and Cultural Tours (tovino.net) offers tours in Spain and Portugal for wine and food lovers.

Vagabond Gourmet (vagabondgourmet.com) provides culinary adventures in Europe, Asia, and North America. —T.M.



Water from stone: hidden falls in the midst of the Baja Desert.

mosquito netting, and the finest margarita I've had in years. My prayers, evidently, have been answered.

And I find people: Sergio, who runs Todos Santos Eco Adventures with his American wife, Bryan. She bundles me up with Lynn Itzkowitz and James Steinberg, two New Yorkers here with Country Walkers, a soft-adventure travel outfitter. The three of us spend the week following, quite literally, in Sergio's footsteps. The day of the hidden waterfall, we walk for nearly two hours upstream of it, skimming the riverbed in our bare feet and marveling at the lush greenery all around us. We scale a short rock wall with a chain ladder Sergio has gallantly carried in his daypack. And we cluck at the local range cattle and pigs who've meandered down the steep ravines for a drink and some welcome shade in the year-round sun.


Because Lynn and James have come with a walking agenda, I gladly fold into their pedestrian rhythms. One afternoon we hike a ridge with Sergio that crests above Todos Santos' 70-mile stretch of near-empty beaches, then descend among blooming cacti to follow the water. We spot cardinals among the thorns, whales spouting

offshore and a horny toad, still and ancient, in the dust. Another day we drive far into the Sierra de la Laguna, then make a final hour's trek to a centuries-old ranch, where matriarch Doña Ramona teaches us how she builds pottery by hand, made in the mountains for generations, with clay dug from behind her small home. She also, with her daughter, shares her outdoor kitchen, where we learn to stretch and shape a tortilla and cook it over a wood-fired grill. We make a feast of our handiwork, with fresh meats, fish, and beans, and sip Doña Ramona's favorite drink for visitors: sweet water the color of a rich, purple blossom, infused with hibiscus.

Under Sergio's wing, we drink in the local history, food, and culture. We spend a morning touring the town, discovering past sugar barons' grand homes and noting small saints perched throughout the historic district to commemorate the town's given name, which comes from its founding on All Saints Day. We also meet local artists both American and Mexican and pause quietly in the simple stately church that anchors the town square.

One night we make a pilgrimage to a local restaurant and spend a margarita-soaked cooking lesson roasting and stuffing poblano chiles. Another afternoon, I pass an hour with Guillermo Bueron, who elegantly plies me with a beginning Berlitz lesson in Spanish, a special offering at the Inn.

All the while, I feel that Todos Santos absorbs me painlessly. The Americans here have not yet overtaken the culture, so Mexican life remains dominant. In the morning, I get up at sunrise and lose myself wandering the maze of dirt streets, watching shop owners water their roads before the rising, enduring sun will dry it into powder again. I hear Spanish floating on the morning breeze, smell coffee brewing at the local café, and form in my mouth the words I will use to ask for it.

I am the happy, well-watered desert traveler: a pilgrim found. 

Todos Santos for Pilgrims

Where to stay:


The Todos Santos Inn (todossantosinn.com) offers two terrace guestrooms in the original 1870s historic hacienda, and several larger suites surrounding the courtyard. Prices range from \$125-\$225, including a continental breakfast. Holiday prices, from December 20-January 6, are higher. The inn also offers single Spanish lessons for \$25 an hour, and many language packages can be included in lodging prices.

Where to eat and drink:

For breakfast, Caffé Todos Santos, Calle Centenario, offers hearty platters and excellent coffee. For lunch, seek out the delicious molé preparations at Los Adobes, Calle Hidalgo, and don't miss touring their beautiful cactus garden. For pre-dinner drinks, begin with that legendary margarita (cheaper than a glass of wine!) at La Copa Wine Bar, on the grounds of the Todos Santos Inn. After drinks, walk the main drag to either the Coronela Restaurant at Hotel California, Calle Juárez, for what they've termed "Mexiteranian Dining," or Café Santa Fe, Calle Centenario, with a flavorful Italian menu that is considered the best on the Baja.

Where to adventure:

Todos Santos Eco-Adventures (tsecoadventures.com) can do it all for you, from an easy stroll to swimming with the seals and from cooking lessons to stargazing and champagne. -T.M.

 eldr.com: Go to eldr.com/baja for a slideshow of Todos Santos.