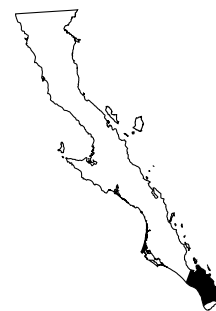


Southern Baja



Also called the Cape Region, southern Baja is bathed in deliciously tropical weather and possesses some of the peninsula's most enticing attractions. The most obvious is Los Cabos, but because that area is a world in itself, it receives its own chapter (see p217). Strikingly different, the rest of southern Baja remains – for the time being, at least – fairly down to earth. Development is encroaching, especially along the Eastern Cape Rd and around Todos Santos, but most places retain their dusty Baja essence.

La Paz bedazzles its visitors with crimson sunsets and one of the finest *malecones* (waterfronts) in all of Mexico. The city is more quintessentially Mexican than many Baja towns and is a superb base for a myriad of outdoor activities. South of the capital, you'll hit the first fork in the Transpeninsular. The faster México 19 drops below the Tropic of Cancer to hug the Pacific then passes the historic town of Todos Santos before hemming an empty coastline and arriving in Cabo San Lucas.

The slower Transpeninsular heads east, touches the gulf then snakes south through the Sierra de la Laguna. These subtropical highlands of the central cape hold Baja's greatest biodiversity as well as tiny towns that attest to the region's mining history. North of the Tropic of Cancer, the Eastern Cape Rd branches off and rumbles south along a marvelous stretch of coast. It passes the prime windsurfing destination of Los Barriles, the coral reef at Cabo Pulmo and a slew of beautiful beaches before emerging at San Jose del Cabo.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Shack up in a comfy beachside *palapa* (palm-leaf shelter) and live the beach life at rural **El Pescadero** (p215).
- Hire mule and guide and explore the wild **Sierra de la Laguna** (p203), Baja's biodiversity hot spot.
- Watch the crystalline, azure water slide beneath your kayak as you paddle the narrow inlets of **Isla Espíritu Santo** (p200).
- Let **La Paz** (p189) cast its spell on you with sunsets, seafood tacos and its wonderful *malecón* (waterfront promenade).
- Swim with garish tropical fish and dive with manta rays at the coral reef of **Cabo Pulmo** (p207).



■ LA PAZ JANUARY AVERAGE HIGH: 73°F/23°C

■ WATER TEMP OFF CABO PULMO: 68-83°F/20-28°C

SOUTHERN BAJA

0 30 km
0 20 miles



SOUTHERN BAJA



LA PAZ

☎ 612 / pop 196,900

There's something special about La Paz that's difficult to pinpoint: the pinkish light of sundown over the bay, the progressive atmosphere created by its university and cultural center, the crooked sidewalks, its status as a free port, its palpable cultural links to mainland Mexico, the abundance of restaurants and cafés, the eccentric and friendly *paceños* themselves, and a lively street life that has and will seemingly forever refuse to cave in to tourism. Lapped by a deliciously blue sea, the city's *malecón* makes for splendid sunset walks and easy socializing for the families that pour from their homes each night to take in the breeze and the day's gossip.

All of this conspires to keep plenty of return visitors swearing that this is the best city in Baja. To top it all off, La Paz is an excellent base for all sorts of ocean activities. Kayaking, diving, sportfishing, whale-watching and beach bumming can all be done as day trips from town. Best of all, you get to return to La Paz at the end of the day.

HISTORY

In 1535 Hernán Cortés established Baja's first European settlement on Península Pichilingue, just north of La Paz. However, despite the discovery of pearls in the Gulf of California, it was soon abandoned due to indigenous hostility and food and water shortages.

By the late 16th century, England and Holland were disputing Spain's maritime hegemony, and buccaneers were raiding Spanish ships throughout the world. The treasure-laden galleons that sailed from Manila to Acapulco were especially popular targets, and the pirates often used Bahía de La Paz as a staging area for raids upon the galleons. After the turn of the century, in response to incursions by Northern Europeans, Viceroy Gaspar de Zuñiga y Acevedo of New Spain (Mexico) granted Sebastián Vizcaíno a license to exploit the pearl fisheries of the Cape Region and establish settlements to discourage privateers.

Though Vizcaíno renamed Bahía de la Santa Cruz as Bahía de La Paz (Bay of Peace), he abandoned the idea of a settlement there due to the shortage of supplies and the area's limited agricultural potential.

In 1720 the Jesuits established a mission, but epidemics and indigenous uprisings led to its abandonment 29 years later. La Paz was briefly occupied by US Marines during the Mexican–American War, then attacked by William Walker during his preposterously incompetent attempt to annex Baja California to the USA (see p195).

Mining at nearby El Triunfo, along with pearling and fishing in the gulf, contributed to the city's postindependence growth. Its political status advanced with the grant of statehood to Baja California Sur in 1974, when La Paz was made the state capital.

ORIENTATION

As the Transpeninsular approaches the city, it runs parallel to Bahía de La Paz and becomes Calzada (or Calle) Abasolo. When Abasolo hits the water, it becomes Paseo Obregón (officially Paseo Alvaro Obregón), running along the *malecón* and on to Península Pichilingue, north of town. If you're continuing to Cabo, entering downtown is unnecessary.

Most of the city's sites are along the *malecón* and within the downtown area bound by Bravo, Héroes de la Independencia and 5 de Mayo. Most of La Paz has a regular grid pattern that makes orientation easy. Plaza Constitución is the city's main plaza, but the *malecón* has become extremely popular for the evening *paseo* (stroll).

INFORMATION

Bookstores

Librería Agora de La Paz (☎ 122-6204; cnr Altamirano at 5 de Mayo) Carries a great selection of Spanish-language books on Baja and mainland Mexico. Inside Museo Regional de Antropología e Historia.

Libros Libros Books Books (☎ 122-1410; Constitución 195) Occasionally stocks English-language magazines and a book or two on Baja in English.

Emergency Services

The tourist police office is inside the tourist office.

Immigration

On weekends immigration officials staff the ferry terminal at Pichilingue and the **airport** (☎ 124-6349), but tourist-card extensions are available only at the Paseo Obregón **immigration office** (Servicios Migratorios; ☎ 125-3493; Paseo Obregón 2140, Edificio Milhe; 🕒 9am–6pm Mon–Fri).