

For Her, joy is a luxurious Todos Santos getaway...

{ GET PAMPERED }



Story & Photos by
COLLEEN & CRAIG
LIGIBEL

{ GO PADDLING }

for Him, joy means roughing it » » » »

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Y WIFE AND I

enjoy the perfect marriage; we spend at least a month each year doing our own thing. While I brave eight-foot Gulf Stream seas in my 43' sailboat *Wind's End*, she flies first-class to meet me at our ultimate destination. While I rub some feeling into my frozen toes at the foot of Kilimanjaro's Furtwangler Glacier, Colleen indulges herself with a hot rock massage at a four-star resort 4,000 miles away. And while I slog through the jungles of Guatemala in search of Mayan ruins, she goes on a shopping spree in Paris in search of jewels of her own. It's a formula that has worked to perfection for almost 30 years.

TEMPTING FATE, HOWEVER, I suggested that we try something different this year. Why not base in Todos Santos? Colleen could relax in the style to which she has become accustomed, while I go kayaking in the nearby Sea of Cortez. It would be a win-win for both of us.

«WHAT MY HUSBAND CRAIG SAYS is true...up to a point. I don't like to sweat or eat anything out of a can. I like my bathwater warm and my wine cool. But I'm not a total wuss. I have slept in a 16-pole teepee on the banks of the Missouri River, and there was that time we almost plunged down a 1,500 foot cliff while hunting mushrooms in Catalonia. But camping out is definitely not my thing, so I jumped at the chance to catch up on my pamper-quotient while my erstwhile husband goes off on another one of his testosterone-infused adventures. Let the pampering begin!»

To handle the logistics of the trip, we enlisted the help of Todos Santos outfitter Sergio Jauregui and his wife Bryan who called upon their circle of Todos Santos and La Paz friends to put it all together. Sergio was more than willing to turn over the day-to-day operations of his company, Todos Santos Eco-Adventures, to his father and

mother while Bryan saw in Colleen a kindred soul with whom she could share some of her special Todos Santos relaxation secrets.

Colleen and I had been to Todos Santos many times before. We were initially lured to the sleepy oasis by the promise of a gourmet meal at Ezio and Paula Colombo's Café Santa Fe Restaurant, not to mention the opportunity to escape the hustle and bustle of touristy Cabo San Lucas, a scant 45 miles south. We've come back time and again just to wander the dusty streets, enjoy a frosty Pacifico in the signature Hotel California (contrary to popular legend, the Eagles never have stayed there) and watch the spectacle of the gray whales as they cavort no more than 100 yards off the sugar-sand beach.

We first met Sergio and Bryan when I put together a hiking expedition to the top of Al Picacho, the Sierra de Laguna's highest peak, two years ago. But that's another story. Since then, we have become internet friends and have vowed to get together for more adventure.

«Enough, already. I want to check into our hotel and line up my massage, facial and shopping! You boys can drink your tequila and smoke your cigars under the stars all you want. Just remember you'll be crawling into a hard sleeping bag where your only companions will be scorpions and snakes! Bryan and I have a date with the masseuse!»



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The “headquarters” for our adventure, Posada La Poza, is as much a work of art as it is a boutique hotel. The six-year-old creation of retired Swiss banker Juerg Weisendanger and his Czech artist wife, Libusche, sits on four acres of lush tropical grounds less than 100 yards from the pounding Pacific surf. La Poza’s seven rooms and suites are simply furnished and reflect Libusche’s impeccable taste. Each offers a stunning view of the two-acre lagoon, a freshwater sanctuary for more than 50 species of birds. Binoculars and birding books are standard issue. There are no televisions or phones in the rooms, although there is internet access in the spacious lobby. Innkeeper Juerg explains his philosophy this way: “People come here to get away. We did have one guest who left after two days. He just

couldn’t cope with the solitude and peace of the place.” In the capable hands of Lenka Heroldora, a 25-year-old hospitality intern from Prague, we enjoyed a capable host providing us a fountain of information about the hotel and the area. Upon arrival at La Poza, we are offered a welcoming glass of lemonade and promptly shown to our well-appointed room on the second floor of a burnt orange-colored adobe casita. A classical CD plays softly over the stereo. The décor is a mixture of function and traditional Mexican color. Whimsical chenille “drapes” hang from the entrance to the bathroom. A bowl of fruit is served as both a centerpiece on our dresser and a delicious work of art that we will devour as our stay lengthens. The mini-fridge is ice-cold and well-stocked.

«La Poza is my kind of place. No way for anybody to bother me here. I unpack quickly while Craig begins to re-pack his camping gear. What does a grown man need with three pairs of shorts, two sets of long underwear and a Hawaiian shirt for a two-day kayak trip? You’d think he was paddling to Panama! He stuffs it all into three dry-bags, including two bottles of wine and a fifth of tequila.»

Our adventure together begins with a couple’s activity, a regional cooking class hosted by Danny La Mote, the Hotel California’s acclaimed French-trained chef. Here is a chance for both of us to pamper our palate! We climb into Sergio’s 8-passenger Suburban and make our way through town into a newly-developed residential area. The class is hosted in the

home of Sylvia St. Clair, a local architect. Her house is unique; there isn’t a square wall in the place and the well-appointed kitchen opens onto a spacious patio with a view of the Sierra La Laguna Mountains. Class is already in session and five pairs of student chefs slice, sauté and stir a variety of local ingredients under the watchful eye of Chef Danny. Colleen and I are assigned the task of preparing the first course, a salad of blanched sea scallops, infused with curry oil and nested in a bowl of grilled zucchini strips. The group is mostly locals; American ex-pats who have found nirvana in Todos Santos’ easy lifestyle and affordable living. We trade banter with our new-found friends. One is a retired radiologist who is making a second career out of marketing Hotel California tequila. Another is a surfer who came for “weed and waves” in the 60’s and never left. A couple who had chucked it all in California to

open a small retail store in Todos Santos is engrossed in preparing their lamb dish. It is an eclectic mix of ages, attitudes and affectations. Chef Danny clucks like a mother hen over each pair of would-be chefs. “Don’t bruise the scallops...ooops...don’t throw out that pan...that’s the sauce for the duck...sauté that lamb for 10 minutes, then let it simmer for 30 minutes...that sauce could be overpowering...ease up on the poblano pepper...watch it...that’s two ounces of tequila for the sauce...not for you!” Under his watchful direction, everyone works hard to please Danny and before we know it, dinner is served! We conclude the culinary festivities with shots of Hotel California tequila accompanied by an avocado milkshake. Then, it is off into the night and back to La Poza, where a million stars dance to the rumble of the waves.

“Chef Danny clucks like a mother hen over each pair of would-be chefs. “Don’t bruise the scallops...ooops... don’t throw out that pan!”



COLLEEN GETS PAMPERED...

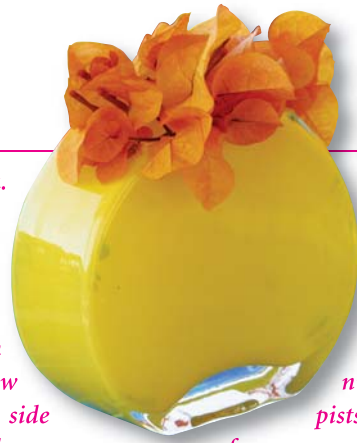
Rising slowly and not too early, I curl up in my robe with a steaming cup of coffee to watch the day unfold before me. Fed by several mountain streams, the lagoon is nearly full and at this point, it has taken over some of La Poza's grounds. The last time I was here, I saw the sand dam between the lagoon and the beach break and the whole lagoon emptied in less than 15 minutes. Juerg hopes the same thing will happen soon. I watch a flock of ducks settle into the reeds. The surf beats a steady if somewhat unnerving cadence.

I stroll down for breakfast at half past nine and find myself alone in the sunlit dining room. Lenka takes my order and we talk about my day. My massage is scheduled for 4:00 PM that afternoon and before that, I plan to stroll the beach, have lunch at the hotel, write some postcards and finish a book I've been wrestling with for a week; a perfect day of relaxation with nothing too strenuous, capped off with a

late dinner at La Poza. Poodling at its best!

After breakfast, I pick my way to the beach, where the sand is soft but the surf is dangerous, even deadly. There are only a few beaches on the Pacific side where it is safe to swim. The waves are intense; the drop-off is steep and the undertow very strong. Close by, surfing nirvana can be experienced at the world-class surf breaks of Los Cerritos, San Pedrito and La Pastora. I lose myself in the solitude. I am alone on the beach and find my toes pushed into the sand, my spirit luxuriating in the dichotomy of solitude and surf.

Lenka has anticipated my return for lunch; there is a cool glass of crisp chardonnay at my place-setting. I order the famous tortilla soup. Its rich, creamy texture does not disappoint. Another glass of chard? Why not? I deserve it...



My masseuse arrives at 4PM and having two options for the treatment, either on the patio of my room or poolside, I opt for poolside. La Poza utilizes a number of massage therapists, some local, some from as far away as La Paz. Maria Gallardo made the 30-mile journey from La Paz and she begins with a standard massage, followed by a hot rock massage, body peeling and exfoliation with red wine. At \$65, I was pleasantly surprised by the cost for my massage as I had recently experienced the ultimate in luxury at The One and Only Palmilla's Spa. There, basic massages start at \$140 and can go as high as \$250. The cares of the day (what cares?) floated away as Maria worked the kinks out of my 50+ year-old-body with her supple fingers. We all know being pampered can be hard work.

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{GO PADDLING}



CRAIG GOES PADDLING...

Up with the birds early, I enjoy a quick breakfast while Colleen exercises the inside of her eyelids. Sergio shows up promptly at 7:30. We have about an hour's drive to La Paz, where we pick up our rented kayaks. Sergio is a diminutive ball of Mexican energy. A former engineer, Sergio has been a clown, a kayak guide and a mountain expedition leader. His company offers a number of guided hiking trips around the Todos Santos area. Our trip to the Sea of Cortez will provide him a chance to see old friends and revisit familiar places. It was on one such trip that he met and fell in love with Bryan, a loquacious Louisiana native whose business dictates numerous trips to China each year. Talk about a contrast in cultures!

Driving through La Paz is somehow very reassuring. Here is a real Mexican town with prosperous merchants, clean open air markets and not many *touristas*. Even the waterfront seems refined with only a few national chains to tempt Spring Breakers. Not at all like Cabo or Cozumel and not a beer chugging contest to be found! La Paz, with a population of about 250,000, is the capital of Baja California Sur

and plays host to a number of local industries, including eco-tourism, mining, shipping, agriculture and fishing. During the 1800's, La Paz was the black pearl capital of Mexico.

As we pull up in front of Baja Outdoor Activities waterfront office, we are warmly greeted by owner Ben Gillam, an affable, barrel-chested Welshman who has built his company into one of La Paz's most successful outfitters. Sergio worked for Ben for six years. Ben and his wife Alejandro have run Baja Outdoor Adventures since 1994 and figure they outfit around 700 clients annually.

"We do the usual to survive around here...whale watching...snorkeling...half-day trips...but our bread and butter is the fully-supported four and eight-day sea kayaking expeditions," explains Ben. Costs range from \$625-1,000 USD, depending on type and length of trip. BOA is unique among Espiritu Santo outfitters in that most of their longer trips involve camping at a different location every night. Other outfitters find it more convenient to set up a base camp and have kayakers return to the same spot each day. We arrange to rent

two single ocean kayaks from Ben and to utilize one of his pangas to transport us to a point midway up the rugged Espiritu Santo coast.

Upon reaching the put-in on the Sea of Cortez at last, we offload 100 pounds of gear in short order. The beach at Playa Tecolote is a mixture of palapas, laid-back restaurants and pangas. Tourists mingle with RV'ers who have settled in for the duration. One of Ben's captains, Mario, welcomes us with a 30' launch. Powered by two brand-new 200 HP 4-strokes, it glides over the azure water at 30 MPH. Our destination is a scant 10 miles away, the beach at Candelero, one of the almost two dozen perfectly shaped bays that ring the island and provide a paddling paradise for novice and experienced kayakers alike.

All of the islands in the Sea of Cortez are now under UNESCO protection as part of the World Heritage Bio-Reserve. The Espiritu Santo Island group, which borders the southeastern portion of the Bay of La Paz, is considered the crown jewels. The diving, snorkeling, and kayaking are second to none. The island of Espiritu Santo is a 23,000-acre ecological wonder. It is home

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Before sunset, after a refreshing dip in the salt water pool and a tall glass of lemonade, I watch the birds conduct their mating rituals far overhead. A luxuriating shower, a short nap and I'm ready for dinner. I miss the sunset, but vow to do better tomorrow.



to go home, but she hung in and soon it felt like home. In June 1998, Jill returned to Todos Santos to live permanently and opened her gallery, Galeria Logan. Using acrylic and oil, Jill depicts European hillsides, trees, women as angels, and still lifes in tropical environments. She infuses strong

Juerg and Libusche have returned from their brief vacation and both are on hand to greet me as I stroll into dinner. Two other couples have arrived and the small room is alive with chatter. I select the lamb chops, grilled to perfection. Satiated, I meander back to my room, pausing to take in the ambiance of the place; subtle lighting highlights the foliage and a million stars provide a brilliant canopy overhead. The Pacific thunders on in the distance as I put on my terrycloth robe, select a CD, sip some herbal tea and become lost in my thoughts.

The next morning I find no reason to move too quickly. Today is about a short drive into town, some shopping and lunch. Having been admirers of this California artist for several years, I head straight for Jill Logan's Studio on Todos Santos' main drag. Jill first came to Todos Santos in 1995 alone to paint and write. Within two weeks she wanted

soul energy into her work, expressed through color and movement. After visiting with Jill, I end up commissioning an original painting of three palm trees, very reminiscent both of my stay in Todos Santos and of the three palm trees that stand sentinel over our beach house in Florida. When completed, Jill will ship the painting directly to us in Florida.

To celebrate my purchase, I decide on lunch at the Hotel California bar where I enjoyed perhaps the most succulent mahi-mahi sandwich I have ever had. It was grilled to perfection with just a touch of wasabi sauce. I look for Danny to complement him, but he is working his magic in the kitchen and cannot be disturbed. Oh, did I forget to mention that the margaritas are outstanding? Frothy cold, a hint of salt, and the rich taste of Hotel California tequila. Craig, eat your heart out! I'll have another, please.

After lunch, it is back to La Poza to get ready for a drum circle on the beach that Bryan and her friends set up. One must pamper the soul as well as the body!

Not rhythmically inclined, I approached this experience with some trepidation. Bryan assures me the ritual, started by local restaurateur and "reformed lawyer", Iker Algorri, is all in good fun. Usually, the group meets at Iker's restaurant, Café Brown on Thursdays. Today they plan a special sunset gathering in my honor. As we pull out of the hotel's parking lot, we see a cloud of dust approaching us from

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to a host of aquatic and animal species, including the black-tailed jack rabbit and two species of snakes found nowhere else in the world. The waters around the island support coral reefs, resident colonies of sea lions and 500 species of fish. In 2003, the Mexican Government acquired the island from the local cooperative.

At Candelero, we load our kayaks and paddle south, alone with our thoughts and the sky blue water. Visibility in the water is excellent. After an easy hour of paddling passing over small patches of coral, we pull into a secluded cove for lunch. Sergio's little company is truly a family affair I note as we feast on cheese quesadillas Sergio's mother prepared the night before.

The geology of Espiritu Santo is a reflection of the region; dramatic volcanic formations that plunge into the sea and red and black lava flows frozen in time. Gigantic boulders litter the ocean floor and each cove presents a new face of the island. Manta rays jump far off and a pair of sea lions swim up to us to play. Flying fish spurt ahead of our kayaks. An Olive Riddley turtle pokes his head above the water and

recognizing we pose no threat to him, swims effortlessly away. We paddle easily with Sergio forging ahead and me hanging back to take photos.

In the late afternoon, sliding past a dramatic rock outcropping, we come abreast of a dilapidated fisherman's camp and arrive at our home for the night, Playa Corralito. The cove is pristine with small dunes that provide a windbreak. Wispy grasses lead to the mountains. The water is warm and crystal clear. Gear is unpacked, tents are set and we stretch out for a little nap. At sunset, the cliffs beckon us to snap some dramatic early-evening images.

Sergio proves himself an accomplished campfire chef as he prepares a feast of "rajas con queso" (chicken, red peppers and cheese) with tequila and cigars for dessert. Darkness comes early on the island. In the distance, fishermen are returning to the camp on the north side of the bay. Sergio entertains us with stories about Mayan legends as well as fables about the constellations. The stars are phenomenal - the Milky Way so bright you could eat it with a spoon. In an open-air planetarium, Orion rises in

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the East. The blur becomes a white Suburban with a grinning Sergio at the wheel. Dressed in our drumming finery, we slow to exchange greetings on the narrow road. Craig and Sergio appear sunburned and scrubby, but satisfied. They promise to clean up as best they can and meet us on the beach before sunset.

About twenty people, mostly American ex-pats, join us. Iker has brought a large pitcher of margaritas, which he sets in the center of the circle. I'm introduced to everyone and quickly show my lack of musical ability as Iker tries to teach me how to properly strike first a bongo, then a marimba and then, ultimately, a wood block. I am a slow learner but I certainly enjoy the margaritas. Isabel settles into her beach chair and starts playing. The crowd is a mixture of old and young drummers, both experienced and novice. Each has brought his or her special instrument. Iker plays a snare drum while three others beat enthusiastically on large congas. One woman, alone with her thoughts, dances towards the surf as if almost in a trance.

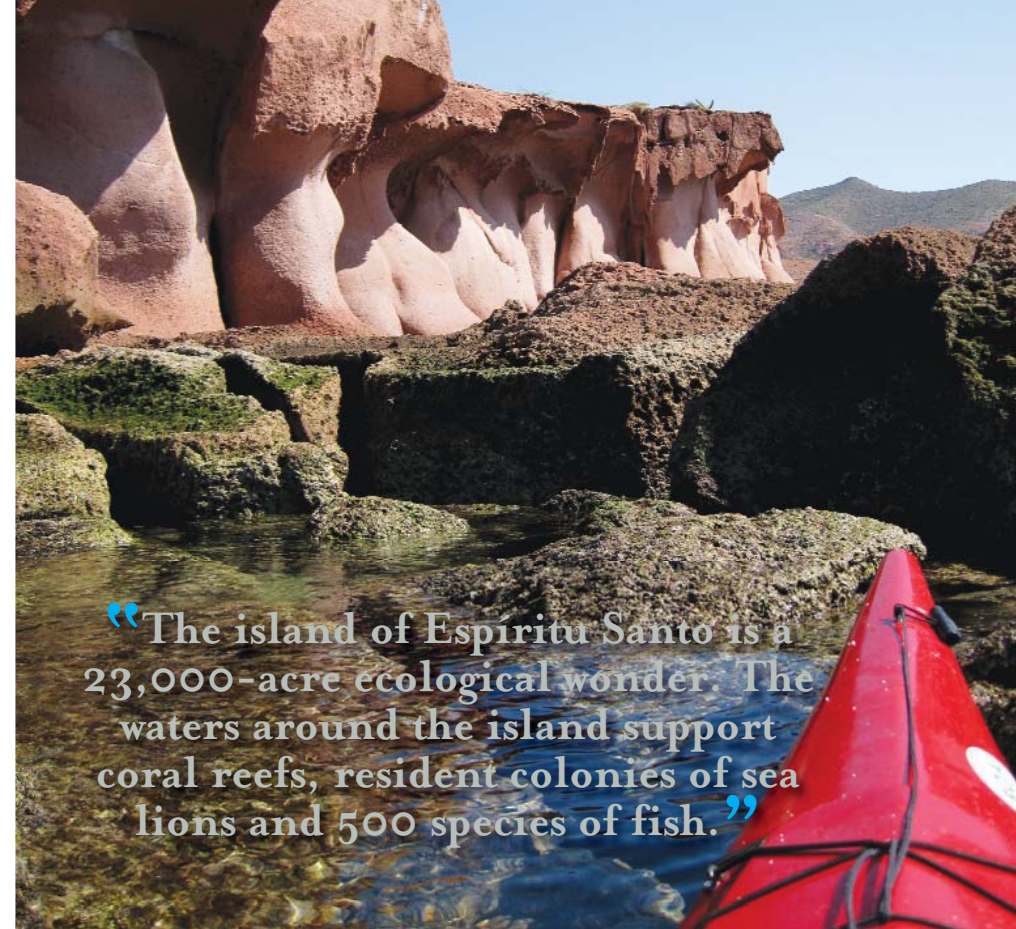
Drum circles have a curious history, going back thousands of years. Many credit them with healing powers. The modern drum circle, some say, can be traced to Grateful Dead percussionist and musicologist Mickey Hart. There are more than 200 web sites dedicated to drum circles, some offering drum circle clothing and gear. Drum circle "chapters" exist all over the world. With Iker taking the lead, the group

beats a steady rhythm. First slow and then fast in a melodic, earthy kind of way. The surf provides an apt counterpoint. A whale and her calf spout not more than a hundred yards offshore. The evening breeze pushes the sweet ocean spray onto our faces. Almost on cue, a flock of more than 100 pelicans form a perfect V and fly directly overhead. The drumming stops and everyone stares in awe at the spectacle.

Whatever cares anyone brought to the circle soon dissipated by the combination of the circle, the elements and, of course, the margaritas. I am consumed by the circle when Craig and Sergio finally show up. Time stands still and I come to the realization that here, on the beach with these 20 strangers, I have found the ultimate in spiritual pampering. It is an experience I will not soon forget.

Dinner is a raucous affair—Sergio and Bryan join us at El Gusto. Lenka and Juerg provide impeccable service and the recollections about our two very different "adventures" flow as liberally as the wine. Craig swears that his camp-side dinner with Sergio and his night under the stars was one of the ten best things he has ever done, ringtail cats notwithstanding. I counter with tales of my poolside massage and the feeling of total relaxation I get every time I walk the grounds of La Poza. For him, the chocolate clams are the ultimate, for me, it was the mahi-mahi sandwich—a culinary Yin and Yang. ■

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the east. The temperature is cool but not chilly. There are no bugs, no competing lights and no sound other than the lap, lap, lap of the waves. After more tequila, I find my way to my tent and settle in for the night.

In the middle of the night, I sit up in my tent bolt upright. I have company. Not the blonde, 24-year-old Playboy centerfold kind. Out comes a blood curdling cry, not knowing who or what my “company” is. I grab a flashlight and shine it in the direction of the noise. It’s a ringtail cat, all eyes and ears and an enormous, fluffy tail, trapped between the rain cover and the tent itself. The little critter stares back at me like the Cheshire cat in Alice in Wonderland. With a kick of my foot, it scampers away up the dunes. Sergio pokes his head into my tent and is laughing uncontrollably. “I told you I would find you a woman on this island,” he jokes. “I just didn’t specify the age or the type!” After a good laugh together, I drift fitfully back to sleep.

Dawn comes early on the island. After that first cup of Mexican coffee, all is right with my world. Some clouds obscure the rising sun, and it looks for a while that we may have to fight some rain and wind on our six-mile trip back to the mainland. A

gentle wind is at our back as we head out. We haven’t seen any other kayakers since we started, and this was still the case as we make our way south. A few fishing boats pass us on the horizon, but other than that, we are alone in the sea.

At about 11:00 AM, we put in at Punta Lupona and rest in preparation for our paddle to the mainland. 90 minutes of paddling later, we are a stone’s throw from land. We pass one couple in single kayaks headed to the island. They tell us they are on a five-day circumnavigation. We wish them well and conjecture that their little kayaks couldn’t possibly contain much more than the bare necessities. Kayaking in style with Sergio spoils one for more spartan journeys.

We heft the kayaks onto the top of Sergio’s Explorer, load our gear, and settle in at the Tecolote restaurant for a lunch of chocolate clams and Pacificos. The clams take their name from the color of their dark brown shells. They are fist-sized, sweet and are a local delicacy. After returning our kayaks to BOA, we stop at the local gelato store for a cactus flower sorbet. It’s a perfect ending to a perfect trip—Colleen couldn’t possibly have had as much fun! ■

