

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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ADVENTURE & TRAVEL

By MELINDA FULMER

I STOOD STILL in the cool emerald water of a swimming hole, tiny carp nibbling my toes, as a 40-foot waterfall thundered down from above. This roaring, soothing idyll was unfolding in the Rancho Ecológico Sol de Mayo, a park on Mexico's Baja California peninsula. Though in a part of the country often mobbed by sun-seeking North Americans, I was one of just five tourists taking in the scene.

I had found myself in Baja California Sur's East Cape, just 45 miles northeast of the comparably teeming Los Cabos tourist corridor, which saw almost four million visitors last year. It felt like an oasis of calm—a world apart from Los Cabos's megaresorts.

An established destination for sport fishermen, snorkelers and divers, the East Cape offers travelers quick access to some of Baja's best fishing and least-trampled nature hubs. Take Cabo Pulmo National Marine Park: Jacques Cousteau once called this Unesco World Heritage site on the Sea of Cortez "the Aquarium of the World" for its 800 species of marine life.

But in years past, traveling to the East Cape often meant settling for bohemian, no-frills accommodations. That changed with the 2019 opening of the Four Seasons, part of the 1,500-acre Costa Palmas beachfront development outside of the tiny town of La Ribera.

Costa Palmas targets those who want to take in the natural splendor of Baja without competing for beach chairs. Its winding private road leads to multiple resorts, 2 miles of swimmable beach and more fine-dining options than most small cities. Access, however, comes with a hefty price tag.

The 118-room Four Seasons Resort Los Cabos at Costa Palmas starts at just over \$1,000 a night. And the beachfront enclave will soon welcome two more ultraluxury resorts, including Amanvari, the first Mexico outpost from the Aman brand, set to open next year, and Casa Blake, which breaks ground in a few months and will offer residences starting at around \$750,000 for a studio apartment.

Costa Palmas's low-slung modern



All Exclusive

Mexico's Los Cabos teems with crowds. This elite enclave promises a reprieve.



A BEACH OF ONE'S OWN

Clockwise from top: The Four Seasons Los Cabos at Costa Palmas sits on 2 miles of swimmable beach; a diver in Cabo Pulmo National Park; Chiki, a nightclub in Costa Palmas.



buildings with their plunge pools, reverently maintained palm trees, and uplighting contrast sharply with the surrounding communities. I felt guilty as I bypassed modest, lived-in towns on my way to this isolated pocket of luxury where guards bar entry through its impos-

ing gates to all but guests of the hotel or restaurants.

But as a traveler looking to truly unplug, I could also see the appeal. You can walk to almost everything within those gates. Eat at Mozza Baja from star chef Nancy Silverton, housed in a marina. Play the 18-hole golf course designed by Robert Trent Jones II. Imbibe and unwind at Chiki, a colorfully mosaicked nightclub and speakeasy. Prefer not to exert yourself? Water taxis and branded SUVs can whisk you between resort and restaurant.

Even if the enclave has plopped itself into the larger community to a degree some travelers might find discomfiting, I was reassured by the fact that Costa Palmas's footprint is still dwarfed by the megaresorts of Los Cabos. "It is just a baby," said Lalo Pita, a guide with the tour outfitter Aventura.

To get a better sense of the vastness of the surrounding countryside, Pita led me on an ATV

tour of the area, leaving the development's gates and weaving along dirt roads and over sand dunes. As we crested a hill by Lighthouse Point, I took in sweeping views of the East Cape's beaches vanishing into the horizon. A lone falcon soared and dipped above us.

Costa Palmas still seems just beyond the radar of most travelers to Baja.

While a mountain range protects Los Cabos, the East Cape can be windy on some winter days. This means snorkeling and sunbathing are, at times, off the agenda—not that the kiteboarders who love this stretch of coastline complain.

Faced with unpredictable weather, I improvised. Rather than sitting by the pool all day as I might at a resort in Cabo, I took satisfyingly aimless walks along

the beach, once stumbling on a release of baby sea turtles from a nearby hatchery. I made several excursions into the surrounding wilderness. To sample the good life that is luring Hollywood A-listers to buy real estate in Costa Palmas, I spent one languorous lunch at the development's Delphine day club, where Michelin-starred chef Ludo Lefebvre oversees the menu and a DJ spun Latin house music for couples armed with margaritas on the beach.

How long, I wondered, would Costa Palmas's "hidden" appeal last, considering all the big names attached to it? For now, the enclave seemed just beyond the radar of most travelers—including the young husband and wife who rode with me to dinner one night. They said they booked their stay in Costa Palmas by accident, thinking they were going to a different Four Seasons resort near Cabo San Lucas, 66 miles away. "It was a nice surprise," the husband said.

A villa for sale in the luxury development of Costa Palmas.

