

Getting Started

Planning a trip is half the fun. Even though you can jump a plane to Los Cabos on a day's notice and be sucking down margaritas beachside the next, you might as well milk your vacation for all the pre-trip daydreaming you can. Dissect maps, read books, pack, repack, gear-check... This section will help you decide where and when to get peninsular as well as steer you to the literary and practical resources that will pump you up for the trip – and make life smoother and more fulfilling once you're there.

WHEN TO GO

Baja is a year-round destination, but the best time to visit depends on where you're going and what you want to do.

The northwestern Pacific coast is busiest from May to October, when the weather is reliably dry and warm. Winter here brings cooler temperatures and occasional rain but also smaller crowds and lower prices. During spring break, American students jam all the resort areas down to San Felipe. If you're heading to Ensenada, San Felipe or anywhere north of these towns, lodging is always cheaper midweek (often by up to 25%!).

On the Sea of Cortez and in the Cape Region, tourist season peaks from November through March. Prices are highest during this time, but there's usually no fluctuation between weekday and weekend lodging rates, except at the resorts. The nicest time to visit the cape is spring, when temperatures are moderate and tourists few. Summer is *chubasco* (tropical storm) season and can be hot, humid and unpleasant, unless fishing is your bailiwick: the biggest catches are usually brought in between July and September. Heavy rains often wash out dirt roads, which is something to consider if you want to leave the beaten track.

Visitors with special interests should tailor their itineraries accordingly; for the lowdown on seasonal activities, see p46. For information on the varying surf seasons around the peninsula, see p56. In general, it's best to skirt the desert areas during the scorching months of May through October.

COSTS

The cost of travel in Baja depends a great deal on the degree of comfort you require. Food and lodgings cost more in Baja than in the rest of Mexico, often only slightly less than in the USA. Prices are highest near the border and in Los Cabos, where things have gotten absurdly expensive.

Unless you're camping or traveling with an RV, lodging will probably take the biggest chunk out of your travel budget. It's hard to find a decent double for less than US\$30 per night. Prices are lower in RV parks or campgrounds, and beach camping is free and legal. Most luxury resort hotels are in Los Cabos, where doubles *start* around US\$200 per night.

You can save money by buying food from supermarkets, bakeries, and fruit and vegetable stands (wash the fruits and veggies first), or by eating at roadside *taquerías* (taco stands) or casual restaurants, where filling meals can cost under US\$5. Prices at better restaurants equal or even exceed those in the USA. Buying warm fresh tortillas, avocados and *carnitas* (slow-roasted pork) is a great way pick up cheap lunches for the road.

Gasoline is not cheap, so using the bus and public transportation can be a money-saver. However, it will also limit your mobility and prevent you from accessing the most fascinating and remote parts of the peninsula.

The best time to visit depends on where you're going and what you want to do.

See climate charts (p257) for more information.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Bruce Berger's *Almost an Island* is an eloquent travelogue with the perfect combination of adventure, history, culture and humor. Berger's love and knowledge of the peninsula brings to life one of the best books on Baja to date.

No Baja reading list is complete without John Steinbeck's classic *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*. The combination travelogue and natural history essay was one of the earliest studies of marine life in the Sea of Cortez.

Another excellent escape into Baja of old – before the Transpeninsular was carved into the scenery – is *The Forgotten Peninsula: A Naturalist in Baja California*, by literary naturalist Joseph Wood Krutch.

Even with the Transpeninsular now paved to Cabo, some still take things slowly: witness *Into a Desert Place*, Graham Mackintosh's narrative of his two-year, 3000-mile walk (walk?!) around the Baja coast, deemed 'one of the most grueling and challenging solo bipedal treks ever taken.'

Gene Kira (author of *The Baja Catch*, Baja's definitive fishing guide) does an impressive authorial sidestep in writing his fictional *King of the Moon*, which brings the people of Baja to life in a truly magical tale.

Cartwheels in the Sand, by Ann Hazard, is an amusing account of a journey down México 1 by four women in a 1978 RV. Hazard, an expat who lives on the eastern cape, has written several books on Baja, including cookbooks.

Both history and eye-candy (it's loaded with juicy glossy photos), *Cave Paintings of Baja California* will inspire you to see Baja's famous cave paintings. It's written by Harry Crosby, the peninsula's definitive historian.

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Hat, sunglasses and sunscreen
- Water bottles (pilfer that free hotel water when you can!)
- At least one good book
- Universal sink plug (for washing clothes)
- A sweater (wool or fleece) for chilly desert nights and mornings on the water
- Snorkel gear (it's always best to have your own)
- Camera
- Swiss Army knife
- Sense of humor (essential)

Drivers:

- Auto insurance (a must)
- Duct tape – and lots of it
- Electrical tape
- Bailing (mechanic's) wire
- Spare fuses
- Motor oil and a spare oil filter
- Radiator water and/or engine coolant
- Basic tool set
- Rags and paper towels
- Spare car key
- Lots of energy bars

TOP PICS


 A stylized map of Baja California, Mexico, with the text 'BAJA CALIFORNIA' overlaid in white.

NATURAL WONDERS

The Baja magic is all about the outdoors, so daydream of the following before heading out. See p46 for more natural highlights.

- **Cabo Pulmo** – Strap on a snorkeling mask and explore the kaleidoscopic underwater world of North America's northernmost living coral reef (p207).
- **Isla Espíritu Santo** – Induce the feeling of floating on air as you paddle the crystalline, sand-bottom coves of this island off the coast of La Paz, one of the world's greatest kayaking destinations (p200).
- **Bahía Magdalena** – Sure the whales are 'friendlier' at San Ignacio, and Laguna Ojo de Liebre is closer to California. But 'Mag Bay's' lack of crowds and the higher concentration of gray whales make this a marvelous place to whale-watch (p184).
- **Península Vizcaíno** – Few places in the world can feel as desolate as this remote peninsula, where only the truly intrepid get the honor of beach combing, camping, and relaxing far away from the crowds (p160).
- **Salt Marshes near Guerrero Negro** – While most people come for the whales, the salt marshes near this nondescript town offer a chance to see thousands of marine birds of all shapes and sizes on a scale that's truly mind-boggling (p155).

BEST PLACES TO SLEEP BENEATH THE STARS

Dragging along the camping gear is undoubtedly the best way to experience the natural soul of Baja – and there's nothing like morning coffee on the beach!

- **Parque Nacional Sierra San Pedro Mártir** – Gear up with your best backpacking equipment and take to the wilderness in this high-mountain national park. The stars are so good, there's even an observatory (p114).
- **Cataviña** – Trip out on the desert sounds and moonlit shadows beneath *cardón* cacti, candle-shaped *cirio* trees, giant boulders and a star-blazoned sky at Parque Natural Palmerito (p147).
- **Playa El Requesón** – Crawl out of your tent at sunrise, step into the warm gentle water of the Sea of Cortez and let the reddening sky pull the sleep gently from your eyes at this splendid beach (p175).
- **Cañón de Guadalupe** – Lay your weary head in this palm-strewn canyon after soaking the night away in hot mineral baths built into the rocks (p136).
- **Laguna Hanson** – Camp beneath giant granite boulders beside this mountain lake in Parque Nacional Constitución de 1857 (p111).

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Mexicans love a good party, and timing your trip around a fiesta is the best way to be certain you'll rub shoulders with the locals. See p258 for more festivals and events.

- **Fiesta de la Vendimia** – (Valle de Guadalupe; August) Forget Napa Valley. Head to the Guadalupe Valley for the down-to-earth celebrations surrounding the grape harvest in Mexico's premier wine region (p109).
- **Carnaval** – (La Paz; February/March) Head to this magnificent seaside city and join in the pre-Lenten fun, a Carnaval celebration that many say is the finest in all of Mexico (p189).
- **Día de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe** – (Tecate; December 12) Let the colorful costumes and joyful dances dazzle your senses at this celebration in honor of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico's patron saint (p123).
- **Fiesta de San Javier** – (Misión San Javier; December 3) Journey to this remote and splendidly restored mission in the Sierra de La Giganta for a celebration that will transport you into another world and another era (p183).
- **Spring Break** – (Rosarito or Cabo San Lucas; late March/early April) So what if it ain't Mexican? Who cares if it's ridiculous? Never mind the drunken crowds. Hit Rosarito (p87) or Cabo San Lucas (p235) and let your inner party animal run wild.

In Walter Nordhoff's *Journey of the Flame*, follow the boyhood travels of Don Juan Obrigón, who in 1810, at age 12, traveled the peninsula with the Spanish inspector-general. The story offers a unique historical glimpse of Baja.

INTERNET RESOURCES

The following sites are great places to start your research. Websites for specific places are listed throughout the book. For websites on outdoor activities, see p46.

Baja Information Pages (<http://math.ucr.edu/~ftm/bajaInfoPage.html>) Tough to navigate and needs updating but is packed with travelers' experiences and information.

Baja Links (www.bajalinks.com) Links galore.

Baja Nomad (www.bajanomad.com) Online travelers' guide to all major Baja destinations, plus forums and newsletter. Huge article archive.

Baja Web (www.baja-web.com) Tome of destination-specific information.

Baja.com (www.baja.com) Loaded with information and history. Hourly updates on border traffic, message boards and more.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Succinct summaries on traveling to most places on earth and the invaluable Thorn Tree bulletin board.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTE

BORDER TO CAPE

Four Days to Three Weeks

Tijuana to Los Cabos is Baja's classic road trip, driven by thousands of North Americans in their RVs, SUVs, trailer rigs, pickups, cars and, occasionally, old Volkswagen campers (someone has to keep the faith alive!). You can make it to Los Cabos in two days of hard driving: **Tijuana** (p68) to Guerrero Negro, Guerrero Negro to Land's End (Cabo San Lucas), 12 hours a leg. If you're a masochist, turn around and drive back. You'll have seen a lot.

With more time under your tires, you'll see a lot more. Stop in **San Quintín** (p117) for clamming, sportfishing and a night's rest. South of the blink-and-you'll-miss-it town of **El Rosario** (p121), the real Baja begins; the boulder-scapes and cacti of **Cataviña** (p147) warrant at least a day's exploration. Catch some Zs here before heading to **Bahía de Los Ángeles** (p150) for some kayaking. Back on the Transpeninsular, continue south to **Guerrero Negro** (p154) and nearby **Laguna Ojo de Liebre** (p157), Baja's northernmost whale-watching site.

With more time under your tires, you'll see a lot more...South of the blink-and-you'll-miss-it town of El Rosario, the real Baja begins.

From here it's a long haul over the Vizcaíno Desert. If you have time, take a detour to **Laguna San Ignacio** (p166) for whale-watching, check out the beautifully preserved mission at **San Ignacio** (p162), or take a multiday trek into the **Sierra de San Francisco** (p164) to marvel at Baja's world-famous indigenous rock art. Continue south and make a quick stop at the historic French mining town of **Santa Rosalía** (p166) on the Sea of Cortez. Next up: the tropical oasis town of **Mulegé** (p170), where faded adobe buildings and narrow streets beckon you into small-town life. Shack up for a night or two, or sleep under the stars on a beach at nearby **Bahía Concepción** (p174).

About two hours south of Mulegé, colonial-style **Loreto** (p177) boasts one of the peninsula's best-preserved missions, plenty of hotels and a long waterfront. South of Loreto, the Transpeninsular doglegs west, over the Sierra de la Giganta, passing the roads to premier whale-watching destinations **Puerto López Mateos** (p185) and **Puerto San Carlos** (p185).

Back on the east coast, **La Paz** (p189) is arguably the finest city in Baja. You could spend at least a day exploring the town, or paddling a kayak around spectacular **Isla Espíritu Santo** (p200). When you're done with La Paz, head south to **San José del Cabo** (p218) and **Cabo San Lucas** (p235) for fine dining, all-night dancing, sportfishing and beaches, beaches, beaches. Hit the brakes at Land's End.



Tune up the car and roll down the windows for the legendary 1711km (1061-mile) drive from the US–Mexico border to Cabo San Lucas, the peninsula’s southernmost point. While two to three weeks is ideal, you could spend months exploring – or, if you’re insane, pull a four-day whirlwind dash.

ROADS LESS TRAVELED

DESERT DUSTER

One to Three Weeks

A world of cacti and lizards and an isolated stretch of coast make the territory south of **San Ignacio** (p162) prime grounds for desert adventure. After a night or two in San Ignacio, hit the dirt and head west to **Laguna San Ignacio** (p166), where you can witness the peninsula's friendliest gray whales (mid-December to April only) before leaving the crowds. From the lagoon, veer south across the salt flats and sand to **San Juanico** (p177), home to some of Baja's best surf.

This last stretch is where you could actually justify buying that GPS. From San Juanico, journey south and slowly inland to the historical date-palm oases of **San Isidro** (p176) and **La Purísima** (p176). After a night there, bump, jump and jolt your way through mountainous canyon country to the twin mission towns of **San José de Comondú** (p176) and **San Miguel de Comondú** (p176).

If you've had enough dirt, head west to the Transpeninsular. If you want more, continue south through the dry, rugged Sierra de la Giganta and visit **Misión San Javier** (p183), one of Baja's best preserved missions. From there, make your way west and back to civilization at **Loreto** (p177).

Check the spare tire, lock the hubs and prepare to get dusty on this section of the Baja 1000 route, a rugged journey through mind-warping desert scenery with desolate ocean vistas. Food, water and camping supplies are a must for this 336km (210-mile) journey.



LOST COASTS

Ten Days to Two Weeks

Arduous roads lead to Baja's finest coves and beaches, where you can do what you please in your own private paradise. From **Bahía de Los Ángeles** (p150), kiss the crowds goodbye and drive south along the rugged road to **Bahía San Francisquito** (p158). After enjoying the gentle Sea of Cortez, journey across the Sierra La Libertad to the roaring Pacific. En route, stop at the bizarre gold-mining ghost town of **Pozo Alemán** (p158). Spend a night in **Vizcaíno** (p160) before braving the hellishly washboarded road to isolated **Bahía Tortugas** (p160). After chatting up the friendly locals, drive out to **Punta Eugenia** (p160) and, if you can find a boat to take you, visit **Isla Natividad** (p160). Reconnoiter Bahía Tortugas, then hit the 4WD for the ride out to **Playa Malarrimo** (p160) for Baja's best beachcombing.

Stock up, retrace your tracks and detour south toward **Bahía Asunción** (p161) before four-wheeling to the isolated fish camp of **La Bocana** (p161). From there it's about an hour's drive to beautiful **Punta Abrejos** (p161), where you can camp, surf and dolphin-spot. Before rejoining the Transpeninsular north of **San Ignacio** (p162) do a little kayaking and bird-watching in **Estero Coyote** (p161).



Be it cliffy, sandy, rock-strewn, marshy, surf-pounded or lapped like the shore of a windless lake, Baja's 4800km (3000-plus miles) of coastline never fails to inspire. This wee journey will introduce you to some of its most splendid coves and desolate shores.

TAILORED TRIPS

SOUTHERN BEACHES & BAYS

The southern beaches and bays route covers more than 96km (60 miles) of spectacular coastline, allowing those with about a week in Los Cabos to take in the area's finest beaches, from Playa del Amor in Cabo San Lucas to the coral reefs of Cabo Pulmo.

Spend your first days in **Cabo San Lucas** (p235), being certain to hit **Playa del Amor** (Lover's Beach; p240), near the famous arches of Land's End. Just around the point lies the Pacific beach of **Playa Solmar** (p240). Eating, drinking and lounging in the sun at one of the beachside restaurants at **Playa Médano** (p240) is a must.



When you've had your fill of Cabo's busy beaches, explore the sandy coves along **Los Cabos Corridor** (p230), especially **Playa Santa María** (p230). **Zipper's Beach** and **Playa Acapulquito** (p230) spell s-u-r-f. Spend a night in **San José del Cabo** (p218) before heading northeast to the spectacular beach-hugging **Eastern Cape Road** (p229). Spend the night (and plenty of time snorkeling) at **Cabo Pulmo** (p207) to maximize your time in the sand. And be sure to stop at exquisite **Playa Arbolito** (p208), with its glassy turquoise water and excellent snorkeling.

NORTHERN ELIXIR TRAIL

By car or bus and with an interest in swill, you're set to explore northern Baja's finest treasures, both natural and human-made. On this quest to see what Baja brews best – margaritas, wine and Tecate beer – this 282km (175-mile) loop will also give you a dose of everything from beaches to scenic valleys to northern Baja's most exciting towns.

First step: spend a night knocking back icy margaritas on Tijuana's infamous **Av Revolución** (p71). The following day, hit **Ensenada** (p95) and **Hussong's Cantina** (p105), the oldest bar in the Americas. While no one has proven the origin of the margarita, Ensenada's historic **Bar Andaluz** (p105) claims to have invented it. After a day or two in Ensenada, head northeast to the **Valle de Guadalupe** (p109) to visit Mexico's best wineries. If you're flush with time (or wine) you can spend a night at one of the country inns around **Francisco Zarco** (p109). After your wander through wine country, spend the night in **Tecate** (p123), home of the **Tecate Brewery** (p125), which brews Carta Blanca, XX, Bohemia and, of course, the town's namesake. After exploring Tecate, cut back to Tijuana and have a pilsner at the city's very own **Tijuana Brewery** (Cervecería Tijuana; p74) before heading home.



Snapshot

Baja wants not for headlines. From cartel wars and police corruption to border walls and real estate booms, there's enough *locura* (insanity) in the air to keep all of the media in business. But don't let the headlines deter you – and remember: there's much more to Baja than what you'll find in the news.

Immigration policies are as newsworthy as ever; the US Congress recently passed a bill authorizing the construction of a 1120km (700-mile) wall along the US–Mexico border (also see p123). Although it is unlikely to reduce the number of illegal immigrants in the USA (and despite the fact that California's economy would crumble should they vanish from its work force), President George W Bush signed the bill into law in 2006. Whether it ultimately receives funding remains to be seen.

Sealing the border began in earnest under President Bill Clinton and the tightening of the frontier has had numerous ill effects. Because illegal immigrants must now cross via more dangerous routes, the rise in immigrant deaths has risen dramatically. The price of hiring a *coyote* (human smuggler) has also risen – to between US\$2000 and US\$3000 per immigrant. The highly profitable business has been largely subsumed by – and is therefore funding – the very cartels authorities are trying to dismantle.

The border wall was severely condemned by former President Vicente Fox, who was succeeded in a hotly contested presidential race in late 2006. Weeks of legal battling followed Mexico's closest election ever and conservative PAN (Partido de Acción Nacional) candidate Felipe Calderón was eventually declared the winner – by a margin of less than 1%.

Within six months of taking the presidential reins, Calderón ordered 3300 troops to Tijuana in a crackdown on organized crime which, by 2007, had become rampant along the northern border, especially in Tijuana. The rise in crime was largely a result of rival gangs battling over turf previously controlled by the Tijuana-based Arellano Félix cartel (see p32). The cartel has been severely weakened by US and Mexican authorities.

Drive south of the border region, and the first thing you notice along coastal highway México 1 is condos, and lots of them. Californians, faced with astronomical real estate prices in their home state, have flooded the peninsula for ocean-front properties sold at prices unheard of back home. It seems everyone you come across down here is involved in the land grab – whether selling, buying or developing – at some level. While it's certainly creating jobs for locals and immigrants from mainland Mexico, wages remain low and the toll on the environment is severe.

Another precarious development threatening Baja's natural beauty is the Escalera Náutica (Nautical Stairway), a federal project begun under former president Vicente Fox and designed to attract wealthy North American yachters. Widely criticized as short-sighted and environmentally unsound, it entails the construction or upgrade of over 24 marinas along both coasts and a 'land-bridge' (ie road) between Santa Rosalillita (p154) and Bahía de Los Ángeles (p150).

If you find the rampant development – or latest headlines – contributing to a case of the travelers' blues, just do what real Baja travelers have always done: hit the bad roads and get away from it all. Or order another margarita.

FAST FACTS

States: Baja California & Baja California Sur

Baja California state capital: Mexicali

Baja California Sur state capital: La Paz

Population, year 2005:
Baja California: 2.84 million;
Baja California Sur: 512,170

Length of peninsula: 1250km (775 miles)

Coastline: over 4800km (3000 miles)

Highest peak: Picacho del Diablo, 3046m (10,154ft)

Approximate number of TVs & computer monitors produced annually in Baja: 17.7 million

Mexico GDP per capita: US\$10,600

Number of tortillas the average Mexican consumes per year: 1700

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'