

Baja for Beginners



Emma Hardy

Sunset at Punta Lobos beach in Baja.

By HEIDI JULAVITS
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"Looking after children can be a subtle way of giving up," the novelist Edward St. Aubyn once wrote. If a vacation is thus a defining microcosm of family life at its presumed artificial best, then it will forever encapsulate your attitude of giving up, or giving in, or putting up a fight, usually at great cost to your nerves and sleeping schedules. It is the family vacations about which your children will brag or complain (or fake-complain) to their friends and future spouses and their own children, as in, "My parents dragged me to Epcot," or, "My parents made me do the midnight watch on a monthlong sailboat trip to Labrador." In short, this is how you will be remembered.



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The requisite surf vehicle and mascot set the scene. [More Photos »](#)

And so, when we were invited to join two other families on a vacation to Todos Santos on the Baja Peninsula in [Mexico](#), we eagerly hitched along. We'd been to Todos twice before with these same friends, but had since collectively amassed three kids, ages 2 and under. What better place, we reasoned, for preconscious children than a town where the coastline is so dangerous and unswimmable that one stretch is referred to locally as Killer Beach? This would be the perfect spot to spend two weeks pretending to relax as our toddlers charged heedlessly and relentlessly toward the 25-foot surf while we — not giving up, mind you — constantly looked after them.

Todos Santos is on the Tropic of Cancer, one hour north of Cabo San Lucas along a cow-frequented stretch of otherwise desolate coastal road. This is the edge of the continent; the entire weight of the ocean rears vertically upward at this precipice and smacks down on the sand so forcefully that at night, even a quarter mile from the beach, the windowpanes rattle in their casements.

According to my co-vacationing friend, the longtime surfer Chris James, Todos first became known among surfing circles for its legendary waves, which were in fact less legendary than the exertions required to enjoy them. As surfers claim, until the mid-70's, there were no paved roads south of Tijuana (the stretch from La Paz to Cabo via Todos seemed to have stayed unpaved until the mid-80's), which made the thousand-mile trip from the border arduously slow and surmountable only by four-wheel drives. Adding to the outlaw thrill was the risk that you'd flip your truck on the bad roads or have a gun pulled on you by a

Federale. "Basically," James admits, "Todos was a mildly scenic town with a great fish-taco stand."

Pilar's Fish Tacos is, in the opinion of some locals, the indirect reason for the town's gradual evolution from a mildly scenic town with a great fish-taco stand into a cultlike destination for an incongruous amalgam of gringos. As local myth would have it, the rancher who owned the land around Pescadero, a nearby village, decided, after the asphalt arrived, to open the San Pedrito RV Park. At about the same time — the late 80's — the artists showed up, as did the first cafe with the first good cappuccino (still available at Caffé Todos Santos). The increasingly artsy vibe attracted the New Agers and the seekers, and soon after, the healers pulled into town. As Charlie Deal, the structural-integration specialist (i.e., nice Rolfer), said of his reasons for living in Todos, "The opportunities for personal growth here are just too great." (Counters James, "I come here for the personal regression.")

We arrive in Todos four days later than expected to find the multifamily vacation in full swing. Connie took a surfboard in the face and has a black eye. The two Chrises (James and Young) are recovering from their thousand-mile trek from [Los Angeles](#) in their respective trucks, loaded with surfboards and oversize bundles of diapers, wipes and baby food. Kristin's working outside on her computer. The babies are obsessively climbing up and down the stone staircase, pausing only to contemplate a spirited hurl off the many concrete precipices. This time we're staying at Las Palmas Casitas, a fenced-in guesthouse with three free-standing casitas arranged around the perimeter of a meticulously landscaped, multilevel park. Its proprietor, Janel Beeman, a silver-haired sage in her late 60's, runs a tight ship in all respects, from the hygienic to the spiritual. While she does her daily stretches on the yoga platform, I admit to her that I don't have time to exercise anymore, between child care and work. She sternly counsels me that my creative and physical selves are intertwined and that one cannot thrive without the other. Our casita bookshelf is loaded with books similarly inclined toward no-excuses self-improvement.

Our days quickly assume a fairly predictable shape: we wake up too early. The kids, who don't really speak English, know the words "outside" and "ball," and though it is 6:45 a.m. and dark and cold (this being a desert climate, the 80-

degree days give way to 50-degree nights — cashmere socks and long johns are essential), we are bombarded with the urgent cries of "ballsideballsideballside." So we brew some coffee and wander into the cold, where we meet two other toddlers and two adults blearily wielding mugs, and another day of total relaxation begins.

After breakfast, the day divides into approximately five noncompulsory parts. Part 1 is the Beach: Part 1/Lunch. There are numerous beaches, but since the surf is best in the morning, we tend to go to La Pastora, located a little more than three miles north of Todos on a washboard dirt road (all the roads, save the main road, are dirt). Surf enchantresses with their matted, salty locks lounge on blankets, fingers draped laconically over the neck of a beer bottle at 10:30 a.m. The nonsurfers among us feel countercultural by proximity, even if we're doing nothing more countercultural than chasing our kids in their mini-O'Neill wet suits. Lunch is a quick fish taco at Pilar's, or carnitas tacos — pork stewed in pork fat and served in a tortilla with lots of mystery salsas and jicama slaws — at Barajas Tacos.

Part 2 is the Nap, during which the non-napping two-thirds of us also nap, or read in a hammock, or walk up the street to "break the seal" at the Internet cafe, or wander into El Tecolote Libros, the extremely decent bookstore run by a friendly woman named Jan who may also pressure you to temporarily adopt a stray dog during your vacation. Part 3 is the Beach: Part 2. Typically we head to Las Palmas, the only good swimming beach, which exudes a pretty malevolent vibe for such a stunning spot — we've been warned that people still drown there every year. For toddlers, however, a warm stream flows from the palm oasis, a stream that we suspect is partly septic runoff. We reason it is better to allow the kids to splash among the E. coli than to be swept off to Samoa by a riptide.

It quickly evolves that we share the burden of Cooking Dinner (Part 5), usually after a trip to Watch the Sunset at Killer Beach (Part 4), because we have ambitious cooks in our midst and dining out with spent kids couldn't be less appealing. The supermercados and plain-old mercados offer a range of edible and inedible fare. The floppy, fruit-fly-infested produce is acceptable in a pinch, but fortunately there are two organic farmstands north and south of town — Rancho Aiki, where you can pick your own greens, and Sueños Tropical, which sells every

imaginable herb as well as eggplants, tomatoes and arugula. We mime our way into buying a who-knows-what cut of beef; we buy chorizo and chicken legs; we even experiment with machaca, a dried, shredded beef. We buy fish at the fishermen's beach, known also as Punta Lobos, at around 5 p.m., when the boats come in. Six red snappers, newly dead, can be procured for about \$9; Chris Young valiantly guts them on his deck and then grills them. Kristin is the most ingenious among us; while the rest of us enact every conceivable taco variation, she's thinking outside the Mexican box — lentils with a Dijon vinaigrette (the Dijon and the white balsamic were wedged, between the diapers, in Chris James's aged Range Rover); eggplant gratin with a tomato-and-onion ratatouille; and bruschetta, using bread purchased from the kitchen at Café Santa-Fé.

As we drift into the second week of our vacation, cooking (and doing dishes) loses what little appeal it ever had. The rare breakfast out becomes a habit at Café Brown, the "local" gringo breakfast spot, aptly housed in a large modern concrete structure that is otherwise completely and depressingly vacant. But the family that runs the place is so unfailingly sweet and the cafe so cheery that we quickly forget we're inside a charmless fortress. They play manic Mexican children's music when we arrive; a sign on the wall reads, "Unattended children will be given an espresso and a free puppy." Samplings from the free-books bookshelf contain all the anthropological clues Margaret Mead would ever need to fingerprint the clientele: "Prescription for Nutritional Healing," a Boggle game, a "Lonely Planet Mexico" guide, a G.R.E. practice book. We patronize the cafe for not only the chorizo eggs and hospitable service but also the restorative delusion that we, too, are breakaway drifters from the States, off to make a new if gravely burdened start as, once again, ourselves.

A different sort of colonialist fantasy life attends the dining experience at Café Santa-Fé, a renovated adobe casona on Márquez de León, darkly cool and unadorned save for the black-and-white tile floors, the Frida Kahlo reproductions and heavy wood furniture. Years ago I approached Café Santa-Fé with heavy skepticism, having heard much about it from Derek Buckner, a Brooklyn-based painter who lives part time in Todos Santos, and his wife, the novelist Joanna Hershon. We assumed their desperate enthusiasm for the food to be the result of the utter sensory exhaustion that they'd experienced after months of tortillas and guacamole. They are not deluded, though the prices at Café Santa-Fé require an

additional suspension of disbelief — a single organic mixed-greens salad will run you around \$14 — especially after paying about \$9 for carne asada tacos for a whole family at Barajas.

Unlike our former thrifty pre-kid incarnations, this time we allow ourselves not one but three decadent trips to Café Santa-Fé; the host stashes us in the drinks room, lorded over by two Kahlos and a muted soccer match. On our second-to-last night, the "ballsideballside" chant begins before the first round of margaritas is delivered, and so we divide into two groups. In Ballside, half of each couple chases the kids around the empty Márquez de León, while the other half holds down the table. The moon is a hair shy of full, the town is eerily silent save for the pigeons in the church belfry and the staccato chick-chick-chick of a manual typewriter from within the lighted archways of the Estacion de Policia. The cold has yet to descend; I'm an odd combination of sleep-deprived and totally rested. I'm with my friends and my daughter, and the only immediate downside to this otherwise perfect moment is that my husband and I seem to never be in the same place and my margarita's becoming watery. Otherwise, I think, St. Aubyn was wrong. You can look after kids while not giving up. I think that I should take a picture to commemorate this moment of victory over my imagined worst self so that I can show my daughter and say: "Don't you remember this? Don't you admire us for not giving up?" But the fact is that she's only 20 months old. What matters, I guess, is that this is how we will remember ourselves to her, because she won't remember a thing.