

SOPHISTICATED LIVING

{Chicago's Finest}



Sept/Oct 2017

slmag.net



A WHALE OF A TIME

The new Baja Luxploration program at The Resort at Pedregal

Written by Bridget Williams

A sudden sensation of aloneness crept over me as I snorkeled a good distance off shore in the bay near the town of La Paz, Mexico. My suspicions were confirmed when I briefly looked out to the horizon and spied my travel mates waving to me from the boat, which was slowly receding into the distance as I swam in the opposite direction. My heart pounded out a furious beat as I plunged my face back into the water and continued my pursuit; the sound of my labored breathing through the snorkel the only thing breaking the silence in the murky expanse.

Within arm's reach, a 40,000-pound behemoth, nearly the size of a school bus, swiftly and silently sliced through the hazy green water, unaffected by my menial presence. A combination of fear and fascination propelled me onward as I kicked my flippered feet with all my might to keep pace with the whale shark we'd traveled far over land and sea to find. After snapping some photos and a few minutes of video, I turned off the technology to fully experience the intensity of this once-in-a-lifetime interaction with a gentle giant. Abandoning my tandem swim when the shark took a dive into deeper waters where I dared not tread, I popped my head

out of the water again, happy to find that the guide boat had circled around to retrieve me.

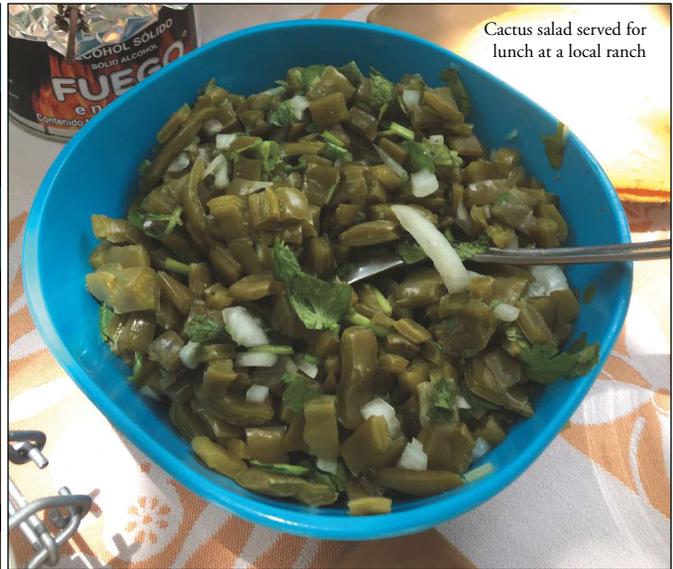
My first trip to the Baja Peninsula could have ended at that moment and I would have been completely satisfied, but the opportunity to swim alongside a whale shark was just one of several unique adventures I was privy to as part of The Resort at Pedregal's Baja Luxploration program. As much as I'd like to keep this gem all to myself, word of the resort's unique mastery of luxury and adventure has already gotten out: the AAA Five-Diamond, Forbes Five-Star resort in Cabo San Lucas was recently named *Best Resort Hotel, Mexico* in the *2017 Travel + Leisure World's Best Awards* readers' survey.

Let's start with the location: the 24-acre resort, just minutes from downtown Cabo San Lucas, is accessed via a long tunnel bored into Pedregal Mountain, which General Manager Fernando Flores describes as "a psychological experience that creates a feeling of exclusivity." If the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel turns out to be the expansive ocean view that gradually comes into sight once you've reached this passageway's terminus, I'm definitely OK with that.

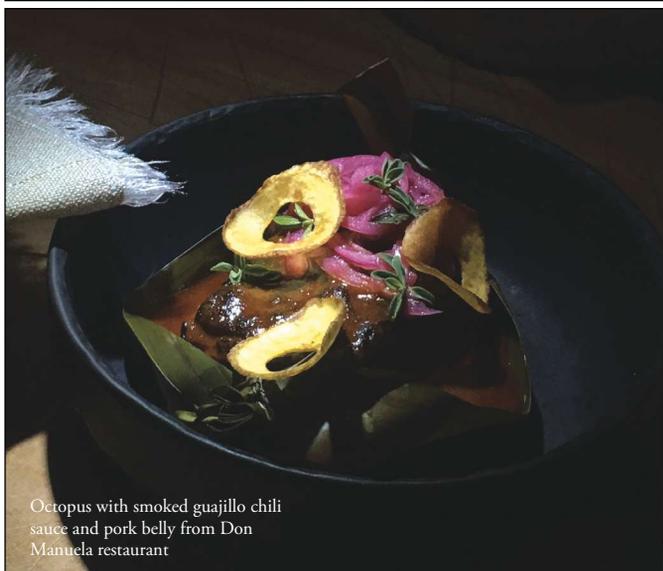




Champagne and salt pairing at the Champagne Terrace



Cactus salad served for lunch at a local ranch



Octopus with smoked guajillo chili sauce and pork belly from Don Manuela restaurant



El Farallon restaurant

Opened in 2015, the architecture-forward resort, comprised of 113 rooms, suites, and stand-alone villas, is designed to hug the serpentine base of the mountain and boasts interesting angles that provide dramatic views of the rocky coastline, which regularly sends rollicking waves up and over massive boulders. Artisanal touches in the guest accommodations—original artwork, an embossed metal frame around the tufted headboard, embroidered accent pillows, hand-painted sink basins, huge hand-hewn doors with rustic hardware, and locally-made glazed ceramic tiles in the bathroom—lend a distinct sense of place. Several of the covetable items from the room are available for purchase in the resort’s thoughtfully curated boutique. My oceanfront room boasted a petite plunge pool cozied up to a covered terrace; it proved to be the ideal spot to enjoy the daily complimentary happy hour in-room service of fresh guacamole and ice-cold Coronas.

Dining is a delight at The Resort at Pedregal, where each of its restaurants creatively capitalize on the celebrated culinary traditions of Mexico. Definitely high on my list of memorable

meals is the al fresco El Farallon, whose most prized tables are those in the “splash zone”, where mist from the crashing waves is said to bring good luck to those whose skin is kissed by the salty spray. The kitchen is literally built into the mountain, and a chalkboard hanging nearby lists the catch of the day. The Champagne Terrace adjacent to El Farallon offers 20+ types champagne by the glass from the world’s most famous purveyors. For an authentic Mexican experience with a twist, opt for a sommelier-guided pairing of bubbly with a tasting of local salts and moles. During the winter, both sites provide a good vantage point for observing the migration of majestic Pacific gray whales who travel here each year from Alaska’s Bering Sea.

Breakfast and dinner is served at Don Manuel, where Chef Gustavo Pinet puts his spin on Old World techniques using local, organic ingredients grown specifically for the hotel. Each morning, Su Cocina, the restaurant’s private dining room, becomes a stunning staging ground for a breakfast presentation that would floor any foodie, including a fresh fruit station that is a juice junkie haven.



Ritual Room at the Luna y Mar Spa



Ocean view guestroom



Sunrise paddleboarding is part of the Luxploration program.



Sunrise view of the reception area at the Resort at Pedregal



Music is an integral part of the ambiance at each of the resort's restaurants.



The famous "El Arco" natural rock arch is minutes from the resort.

Launched this past February, the resort's Baja Luxploration program (the first of its kind in this region), offers a host of distinct experiences under the direction of experienced naturalists and adventurers who cater to discerning travelers looking for bucket-list-worthy excursions. I utilized the hour-long drive to the aforementioned whale shark expedition to appreciate the natural beauty of the Baja: the juxtaposition of the endless sea on one side with the expanse of desert on the other; the interplay of light and shadow on barren, jagged peaks; and, the colorful religious shrines that peppered the roadside.

Arriving in La Paz, we boarded a small boat and set off to "hunt" for whale sharks, which are known to frequent the area between October and March. After an hour of perusing the bay, a dark shadow emerged near the surface of the water, and we rushed to grab our snorkeling gear. After the boat positioned us within several feet of the largest known fish species in existence, we eagerly slid into the water in groups of three along with our guide, who instructed us to stay a few feet away as we swam alongside.

It took several tries for everyone to experience a swim-along, as it is easy to become disoriented and set off in the opposite direction from the shark once you enter the water.

One of the most unique aspects of the Luxploration program is the combination of adventure with high-end experiences. For example, following our swim with the whale shark, we were treated to a bounteous lunch on a deserted strand of sand where we feasted on octopus ceviche, crab salad and other delicacies. The amount of logistics required to pull off such an elegant set-up was certainly no easy feat, but the staff made it appear effortless. "As an independent resort, we are not afraid to try new things to create magical experience for our guests," said Flores.

Day two of "Luxploring" involved hiking Cañon del Zorro near the base of the Sierra de la Laguna Mountains, a lush oasis with an interesting array of flora and fauna and a dramatic 45-foot waterfall. En route we stopped in the tiny town of Santiago to pick up fresh cheese and avocados that would later find their way into our lunch. During our two-hour hike, we



Waterfall in Cañon del Zorro



Whale shark in the Bay of La Paz



Adult pool at sunrise

scaled boulders and slid down a gentle waterfall into a crystal-clear pool that provided welcome respite from the desert heat. An authentic, abuela-cooked lunch was enjoyed at a nearby rustic ranch far, far from the beaten path, and definitely the kind of place your average traveler would never discover on their own. The cheese we'd picked up earlier was used to make the most perfect quesadilla: served warm and drizzled with local honey. It was a simple and decadent pleasure I won't soon forget.

Returning back to the resort by late afternoon each day provided us with ample time to enjoy a host of on-site amenities: the adult-only pool with swim-up bar, a family-friendly infinity pool, and the meditation pool at Luna y Mar, a 12,000-square-foot spa where signature treatments are based on the cycles of the moon. Particularly welcome after a day of hiking, my 60-minute massage began (as all spa treatments here do) with a welcome foot-cleansing ritual that utilizes special herbs selected for their purification attributes. The resort also stages a diverse lineup of activities each week, from cooking demos to surf fishing classes. If

there is anything you need, a team of genuinely service-oriented personal concierge are on call and wholly dedicated to ensuring that your expectations are exceeded.

A late afternoon flight allowed us to squeeze in one additional excursion before heading home: paddle boarding at sunrise to Cabo's iconic Land's End, the final point on the Baja Peninsula where "El Arco," a natural rock arch, frames the meeting place of the raucous Pacific Ocean and the placid Sea of Cortez. Within 15 minutes of leaving the hotel, we were gliding across the water and mingling with chatty sea lions who seemed intent on leading the way. After admiring the rock formations on our boards from a safe distance, we made a brief stop for a stroll along Lover's Beach, a secluded and narrow sliver of beach that straddles the two bodies of water. By the time we returned to dry land, a breakfast spread was waiting for us on the beach. I wrapped up my trip sore (in a good way), satiated, and sun-kissed—an enviable vacation trifecta. **sl**

Accommodations at The Resort at Pedregal from \$580/night. For more information or reservations visit theresortatpedregal.com.