

l'art de vivre

# Auberge

VOLUME 14

NECESSARY  
LUXURIES  
ESSENTIALS

YOGA,  
CALISTOGA  
STYLE  
OUTDOORS IS BEST

## THE PERFECT ESCAPE

THE BEACH BECKONS  
AT ESPERANZA





# ESCAPE TO

# ESPERANZA

IN A QUIET ROMANTIC CORNER OF BAJA, THE PERFECT SOUJORN AWAITS. BY JOSH LERMAN



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERICKA MCCONNELL  
STYLING BY ANNA ROTH MILNER

# W

e step out of the limo at the shady, palapa-roofed entrance to the Esperanza resort and suddenly our worries melt away—

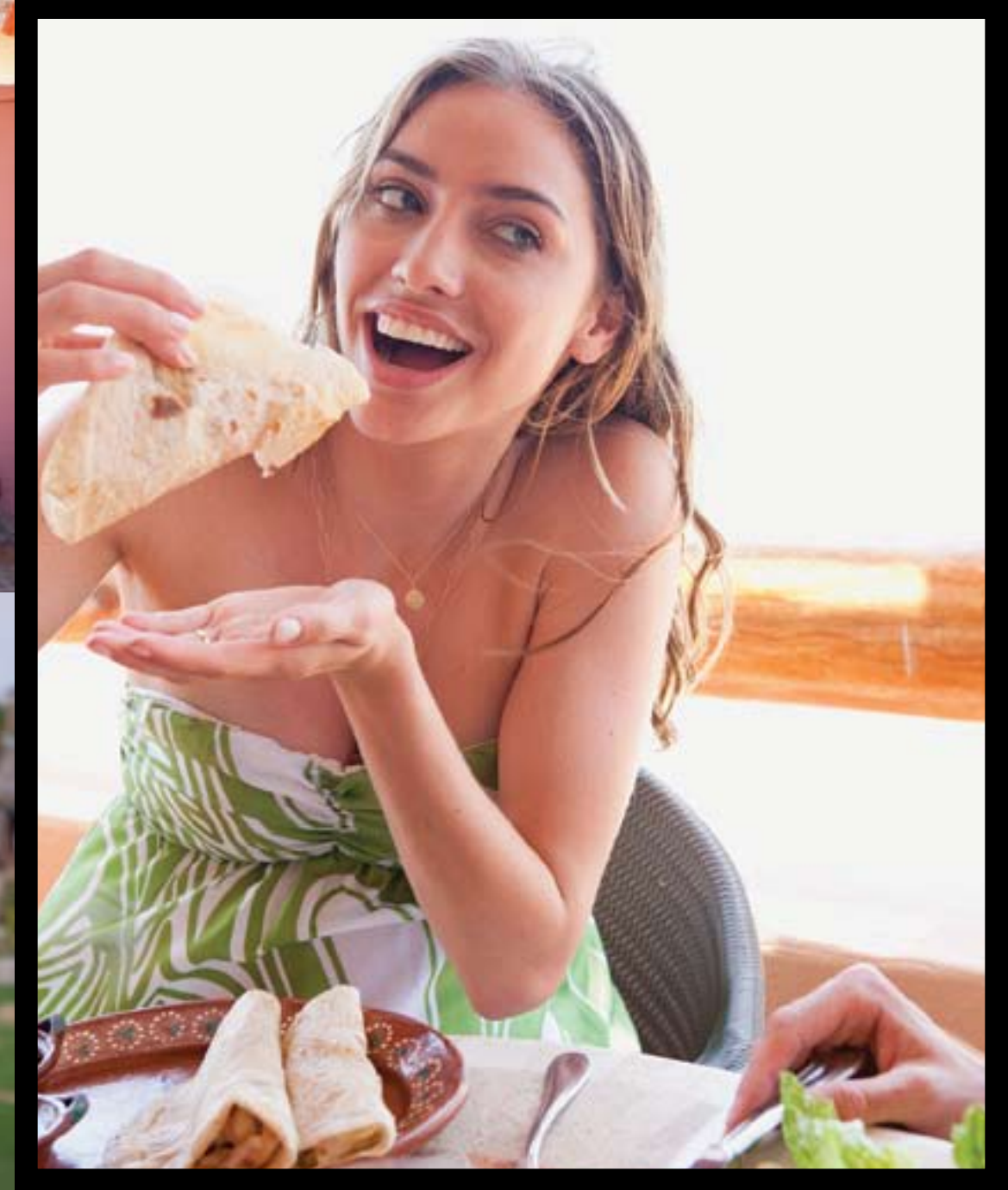
the annoyance of airports, the tension of the city. We breathe deeply and look around. The air smells sweetly of cream-petalled jasmine; through a wrought iron gate and across a terrace, we can see the bright blue sea, trimmed with surf.

My guest and I have arrived without luggage, wearing the jeans and long-sleeved shirts that protected us from the chill of the plane: our carry-on bag containing all of our clothes for the weekend was taken from us and tagged at the door of the plane in New York because all the overhead bins were full, and did not travel with us to San Jose del Cabo International Airport at the tip of Mexico's Baja peninsula. Instead, we have been told, it is visiting San Pedro Sula, Honduras. But somehow none of this seems to matter. We are welcomed by name by our smiling personal concierge—all guests are assigned one when they arrive—clucked over, the airline tsk-tsked, and whisked into Esperanza's small boutique, where we're helped to a pair of emergency swim trunks for me (surely the bag will come this afternoon?) and a bathing suit and dress for my girlfriend, Fernanda. All fit us perfectly—at Esperanza, it seems, problems simply disappear.

Our concierge, Victoria, gives us a tour of the grounds as she escorts us to our room. Our path meanders past enormous agave plants and cacti, cascades of bougainvillea, palms with gorgeous green fronds, bright purple lantana, and a gigantic bird of paradise plant from whose flowers a Hooded Oriole is sipping lunch. We're hungry, too, so Victoria points out El Restaurante, which serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and the adjacent El Bar. Both have multiple terraces spilling down from their perches on the clifftop, so we can eat and drink right above the surf. Everything is open to the air and sea. Both restaurant and bar have central areas with huge palm palapa roofs and no walls—they're cool and shady refuges from the sun. A breeze blows constantly and we fill our lungs with air that feels like a delicious tonic.

**BY THE SEA** Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Esperanza ignites romance; fresh limes grace the cuisine; a Casita glows in the sun; the food spotlights Mexican flavors; the chef; the design allows guests to choose between sunlight and shade.

PREVIOUS PAGE: ON HER: BIKINI BY BRETTE SANDLER, AVAILABLE AT BRETTE SANDLER.COM. OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ON HER: SANDALS BY CORSO.COME, ON HIM, SHIRT BY TED BAKER, SUNGLASSES ON BOTH BY OLIVER PEOPLES, AVAILABLE AT OLIVERPEOPLES.COM. GOLD NECKLACES BY MAYA BRENNER, AVAILABLE AT MAYABRENNER.COM.





ON HER: DRESS BY RACHEL PALLY. AVAILABLE AT RACHELPALLY.COM. RING, NECKLACE, AND BRACELET ALL BY ELIZABETH SAYLES. AVAILABLE AT ESAYLES.COM.

## A pair of emergency swim trunks (surely the bag will come this afternoon?) fits perfectly—at Esperanza, it seems, problems simply disappear.

Esperanza, a lovely 57-room Auberge resort, faces south on the tip of the nearly-800-mile-long Baja Peninsula. It looks out on the blue waters of the Sea of Cortez where it meets the enormous Pacific. Esperanza is four miles (and a million light years) outside the town of Cabo San Lucas. Though the area is a popular tourist destination, with all the conveniences of transportation that implies, you'd never know it once you drive through the gate. Esperanza is its own very private, romantic world.

The resort has palm-thatched and woven twig structures everywhere providing a cool enticing shade, and all are supported by massive palm trunks twined and partially wrapped in peeled and polished strangler vines. The strangler fig and palm trees grow this way in the wild, but used structurally the two are a fascinating and beautiful element of the resort—a sort of signature motif.

Below the bar are a pair of vivid, cerulean pools whose infinity edges hover over the very edge of the beach. You can float and watch the waves crash and foam over the rocks and sand of the cove below, or turn on your back to watch palm fronds flutter in the breeze. Around the pool and on terraces above it are white-cushioned chaises, some of them generously sized for two.

Our room is tucked on the second floor of an Esperanza “casita”—palm-roofed little buildings containing three or four rooms each—behind a modest wooden door. As you'd expect at an Auberge resort, the décor is understated, with guest comfort and relaxed elegance being the clear goal. Original modern art by Mexican artists gives depth and warmth to the walls. Sliding glass doors open to a huge private balcony terrace, from which we look down on an undulating lawn that slopes down to the palm grove, the lapis-hued pools and the ocean beyond. At one end of the terrace is a soft-cushioned bench. At the other is a perfect, infinity-edged, blue-glass-tiled tub for two. You can climb right from the tub into the bathroom through a huge window, should you feel like moving from hot tub to bathtub or shower. The whole thing manages to feel both spacious and cozy—the transition from indoors to outdoors is seamless.

Victoria leaves and we throw open the sliding doors and the bathroom window. The warm seaside air is soft, fragrant, and comfortable even in mid-summer. Romance seems to imbue everything—the wind, the rooms, the weather. Since we have nothing to unpack, we mosey to lunch, which we eat at La Palapa, at a table perched atop a bluff looking over the water. The tawny perfection of Esperanza's two beaches is a serene counterpoint to the hissing, reef-tossed surf—a gorgeous backdrop for our lunch.

The menu is a casual and eclectic combination of Mediterranean, American, and Mexican dishes. As always at Auberge properties, even a beachside lunch is memorable. We hungrily slurp up a jumble of glistening ceviches: succulent baby shrimp in an orange juice and guajillo chile puree, and rich blue fin tuna with avocado in a soy-nori vinaigrette.



**NIGHT AND DAY** From right: the bar is the perfect spot for a midafternoon margarita; or a cozy nightcap beneath the hand-blown-glass chandelier.



**The perfection of Esperanza's beaches is a serene counterpoint to the hissing, reef-tossed surf—a gorgeous backdrop to our lunch.**

After lunch we head to the pool, where we lie under a large umbrella, reading and jumping in the pool, wallowing in the sybaritic pleasures of the warm air, the cool water, the soothing surf sounds, and the flecks of sunlight dancing through the rustling palms. Esperanza is a small hotel and we're able to feel very alone, in our own world, even as other couples share "our" resort.

That evening, as the sun sets behind us, we sit on a terrace above the Sea of Cortez with Severino Gomez, Esperanza's general manager, sipping ice cold Billecart-Salmon champagne, a bubbly treat difficult enough to find in the U.S., let alone in Baja. Gomez says he has to import it—his favorite champagne—directly from France. Champagne is not the only detail at Esperanza that benefits from Gomez's highly personal approach and 30-plus years in the hospitality business in 14 countries. In a business known for high turnover Gomez and Esperanza are an anomaly. Gomez has been at Esperanza for 9 years—since before it even opened. Esperanza is his baby, and he brings to it everything he's learned in his international career. All of this would be meaningless were it not for the exceptionally attentive and genuinely warm service ethos he's managed to instill in the staff. Everyone, from the guy mowing the lawn to the busboy, greets you with genuine smiles and the sense that you are welcome, that they are glad that you're here.

The next day, after a deeply satisfying breakfast of huevos rancheros and fresh fruit, we head to Esperanza's award-winning spa. In Auberge tradition, the spa manages to bring the outdoors in, mingling the comforts of the cool indoors with the light and colors and feel of the outdoors. From the changing area you step outside to a small courtyard for a pre-treatment *Pasaje de Agua*, a warm-spring soak, steam bath, and cool shower ritual to relax and cleanse you.

From there you proceed to another courtyard where you recline on a chaise in the shade and sip cold *aguas frescas* while awaiting your therapist.

Treatment rooms, down winding paths draped with flowering vines and punctuated with small fountains, all have private courtyards with outdoor showers. The total effect is to immerse you in an alternate reality, a world of quietly splashing water, dappled sun, stone walls, and tropical flowers.

My massage is simply the best I've ever had, as is Fernanda's. She combines hers with one of Auberge's signature facials, in which the therapist tailors the treatment to your specific skin type, using all-natural indigenous ingredients and cleansers—avocado, mango, lime, aloe, sea greens—to restore and replenish your skin. The result, at least in Fernanda's case, is a deliciously healthy radiance and glow—one that lasts until we are home; she is repeatedly told how good she looks.

We stagger over to lunch in a blissed out stupor, slurp up some more of that shrimp ceviche, try out the grilled octopus tacos (delicious), and head

**BEAUTIFUL MEXICO** Clockwise from above: the terraces are designed for blissful ease; a private infinity pool lies outside your Casita window; the spa's earth tones soothe the senses; treatments are designed for your skin; the tropical warmth brings out beauty; the beds are divine; the beach is the perfect place for a romantic ramble.



ON HER: NECKLACES BY MAYA BRENNER, AVAILABLE AT MAYABRENNER.COM. ON HIM: SHIRT BY TED BAKER.



PURPLE PEARL BRACELETS BY PEARLPARADISE.COM; PINK PEARL BRACELET BY ELIZABETH SAYLES. AVAILABLE AT ESAYLES.COM

## Owning a Residence at Esperanza

Life as a member of the private Residence Club at Esperanza—could anything be better? As a Residence Club member, you can have it all—the amenities and service of one of the finest Cabo San Lucas resorts along with the benefits of vacation-home ownership, including the potential return on your real estate investment, without the home-ownership hassle. A big part of what makes the experience so easy and enjoyable are the casual, elegant villas. Each residence welcomes its owners with inviting open-air design and the ideal blend of timeless styling and modern amenities. Call 877/615-7187 for more information.

down to the beach. Hoping to keep our post-massage buzz going as long as possible, we flop down on a huge mattress under a palapa, a sort of gigantic four-poster bed on the beach with a thick palm-thatch roof. We lie there, drowsy in the mid-afternoon heat. In front of us waves hurl themselves endlessly against wet rocks.

Dinner that night is memorable. Esperanza's executive chef, Sergio Howland, who in response to guest requests has brought a Mexican flair to a previously solely continental menu, prepares a tasting menu for us. Drawing from the nearby ocean, his own herb garden, and the group of local farmers who grow delicious fruits and vegetables specifically for Esperanza, Howland creates food that is rooted in classical tradition with deft touches of indigenous flavor. Raw tuna is topped with crunchy seaweed from the same local seas as the fish. Rich, irresistible gnoc-chi and a heavenly morel cream sauce is brightened with local herbs. And a meltingly tender piece of tenderloin is given a hint of heat and smoke with a delicate chipotle sauce.

Dinner is accompanied by a course-by-course selection of wines which immediately and permanently stamp out any snobbery I might have had about Mexican viniculture. My favorite was a Cabernet-tempranillo blend. Perhaps it was the setting sun, the surf below our cliffside table, or the sweet ocean breeze, but that glass of Tramonte Tinto from north Baja's Ensenada wine-growing region was among the best I have ever had.

After a small glass of port to go with my molten chocolate cake I manage to taste a few aged tequilas. Nothing like the strong-flavored liquor we are used to, aged tequila is more like cognac or armagnac than anything else. My favorite is the Jose Cuervo Reserva de la Familia, a limited edition bottling of aged tequilas that each year comes in a different presentation box by a different Mexican artist.

Call it luck, call it a fluke, call it fresh air and clean living, but the next morning we are, mystifyingly, not at all hung over. We awake at sunrise, order coffee and a basket of sweet rolls still warm from the oven, and go down to the beach. This morning we have to leave, and although we are tired we'd rather soak up a little more of Esperanza's magic than sleep. We could have snorkeled or gone horseback riding or played golf at one of Cabo's many world-class courses, but all we've managed to do is swim in the pool, walk around the beautiful grounds, splash in the ocean, and lie on comfy chaises with a book. That, it turns out, was quite enough.

So, too, was our abbreviated wardrobe. Our suitcase never showed up (and as I write this it still hasn't), but we hardly noticed. We spent practically the entire weekend in our bathing suits and didn't miss our more complete wardrobe at all. It turns out all you need at Esperanza is a willingness to let go of your outside life and revel in the privacy and pleasure of this perfect escape. ■ *Esperanza Resort, Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. Room rates from \$475 to \$7,000. For reservations, call 866/311-2226; [esperanzaresort.com](http://esperanzaresort.com).*



**THE TIME FOR ROMANCE**  
From left: cool grass peeks through warm stones by the pool, where shaded chaises await; every space at Esperanza offers welcoming spots to rest.