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MEXICO'S HOT SPOTS

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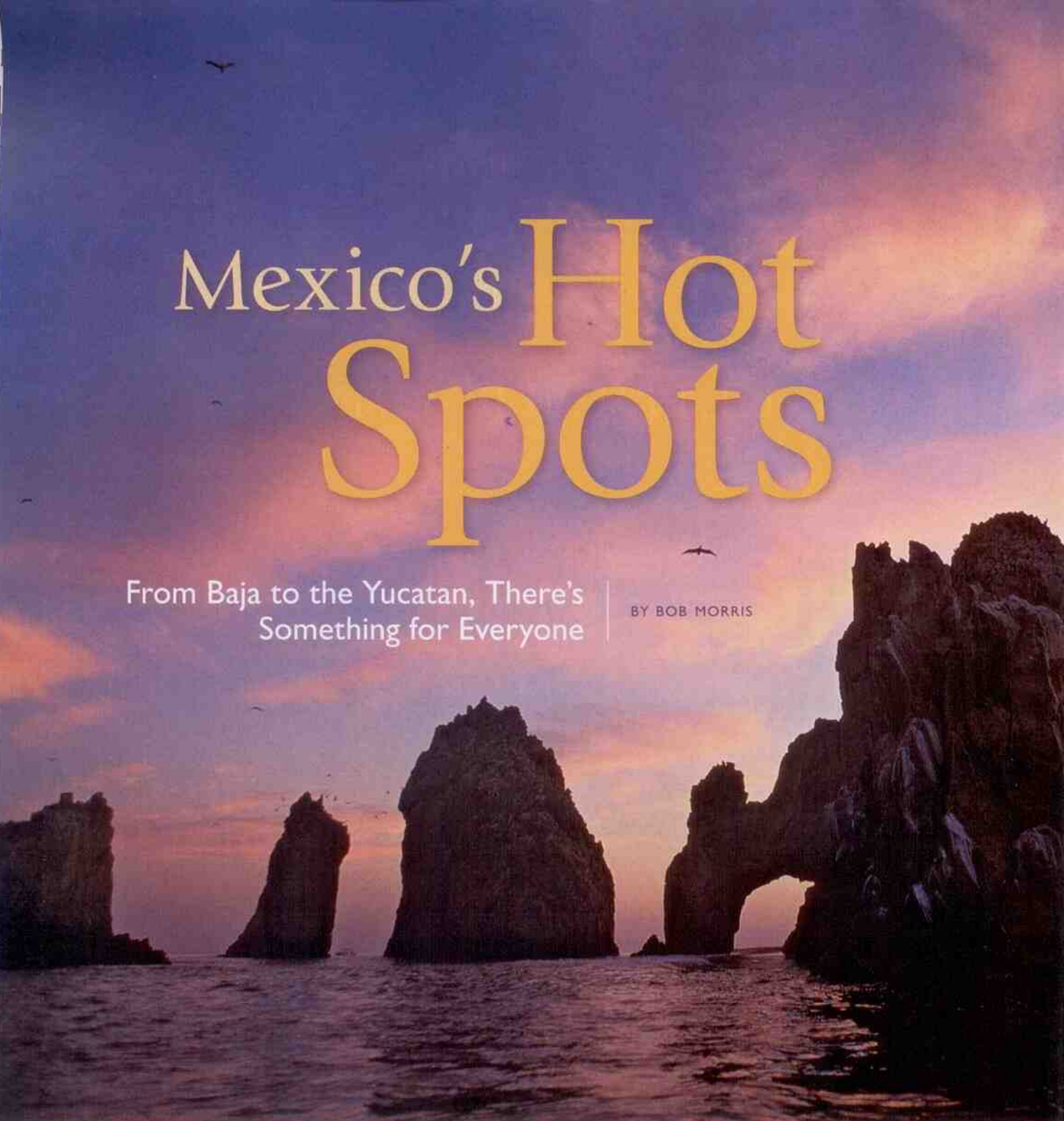


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Mexico's Hot Spots

From Baja to the Yucatan, There's
Something for Everyone

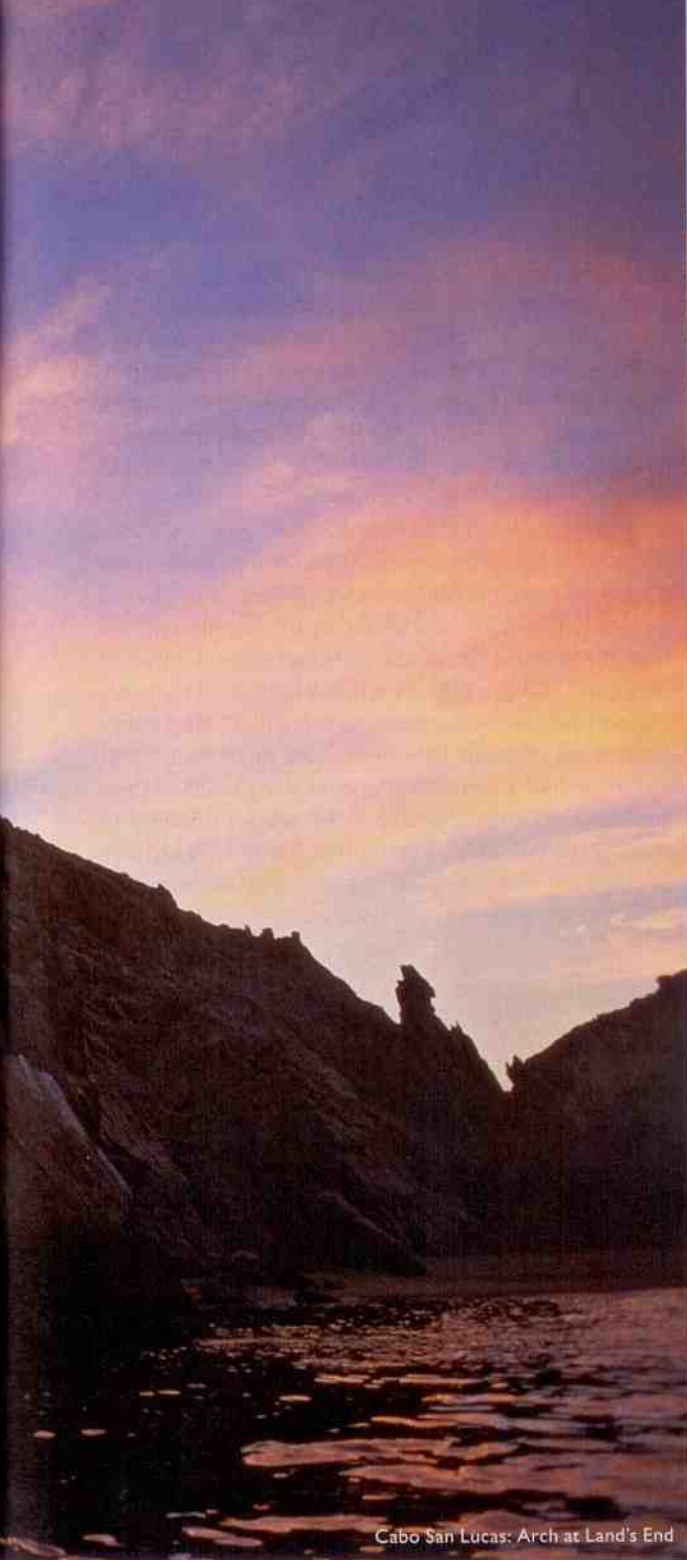
BY BOB MORRIS

It was late in the evening and Kevin Roberts was driving back to the Mexican beach town of Sayulita when he saw a dark shape crossing the road ahead. He slowed down and flipped on the high beams.

"And there it was—a jaguar. Right in the middle of the road," says Roberts, a Californian who has lived in the area north of Puerto Vallarta for the past dozen years. "I sat there, stupefied, as it dashed into the jungle. But it reminded me that, despite all the progress that has come here, the wildness of Mexico is still close at hand."

That sense of wildness, mixed with a stunningly diverse natural habitat and resort areas offering plenty of creature comforts, makes Mexico a perennial favorite destination for North Americans, especially those who are looking to buy second homes and vacation property. Recent economic woes have had a decidedly settling effect on the Mexican real estate market.

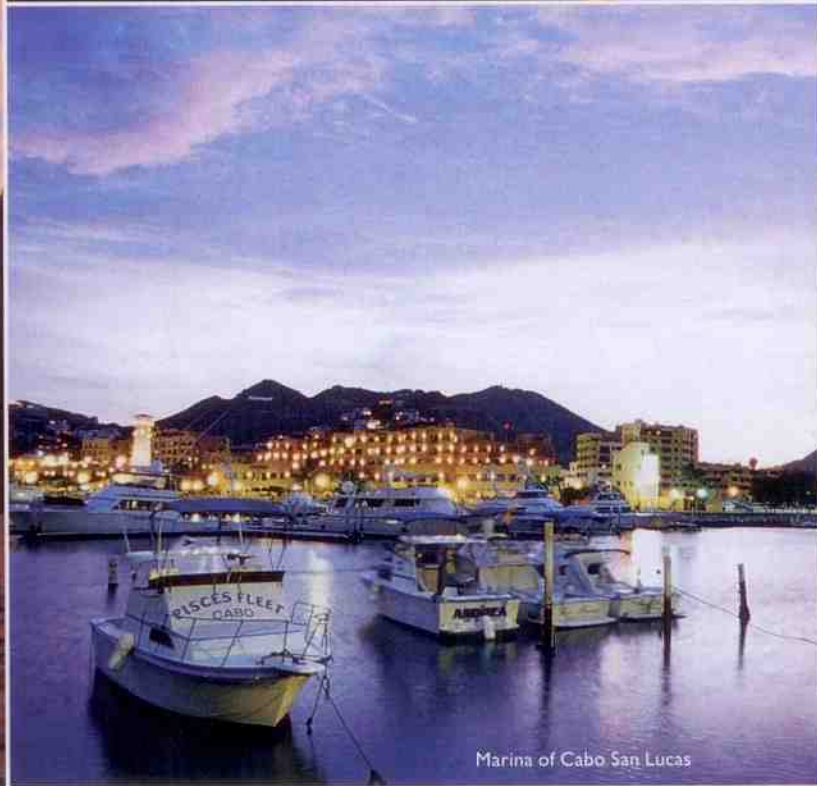
"Prices have dropped considerably, but the economic crisis has actually resulted in some real benefits," says Carlos González, chairman of the board of Sotheby's



Cabo San Lucas: Arch at Land's End



Cancun



Marina of Cabo San Lucas

International Realty Mexico. "It has brought back good sense and stability. Previously, the market had such wide margins that anyone could make money. But for the near future, this will definitely be a big player's market, for people with a strong balance sheet who invest with expertise and look at the big picture. And in the long haul, I'm extremely bullish on Mexico as a second-home destination."

The only real difficulty comes in deciding exactly where to go in this sprawling country that offers every-

thing from tranquil Caribbean beaches with a distinct Mayan culture to Pacific coast surf breaks and ancient towns with a Spanish colonial heritage.

Los Cabos

While there's evidence that nomadic tribes settled the southern tip of the Baja Peninsula some 14,000 years ago and sportsfishermen discovered it in a big way during the mid-20th century, Los Cabos got its jump start as a destination in 1974 when the Mexican govern-

ment, just as it did with Cancún, targeted the area as a center for tourism and created the infrastructure that would help it along. Between Cabo San Lucas (population 58,000), with its nightlife and restaurants, and the decidedly more laid-back atmosphere in San Jose del Cabo (population 45,800) you'll find what's known locally as "The Corridor." This 20-mile stretch of pristine white beaches and craggy coves offers dozen of high-end resort communities, many of them featuring world-class golf courses designed by the likes of Jack Nicklaus and Greg Norman.

Marked by the iconic Land's End arch, the waters around Los Cabos are home to prime billfishing grounds. Indeed, Cabo San Lucas is home to the world's largest marlin tournament and its marina is not only a base for charter boats but offers slips that accommodate glistening mega-yachts. With its international airport and private jet facilities, Los Cabos is easily accessible from most major North American cities and is an especially popular getaway for Californians and Texans.

"In recent years, there seems to have been a shift in

emphasis and development toward what's known as the East Cape," says Seth Romans, of Cabo Riviera, a 900-acre resort community with a 285-slip marina and Pete Dye-designed golf course. "But no matter where you wind up in Los Cabos, it's the ideal place for escaping the hustle-bustle of everyday life and enjoying the richness of Mexican culture."

Riviera Nayarit

While this 200-mile stretch of Pacific coast north of Puerto Vallarta ranked second in Mexico for tourism investment in 2008 and seems to perennially win the title of "Next Big Travel Destination" from all kinds of magazines, Riviera Nayarit remains largely off the radar for many North Americans. That will likely change once word gets out that the region offers just about every kind of vacation experience imaginable – from surfing, kayaking, snorkeling and whale watching to world-class golf and hiking in the nearby Sierra Madre Mountains. With its nearly ten miles on Banderas Bay, Mexico's largest natural bay, the 1,500-acre Punta Mita

Cathedral of Puerto Vallarta



community is home to the Four Seasons and St. Regis hotels, along with two Jack Nicklaus Signature courses, spas, a marina and numerous cultural offerings.

About eight miles north of Punta Mita, the funky beach town of Sayulita is emerging as a favored destination among those who like adventure in the mix. Sayulita's relative remoteness, along with the thick jungle that surrounds it, prevented extensive settlement until the late 1800s. And it wasn't until the 1960s, with the completion of Mexican Highway 200, that it became a popular outpost for surfers and other nomads.

"Sayulita still has this bohemian vibe to it. There's a real mix to the ex-pat community—German, French, Australian, American. It's a place for people who want to own coastal property in an uncrowded and very friendly environment," says Kevin Roberts, a principle with Punta Sayulita, a resort community that has taken a stewardship approach to its development by preserving most of the natural terrain on its site. Its 62 residences will be constructed largely of indigenous materials in a traditional Mexican coastal architectural style with

an emphasis on indoor-outdoor living. "We consider ourselves an extension of the town of Sayulita and we appreciate and treasure the ebb and flow of life here."

Riviera Maya

For those seeking the quintessential tropical experience—miles of white-sand beach with pristine coral reefs just offshore—the Caribbean coastline of Quintana Roo offers a variety of pleasures. Traditionally extending from Playa del Carmen to the Mayan ruins at Tulum, Riviera Maya now runs well to the south, beyond the town of Felipe Carrillo Puerto.

"I foresee a day, not that far off, when what we call the Riviera Maya will stretch all the way south to Belize," says Carlos González. "It's a magnificent area with a great deal of appeal to people from all over the world."

With the mega-resort of Cancún to the north, the Riviera Maya provides a slower pace with an emphasis on taking in the best of the beach life. The barrier reef, which runs as far south as Guatemala, is the second largest in the world and a favorite haunt of scuba div-



Beach Statues, Puerto Vallarta



Special Reserve of the Biosphere Isla Contoy



ers. Originally a small fishing town, Playa del Carmen (population 109,500) first launched itself as a tourist destination with a ferry service to Cozumel. It's now a popular cruise ship port with a lively downtown and a pedestrian-only boulevard lined with shops and cafes. To the south of Riviera Maya lies the Sian Ka'an biosphere reserve, a vast UNESCO World Heritage Site with more than 20 significant Mayan archaeological ruins and magnificent flocks of flamingoes.

Colonial Towns

One of the bigger draws over the next few years for North Americans looking to buy property in Mexico, especially those seeking an authentic cultural experience, will be the country's charming and history-filled "colonial towns." More than twenty such towns rate that official designation, including places like Veracruz, Taxco, Merida and Campeche. The most popular, certainly for Americans looking to retire in Mexico, are San Miguel de Allende and Oaxaca.

Oaxaca, which is also the name of the state in which it is located, dates its modern heritage to the 16th century. Although an 1854 earthquake destroyed much of the city, it has been lovingly tended over the years and



boasts an appealing historic center with cobbled streets, striking architecture and quiet plazas. Vehicles aren't permitted in the heart of the city, making it all the more enjoyable for sightseeing.

Sitting northwest of Mexico City, San Miguel de Allende is one of several old silver mining cities in the region and a magnet for artists and craftspeople from all over the world. Those who relocate here are drawn to the colonial architecture and the opportunity to take numerous classes in pottery, weaving, painting, photography and sculpture. [EP](#)



Cathedral of San Miguel de Allende. Above: Church (left) and monument (right) in San Miguel de Allende