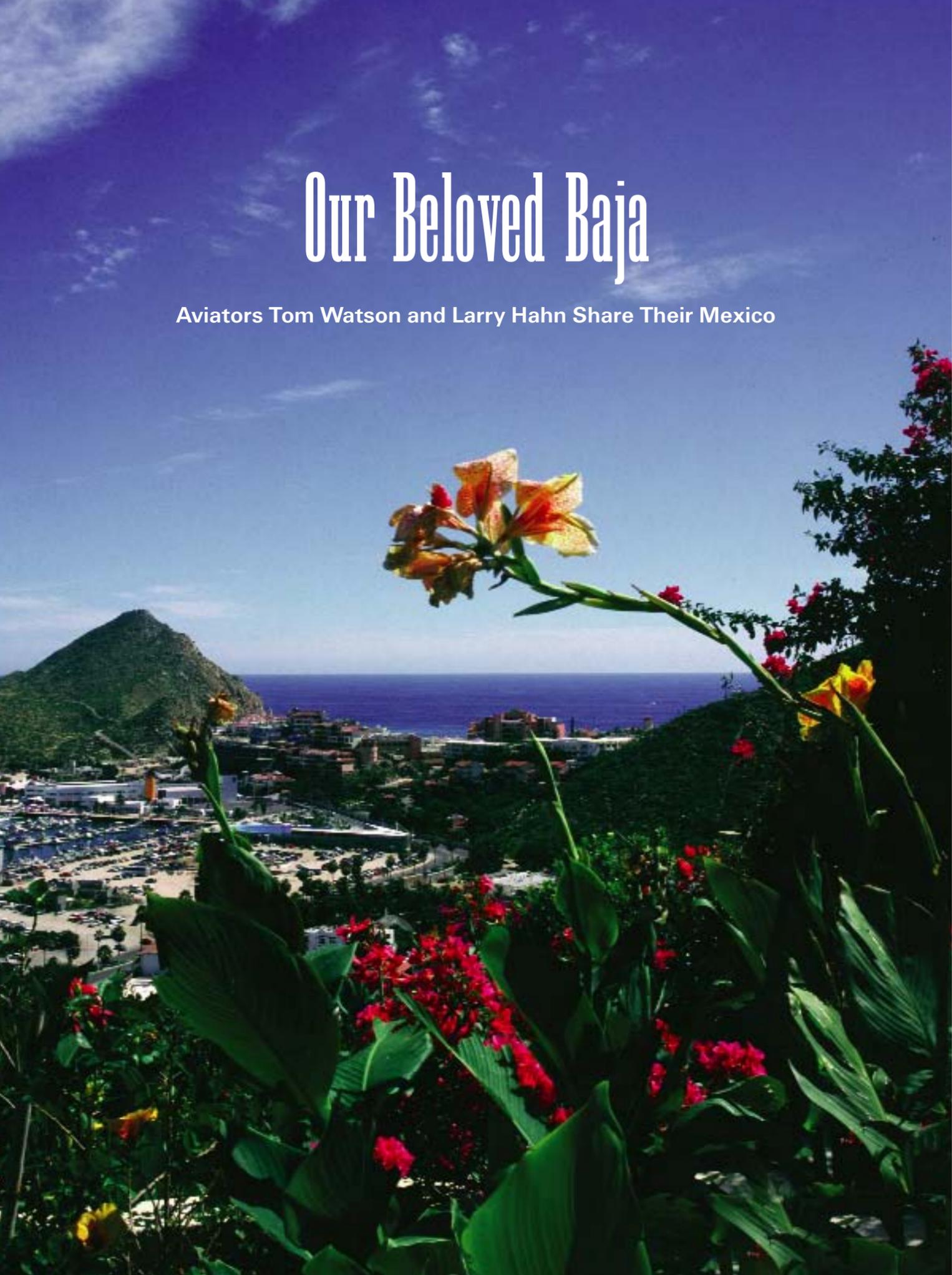


Our Beloved Baja

Aviators Tom Watson and Larry Hahn Share Their Mexico



Flying Baja doesn't get any better than this.
— Larry Hahn

“Are you coming, Tom?” asks Larry Hahn.

“No, I can't,” says his buddy, Tom Watson.

“But you have to!”

“Why?”

Thus begins the adventure of Larry and Tom. Thus begins every adventure of Larry and Tom. Given that Larry – by his own admission “older than dirt” – has known Tom since first grade at Lincoln Elementary School in Imperial, California – that would be 67 years ago – you can bet big money that these fast, flying friends have shared a lot of adventures.

“I knew Larry when he weighed 40 pounds,” jokes Tom, a retired electrical contractor and 2600-hour pilot of a V-35 Bonanza.

“Don't be listening to that strange duck,” laughs Larry, an Aztec-flying

farmer's son who with pal Glen Bell built Taco Bell (yes, *that* Taco Bell) from one bitty burrito stand in Los Angeles to the taco empire that in 1978 PepsiCo took over for, as Larry jests, “a jillion million dollars.”

Be serious.

Lotsa luck. Besides sharing a relentless sense of humor and a lifetime of closeness thanks to a mutual love of fishing, boating, skiing, hiking and pretty much any excuse to fly, Larry and Tom both are bonkers for Baja. That would be Mexico. And since the 1950s, when Larry would buzz into the dirt landing strips of tiny, remote villages, plunk down \$5 for a cot plus three meals and more fishing than he could handle, adventures south of the border have claimed a large share of these best buddies' favors. From the Bahía de los Angeles on the shimmering Sea of Cortez to colorful Cabo San Lucas to all the paradisiacal points between, Baja's bounty of enchantments in the minds of Larry and Tom are everything a flying adventurer ever could want.

A bright new day in Cabo San Lucas (left); fisherman at dawn on the Bahía de los Ángeles (above); Baja buddies Tom Watson and Larry Hahn (below)





Above Bahía de Los Ángeles

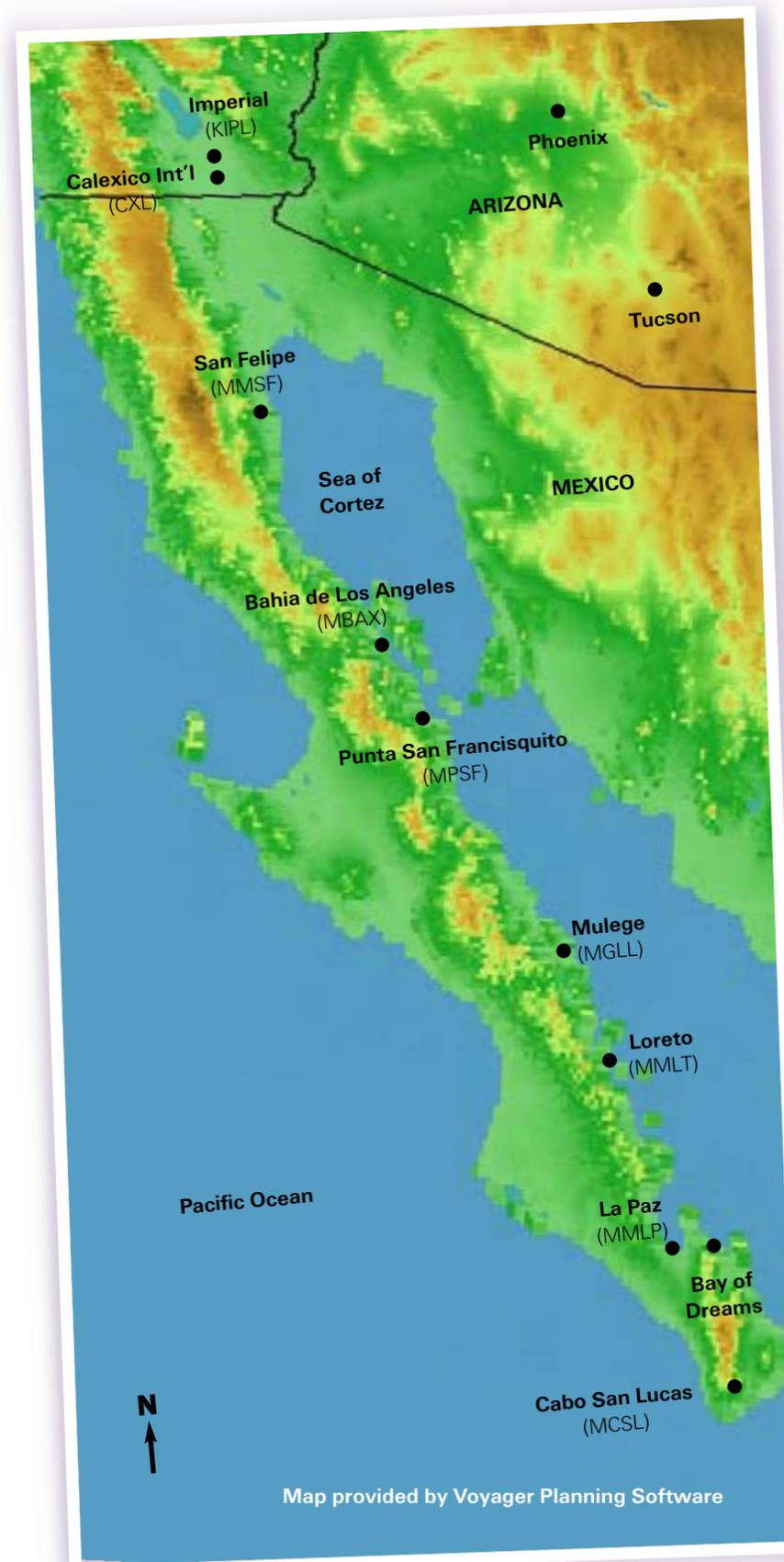
“Because Larry had a place in San Pedro de la Cueva, I needed to buy one too so we could live right next door,” says Tom, once upon a time a paratrooper with the Army’s 82nd Airborne Division. Not that when Larry says “jump!” Tom will. It’s just that “anytime you get involved in one of Larry’s adventures, even if you don’t know what it’s going to be, you just figure it’s going to be exciting,” he says.

Larry’s latest adventure – that of course is Tom’s, too – is one of their fly-Baja favorites. It includes many of the spots that Larry and Tom recommend to their flying friends. It is four or more days of phenomenal fishing, pleasant relaxing, and flights above a Mexico that only their fellow aviators may be privileged to know. Perhaps best, it is Baja the way Larry and Tom do Baja. That is to say, don’t go looking for bright lights and big city thrill. Instead consider one tale the two are rumored to toss around, something about Jell-O cubes made with tequila that serve as shots, delivered to the table by a beautiful bare-midriff waitress who...

Be serious.

“We try to stay out of trouble,” says Tom, who like Larry is a devoted family man (wives Lucille Watson and Valentine Hahn also are best friends and the grandchildren among them appear too many to count). As to flying Baja? Says Larry: “We never take chances. We never will.”

Call it *tame* wild fun then: The Baja trip that Larry and Tom want to share with all begins in Bahía de los Ángeles, where like everywhere on this itinerary the fishing is the draw. Next it wings south via remote Punta de San Francisquito to Loreto, one-time capital of the Jesuit empire and today Baja’s oldest city. From there, the trip backtracks north a bit to tropical Mulegé, where the fabulous Hotel Serenidad and its infamous pig roast serves as Fun Central for Larry-and-Tom style adventure. Finally, the flight buzzes again south to Cabo San Lucas – home to the One and Only Palmilla Resort and its unique Baja splendors – before returning to the States by way of bustling La Paz and the glamorous Bay of Dreams. All in all, it is 12.5 flying hours of spectacle, given Baja’s rugged beauty. It is



Map provided by Voyager Planning Software



Early morning on a private beach, Bay of Dreams; Conception Bay (opposite): "The most beautiful bay in Baja," says Hahn.



also a blitz that Larry and Tom feel confident will introduce their magical Mexico to new flying friends who too will love the \$3 per gallon fuel they will find throughout – not to mention the get-away-from-it-all gift that Baja is, especially in the more remote outposts accessible best by plane, unless one prefers a mule.

Ready? Rock and roll, says Larry. Pass "go!" by fueling up and breezing through customs at San Felipe (MMSF) before flying south to Bahía de los Ángeles. This lazy fishing and kayaking town is where the friends' beloved Hotel Casa Dias offers (for about \$25 a night) a welcome among the warmest in Mexico. The retreat is run by Larry's lifelong friends, the Dias family, and it is the ideal home base for the area's non-fishing joys, among them diving off Isla Ángel de la Guarda, the Sea of Cortez's largest island, and wandering around the Meseo de Naturaleza y Cultura, a museum of relics from the local gold and copper mines that first attracted Europeans to the region. Here, you could have one mean margarita and several memorable fish tacos at Larry and Raquel's Motel on the Beach, or get pampered by a massage at the new (and nice) Los Vientos Spa & Resort. Or

you could thrill to the romance of a sleeper town with no electricity (generators powering the place shut off at midnight) that is absolutely spectacular for its beauty, warmth and isolation. Whatever your mood, you will do no better than to do as Larry and Tom and take advantage of the main attraction. "The fishing is super!" says Larry, with signature enthusiasm. Believe him.

Tearing themselves away from this great kick-back spot always is tough for the buddies, but often the siren song of Punta de San Francisquito calls, and who can resist? Certainly not Larry and Tom. This sand landing strip just south of Bahía de los Ángeles, alights you on a blinding-white beach where there is nothing for miles in any direction, unless you count the insanely gorgeous seaside setting. Here you can overnight in a cozy beach hut and revel in the just-caught fish – utterly unforgettable – served to you by the resident family in their tiny café. Away? Oh, baby, say Larry and Tom. Here you are so away from it all, and absolutely dazzled by the peace and beauty. A lazy nap in your hut-side hammock is good, too. Should you manage to climb back into the cockpit, the Baja buddies sug-

gest next popping again south to Loreto, and preparing for an arrival in Baja's oldest city that is rich in Mexican magic. The Jesuits in the late 1600s christened this their empire's capitol, and today the stunning bayside town not only retains the interest of its colonial past, but also offers *mucho* in terms of great explorations. Visit beautiful Mission San Javier, one of the few original Baja California missions in an almost perfect state of preservation. Or, the better plan: Head to Hotel Oasis. Get a room or suite on the beach. And know: You are about to experience the margarita event of your life. The Oasis's legendary, ultra-fresh, fake-mix-free, super-limey concoction is as dear to the hearts of Larry and Tom as that *other* Loreto joy – the annual three-day "Fishing for the Mission" tournament – sponsored by Tom – that raises money for children's programs. This don't-miss local event is so successful (in 2006 eager anglers reeled-in an astonishing \$25,000) and the supply of donated Corona beer so unlimited, that the Baja buddies and *their* buddies' buddies wouldn't miss it for the world. So why would you?

"I fell in love with Baja because of Larry," says Tom of how such devotion to

Paradise found at the One & Only Palmilla;
alight mere feet from the beach at Punta de
San Francisquito (opposite)



the area and its “phenomenal” sportfishing started. “I admire him a lot. He’s a person who if he tells you something, you can go to the bank with it.” Says Larry, the self-confessed “dreamer” of the duo: “Tom has always been smarter than me. I don’t go around telling people that, but it’s part of the deal.”

The real deal with the Baja of Larry and Tom is how brilliantly the next leg of their flying odyssey – Mulegé – can please every adventurous pilot. A brief backtrack north from Loreto alights you on a 4,000’ dirt strip in the region where the largest pearl in the world was found – the size of a pigeon egg – and the culture of the Cochimi Indians speaks beautifully in the local cave paintings. These are a must-see. But first, taxi right to the door of Hotel Serenidad.

“Nothing has changed much at the Serenidad over the last 42 years, THANK YOU GOD,” says Larry. “Everything is still as beautiful and quaint. And what makes it special and keeps it special is the owner, Don Johnson. If a pilot or fisherman has

been going to Baja for any length of time, Don Johnson has probably helped him in some way. His genuine desire to please never changes.” So, introduce yourself to Don Johnson as the newest member of the family, and be excited by why you came. “Flying Baja does not get any better than the pig roast,” says Larry. This legendary Saturday evening feast at the Serenidad – Saturday in and Saturday out – attracts aviators from everywhere to the hacienda that in style and ambiance evokes Old Mexico. Imagine it: a warm, starry evening, new flying friends and by the swing of the Mariachi music? A meal of sweet, sweet slow-roasted, date-fed pig. No wonder Mulegé, in Larry’s words, is “a wonderland!”

“Swim, snorkel, fish...it’s a thrill just to talk about it,” he says. Scuba dive, horseback ride, clam, hike or challenge your angling skills against the fighting Dorado. Here, where river meets sea in an oasis of abundant palm trees, the romance of Baja reigns.

If it weren’t for Cabo San Lucas, the fast, flying friends might go MIA for years in

Mulegé. As it is, the two towns at Baja’s southernmost tip – “old” San Jose del Cabo and “new” Cabo San Lucas – lure with the handful of attractions that get the friends airborne again and again. First stop after landing at Cabo San Lucas Airport (MM15)? The Giggling Marlin, of course. “Let’s fiesta!” seems the motto of this happy hangout. Never mind. It also serves a breakfast at the bar that Larry and Tom maintain will elevate forever your concept of *huevos rancheros*. Let the ultra-fresh salsa made at your table seduce you to a state of perfect well-being. You just may need to maintain your inner happy place to withstand the evening’s hi-jinx should you, later, decide to partake in the Giggling Marlin’s most popular game – that of hanging you upside down beside the artistic rendition of trophy fish, someone feeding you tequila, or not – much to the merriment of everyone present. Perhaps you will choose instead a quieter moment at the Sunset Da Mona Lisa. Here, Larry and Tom promise, you will awe to a sunset of true Mexican

spectacle, thanks to the restaurant's six levels of cantilevered terrace built into the cliff that allow for out-of-this-world views. At the wildly popular Office On The Beach, where there is no actual restaurant (save the kitchen), only tables set down in the sand, you can enjoy the *palapa*s ceviche and cuba libres, it's piñatas and traditional folk dances. Or right next door – unfortunately, the name of the place escapes them – excellent, *excellent* meals may be had for none of the typical Office wait.

Cabo San Lucas is not all endless fiesta, of course. For those who seek Larry and Tom's *elegant* Baja, the flying friends will spirit you forthwith to the One & Only Palmilla Resort. It is gorgeous, all red-tile roofs, whitewashed

walls and swaying palms. It is historic – founded in the pre-road 1950s when only long-range pleasure yachts and aircraft carrying the worldly, the wealthy, and the celebrity likes of Hemingway and Harlow had access. Today this verdant seaside oasis retains its Old Hollywood glamour while offering world-class golf among the hundreds of seductions that Larry and Tom absolutely love and heartily recommend you experience, if only once.

Possibly, you can do it all. Larry and Tom do. Often. Possibly not. However, should there be any dissent in your traveling party as to what parts of “their” Baja will or will not make up *your* trip itinerary, it might be good to remember one telling

secret of the Baja buddies' 67-year friendship. “I don't think we've ever had a cross word between us,” says Tom. Adds Larry: “Years ago on a fly-in fishing trip Tom hit a rock and bent my prop. Later in the mail I get this blank check. His note says, ‘I don't know how much I owe you...’.” He laughs: “I still have that check. Every time I look at it I tell him, ‘Tom, if you're ever mad at me, I'm going to fill it out!’”

This rapport infused with what Larry calls “silly kid stuff” follows the Baja flyers everywhere. On this particular trip it next wings with them north over La Paz (if you wish you can refuel at MMLP), where the thriving waters of the Bay of La Paz once so impressed Jacques Cousteau with their diversity that he called the bay the “the aquarium of the world.” From the air you can let its beauty inspire you to recall its colorful history: pearl divers, pirates, Spanish galleons, the colonizing dramas of Hernan Cortez – all this and more happened here.

It's just a hop southeast to the Bay of Dreams, the mega-development now in the works of showplace homes and hotels and golf courses. The luxury retreat is transforming the former Bahía de los Muertos, or “Bay of the Dead” – so-called for the giant anchors (“dead men”) allegedly buried beneath its seas – into the newest Baja jewel for all who seek large-scale splendor in their Mexico retreat. On occasion, Larry and Tom allow themselves to be so dazzled. Says Tom: “It's a beautiful trip.”

The day does arrive when home beckons and the Baja-loving buddies return to the States via San Felipe and Calexico Int'l (KCXL). Until the next flight. Sharing *their* Mexico with other aviators always is a joy, says Larry. “For me it's been a 54-year love affair with aviation and a serious romance with Baja,” he says. Such enduring affection also can be said to characterize the friendship that has made flying Baja just so darn fun for Larry and Tom – and, they hope, for you.

“We will take care of each other in the rest home, I can see that!” laughs Larry.

Yes, agrees Tom, “I want to keep us going a long, long time.”

As long as there is Baja to keep them flying, there really is no reason why not. ✕

Bound for Baja...

Larry and Tom will be the first to bid *bienvenido!* Then let the Mexico of their fun and friends invite you into their world. Before flying south of the border, get prepped for the adventure by browsing some of the highlights below:

Flying Into Mexico Made Easy information: flyingadventures.com/mexico

The adventures and advice of Larry Hahn: bajadreams.com

General Baja travel information: bajaexpo.com; bajabushpilots.com;

<http://users.keyway.net/~lroberts>

Bahía de Los Angeles

Hotel Casa Dias

(011 52) 200.124.9112

Los Vientos Spa & Resort

losvientospaandresort.com

(011 52) 664.638.3279

Punta San Francisquito

(011 52) 664.681.0709

Loreto

Hotel Oasis

hoteloasis.com

800.497.3923

Mulegé

Hotel Serenidad

serenidad.com

(011 52) 615.153.0530

Cabo San Lucas

Giggling Marlin Bar & Grille

gigglingmarlin.com

(011 52) 624.143.0606

Sunset da Mona Lisa

sunsetmonalisa.com

(011 52) 624.145.8160

The Office on the Beach

theofficeonthebeach.com

(011 52) 624.143.3464

One & Only Palmilla

oneandonlyresorts.com

(011 52) 624.146.7000

The Bay of Dreams

(southeast of La Paz):

thebayofdreams.com

866.299.5197

Daybreak at the Bay of Dreams





Above Loredo Bay, Baja, Mexico
Photograph by Michael Higgins

*Be like the bird in flight...
pausing a while on boughs too slight,
feels them give way beneath her,
yet sings knowing yet, that she has wings.*
—Victor Hugo



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