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**Great Escapes**

**Escape to Rosarito**

By Tim Wassberg

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Rosarito is a town in flux, growing and soaring. Located 20 miles south of the Mexico/California border in Baja, it has a main strip peppered with clubs, bars, and hideaways. But the town is a sum of its parts, from a growing arts scene to its hidden restaurant gems to its secluded spas and the added attraction of Fox Baja Studios where the movie "Titanic" was filmed.

Driving into the coastal mecca, the energy is palpable. The Rosarito Beach Hotel has been the crown jewel of the town for close to 90 years. Back in the 1930s, which was during prohibition, all the big celebrities and rich magnates used to fly down to this exclusive spot in their planes and land on the majestic beach stretching behind the hotel.

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One of most famous eateries in town, also under the roof of the hotel, is Chabert's, structured within the old family mansion on the original property. It is old school glamour with chandeliers and silk. In one room, a picture from 1920 on the wall shows that the room is exactly maintained as it was then. It is like time has not changed. The three-course style dinner within this moody atmosphere was smooth and tantalizing with beef brisquet, pousini mixed with goat cheese and curd and berries with a shard of caramel as a desert. The after dinner nightcap at the Museo Tequila, a warm, bright but intimate bar, brought the first tequila shot and beer combo of the trip. The patrons vocalized their approval as the wind whirled the palm trees.

The morning brought a drive down the coast to Los Rojas defined by two rocks overlooking the bay. Entering the spa, the different rooms cater to every whim with submerging baths with ocean views and undenied pampering. The "Fusion Massage" was selected for its melding of many different intensities from deep tissue massage to hot rocks. The music was soothing. The mood relaxing. The sauna allowed the skin to breathe as cucumber water was poured. The car sped north to Calafia, an older family hotel establishment located on the bluffs. On the mountain overlooking the bay, a large Jesus statue reminiscent of Rio peers into the deep water. Within Calafia, the Barracuda Bar tantalizes with its multitudes of tequila as the surf breaks below. In the main dining room, the lobster bisque quelled with tang while the crab salad served within an avocado was godsend. The main course was divine in a platter for three, which consisted of Mexican, grilled lobster, marinated calamari strips, sautéed and breaded shrimp and salmon wrapped in mahi-mahi. So much it couldn't be finished. As iced tea was poured, the sun glistened across the waters spreading to the horizon.

The dinner spot for the evening was La Cava de Gonzalez, where Manny, the owner, was our host. Cava is old school jazz for the cool crowd. The appetizers consisted of ham, cheese, and olives as a bottle of Don Juan vino was opened. Tales about the Mexican coastline kept us entertained, as Manny seemed to know everyone that came in the door. Grilled shrimp, filet mignon, tri-tip and chicken marsala surrounding a bowl of refried bean mixed with the flavor of four different cheeses amazed the palette. The wine was aplenty. Manny urged us to stay to listen to the band into the night. The restaurant was packed.



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Early the next morning, a sensational dish of Huevos Mexicano mixing different chiles and natural cheeses was prepared with flavor in the Rosarito Beach Hotel's Azteca Room. Touring the outskirts of the town, the ironworks at The Metal Corral with its visages of gorillas, giraffes, and Don Quixote displayed the intricacy of the work. The Poyo Gallery, a short drive away, displayed the fine art of the region from the impressionistic elements of the female form to the overwhelming religious imagery of the peninsula bathed in blacks and reds. A few stores down a glass artist fashioned a pewter angel with floating wings of blue and gray.

As described above, a new art scene is forming down here. Ugi, a gallery owner and artist, spoke of the nearly 300 artists working in Mexico currently. Inside his gallery, the seductive twirl of a dancer bathed in a desert burned sun dances through an alleyway in oils. The most cutting edge of all these artists is Rosarito's own David Silva with his mix of seductive imagery and mass media elements. The dancer painting at Ugi's is one of David's creations. Silva does his work in a small studio overlooking the ocean right in the middle of town. Below his workshop is Cha Cha's Cafe, run by a former nurse from Boston. The grilled chicken sandwich she serves is seasoned to perfection: light and tangy. Her specials permeate the town's psyche from meatloaf to pasta, a taste of America below the border.

The Fox Baja Studios spreads out over the horizon as the sun dips in the sky. Touring the sets of "Titanic" mere yards from where it was actually filmed was fun. However, walking out into the cement desert and viewing the tanks which submerged the massive ship is extraordinary and gives an indication of its scope.

Driving down the coast as the sun set, the village of Puerto Nuevo, where the legend behind the Mexican preparation of the crustacean began, comes into view. The first dish to be savored was the stuffed mushrooms filled with marlin followed by the two halves of a massive lobster seasoned with garlic and dipped in butter. The margaritas were sweet and salty as the lights along the old school block lit up with the storm clouds simmering offshore in the distance.

Walking through the bazaar in Rosarito during the late afternoon the following day, the shopkeepers peddle their wares from religious iconography to Don Quixote. Fajitas sizzle inside the Carnitas restaurant with rich salsa, simmering steak and natural margaritas assaulting the senses. The Macho Taco, a high-energy spring break establishment along the main street in town, sets the mood with its plush couches, hip-hop overtones, and non-stop tequila as the whistles sound. A late night taco stand hits the spot as the street lamps flicker overhead.

After exploring the coastline, the breathe of the real estate in this region also becomes clear. With Donald Trump about to break ground on an elaborate condo development right in this area, Rosarito has the possibility to attract the Hollywood elite again as it did nearly a century ago. And it is affordable, like much of the town's food, drinks, and attractions.

Rosarito is slowly realizing its potential again. There is much to be discovered and much to be gained. From the exclusive spas to shopping to the excellent, spry cuisine to the burgeoning art scene, this getaway below the border offers all the curves in all the right places.



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