

GO HERE, NOT THERE



ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Discover sea life, and avoid party animals, in La Paz

BY ERIN E. WILLIAMS

Offering alternatives to overcrowded destinations.

Los Cabos's setting is spectacular, on the southern tip of Baja California, Mexico, where desert meets ocean. Its tourism numbers are also jaw-dropping, with more than 2 million visitors a year. This region of the state known as Baja California Sur includes two towns, San José del Cabo and Cabo San Lucas, and the 20 miles of coastline between them.

Los Cabos boasts photogenic beaches as well as less photoworthy cruise ships, a seemingly endless stretch of golf courses and resorts, and, especially in Cabo San Lucas's case, tourist bars. Quieter San José del Cabo features colonial architecture and art galleries, but like Cabo, it faces overdevelopment.

Visitors can get some distance from Cabo San Lucas's perpetual spring break by escaping onto the water. Rent a boat or kayak from the city's yacht-filled downtown marina to reach El Arco, the famous golden limestone arch that straddles the Gulf of California (a.k.a. the Sea of Cortez) and the Pacific Ocean.

Even better, visit the landmark underwater, where you can scuba dive alongside rays and sea lions. Or venture farther



ISTOCK

TOP: La Paz is great for aquatic adventures, like kayaking around Isla Espíritu Santo. ABOVE: Cabo San Lucas boasts lovely views but also seems to be on perpetual spring break.

into the Pacific to dive with hammerhead sharks, marlin, mahi-mahi and more wildlife far from the party animals on shore.

Location: Cabo San Lucas is located 1,000 miles south of San Diego, a two-hour flight or 22-hour drive.

To experience the peninsula's stark beauty and sea life, base yourself in La Paz, on the eastern side of Baja California Sur.

The state capital features Mexico's largest promenade, a vibrant waterfront stretch adorned with sculptures by Mexican artists.

The path is a good jumping-off point for land-based and aquatic adventures; pedal a bike along its 3½-mile expanse or stand-up paddleboard in the bay. Seventeen miles north of the city, Tecolote Beach is also reachable by bike, and its neighbor, Balandra Beach, is ideal for kayaking.

Around La Paz, the Gulf of California's protected waters host an abundance of migrating whales. In the winter, watch for 30-ton gray whales or humpbacks that breach tantalizingly close to shore.

La Ventana, 30 miles southeast of the city, is one of the

world's best kiteboarding and windsurfing spots because of its steady winter winds, protected bay and beautiful beaches. Small resorts offer equipment and lessons. Don't want to go where the wind takes you? Steer your own course and kayak, paddleboard, dive, hike or mountain bike.

Take a panga boat 90 minutes north from La Paz to visit Isla Espíritu Santo, one of 244 UNESCO-listed islands, islets and coastal areas in the Gulf of California. Although day trips are available, consider camping in an off-grid retreat such as Baja Expeditions' site at Candelero Bay. Excursions include trekking through mangroves and cactuses to dramatic red-rock vistas (watch for ring-tailed cats and black-tailed jack rabbits along the way) and kayaking in cliff-flanked bays. Snorkel or dive with rambunctious sea lions and a variety of critters, including sea turtles and octopuses. At sunset, watch rays leap from the water, and later, stargaze from your waterside tent — a different kind of intoxication than Cabo's nightlife.

Location: La Paz is about 100 miles north of Cabo San Lucas, a two-hour drive.

travel@washpost.com

Williams is a writer based in Nevada. Her website is erinewilliams.com.

With travel blacklists, customers are in the dark



The Navigator

CHRISTOPHER ELLIOTT

Don't hit a flight attendant. Don't trash your hotel room. And whatever you do, don't leave a gun in your rental car. All of the above can land you on the travel industry's mysterious

blacklists — banned from flying, staying or renting again. But it turns out you can also get there for much smaller infractions, which include disputing a credit card charge or spilling a drink on a crew member. The lines aren't always clear.

Consider what happened on Richard Laermer's Delta Air Lines flight from Atlanta to Westchester County Airport in New York in 2014. When he tried to access the lavatories during meal service, Laermer says, he accidentally spilled a drink on an empty seat. A flight attendant, believing he'd thrown the beverage at her, reported him to the pilot.

"When we landed in Westchester, there were three large police officers waiting for me," recalls Laermer, who owns a New York communications consulting company. "They took me into a windowless room, and they told me I had threatened a crew member."

An airline representative visited him while he was being detained to say he was on the company's "no fly" list, effective immediately.

"All because of a drink," Laermer says.

Delta didn't respond to a request for comment on Laermer's case. But his experience calls into question the conventional wisdom about blacklists: that you can only get on them for a serious infraction. Hotels and cruise lines also keep blacklists, and you can get banned from travel for all the reasons you might expect — and some you might not.

Disputing credit card charges, for example, is often considered enough to warrant blacklisting, even if the dispute isn't resolved in your favor. Christie Bissias, who sailed on the Norwegian Bliss with her family last year, says she didn't think she'd done anything that warranted getting her name on the cruise line's "do not sail" list. After a less-than-satisfactory cruise — her chief complaint was that the company failed to provide her and her family with connecting rooms — she complained to Norwegian Cruise Line.

"I was never aggressive, abusive or ugly," says Bissias, who works for a technology company in Houston.

NCL offered her \$3,000 in future cruise credits by way of apology, but she said she preferred a refund. When the cruise line didn't offer one, she disputed her credit card charges. After that, NCL told her she was on its "do not sail" list. The company would not comment on her case, but when Bissias appealed her blacklisting, NCL allowed her to return. "They said there was a system error that

caused all of this confusion," she says.

With car companies, normally, it takes a serious offense to land on the "do not rent" list — an offense like the one Niebes Castillo committed. Castillo, a truck driver from Baytown, Tex., left his handgun in his rental car. He caught the mistake almost immediately, turned around and retrieved the weapon.

"I was in a rush," he says. "I know it was careless and reckless of me."

But Hertz added him to the "do not rent" list, as is the car rental company's standard practice for customers who leave weapons in their rental vehicles.

Interestingly, car rental companies might blacklist you for lesser infractions. I just had a case from Jacob Danesh, an e-commerce worker from Pikesville, Md., who says Hertz blacklisted him because he used a discount code for which he didn't qualify.

Another bannable crime: disputing damage charges on a rental car, as Carol Amittin discovered. She'd rented a car in Baltimore, parked it on her street and then returned it. The car rental company, Enterprise, claimed she damaged the vehicle and billed her. She disputed the credit card charges and won.

Then Amittin, a retired nurse from Baltimore, tried to rent another car from Enterprise and discovered that she'd actually lost — she couldn't rent a car.

"I was put on a 'do not rent' list for Enterprise, which also included their other car rental companies, Alamo and National," she told me. She had no idea what had happened until she tried to rent another car. "I was informed by the counter personnel that I was on the list and nothing could be done about it, even though I had confirmed reservations in each case," she says.

Maybe it's time for customers to draw up blacklists of their own. That's what Laermer, the banned Delta passenger, did. After he appealed his blacklisting, Delta allowed him to return. Laermer took one final flight, which he had already booked, and then took his business elsewhere.

"I fly JetBlue now," he says. "They're better."

Of course, companies have every right to choose which travelers they do business with, as long as it's legal. But taken together, the cases I've received in the past few years present a troubling picture.

Most people know they can get banned for striking a crew member or damaging a rental car. And it's fairly common knowledge that the government has a No Fly List, which is part of the Terrorist Screening Database. But the latest cases suggest that simple misunderstandings or forgetfulness could lead to you being blacklisted, too.

Elliott is a consumer advocate, journalist and co-founder of the advocacy group Travelers United. Email him at chris@elliott.org.

The darker the better to see the northern lights

On Mondays at 2 p.m., the Travel section staff hosts Talk About Travel, an online forum for reader questions and comments. The following is an edited excerpt from a recent discussion.

Q: We're trying to decide between going on a northern lights tour in Iceland in March or September. Do you have a recommendation for the best time to travel to increase our chances of seeing them?

A: The darker the better, so I'd opt for early March. — *Carol Sottili*

Q: Is there a good resource where I can find hotels that allow dogs? Some of the resources that I have now are either out of date or haven't been updated, and I wanted to see if there's a good clearinghouse for dog-friendly hotels.

A: I would start with the American Kennel Club, which has a good list of dog-friendly hotels (last updated in May). Some chains are also known for throwing out the welcome mat to pets, such as Kimpton and Aloft. BringFido.com also has a good reputation for its tips and resources. Of course, before booking, call the hotel and ask



ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

The northern lights dance over a Norwegian fjord. Early spring is a good time to see the aurora borealis.

about the pet policy, restrictions and extra costs. — *Andrea Sachs*

Q: We're planning on taking a European river cruise next year, probably along the Rhine or Danube, and likely at the beginning of the season in late March. The costs are a little more reasonable and I know the places we'll visit will be less crowded. Are we going to have problems with the river level being too high or too low, and our cruise turned into a bus

tour? Would the fall be a better choice?

A: Spring is a better choice than fall. River levels are very low this fall on several rivers in Europe, and some cruise lines are changing itineraries. — *C.S.*

Q: We're looking at taking a seven- to 10-day trip to Tokyo in December. We'll have a 20-month-old at that time and I'm wondering if we're totally crazy for considering bringing him. We've never left him for more

than one night with anyone. Do you have experience bringing a kid on a trip with that big of a time difference?

A: Not crazy. I've traveled with all my kids when they were very young. Kids adjust to the time difference much faster than adults, in my experience. — *Chris Elliott*

Q: I live on the East Coast and have never left the country. I'm a new passport holder and want to get started, but after a rough year, I'd like to go someplace inexpensive first (and alone). What're your first thoughts on something quick and sunny and affordable and good for a loner?

A: If we had nonstops to Bermuda, I'd tell you to start there. Instead, how about Jamaica? — *C.S.*

Q: My biggest work deadline of the year is coming up in a couple of weeks, so I'll need a weekend after that to get away just to sit under an umbrella and recover. How far down the East Coast do I need to go to find ocean water warm enough to swim in?

A: I've been swimming in Ocean City in mid-October, but I'd say, to be safe, Myrtle Beach, S.C. Average ocean temperature is 73 in October. — *C.S.*

SIGN LANGUAGE



TOM MASSEY

Spotted by **Tom Massey** of Chevy Chase, Md., on the Isle of Skye in Scotland in September.

Have you seen an amusing sign in your travels? Read on.

Photos may be color or black-and-white and should be no more than a year old. Send high-resolution JPEG image to travel@washpost.com with "Sign Language" in the subject line. Be sure to include your name, contact information and a proposed caption. You can also submit prints or photo-quality printouts to Travel Section Sign Contest, 1301 K St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071. (Write your name, caption and contact information on the back.) Photos become property of The Washington Post, which may edit, publish, distribute or republish them in any form. No purchase necessary.

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National: Wesley Tyeryar, 202-334-9702 • **International:** Sam Kumar, email sam.kumar@washpost.com, call +44 (0) 7581 798 011 • **To respond to one of our articles:** Email travel@washpost.com, call 202-334-7750 or write us: Washington Post Travel section, 1301 K St. NW Washington, D.C. 20071.