

ESPERANZA

Auberge Resorts Collection

| BY TRACY ELLEN BEARD

[Esperanza, Auberge Resorts Collection](#) rests perched above Cabo's Punta Ballena's stunning coastline and boasts one of the most resplendent alfresco dining spots in Baja, California. This five-star resort features upscale casitas and suites, haciendas, villas, and oceanfront villas for individuals, couples and large groups. The food is spectacular, the accommodations are opulent and the activities are phenomenal.

A WARM WELCOME

My daughter Brittney and I arrived at Esperanza on a warm, muggy day. After exiting our private, airconditioned car we were greeted with cold passion fruit margaritas, given a short tour of the resort and escorted to the open-air Cocina del Mar restaurant for lunch. Our cold, crispy crudité was paired with a jocoque (a Mexican dairy product) dip made with mint jocoque cheese, jalapeño, toasted lemon seeds and olive oil. We also shared a beef tenderloin steak sandwich with caramelized onions, tomato, arugula, mustard and mayo. Lunch was tasty and we felt satisfied and refreshed from the breezy air.

THE LUXURIOUS CASITA

After lunch we were taken to our stunning, well-appointed casita featuring a terrace that overlooked the Sea of Cortez. The bedroom had a lovely sitting area in front of expansive sliding glass doors that led onto the balcony complete with a hot tub. The large bathroom boasted two rain showers, an enormous tub and double sinks. On one side of the room a beautiful cabinet held a Nespresso machine, hot water

maker and various alcohols and snacks. The king bed, adorned with a white duvet, was enveloped with flowing white linens draped from rods hung from the ceiling. Muted shades of green were used to offset the crisp whites in the room creating an elegant style, and iron sconces added an opulent yet authentic Mexican feel. While looking around, we discovered a splendid edible cactus display on the buffet table under the TV; and we were thrilled to learn that a new edible piece of art would be left for us to enjoy each evening.

AN ENCHANTING DINING EXPERIENCE

Lunch and breakfast at Cocina del Mar are wonderful, but dinner is a grand performance. Sitting on the furthest platform stretched out toward the sea, we began the evening with a delicious Del-margarita made with lemon, grapefruit 1800 anejo tequila, Grand Marnier and volcanic salt. Sourdough bread cooked in a cup, resembling a popover, was served and accompanied by a tasty, sweet eggplant butter.

Our first course was Torre de Mariscos—an assortment of raw gifts from the sea. The platter included Kumiai oysters, chocolate clams, poached blue shrimp, octopus, local baby scallops with pineapple and jicama, hamachi with ponzu sauce, black lime paste, salsa chiles secos sauce and passion fruit mignonette for the oysters. Everything was fresh and tasted vaguely of the sea, and the presentation was dramatic.

Thinly sliced bluefin tuna crudo arrived with sliced avocado, salsa macha XO, cilantro and

wakame. This flavorful sauce with a paste consistency was exquisite on the delicate tuna. The entree, fresh sea bass, was prepared in a traditional smoked chili marinade. Mexican rice, charro beans, shredded cabbage, guacamole, house-made tortillas, tomatillo salsa and very spicy and smokey tormenta salsa made with habanero peppers came with the sea bass—everything needed to prepare perfect individual tacos.

The chef prepared two desserts, an amaretto coffee souffle with crème anglaise and vanilla ice cream and a double chocolate mousse served in a chocolate bowl with mini malted chocolate balls topped with gold leaf. Yummy!

EXCITING RESORT ACTIVITIES

The Creative Art Class - We attended a pottery class at the Agave Art Studio. Two gentlemen sat with us in the studio to give brief instructions, and then we were on our own. Brittney used a mold to make a dolphin, and I made a turtle. We each painted a few small bowls and a coffee mug. Once finished, we left the items to be fired and picked up the following day. It was a fun way to spend a few hours in the afternoon.

TIME WITH CHEF PALACIOS

My favorite activity was our private event with the resort's Executive Chef Alexis Palacios. He took us down to the beach to learn about the different marine life in the local tide pools. We found crabs, snails and small fish. Chef told us that sometimes he finds octopus and larger fish.





After poking around for a while, we returned to the restaurant where we found a gorgeous spread of beautifully ripe fruits and vegetables awaiting us. Chocolate clams, blue shrimp and fresh tuna were also ready for preparation. The staff handed us aprons, and we stood at stations across from the chef and began our cooking class.

Chef Palacios showed us how to cure raw onion in lemon juice and water. This technique removes some of the onion's acidity and crunch. We added serrano chili to bump up the flavor. It worked great. We made a tasty and unique guacamole with avocado, cucumber with no seeds, lemon juice, chopped tomatillo, olive oil, salt and pepper. It was incredibly delicious.

We also made a fruity pico de gallo with the cured onion, serrano chili, especially ripe cherry tomatoes, chunks of fresh mango and pineapple, olive oil and fresh cilantro. We ate the guacamole and fruity pico with fresh large basil leaves and tortilla chips. Lastly we prepared a mignonette for the raw oysters and a black lemon paste for the tuna and shrimp. It was a fantastic and fun learning experience with the chef.

MIXOLOGY CLASS

Our mixology instructor, Christian, waited for us after our cooking class. He planned to teach us to make margaritas, but we opted to

make mojitos with a twist since we had already been imbibing on the tequila beverage during our culinary lesson. He taught us the basics of making mojitos, then I added mango syrup and Brittney added Frangelico to hers. Both cocktails were picturesque and refreshing.

DINNER IN THE GARDEN

Las Estrellas restaurant is located near the residences and in the garden area. Tables sit on the grass next to a small vineyard, fruit trees and an herb garden. Additional seating is available on the patio with pretty wicker lanterns. The cuisine at Las Estrellas has an Italian flare. We began dinner with the baked burrata with an heirloom tomato mix, and a roasted pumpkin fondue. Onion focaccia and flatbread with rosemary accompanied the dips. Delicious.

The final course was a massive wedge of meat lasagna and a bowl of saffron and shrimp fettuccine. The pasta was handmade and cooked al dente. For dessert we dined on crème brûlée with berries and a zucchini cake cooked in a mini cast iron skillet topped with a nutmeg ice cream.

INDULGENT SPA TREATMENTS

The Spa at Esperanza brings the flourishing desert into its indoor and outdoor spaces. Upon entering, we received our assigned lockers, changed into our robes and relaxed in the

outdoor waiting area. The space was a tropical jungle with stone walls, a stone shower and two Jacuzzis, one cold and one hot. Brittney and I put our feet in the cold pool and waited for our masseuses.

Soon we were collected, and we entered the spa through its weather-beaten wooden gates to experience paradise. We went our separate ways, and Connie, my masseuse, walked me through the beautiful flower-filled jungle to a therapy room. It had an outdoor section, a Jacuzzi and shower, and inside was an extra-large room with a bathroom.

Connie was well trained in her craft. She used long, broad strokes with deep pressure getting down into the secondary layers under the fascia without causing pain from pinpoint pressure. It was wonderful. She also used several stretching techniques to manipulate my appendages to get deeper into spots that hold tension. It was extremely relaxing, and she eliminated the knots in my muscles. After finishing our massages, we met outside under the palapa shaded lounges where we sipped on our choice of local fresh fruit beverages.

Treat yourself and your loved ones to an unforgettable trip to the Esperanza, Auberge Resorts Collection. Savor the marvelous cuisine, relax in upscale accommodations and pamper yourself at the spa. ♦