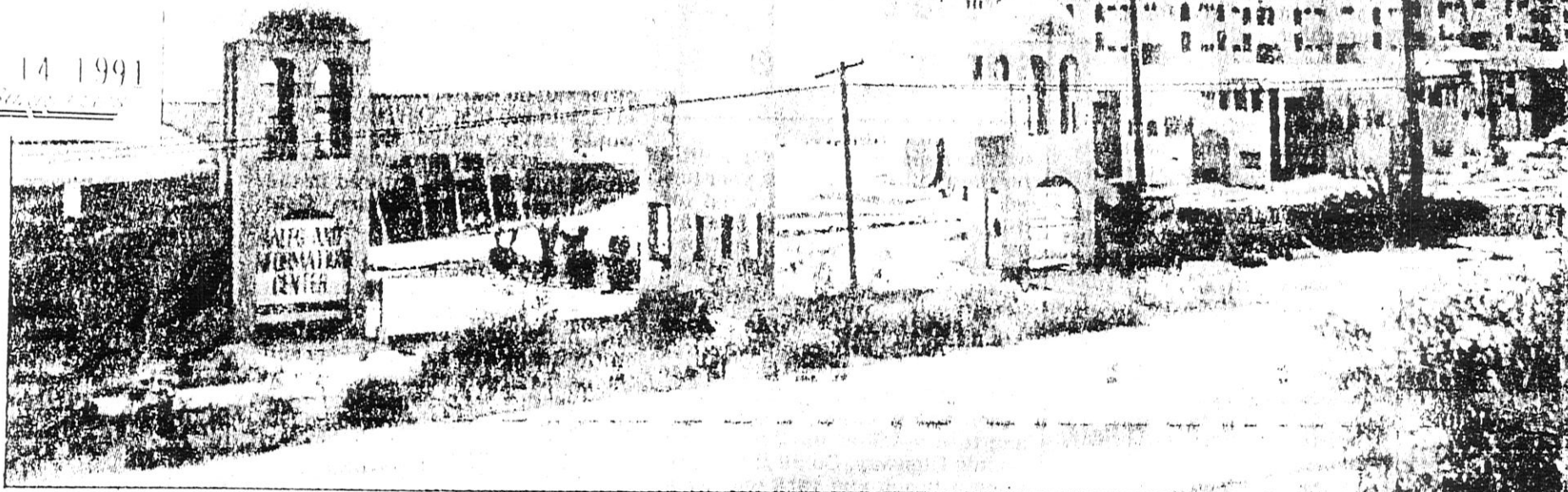


APR 14 1991



BY LARRY ROHTER, NEW YORK TIMES

Baja California is going from wilderness to white stucco condos and shopping malls, a haven for retirees and expatriates

The Land of Señor Sushi

Developers are bulldozing Baja to make room for 'tourist architecture'

BY LAWRENCE A. HERZOG

Cabo San Lucas, Mexico

Dawn in Baja California: Only one office is open along the main commercial street in the town of Cabo San Lucas — a real estate company. Tractors and cement trucks roll by; workers in hard hats, lunch pails in hand, amble toward construction sites. Along the main high-

way, land is being graded and new sewer lines are being dug. Seven hotels, backed by American capital, are under construction.

Once Baja California was 55,000 square miles of pure wilderness — desert, mountains, exquisite coastline. Now the 800-mile-long peninsula has come within the reach of Southern California land developers.

One of the last great wilderness regions on the globe, comparable to the Australian outback or the upper Amazon basin of Brazil, is giving way to the bulldozer, to white stucco condominiums, to shopping malls.

More than 25 million U.S. tourists visit Baja California each year. More than 40,000 Americans, many retired, live here. Direct air routes connect the Baja peninsula to an ever-expanding network of cities: San Diego, Los Angeles, Dallas, Denver, Vancouver, Toronto. A direct flight from Baja to Tokyo is pending.

"The Mexicans provide the land, and we provide expertise and money," says Don Balsley, a San Diego real estate agent who is developing coastal property in the Los Cabos region. Balsley thinks U.S. capital buffers the region from the nation's general economic malaise.

"The rest of Mexico may be in a tough situation economically, but Cabo isn't," he says. "It's

Architects hired by resort developers are working out the future on their sketch pads. Their designs must satisfy the tastes of foreign clients. Tourists want comfort, escapism and a bit of caprice. Native Mexican culture will be bulldozed away where necessary, or romanticized.

Discos have Mexican sounding names, like "El Faro Viejo" (the old fountain) or "Candidos."

"Authentic" Spanish tiles decorate the swimming pools. Palm trees are imported to the region like stage props in a fantasy play.

"Tourist architecture is a way of manipulating people," Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta remarked recently.

When he was designing the lavish Camino Real Hotel in Ixtapa, Legorreta says the developers wanted him to create an artificial environment. "The main attraction of Mexico's Pacific Coast is that it has the best climate in the world, but they wanted to put air conditioning in all 450 rooms," he noted.

In most Mexican cities, there are public

squares, baroque churches, colonial buildings, open markets. Downtown Cabo San Lucas is chaotic clutter: international boutique shops (like Benetton, Fila); a sushi bar called Señor Sushi; new supermarkets.

"For me, this town is American," says Claudia Selmi, one of the sales agents for a new resort development. "It has American food, American cars, American prices. When you go shopping, all you can find are T-shirts."

Jorge Mesa grew up in the copper-mining town of Santa Rosalia. Stocky and cheerful, Mesa, in his early 40s, is part of the new labor force of Baja California. He is head waiter at the Hotel Cabo San Lucas, one of the upscale southern Baja resorts. He works 11-hour shifts and supports four children, an ex-wife and his current girlfriend.

A short drive up the coast from where Mesa works, another new arrival, from a different world, is Swiss-born Eric Lundgren. Lundgren, also in his early 40s, is sales manager for Century 21, the international realty firm. After a divorce, he left the computer business in Southern California to begin a new life in Baja. "One day I was sitting in traffic in Irvine, and I realized it was time to go," he said.

Lundgren is part of what he describes as an expatriate community of Americans and Canadians living on the cape. "Many of the people are here because they were, in a way, failures in their society. They've come here to re-evaluate their lives," he says.

But Lundgren laments, "Sometimes I feel bad about what I do. I come in here and sell my condos and move on. But I'm participating in ruining their environment."

Now, Jorge Mesa and Eric Lundgren share the same future. They are watching Baja California shed its old identity. But they're not quite sure what the new one will be.

Rick Dobson, a former cattleman from Oklahoma, like Lundgren, has started a second career in Baja: selling luxury condos to Americans. He thinks he knows what the presence of more Americans will mean for the new Baja.

"We're gonna ruin it like we do any place," he says.