

From Miraculous Air: Journey of a Thousand Miles through Baja California, the Other Mexico

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From the chapter "The Visitors"

In the Galería de Todos Santos there was a painting by an American named Derek Buckner. I'd found it propped against the wall in the back room, the paint still fresh. It was a curious tableau: a man in a turquoise skirt and a brick-red fez; another man, also in a fez, his smile a slash of white between a mustache and a goatee, arms spread wide as if to say *Voilà!*; a woman with smooth red hair pinned into a topknot, her rose-colored dress catching the light of morning sun, the dappled shade of trees; another woman, wielding her tambourine like a weapon, chastising a dog. These exotic characters stood around a table, the dog with its paws on the edge of the tablecloth. Plunk in its center, like a soup tureen, sat a flying saucer.

The painting was titled "The Visitors." There was a woman who wanted to buy it, but the Galería de Todos Santos was asking two thousand dollars. It was worth it, she acknowledged. But she was remodeling her kitchen and she had to buy a stove.

"Who needs a stove?" the gallery owner said. His name was Michael Cope, as in "I can't," he liked to say. He was blonde and apple-cheeked, Danny Kaye as Hans Christian Andersen. He was from L.A., a refugee of corporate life, a painter himself. He placed his arms akimbo.

"We don't need food," Michael said. "We need art!"

What had brought the first big spending visitors to Todos Santos, however, was the food — specifically, lunch at the Café Santa Fé, an Italian restaurant on the plaza. Todos Santos was only an hour north from Cabo San Lucas on the highway, a narrow shoulderless pavement threading through a wilderness of cardón and cholla cactus, the sea on one side, the sierra on the other. Cattle browsed around the cholla cactus at the edge. Sometimes they wandered into the road and stood there chewing their cud. Every ten miles or so was a clump of palms: a fishing village of cinderblocks and thatch-roofed adobes, a roadside stand offering Tecate beer and cold Cokes.

Todos Santos seemed like just another of those villages, although larger, with a gas station. It also had a spotlight and a grocery store. A few Americans lived here, some in an RV park, others — many of them artists — in the old downtown, which was no more than a plaza with a white-washed theater and the requisite church, around which clustered a few blocks of 19th and early 20th century brick townhouses and shops. Some were newly renovated, painted bright fruity colors, but many remained empty, their rotted wooden doors padlocked, roofs caved in.

Todos Santos had once boasted a prosperous bourgeoisie whose fortunes were built on sugar. With water from a spring, they grew the cane, milled it for its juice, then boiled it down to a syrup in great cauldrons with orange peel and spices, which was then poured into molds to make the hard cones of panocha. But in 1950, the spring slowed to a trickle and the mills closed, one by one. The few families that remained in Todos Santos lived by hunting turtles and sharks. The spring revived in the early 1980s, but now the water

was used to irrigate tomatoes, papayas, mangoes. The ruins of the sugar mills, their rusted machinery and brick smokestacks, dotted the tiny town of 4,000 people. Most of the streets were dirt.

The air in the Café Santa Fé was cool, the tables were of pink marble. Nuevo flamenco played on the stereo, intricate and delicate as fluttering gauze. I sat out back under the pergola in the garden. I spread the napkin — a great flannel-soft square — across my lap and ordered lunch: rosemary focaccia, lobster ravioli with basil, roasted new potatoes and mesquite-grilled dorado drizzled with balsamic vinegar and olive oil.

The restaurant was full: Americans up from Cabo for the day, most of them. The women were in espadrilles and linen; the men sported Rolexes and baseball caps embroidered with the names of golf resorts.

The owners of the Café Santa Fé, Paula and Ezio Colombo, had just returned from Paris. “We took in a fashion show,” Paula said when she stopped by my table. “Oh! And a film opening, and the Francis Bacon show.” She’d been a fashion model once herself, an African-American covergirl for *Essence* and *Seventeen*. That was more than twenty years ago, but Paula still seemed girlish, fine-boned and bubbly. Ezio, a thick-waisted fellow in the background, striding like a worthy burgher between his bar and his kitchen, was a painter from Milan.

As I was leaving I saw the gallery owner, Michael Cope. He was having lunch with two of his artists: Robert Whiting, who also owned the new Todos Santos Inn, and Gloria Marie V., a petite woman with long straight chocolate-brown hair. She wore a straw boater with silk flowers bunched at the brim. Birds were singing, something rustled in the thick matt of bougainvillea over the pergola. Their table was a still life: goblets of chilled white wine glistening with condensation; a vase with a sprig of desert wildflowers bright as raspberries.

If I were a painter, I thought, I would have liked to paint that.

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