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- Local News
- Insight
- Business
- Sports
- Sunday Currents
- Arts
- Travel
- Homes
- Homescape
- Books
- Passages
- The Last Week
- Sunday
- Monday
- Tuesday
- Wednesday
- Thursday
- Friday
- Saturday
- Weekly Sections
- Books
- Personal Tech
- Family
- Food
- Health
- Home
- Homescape
- Insight
- InStyle
- Night & Day
- Street
- Sunday Arts
- Travel
- Quest
- Wheels

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Starry, starry site

Hotel Rosarito, once a vacation getaway for the world's celebrities, turns 80 this month

By Norma de la Vega
STAFF WRITER

May 1, 2005

ROSARITO BEACH, Mexico – The Charleston was all the rage when it opened. It was a favorite getaway for stars. And it has weathered the end of gambling and the attack on Pearl Harbor.

It's the Hotel Rosarito, a regional icon that turns 80 this month.

The hotel opened in 1925, and, though there was no highway back then linking it to Tijuana, just a handful of ranches, the hotel became a magnet for celebrities from both sides of the border.

It's a place of many legends and few documents that can precisely trace its founding. Yet the hotel is at the heart of the history of the young community of Rosarito that faced many challenges as it grew.

In fact, on June 29, Playas de Rosarito, or Rosarito Beach, will mark its 10th anniversary as an incorporated city.



DAVID MAUNG

Hotel Rosarito in Rosarito Beach is a place of many legends. Famous guests include John Wayne, Dolores del Rio, Glenn Miller, Jorge Negrete, Gregory Peck, Frank Sinatra and Marilyn Monroe.

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DATEBOOK

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known inhabitants, Kumeyaay natives, called it Wa-Kuatay, which means "Big House." The Dominican missionaries who followed them named it El Rosario, the rosary.

And it took on the quintessential Mexican diminutive in 1885, when Joaquín Machado received the deed to nearly 20,000 hectares from his father, pioneer José Manuel Machado, who obtained it from the Mexican government.

According to Conrado Acevedo Cárdenas, Rosarito's official historian, the first tourists arrived in the 1890s in horse-drawn wagons. It was a long journey, 12 hours from San Diego, and the attractions were hunting rabbits, quail and deer and fishing for clams, abalone and lobster.

Rosarito began to take off around 1924. At that time, the United States was in the midst of Prohibition, and someone got the idea of opening a cantina and three guest rooms. The place was called René's. and it became a strategic stop between Tijuana and Ensenada.

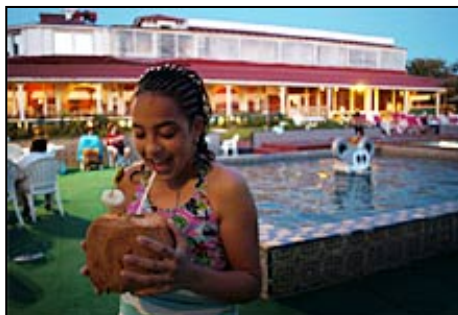
One or two years later – the exact date is unclear – the Hotel Rosarito opened, and thus began the glory years for a little-known village in Mexico.

Nowadays, some 140,000 residents live in the municipality of Rosarito Beach, which totals 198 square miles. Its main income comes from commerce, the service industry and, of course, tourism.

Parade of stars



Hotel Rosarito
Guests of yesteryear and today enjoyed Hotel Rosarito's pool. The drink below is a non-alcoholic Coco Loco.



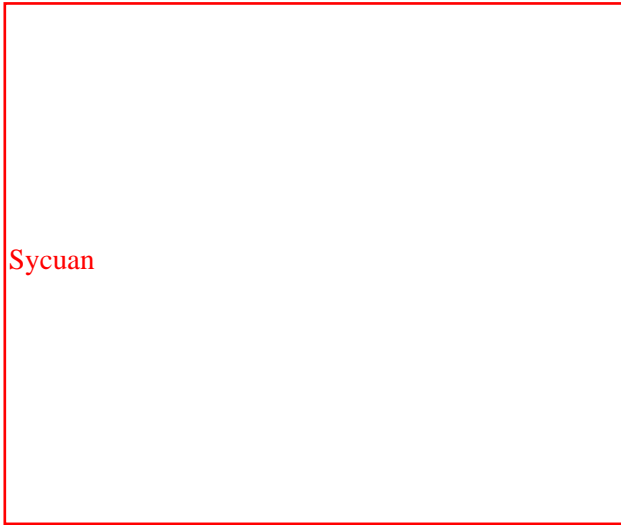
David Maung

The history of the Hotel Rosarito really begins in 1916, when the Machados sold part of their land to a U.S. company called Explotador de Baja California, which wanted to drill for oil. The project never prospered, and the investors opted to build the hotel, which rented rooms for \$8 a night.

Hugo Torres Chabert is the present-day owner and a relative of the founders. He said the original building, which consisted of 12 bedrooms and a central bathroom, was built by an American who saw an economic opportunity in the arid little town by the beach.

Time would prove him right.

Advertisement



The hotel's foyer

Sycuan

boasts photographs of some of its famous guests from both sides of the border: John Wayne, Dolores del Río, Glen Miller, Jorge Negrete, Gregory Peck, Frank Sinatra, Marilyn Monroe, several Mexican presidents and even a Persian prince.

The immortal María Félix, the greatest star of Mexico's golden age of cinema in the 1930s and 1940s, stayed five times. "La dona," as she was called, first came to the hotel when she was married to Agustín Lara, one of Mexico's greatest composers.

And it was the visits from these divas that inspired the hotel's motto: "The most beautiful women in the world have passed through here."

Juvenal Arias was born in the hotel 57 years ago. His father worked there, and the family lived on the premises. He has many fond memories of growing up in the hotel.

He said he was 12 years old when they sent him to deliver a bouquet of flowers to Sonia Furio's room. The voluptuous actress received him wearing little clothing, and he became nervous.

"She asked me if the flowers were from the management," he recalled. "And I answered, 'No, they're from Tijuana.' "

In 1929 Mexican entrepreneur Manuel Barbachano bought the hotel after the U.S. owner ran into legal problems. Foreigners were not supposed to own coastal property in Mexico.

Barbachano had great plans for his acquisition. He built 50 more rooms and a grand ballroom big enough for 500 people and a casino. In 1932, he led the call to build the Tijuana to Ensenada highway.

By 1937, Rosarito had some 200 residents. That same year, Mexico outlawed gambling and the casinos in Agua Caliente in Tijuana, and the Hotel Riviera in Ensenada closed. The Hotel Rosarito closed its casino but kept operating as a hotel.

\$99 tip

The casino became a dance hall that featured big-band music in the style of Glenn Miller.

Another great era began.

Arias said the New Year's parties were lavish affairs. He once got to see María Félix perform.

"She couldn't sing at all, but you couldn't stop looking at her."

In 1937, Barbachano married María Luisa Chabert, an actress who decided to move to Rosarito and build a luxurious mansion that eventually became part of the hotel. It is now Chabert's Restaurant, with talavera tiles from Puebla and even a spa.

Torres said that some letters from his aunt María Luisa tell that in 1941, the hotel emptied out in one hour after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

"There were a lot of rumors. People were saying the Japanese were going to land on the coast, and there was a big crisis that lasted several weeks."

In 1954 Ali Khan, a son of the Shah of Iran, stayed at the hotel. The Persian millionaire ordered a 45-cent drink, paid with a \$100 bill and told the waiter to keep the change.

"It was a \$99 tip," laughed Tomás Perrín, who has compiled a history of the place.

With the death of its owner in 1953, a new era began after his widow decided to lease the hotel. But in 1972, she regained control. Two years later, her nephew, Hugo Torres Chabert, took over its administration.

It now has 276 rooms, and it's still a preferred destination for vacationing Californians. Chabert said only 3 percent of his guests are from Mexico.

The rooms range from \$65 on weekdays to \$149 for rooms with an ocean view on weekends. Along with the usual amenities, guests get a colorful serving of the region's history, 80 years strong.

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