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Baja Pioneers
**Roberto
Balderrama**

*A Lifetime of Hospitality
Experience in Northwest Mexico
Brings Added Charm
to Los Cabos with the
Cabo Surf Hotel and Spa.*

-by Michael Koehn | photos courtesy of the Balderrama Family & Francisco Estrada-

If there's one thing we've learned when it comes to covering the original pioneers, the visionaries who had a passion for southern Baja and wanted to share it, is that they were often flying by the seat of their pants but trusted their instincts. There was something here, and where not much existed before, except the scenic beauty, they worked against enormous odds to build places where friends, family and guests would be able to settle in and enjoy the magnificent environment.

Most of the Baja pioneers we've written about in these pages had origins outside of southern Baja, traveling to the area in its early days, becoming enamored with the pristine waters and contrasting desert landscape. But one thing all of these adventurers seem to have in common is a real passion for going out and beyond the accepted limits.

With Roberto Balderrama, the story begins in another part of Mexico. Born

in the small coastal sugar cane plantation town of Los Mochis in northern Sinaloa, young Roberto had an early love for the outdoors, enjoying hunting and fishing, and eventually graduated from Law School at the University of Guadalajara, where he was also a pitcher for his university baseball team. His father and older brothers were betting on the potential of the hospitality business and decided to build the majestic

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(ABOVE) | Aboard "Joker," the family boat, a 60' Hatteras, catching a yellowtail around the "Farallon Rock."

Santa Anita Hotel while most of the area in the mountains above Los Mochis was still involved in mining and agriculture.

Even though Roberto Balderrama was an avid student and had earned a law degree, he didn't practice law much, beginning his hospitality career with an involvement in the Santa Anita Hotel in Los Mochis that was begun by his father, who died during its construction. "He laid the first stone for the hotel in 1956. He was a risk-taker," explains Mauricio. "He saw Los Mochis as an up-and-coming area with a need for a nice place to stay for visitors and tourism that would be drawn by the Chihuahua-

Pacifico scenic train ride majestic beauty. It had been relatively isolated before. Most of the local economy was based on farming and commercial fishing then, but Los Mochis was a coastal town with superabundant fishing."

Before he began managing the Santa Anita, Balderrama took a course in hotel management at the Whitcomb Hotel School in downtown Los Angeles. With the Santa Anita, the Balderrama family had a deluxe four-story property that became the icon of luxury on Mexico's upper west coast in the fifties, sixties, and seventies, and it remains a well-respected and venerable property to this day. Before his retirement in 2018, he

(BELOW) | With mother Anita Gomez Cota and brothers Enrique, Armando and Adolfo with respective wives during first opening of the Santa Anita hotel restaurant, 1959. Welcome recognition to the governor of Texas, Preston Smith, to the Posada Hidalgo hotel in El Fuerte in 1971. Roberto's father, local prominent entrepreneur Prospero Balderrama Gomez at the moment the "first stone" was placed for the building of the Santa Anita Hotel. Shown with older brother Enrique Balderrama Gomez.





had over sixty years' experience in operating a chain of eight unique hotels and properties in Sinaloa, Chihuahua, and Baja California beginning with the Santa Anita Hotel in 1958 inaugurated by Mexico's President Lopez Mateos. Over the length of his career, Balderrama has personally hosted several Mexican presidents and celebrities at his hotels, and he received the National Tourism Award from then-president Ernesto Zedillo. In 1985, Balderrama was also appointed tourism secretary for the state of Sinaloa and was awarded honorary citizenships by Arizona and Texas state governments.

Like other pioneers with an entrepreneurial spirit, Balderrama always had his eye open for new opportunities, and in the mid-sixties he leased a hotel property in nearby Topolobampo Bay called The Yacht Hotel, which, naturally, was shaped like a big boat. With that property, he was able to expand the amenities, adding a sportfishing fleet and made the property a destination location for ocean-loving vacationers from

all over Mexico and American sportfishing enthusiasts for marlin, sailfish, dorado, and yellowtail fishing at the iconic Farallon rock, 22 miles outside the bay.

Among the stories he tells from that era is the one where he was notified that someone was being detained and they wanted to leave their luggage at the Santa Anita hotel where he was staying. It turned out that a local immigration officer had arrested American General James Doolittle for flying in with his favorite shotguns to do a little duck and dove hunting with no passport. The general, of course, was awarded the Medal of Honor for personal valor and leadership as commander of the Doolittle Raid, a bold long-range retaliatory air raid on Tokyo on April 18, 1942, four months after the attack on Pearl Harbor. After the raid, Doolittle was celebrated as a hero.

The Jimmy Doolittle incident was quickly cleared up personally by Roberto, and as the area around Los Mochis was becoming popular for tourists the Santa Anita Hotel

(ABOVE) | *President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, governor of Sinaloa Francisco Labastida Ochoa, Roberto Balderrama and son Mauricio Balderrama at the Posada Hidalgo hotel in El Fuerte, 1989. President Adolfo Lopez Mateos checking in at the Santa Anita hotel during the inauguration train ride of the Chihuahua-al-Pacifico railroad, 1960. Offshore of Puerto Los Cabos with son in law Ramon Guerrero with a wahoo and yellow fin tuna catch.*

became a base of operations for many notables and celebrities, including an Apollo 11 mission astronaut, Buzz Aldrin, General Curtis LeMay, always with a cigar on hand, and Mexico's most popular singer/composer Jose Alfredo Jimenez, who stayed at the hotel during his touring road trips. The Santa Anita also served as the location for the first deluxe discotheque in northwest Mexico, Boccaccio's, in 1972 on the fourth floor of the hotel. Balderrama later opened the

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(ABOVE) | *The Chepe Express Train crossing the longest bridge of the journey over Rio Fuerte on its way to the Sierra Madre and the Copper Canyon. The Santa Anita hotel in Los Mochis, Sinaloa. The first hotel built of the Balderrama Hotel Collection (1958). Copper Canyon view from the Mirador Hotel lobby lounge veranda.*

Morocco disco, as grandiose and elaborate in design as Studio 54.

Always on the lookout for new opportunities, Balderrama was the first to see the potential in the Copper Canyon area along the 415-mile (668 km) Chihuahua al Pacífico train route for its tourism possibilities in the early sixties. The Copper Canyon is located in the Sierra Madre mountains of Chihuahua and is four times larger than Arizona's Grand Canyon. It's a spectacular piece of real estate, served

by trains that pass over 37 bridges, travel through 86 tunnels and climb to 7,500 feet, with an eventual terminus at Los Mochis. At the time, it wasn't a particularly well-known sight-seeing destination, even for Mexicans, but as Balderrama explored the area and developed a series of beautifully-restored hotels and stations and made possible the purchase of deluxe American passenger railroad cars, he made it more accessible and convenient for visitors from around the world to appreciate.

In 1968, Balderrama bought the legendary old mansion that follows the slope up several levels to the historical Fort of Montescaros in the town of El Fuerte. Balderrama had a special appreciation for older, historic buildings, and turned the Casa Vieja, the oldest section, into the magnificent hostelry for train travelers, the Posada del Hidalgo. This property was originally owned by Don Alejandro de la Vega in 1795, father of

Don Diego de la Vega, known to many as Mexico's Robin Hood, El Zorro.

That first property in the unknown Copper Canyon area led to an increasing involvement in the area and the Balderrama family has celebrated over sixty years serving the hospitality and tourism industry in the states of Sinaloa, Chihuahua, and Baja California with the Balderrama Hotel Collection. The family currently operates six properties on the mainland: Hotel Santa Anita and Plaza Inn in Los Mochis (a jumping-off point for excursions to the canyon), Hotel Posada Hidalgo in old El Fuerte, Hotel Mision in Cerocahui, and Hotel Mirador, both near Divisadero in the heart of the canyon. Balderrama also renovated the El Fuerte train station as part of an agreement with Ferromex, a private railroad enterprise, and an expansion project added rooms and amenities at Hotel Posada Hidalgo, Hotel Mision and Hotel Mirador,

all situated at stops along the train route. Hotel Posada Hidalgo is a 75-room property housed in a former hacienda and fort built in 1890 for the territorial governor and was remodeled adding wood-beamed ceilings, bathrooms, and floors crafted with Mexican tiles, a pool, and gardens.

A particularly fine example of the work his company has done is the 41-room Hotel Mision in Cerocahuahi near the Bahuichivo train station. The adobe-and-tile property is a former hacienda that sits next to a mission built in 1690 by the Jesuit fathers and has been converted into a lodge with a small vineyard and winery. Mision Wine is produced from their own single vineyard and served exclusively to its hotel chain guests. The hotel group also makes its own El Zorro quality tequila, which can be found in all of the Balderrama Hotels chain.

Balderrama's love for exploration eventually brought him to Baja in the late fifties. With his adventurous spirit and love of the outdoors, he was captivated by the striking desert landscape and the abundant

marine sea life. He traveled the peninsula making several yacht excursions to the Sea of Cortez islands during the sixties visiting the early fishing lodges on the coastline, including Rancho Buenavista with his friend Colonel Walters, Ed Tabor's Flying Sportsman Lodge near Loreto, and Don Johnson's Hotel Serenidad in Mulege. He also had good friends in La Paz and once flew a Banda Tambora musical group, about twelve musicians, from Los Mochis into town to play for the inaugural ceremony in 1975 of Angel Cesar Mendoza, a good friend who was being appointed the first governor of the state. The performance earned accolades from then-president of Mexico Luis Echeverria, who was impressed with the talent of the "local" musicians.

Balderrama also traveled through Baja extensively with his family, often visiting Loreto, Los Cabos, and La Paz. His first visit to Cabo San Lucas was in August of 1970, crossing over on the Ruffo's Salvatierra ferry in a brand new Ford Galaxy 500, driving Baja's dirt roads with his wife Vilma, four

children and holing up at the Hacienda Hotel for a week. He remembered then that his father Prospero had crossed the ocean in the old wooden passenger boat "Arturo" and had driven to San Jose del Cabo in 1948 to meet the well-known merchant and friend Don Valerio Gonzalez Canseco for business. Eventually, his son Jose Manuel "Lito" Gonzalez became his lifelong friend.

"When we arrived at the property, the Hacienda Hotel was closed, but my dad

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(BELOW) | A bronze sculpture of El Zorro at the center of the patio in a room section of the century old building of the Posada Hidalgo hotel in El Fuerte, Sinaloa. Jesuit Mission of Cerocahui, Chihuahua. By its side is the Mision Hotel. The Mission was founded by Italian friar Juan Maria Salvatierra, in the late part of the 17th century. Ten years later he founded the mission of Loreto and several others in Baja California. View of the Mirador Hotel from the nearby pine woods.



convinced the manager, Candido Lopez, to let us stay,” says Mauricio Balderrama, then, 6 years old. “Candido told us there were no services, no restaurant or maid service, but we kids had a ball, playing around the hotel beach and buying American candy from the Chinese store in town. Cabo San Lucas was a ranch with barbed wire fences all over and unpaved streets but we loved it.”

As Roberto Balderrama traveled and explored, his love affair with Baja developed to the point where he decided to look into buying land in the area to serve as a base for a hotel property. He entered into a deal with Fonatur that fell through in the late eighties and at one point Luis Bulnes offered to sell

the Solmar property in times of a tourist crisis to Balderrama, which didn't work out either. But then another piece of property came to his attention in the mid-nineties: a modest beach house in the San Jose del Cabo area that was to eventually become one of southern Baja's most well-loved destinations.

“It was not a remarkable place when we bought it in 1994, but it was a natural location for a boutique hotel,” Mauricio explains. “My father also bought the lot next to the beach house, which we eventually expanded on and we now sit on 1.5 acres. When it opened in 1996 as a bed and breakfast, the original floorplan had eight rooms and a Jacuzzi, but no pool. The caretaker would go to a local bakery to get pastries for the guests and surfers who were staying there.” The property, now the Cabo Surf Hotel, after being called Cabo Surf Villas and Cabo Surf Royale in previous incarnations, evolved over time, adding services and its own fine restaurant in the 7 Seas Seafood Grille with its inspiring

picture-postcard views of the coast just steps away from the area's surf break. Now run by son and General Manager Mauricio Balderrama, the Cabo Surf Hotel has become one of the most highly-regarded properties in southern Baja, a boutique hotel with all the amenities offered by larger properties, and some they can't offer, like Mike Doyle's in-house surf school, which has taught thousands of people to surf since it opened under the tutelage of veteran surfer Mike Doyle in 2004. The Cabo Surf Hotel now offers, in addition to its world-class view, 37 rooms including a new wing completed a few years ago, a full slate of luxury services including a full-service Sea Spa and Salon, great dining, a gift shop for surf and beach gear and convenient access to the beach and surf break. It's become a favorite spot for people seeking a more direct connection to the Sea of Cortez and a smaller, more intimate environment, a place to just hang out and let the rhythms of the waves relax you. It's also become a very popular spot for

(BELOW AND FAR RIGHT) | THIS PAGE: Mauricio Balderrama with Roberto and three brothers, from 17 years ago. Cabo Surf Hotel in 1994. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Cabo Surf Hotel & Spa, present day.





weddings and other events. “We’ve had a lot of great moments here at the hotel,” Mauricio says. “One day Adam Sandler showed up and wanted to see one of the rooms, but the hotel was full so I knocked on the door of a room and when it opened, the lady and children who were staying there were very surprised to see Adam standing at their door.”

The Cabo Surf Hotel is a place that Roberto likes to visit when he ventures out from his home in Los Mochis, enjoying the property, its unmatched views, and doing a little fishing and cruising off the coast in his Overblue 54 power catamaran. He still is involved in a lot of things and is always keeping his eye on the details, and ways to improve. “He was here early last year and he told me that we should put a cover on

the parking lot,” Mauricio says. “I was first arguing about the danger of hurricanes, but I went along and now we have a new covered “eco” parking area, with 240 solar panels over it providing green power to the hotel. Like I said, my father is always looking for an opportunity to make things better. Also, my mother, Vilma, participated for years with great taste in interior design, architecture, food and by operating gift shops in the hotels. They traveled a lot together and brought new ideas from their trips to the hotels, restaurants, and discotheques.

As an intrepid visionary in the hospitality business, sportsman, and adventurer, Roberto Balderrama has truly lived the life of a renaissance man, living life to the fullest, always curious, ready to take advantage of an

opportunity, with a passion for travel and the outdoors, regional and Mexican history, old buildings and fine wine. He’s also authored two books: a Mayo Indian language dictionary and a history of the Balderrama Gomez family roots, including grandparents, parents, and siblings. His legacy now lives on through the fine hotels and the style of hospitality that he has promoted over his lifetime, which is carried on by his three sons at their fine hotels in Mexico and by son Mauricio here in Los Cabos at the Cabo Surf Hotel.

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El Fin!