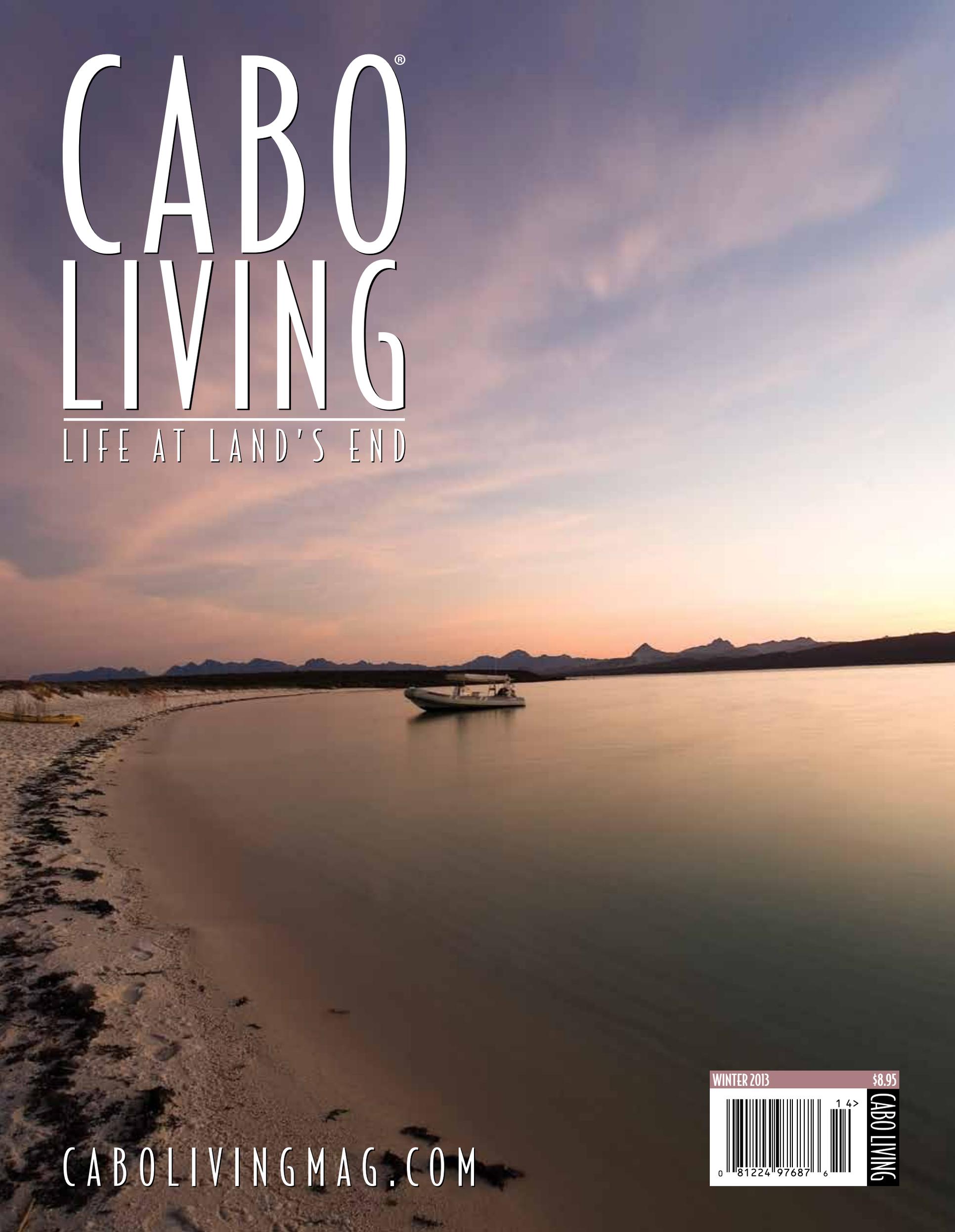


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Baja Pioneers

MARCO ANTONIO MONROY MILAN

It was 1969 when a budding architect first set eyes on Los Cabos. Now at 75, the still active Baja pioneer recalls the many memories that made his hometown great.

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

Looking at it now, it's hard to believe that Cabo San Lucas was once nothing more than a neglected backwater in the larger map of Mexico, an outpost that consisted primarily of the Pando tuna cannery, a few hardy souls who made the rustic fishing village their home, and not much else.

Cabo and much of southern Baja has come so far so fast we sometimes lose sight of the origins of things here. Cabo Living has documented many of the original pioneers who came to the southern tip of Baja and saw something no one else did, a scenic paradise with unbounded resources in both the Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Cortez, and a starkly contrasting combination of fertile marine habitat and the arid landscape of the surrounding desert.

Before the boom, Cabo was the kind of place where you didn't need a watch, since

the cannery blew its whistle at 10:00, 1:00 and 4:00, and when it didn't blow you knew it was Sunday. The atmosphere here was still very "wild west" then, and it was attractive to people who were able to carve a vision out of the bare rock and sandy beaches that fronted the coastline.

It also attracted people like Marco Antonio Monroy Milan, an architect and designer who was enlisted by several first generation pioneers to help fulfill their vision for the place. Monroy was born in Tepic in state of Nayarit, Mexico, close to the well-

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known tourist area Rivera Nayarit. After obtaining a degree in Architecture from the Mexican National University in Mexico City in 1957, Monroy decided against his true passion of bullfighting, choosing instead a career in design and commercial development. He fell in love and married his wife Jana, a Peruvian-born woman with a Czech heritage and they eventually had four children.

He also began to develop a very successful architectural and construction career in Mexico City. At the age of 29 he began consulting for Sears, Roebuck & Company, who had created a division that was exploring building commercial centers throughout Latin America.

The head of Sears in Mexico at that time was Jim Bonillas, a Mexican-American whose father had been the U.S. ambassador in Mexico City. Bonillas had a cousin in La Paz named Luis Coppola Bonillas who owned the famous Los Arcos Hotel. As part of the services offered by the hotel, Luis would fly hotel guests on his private aircraft

from La Paz to Cabo for fishing trips. It was during those trips that the plan for building a hotel in Cabo San Lucas was conceived by Sr. Coppola, Sr. Bulnes and Sr. Arechiga.

“I met Luis Coppola Sr. in Mexico City when he visited Jim Bonillas seeking financing from Sears for the hotel’s equipment and furnishings,” Monroy says. “Jim Bonillas invited me to attend the meeting with Coppola, where he very enthusiastically presented the idea of building a hotel in Cabo San Lucas and showed pictures of the property they had selected for the construction site. The pictures showed nothing but a bare rocky mountain with some beautiful ocean views. The site is where the first phase of the Finisterra Hotel sits today.”

After the meeting, Bonillas invited Monroy to visit the site to evaluate the feasibility of the project. They flew to La Paz a few days later, and from there Luis Coppola flew them down to Cabo San Lucas in his plane. “That was in 1969. I still remember seeing the beautiful bay of Cabo San Lucas

for the very first time,” Monroy recalls. “The desert against the dark deep blue ocean was a contrast I had never seen before. The landing strip was just a long dirt road behind where the Marina is now. After circling twice to get the cattle out of the way and a few nimble moves we landed on a dirt landing strip in Cabo San Lucas. I was very impressed with Luis Coppola’s piloting skills after that approach and landing.”

When Monroy got out of the plane all he saw was a few houses, a church in the distance and, right next to the landing strip, the Hotel Hacienda, which had about 25 rooms at the time. Designed and constructed by Abelardo “Rod” Rodriguez, southern Baja’s original pioneer, the Hacienda was the place to stay in Cabo. “Rodriguez was an adventurous and dynamic character,” Monroy recalls. “I remember times when he would just fly over the hotel and drop a bag of cash for payroll, as he was busy with other projects and there were no banks in town.”

After their arrival in Cabo, Coppola and Monroy immediately climbed to the top of

Sears

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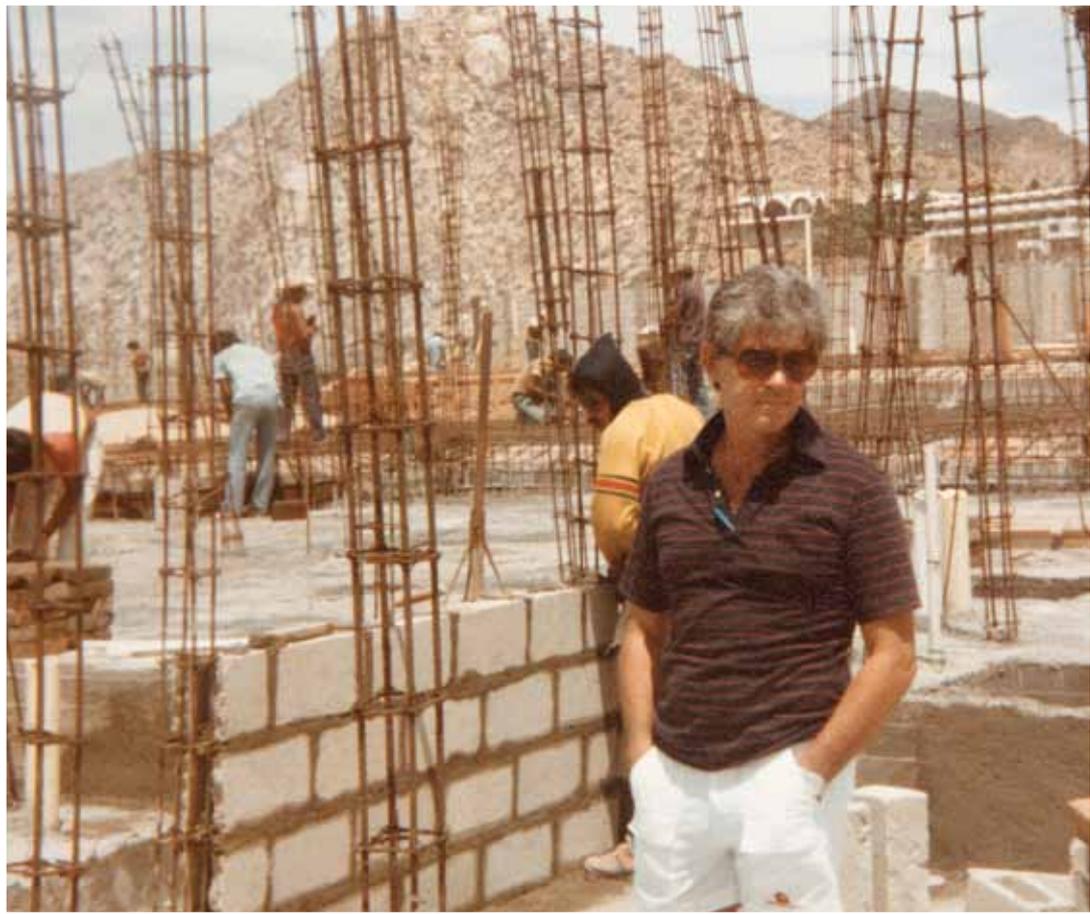


(FAR LEFT, ABOVE AND RIGHT) | An aerial view of Cabo shows the area as Marco first saw it. Other images show the Finisterra, Misiones and Solmar. A photo shows an original palapa at Misiones, which is now the site of the Sunset de Mona Lisa.

the rocky mountain that he had been shown in the photos as the future site of the hotel. Once at the vantage point that Coppola had chosen, Monroy was struck by the unique scenic beauty of the location. "I was so mesmerized by the view once we got to the top I could hardly talk," he says. "Seeing the desert, the Pacific Ocean and the beautiful Sea of Cortez meeting up at that point was just unbelievable. In the back of my head I was also nervously thinking about what a challenge it would be designing a hotel on such a steep hill in this very remote place."

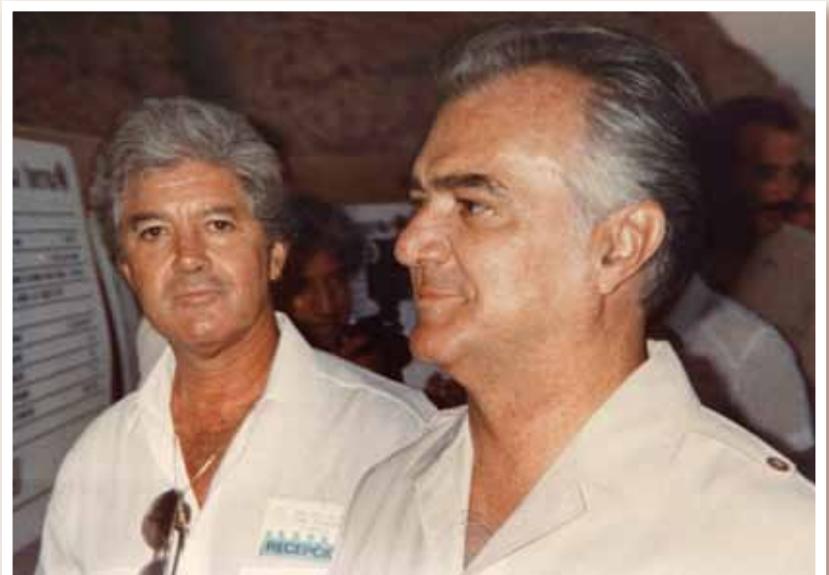
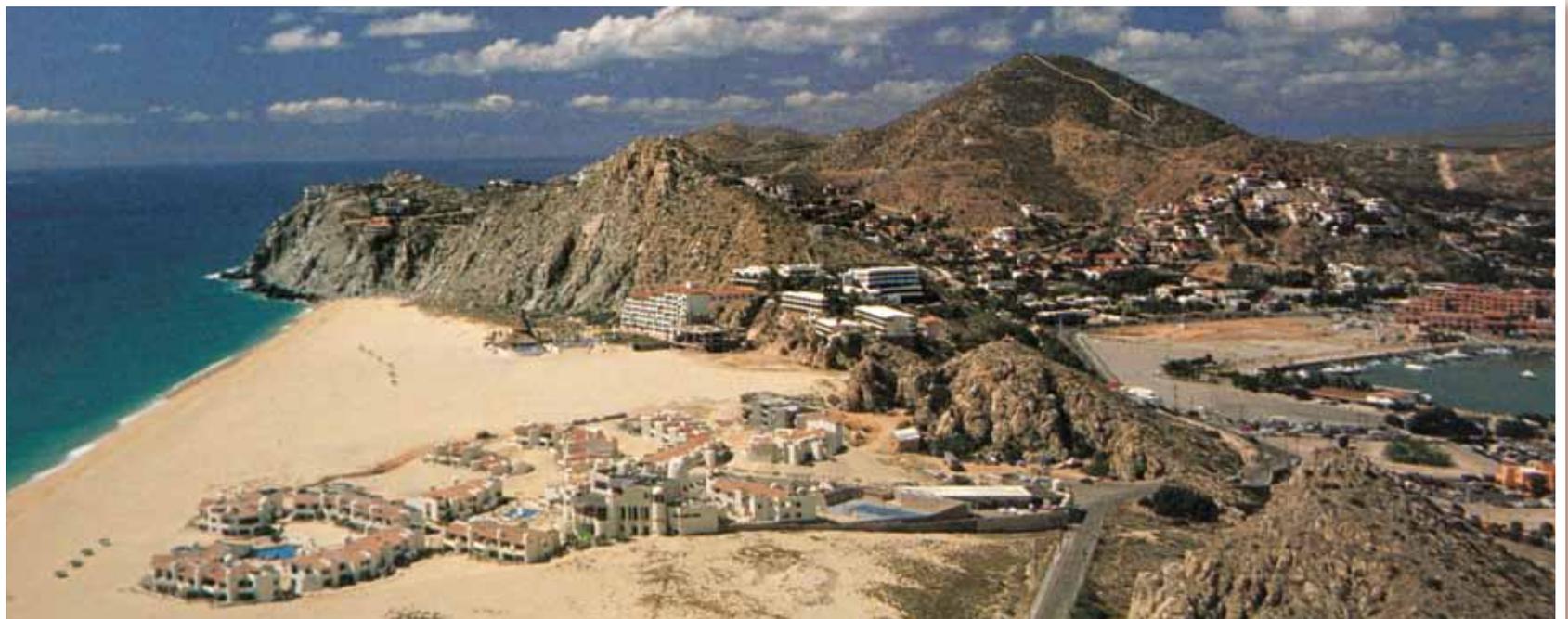


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Later that same day, Coppola took Monroy to meet Luis Bulnes, the general manager of the Pando tuna cannery and the owner of the land where the proposed hotel was to be built. Bulnes was to be one of three partners in the hotel. "I was immediately impressed by his very determined personality and dream of building a hotel on the site, and his vision of seeing Los Cabos as a world tourist destination in the future," says Monroy. "Bulnes would later become my good friend and also a business partner. Over the years we developed a close relationship. Unfortunately, we lost him last year, but he is without a question a great man and one of the great pioneers of Los Cabos."

On that initial visit Monroy also met the third partner on the hotel project, Raul Arechiga, a highly successful businessman who later started Aero California and is still a good friend with Sr. Monroy. After the three partners agreed on the concept for the hotel and design they needed to come up with a name. Luis Bulnes proposed the name Finisterra, in honor of Cabo Finisterra, his homeland in Spain. The Spanish word



translates as “land’s end.” Everyone agreed it was a fitting name for the new hotel, and the new partners asked Monroy to submit a preliminary design for the project.

Monroy returned to Mexico City and reported the details of his trip to Jim Bonillas.

Although Sears’ financial department wasn’t interested in financing any projects not involved directly with their stores and commercial centers, Monroy tried very hard to convince them that the project was a great opportunity and would be good business. “I thought there was great potential in it and suggested they finance the whole package including construction, equipment and furnishings,” Monroy says. “I put Sears in contact with the head of FOGATUR (Fund for the Guarantee and Promotion of Tourism) that was promoting tourist developments, and they finally agreed to explore the possibility of funding the project through them.”

Monroy invited the head of FOGATUR to visit Cabo San Lucas. The trip was uneventful until they arrived in La Paz,

where the head of the bank decided he did not want to get into the small plane to fly to Cabo and insisted on driving. The trip from La Paz to Cabo took eight long hours, and after all that time in the car through such remote terrain, Monroy thought his chances of convincing the banker to invest in the project were slipping away. To his surprise, after seeing the construction site and talking to the investors, the banker became very interested and was attentive to all the information given him.

“On our trip back to Mexico City he told me this was one of the craziest projects ever presented to him, but that at the same time Cabo San Lucas was one of the most beautiful places he had ever seen,” Monroy remembers. The banker’s enthusiasm carried the day, and the project was quickly approved and funded.

Marco Monroy was also riding a wave of enthusiasm when he returned from Cabo. As a young architect he was excited about participating on a unique project, and also saw an opportunity over time of moving his family from densely-populated Mexico City

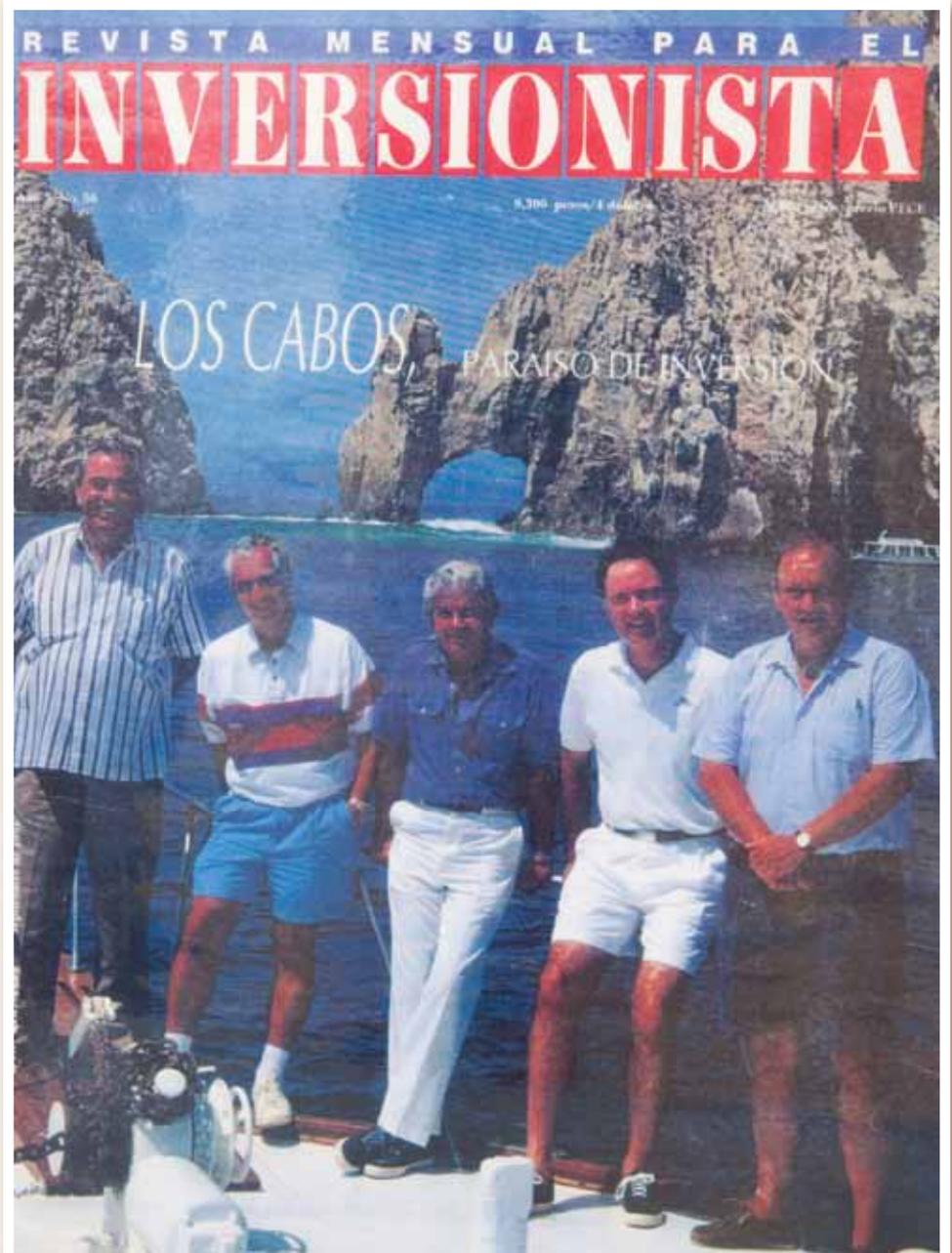
(FAR LEFT AND BELOW) | Marco checks in on the construction of Terrasol Condominiums. Sailboats finish a race in front of the Solmar Hotel in the early 1980’s. In 1988, President Miguel De La Madrid inaugurated Terrasol. *Misiones* is represented with an aerial view and a pool shot. The cover of a periodical that declares Los Cabos as a “haven investment” features notable figures such as Luis Bulnes, Luis Copella Jr., Marco Monroy and Johnny Vaughn.

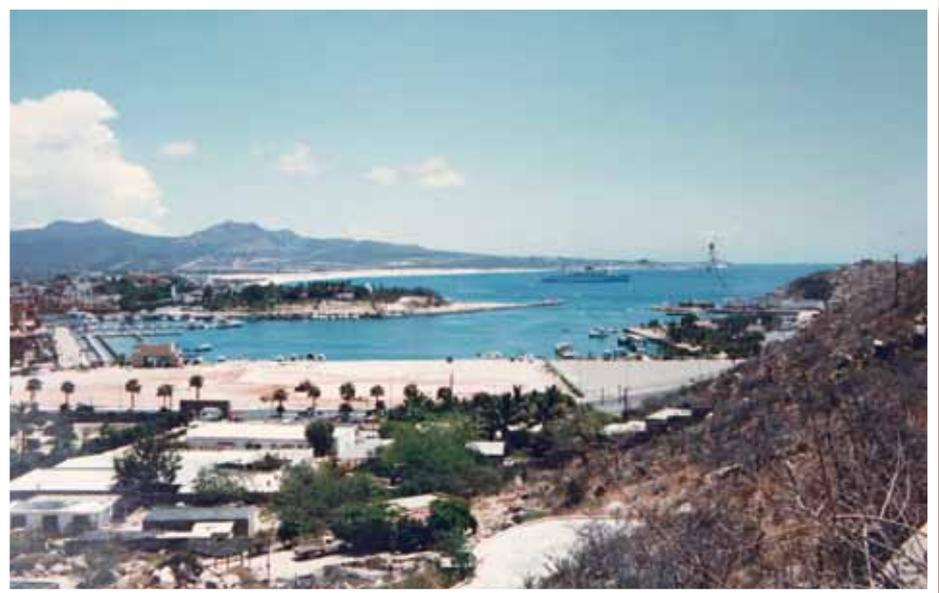
to the beautiful location at the tip of Baja California Sur.

After a few months Monroy had all the construction drawings ready, and work on the Finisterra Hotel began in 1969 under the supervision of engineer Manuel Angulo, who over the years would become Monroy’s good friend and partner in several ventures.

While the hotel was being built, Monroy would periodically visit from Mexico City and with every visit the desire to live in the

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(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT) | *Marco Sr. and son, Marco Jr., posing with the day's catch. Marco has worked with a number of celebrities, including Jack Nicklaus, Oscar de la Hoya and Sammy Hagar. An image above shows the downtown Cabo area, with the marina in the early states of construction.*

area became stronger. The project, though, was challenging, to say the least. Difficulties during construction were constant, with no phones, no highway, a complete lack of construction materials and the questionable availability of electrical power. Improvisation was the only way that some things got done, including the way Manuel Angulo produced gravel for concrete with local rocks, a couple of steel jaws and an old Ford engine. Almost every stage of the construction process required some sort of resourcefulness. All communication to the outside world at that time was done through a marine radio, with

the construction site effectively acting like a boat anchored on the bay.

The first phase of the Finisterra opened in October of 1971. "I was very proud of the accomplishment and the hard work of all involved," Monroy says. "The hotel struggled for the first few years and had some tough financial times at the beginning but it eventually became a place where celebrities from all over the world would come and visit." The Finisterra was also acclaimed by *Architectural Digest* magazine for the way its construction was artfully blended into the natural hillside environment.

After the hotel was completed, Monroy continued to expand his architectural and construction career in Mexico City. As his business continued to grow, Monroy eventually started his own construction company, and he designed and built residential and commercial projects including bank branches, which became his specialty, all over Mexico.

It wasn't long before Monroy got a call from Cabo. Luis Bulnes had decided to get into the luxury resort business and invited Monroy to design his Hotel Solmar. At that

time Monroy sat on the project approval board of Nacional Financiera, a Mexican financial institution, so he was able to assist in obtaining a loan for the construction of the hotel with a total of 20 rooms, a restaurant and a pool.

The siren song of Cabo continued to beckon, and in 1982 Monroy decided to slow down his construction activities on the mainland and explore his dream of moving to Cabo and getting involved in some creative projects there. He decided to approach Luis Bulnes and together they started Terrasol Condominiums, Phase I. Terrasol was the first condominium development on the beach in Los Cabos right next door to Solmar, and was inaugurated by President Miguel De La Madrid in 1988. Despite a lot of skepticism from people who thought that Cabo wasn't ready for that kind of project, Terrasol Phase I was a great success.

Monroy's timing couldn't have been better. At this point Cabo was starting to become a luxury tourist destination and was getting a lot of attention from celebrities. Sammy Hagar, who was inspired to visit

Cabo after seeing magazine photos of Keith Richards' wedding to Patti Hansen at the Finisterra, bought a condo from Monroy and later became a partner with his son in Cabo Wabo Cantina. Oscar de la Hoya also showed up and decided to buy the penthouse Monroy was living in. It was clear that Cabo was quickly becoming a celebrity hotspot.

FONATUR was also active in the area then, and had started building the Marina, and other investors from Mexico and the U.S. also caught the fever and began a number of developments around town. Monroy was actively doing his part, developing the Marina Cabo Plaza in the marina, among many construction projects.

He also started Terrasol Phase II in 1983. But after a couple of years into the project, the Mexican Peso underwent big devaluation and, combined with the economic downturn in the U.S. in the early nineties, much of the activity in Los Cabos came to a stop. Sales dropped off steeply and many projects in Los

Cabos were stopped and were forced to pay the banks with their remaining assets. These were tough years, but it was only temporary, and Cabo was to rebound stronger than ever a few years later.

When the area eventually rebounded, Monroy was able to put his imprint on many developments and land ventures around southern Baja, like Misiones del Cabo, a project he developed with his good friends Manuel Angulo and Cristina Rodriguez, daughter of Abelardo Rodriguez.

Now, at the age of 75, Marco Monroy is not retired and doubts he ever will be. He continues to work and get involved in developments that he finds intriguing, but has also decided that he wants to spend as much time as possible working on his golf game and play every chance he gets. He also travels to Mexico City often, but calls Los Cabos his home.

It's a home that he has helped shape, through his work with the first wave of

pioneers who sought his talents in creating their visions for the area. In addition to his many credits in development and construction, he is also very proud of the fact that he organized and was the first president of the Los Cabos Developers Association and brought the first commercial real estate franchise, Century 21, to Baja California Sur in 1981.

"I have met the most incredible people from all walks of life here in Los Cabos, have seen the most amazing changes in the last 40 years," Monroy says. "I've seen it evolve from a sleepy fishing village in 1969 to what Los Cabos is today. I have lived through all the tough economic times in Los Cabos and, of course, all the great and plentiful times we are all grateful for. One thing I can say is that Cabo is a place with such a special energy that it always comes back stronger than ever. Proof of that is the economic recovery we are now experiencing after one of the worst economic crisis in the last 100 years." **El Fin!**

