

Museo de las Californias

There are no signs outside the building, no hours of operation prominently displayed, little to nothing is done in the way of advertising, and yet more than ten thousand tourists have found their way through the doors of The Museo de las Californias since it's opening in October, 2006.

The museum curator Roberto Cuétara and his assistant Rubén Sánchez keep meticulous visitor demographic records for the museum; along with the thirty security cameras monitoring the eight exhibit rooms, administration offices, future gift shop / cafeteria and the wraparound interior patio. Their data shows, that as of the end of April 2009 an impressive 22,953 people have crossed the threshold with an almost even split between, locals and students as one group, and foreigners as another.

The Museo de las Californias sits incognito on the edge of the Cabo San Lucas Town Square, across the street from the restaurant Mi Casa. It's first function was as a school, founded back in 1951 by Professor Amelia Wilkes.

Wilkes holds a notable position in the museum's room dedicated to the bygone days of Cabo. She was born in 1907 and died in 1989. Not only was Wilkes the school director, she also managed the electrical supply, was head of the water commission and went on to become the first female sub-delegate when Baja Sur was still a territory of Mexico. The town square is dedicated to her name.

Cuétara brings a lot of experience to The Museo de las Californias and he is available and eager to share his encyclopedic size knowledge. He started his career at the Anthropology Museum in Mexico City and has been in charge of opening all of the Museums of Baja Sur, starting in Loreto in 1973 and continuing to La Paz, the Mission of San Javier, the Music Museum in El Triunfo and the Marine Museum in San Jose.

When asked why there are no signs to let people know the building houses a museum, Cuétara, smiles and says, "We lack funds and need sponsors to complete many things." The museum relies on funding from the Municipality and from donations. He gives the same, 'lack of funds' answer, when asked why the exhibits are not bilingual, considering almost half of the visitors are foreigners.

The museum has an ambitious foundation. Touring the various rooms it is evident a lot of planning and working hours has gone into researching and preserving the historical heritage and natural science of our region. They have also encompassed a room illustrating the solar system starting with the Big Bang. Cuétara states, this room is popular with the school kids. Another area is designated as a student learning center and has a couple of computers. Cuétara, has plans for more computers, when there are 'more funds'.

Since one of the key components of a successful museum is to educate, you have to consider how successful the exhibits are by how they communicate the message to the public.

If you are part of the public that speaks Spanish then the Museo de las Californias deserves a good ranking. The exhibits are informative, the oral videos recorded by the relatives of the founding fathers are well executed and the displays immersing us into Baja history, with items like fossilized sabertooth tiger heads, are awesome. The effort and expense that has been put into the museum to date is respectable.

If you are part of the public that is monolingual, then you will have to be content to enjoy on a visual level only. Your eye can take in spectacular photos of desert plant and animal life and in the historical room there is an astonishing photograph of the tornado that ripped through Los Cabos in 1972 tearing off roofs. Following this photo is another one, showing eight men carrying a roof back to where it belonged. But, without the written and the oral understanding, the museum doesn't deliver to these visitors the full educational impact. Having audio earphones in English for visitors to use as they wander through the museum is another item on Cuétara's wish list, when there are 'more funds.'

When interviewing Cuétara for this article, he gave a behind the scene tour of the rooms that store hundreds of donated artifacts. Items waiting to be catalogued or are too fragile to put on display. One such item is a thick, yellowed book written in 1905 by Engineer Joaquin Palacios describing the construction of all the lighthouses in Mexico, including, El Faro Cabo Falso in San Lucas. His book sits on a shelf wrapped in tinfoil, the binding crumbling and the historical value priceless.

The Museo de las Californias has a program called, Adopt a Piece of Art where someone can sponsor the restoration and preservation of item of your choice. For more information about this program you can email Roberto Cuétara at mscl@loscabos.gob.mx or better still visit him and enjoy a tour of the Museum.

The museum is closed only two days out of the year December 25 and 31. Hours are: Monday 10 to 2, Tuesday to Friday 10 to 7, Saturday 10 to 2 then 4 to 8, Sunday and Holidays 4 to 8.

The hours are abundant if not a bit unwieldy, the location not marked but centrally located, English is limited but the outing still enjoyable and the entrance fee is nothing more than a small donation.