



iSalud!

Sea Ray owners enjoy a true tequila
sunrise with a trip to the land of the agave

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Taking the morning train usually involves juggling a briefcase, jockeying for elbowroom in office attire and trying to beat the clock. However, in a land where the timepiece is the sun, there's a morning train with plush seats, smooth cocktails and a live mariachi band to hypnotize passengers on a journey through steep hills that give way to fields of blue.

The fields get their tint from the Agave Tequilana Weber plant, a succulent native of Mexico from which tequila is made. The train, the Tequila Express, transports locals and tourists from Guadalajara to Tequila, a town in the western state of Jalisco. The area surrounding Tequila is the spirit's mecca—where it's primarily manufactured in adherence to strict regulations set by the *Consejo Regulador del Tequila*.

"Vaminos," says Kris House, a Sea Ray 550 Sedan Bridge owner eager to head down the historical tracks. She and

her husband, Jim, gaze out the window at the passing orange and turquoise villas topped with red Spanish tiles. Linens sway in the breeze and dry in the sun on lines stretched across small garden plots. From verandas, locals wave at the train, operated by the Guadalajara Chamber of Commerce, as it rumbles beyond the city limits.

From their moving perch on tracks that carve along a rocky ledge, the Houses spy a herd of goats grazing below. The population density dwindles to scattered ranchers and then to no one, just vast fields of pointy, fleshy leaves stretching toward the sun. "It's like a vineyard, only stronger," jokes Steve Madison, a longtime friend of the House family. Steve, his wife, Marie, and Jim's sister, Sandra, are also on the journey, where the group will sample the fruits of the agave and learn about the distillation processes at the Hacienda San Jose del Refugio, Casa de Tequila Herradura.

Under the watchful eye of the long-extinct Tequila Volcano, Herradura Tequila, purchased by the Brown-Forman Corporation in 2006, prides itself on a 136-year history of making premium tequila with 100 percent Agave Tequilana Weber, variety azul. It is completely natural, made without yeast, origin-bottled and rested and aged in barrels of white oak. Herradura, which means horseshoe and symbolizes good luck, found its lucky charm in the Amatitan Valley. Its micro-weather, mineral-rich soil and pure water produce an agave plant different than any other state in Mexico.

"I had no idea it was so labor-intensive," says Kris after watching a demonstration of how the agave plant is harvested. "I have a whole new appreciation for tequila and I want to really start getting into it." Trucks filled with the *corazon* or the heart of the agave, stream into the hacienda. The jimidor or harvester must be strong, able to withstand long days in the heat and be very cautious and patient. Ten years have to pass from the time the seed of the agave is sown until the plant is ripe for harvest.

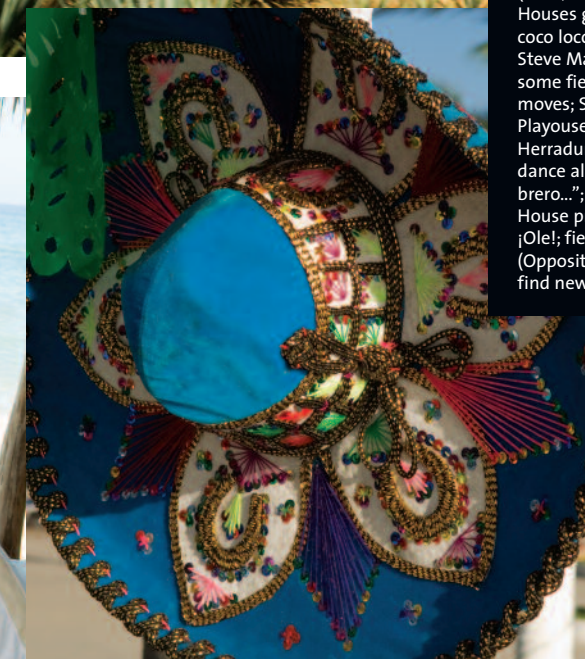
A jimidor named Pedro demonstrates for Jim how to use the *coa*, a tool that resembles a sharp spear. Jim, a high-end door manufacturer, tries his hand at separating the leaves or *pencas* from the heart. "This is hard work," he says.

"Yeah, but Pedro makes it look easy," Kris jokes. The heart Jim has just harvested will produce five liters of premium Herradura tequila.

Living in San Clemente, California, Jim has always been more of a connoisseur of the grape. But having kept his Sea Ray, *Playhouse*, in various Mexican ports like Cabo San Lucas and Puerto Vallarta, he's certainly dabbled in premium tequilas. Jim calls for a high-end reposado for



(Here, clockwise) The Houses go loco for their coco locos; Kris House and Steve Madison practice some fiesta Mexicana moves; Sea Ray bliss; Team Playouse samples Herradura Blanco; "We will dance all around the sombrero..." ; ¡muy bien!; Jim House prepares his gear; ¡Ole!; fields of blue. (Opposite) Kris and Steve find new depths of fun.



(Here) Los Aminos and the Houses' 550 Sedan Bridge provide the perfect south-of-the-border respite. (Opposite) Casa Herradura burros its way into Marie Madison's heart.

“We liked that you could make the Sedan Bridge fishable, yet it’s luxurious.”

everything from his afternoon margarita to an after-dinner cocktail. That’s his style: a taste for the finer things in life and a zest to go after them, a characteristic evident in his boat purchase, as well.

Jim is also a fisherman who chases after marlin and dorado. But securing a fishing boat to swing his family of 13 from port to port just wouldn’t do. So he added removable stainless steel rails to the Sea Ray’s swim platform and a livewell with rodholders in place of the aft seating. “We just loved the Sea Ray and that’s why we bought it,” he says of his second Sedan Bridge bought from Newport Boats in Newport Beach, California.

Kris, on the other hand, a no-nonsense, down-to-earth woman who holds the world record for the number of C-sections for giving birth to the couple’s 11 children, gets a little more specific. “We liked that you could make the Sedan Bridge fishable, yet it’s luxurious,” she says. “It has the right amount of utility and the kids can still hang out in the salon and play their games.” On this particular trip, the kids are all back in Cali, leaving their parents to play their own games.

¡BEACH TIME!

The previous day, the crew, playfully calling themselves Team Playhouse, had cruised across Bahai de Banderas to Los Aminos, a beach accessible only by boat. They lounged under a thatched roof, sipped margaritas out of giant fishbowl glasses, munched on heuvos rancheros and watched fishermen net sardines in the surf. “It’s going to be hard to get us off of our have-fun game mode today,” Jim had warned, playing a game of gin with the ladies.

The party of five had the beach to themselves save for a señor with an iguana that Kris was dared to hold. Aside from an occasional squawk from a pelican that had just fetched its own breakfast, the only sound was the crash of the waves on the rocky points framing their little slice of paradise. Far across the bay, they could see the villas built into the mountainside that make up the town of Puerto Vallarta.

A mist hung thick in the lush peaks, and the city looked peaceful in the morning light. In reality the cobblestone streets were just coming to life. Art galleries and silver shops were opening their doors, fried plantain and taco vendors were staking out their spots on the Malecon Promenade, locals were getting ready to display their handiwork of beaded jewelry and woven blankets and artists were beginning their first sand sculptures of the day in hopes someone would drop a few pesos in their buckets.

Team Playhouse finished their drinks and navigated the Sedan Bridge to Roca los Arcos, a rock formation near Mismaloya, where the movie “Night of the Iguana” was filmed. Kris and Steve pulled on snorkel gear and dove amidst a sea of jumping black and orange angelfish. “Come on in,” shouted Steve after resurfacing, “The water tastes like margaritas!”

The House family has taken diving to a new level with their Sea Ray. Jim had a cage built that he attaches to the swim platform and uses as protection when observing great white sharks off Guadalupe Island near

Ensenada. “I’ve been diving my whole life,” he said. “It’s just amazing to go down there. These sharks are 15 feet long. They are juveniles and very aggressive.”

It’s their unrelenting curiosity for just about everything that drove Jim and Kris to hop on the Tequila Express after an invitation for a private tour of the Hacienda Herradura courtesy of *Sea Ray Living* magazine and Sea Ray partner Brown-Forman. “It’s something we’ve always wanted to do,” says Kris.

¡TEQUILA TIME!

Today, back at the hacienda, Kris, sunkissed and clearly in south-of-the-border mode after a full-day ocean frolic, is finally getting her



tequila tour. She stands before a wall that holds several kilns. Workers fill the ovens made of sand and stone with the 50- to 100-pound agave hearts, where they will slow-cook for 24 hours. The air is thick with a sugary, yet acrid scent reminiscent of cinnamon and sweet potatoes. The cooked agave juice, or *must*, tastes of honey, caramel and vanilla.

Up until 1974, the must was separated out by means of a massive stone called a *tahona*, which still stands on display in the old factory. A worker would roll the giant stone over the agave hearts, and the juices were carried in buckets to stone wells. The old factory still houses the ancient copper stills. Today, Tequila Herradura uses powerful shredders and large stainless steel tanks. Fermentation takes many days as Herradura’s recipe allows the natural yeasts present to perform the process just as it occurs in nature.

Next, two distillation processes occur, one that causes the vapors and the aromas of alcohol to break out and one that enhances the richness and the aromas of the product. “We’re having the time of our lives,” laughs Jim after tasting the Tequila Herradura Blanco out of a tiny clay cup straight from the still. Having not aged or rested, it’s strong with an astringent, burning and spicy feel in the mouth. The guide leads Team Playhouse inside the old factory’s stone walls to seek refuge from the hot

sun and to taste the reposado. Reposado means rested, and Herradura’s reposado sleeps for 11 months. “This is the stuff,” says Jim, his permanent smile growing even larger. “It’s smooth.” Marie refills his glass and watches as he mischievously takes another sip.

Jim is no stranger to the entrancing effects of tequila. After a Sea Ray excursion in Cabo San Lucas, he and Kris headed to the airport to catch a flight back to Los Angeles. “We took a \$100 taxi to the airport and started drinking tequila,” he says. “Then I decided I didn’t want to go home. So we took a \$100 taxi back to the boat. Three days later, we took another taxi to the airport, I started drinking tequila... We stayed for another week.”

It’s no surprise then that Team Playhouse misses their flight back to Puerto Vallarta. On the return train ride, the agave fields cast long spiky shadows across the land in the low-hanging sun. Jim settles into his seat, the tequila warm in his belly, and dozes off to the soothing sounds of a mariachi ballad. “Uh oh, he’s napping,” says Sandra. “That could be lethal. When he naps, we all should be napping.”

She’s right. Jim hits a reset button somewhere inside himself, and everyone knows there’s no going to the airport. Suddenly, the troop finds itself at Cocina Ochenta Y Ocho, spellbound by a flamenco dancer in gauzy white and the stomp, stomp, stomp of her heels.

Maybe it’s saying “yes,” “please” and “thank you” in another language. Maybe it’s the digging of toes into warm sand. Maybe it’s being on Mexico time. Even though *adios amigos* rolls so nicely off the tongue, when the locals offer a friendly wave, tip their hats and offer up a goodbye, it’s hard to say in return. It’s easy to see why Team Playhouse prefers *hasta mañana*. SR



(Above) The old factory at Casa Herradura offers refuge from the sun and the perfect sipping setting. (Here) A jimidor teaches Team Playhouse how to get to the heart of the precious agave.